

INTRUDERS™

ENCOUNTERS WITH THE ABYSS

The World of Darkness

MAGE™
THE AWAKENING

THE STORYTELLER

Jimmy held the warm bundle close to his body as he stepped across the soggy field. The Wilsons had moved off this land long ago, and it hadn't been farmed since. The soil was scarred with deep ruts and pockmarks, some filled with rain from the night before. Jimmy noted the mud that was clinging to his shoes and pant legs, and for a moment he worried about how to explain it. But then he remembered that his mother and father didn't care about that kind of thing. Not anymore.

Up ahead, at the top of a rise, he saw the curved stone wall of the old well. The ground felt a bit drier and firmer as Jimmy made his way up the slope. Mosquitoes and midges buzzed around his face. He shifted the bundle, cradling it in one arm to shoo away the insects with his free hand. He felt the blankets move and twist, and pulled them to his chest again.

As Jimmy reached the well, a slim, rufous, four-legged animal stepped out from behind the stones. The creature's pointed ears twitched once; it raised its angular muzzle and sniffed the air. A light breeze carried the scent of spoiled meat; the animal shook its head, pawed at the ground with one black-socked foot and raised its bushy tail.

"Fox," Jimmy said to the animal, "Are you sure we should do this?"

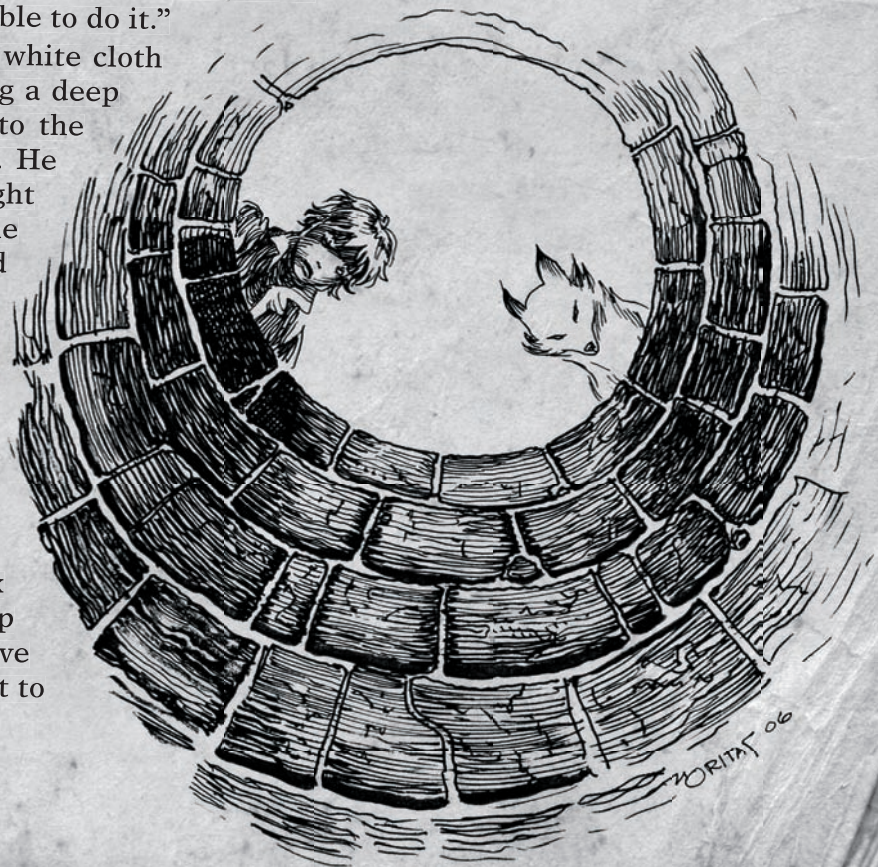
Fox sat on his haunches, glanced to the right and left, taking in the barren farmland, the broken-down barn, the dirt road that led back toward town. "I've given it a lot of thought, Jimmy," he said. "And I'm certain it's for the best. Don't you trust me?"

"Sure I do." Jimmy stepped to the edge of the well and looked over, down into the darkness. "I think it's waking up," he said suddenly, as the cloth bundle quivered and shook. "I think it wants to come out."

"Hurry, Jimmy," Fox told him. "Hurry. If it wakes and you hear its voice, you won't be able to do it."

Jimmy stared at the swaddled white cloth for another moment. Then, taking a deep breath, he heaved the parcel into the well with an exaggerated grunt. He looked in and watched the bright white shape, lit by the sun, tumble into the black. He felt like he'd thrown a scrap of food into the maw of some hungry giant. At the last moment, before it was swallowed up by inky shadow, the wrappings flew apart and Jimmy could see the infant's stubby arms and legs flailing and waving.

"You did good today, Jimmy," Fox told him that night as he curled up at the end of Jimmy's bed. "So I have another story for you. Do you want to hear it now?"



"Sure," Jimmy said. He didn't bother to whisper, because his parents never checked up on him after bedtime. Not lately, anyway.

"This one's called:

The Bull and the Ants

There once was a large, strong bull who was mightier than any other in his herd. None of the younger, weaker bulls ever dared challenge him. One day the bull decided that life with the herd was boring, and so he decided to see what lay beyond the pasture. All the cows warned him not to go, and said that there were unspeakable dangers out there, and that it was much better to stay safe where they were. The bull just laughed at their fear, convinced that there could be no other animal as strong and powerful as he.

So the bull easily broke through the fence and began walking through the field beyond. He had traveled for a whole day when he heard a small voice call out to him. "Please, mighty one, do not go any further." Looking down, the bull saw a tiny ant. "Please change your direction, O powerful bull," said the ant, "or you may tread on me and my family." The bull laughed. "No one tells me what to do or where to walk!" With that, he deliberately crushed the ant beneath his hoof. The bull kept walking, and every time he saw an ant he crushed it out of spite.

But then, as his powerful hoof crashed to the ground to crush another ant, his hoof broke through the turf. The bull had stepped into an anthill and now his foot was trapped. He tried to pull out, only to find his other three limbs trapped as well. As the bull snorted with rage, hundreds of ants swarmed from their holes and crawled up his legs and flanks and chest and back until his body was covered with the insects. They began to rip away his flesh, carrying bit after bit of him down into their anthills.

With his last ounce of strength, the bull turned his head and saw the broken fence, very far away now. He could just make out all the cows standing behind it, watching. And then the ants carried away his eyes.

"Babykiller!"

Jimmy was in the far corner of the schoolyard, where the asphalt was torn up, when he heard the snickers of the three older boys. They passed him by, then stopped and turned back to look at him.

"I never see this kid in Church," one was saying. "How come you don't go to Church, kid?"

"Maybe he has better things to do."

"Maybe he's out looking for babies to kill. Babykiller."

"How come you call him that?" the runt of the trio asked, his voice ponderous with boredom.

"What are you, stupid? Everybody in town knows the story," their leader answered. "His whole family are babykillers. They took his mom to the plant and they cut out her baby and hung it on a meat hook. Isn't that right, Babykiller?"

"You'll be sorry," Jimmy sighed.

"What did you say? The lead boy stepped closer; his companions scuffled their feet on the macadam as they followed. "You little fuck, what did you —"

Then the three aggressors began shaking their hands in the air, brushing at their arms and legs. Jimmy was surprised at how girlish their shrieks were as he watched the black and yellow blurs of a dozen wasps diving at their faces and hands. The boys fled in a blind panic, not looking back, falling to the ground more than once.

"Jimmy." He already knew Fox was behind him; he didn't turn around. "You don't have to go to school anymore, Jimmy. I told you that. You have more important work to do."

That night Jimmy lay in bed thinking about his parents. Rumors about them had been making the rounds for over a year now. His mother and father assured him there was no truth to them, but their explanations of what had really gone on were unsatisfying. They said he wasn't old enough to understand, that he shouldn't worry about it.

From what Jimmy had pieced together, his mother and father had been in a big argument, bigger than any they'd ever had before, right in front of everyone at the plant. And then his mother had gotten sick somehow. She tried to get to the bathroom but didn't make it in time, and ended up bleeding all over the floor. One schoolmate who'd taunted Jimmy about it said Jimmy's father pushed his mother down, but Jimmy didn't believe that.

To help himself fall asleep, Jimmy muttered one of Fox's stories:

The Leg

Long ago there was a man who became so furious that he tore himself in half. He threw his bottom half down a deep well, where it lay in the cold dark for seven years. Then the man's left leg couldn't stand the loneliness any more, so it ripped itself away from the right leg and wriggled up the side of the well like a snake. Once out of the well, the leg crawled through the countryside for days until it came across the small cottage where the leg used to live. It waited until dark and then slithered into the house.

The next morning, the man rolled over in bed and felt something cold and hairy brush up against his arm. He threw back the bedsheets and there he saw the leg, which had crawled into bed with him during the night.

"What is this thing!" the man shouted.

"I'm your leg!" answered the leg. "Don't you want me back?"

"Leg?" the man cried. "I don't know what that is!" He grabbed the leg by the big toe and tossed it into the fire, where the leg was burned to ash.

"What a disgusting and incomprehensible nightmare," the man said to himself, using his arms to crawl into the kitchen for breakfast.

After breakfast, Jimmy was on his way up to his room when he heard his parents' voices.

"What are we going to do with him?" His mother sounded like she was about to cry. "He just won't go to church. People notice. They're talking. He has to come to church with us, he has to."

"I know," his father was saying. "I — well, making him go to church when he doesn't want to, that isn't what Our Lord wants. He wants Jimmy to come to Him of his own free will."

Jimmy gripped the top of the banister with both hands, pulled himself up. He leaned over to see his parents clearly.

"I... I know you're right." His mother wiped her hands on a dishtowel. "I just... I just hate all the talk."

Jimmy watched his father lean in to kiss his mother on the cheek. But before his lips touched her skin, he stopped, holding his face a few inches from her, his lips pursed. He looked confused, blinking his eyes and taking a sudden breath. He looked like he was trying to remember what it was he was about to do. Jimmy's mother looked equally puzzled, and after a few awkward seconds, she took a step back. His father pulled back as well, and they looked at each other, not upset, not afraid, just uncertain. Jimmy's father shook his head, as if to wake himself from a stupor; his mother gave a little shrug. Then they nodded and went their separate ways.

Later, Fox told Jimmy he'd be away for several hours. But before he left, he shared a new story:

Grandpa's Favourite

There was an old man who lived in a house near the edge of the world, and he had four grandchildren. Every morning they would walk to the great glass wall that separated the world from what was beyond. One day, the eldest grandchild said, "Grandpa, if I was to climb to the top of that high wall, what would I find?"

"I don't know," the old man answered. "Why don't you try it, then come back and tell us?"

So the child began to climb. The watched him for a while, until he was just a small dot, and then was gone.

The next day the child returned, and they all gathered around him. "Well," they asked, "What did you find?"

"They have a thing called Light," the child said. "But I have no eyes, so it was useless to me." And the child fell sick and died.

The next day, as they stood by the wall, the second oldest child said, "Grandpa, if I was to climb to the top of that high wall, what would I find?"

"I don't know," the old man answered. "Why don't you try it, then come back and tell us?"

So the child climbed. When the child returned on the following day, they all gathered around him. "Well," they asked, "What did you find?"

"They have a thing called Music," the child said. "But I have no ears, so it was useless to me." And the child fell sick and died.

The next day, as they stood by the wall, the third oldest child said, "Grandpa, if I was to climb to the top of that high wall, what would I find?"

"I don't know," the old man answered. "Why don't you try it, then come back and tell us?"

So the child climbed. When the child returned on the following day, they all gathered around him. "Well," they asked, "What did you find?"

"They have a thing called Time," the child said. "But I have no clock, so it was useless to me." And the child fell sick and died.

The next day, as they stood by the wall, the youngest child said, "Grandpa, if I was to climb to the top of that high wall, what would I find?"

"Wait," said the old man. He went into the house and returned with an iron box. "You are my favorite, grandchild," he said, "so before you climb, take these." He opened the box. "These are eyes, and these are ears, and this is a clock."

The child took the eyes, the ears, and the clock. And then, for the first time, he saw his grandfather, and heard his grandfather's voice, and knew how long they had been living in the house at the edge of the world. And he screamed in horror and tore himself to shreds.

"Is someone there?"

The voice was so soft that Jimmy wondered, at first, if he'd imagined it. He stood still for a minute, listening. The room was dim, even with the sunlight that found its way through the narrow basement window he'd pushed open. The voice did not repeat itself, but it seemed to Jimmy that the voice waited behind the only door in the room.

He knew that Fox wouldn't like him coming here to see the Magician. Fox seemed to regret ever mentioning the Magician. But Fox had let enough details slip for Jimmy to find this place, a long-abandoned farmhouse across the road from the plant. "You can't trust a magician, Jimmy," Fox had told him. "All magicians are liars. And when magicians lie, their lies become real."

Jimmy considered turning back, but he didn't relish the thought of going outside so soon, smelling that carrion stink, or hearing the awful shrieks and the insect noises that drifted on the wind. So he approached the door and reminded himself of Fox's warnings concerning magicians. Not to trust them, not to tell them your name, not to give them anything of yours, not to let them look into your eyes or touch you.

The door made no sound as Jimmy pushed it open. A few flies whirled around his head and sped off. The cage that the Magician was lying in looked just like the large dog kennels Jimmy had seen once at the state fair. This room had a light on, a bare bulb that hung from the ceiling and made shadows along the walls and floor. Jimmy stepped into the room and squinted at the figure lying in the cage. The Magician's form was mostly covered by a dark blanket or sheet. Jimmy could only see was the vague outlines of a body beneath, and a thin-fingered hand jutting past the blanket's edge.

Jimmy cleared his throat.

"Is... someone... there?" The Magician's voice was faint, and not as deep as Jimmy had expected. He took one step closer, just as the Magician rolled over and the sheet fell away to reveal a face.

"Come closer," the voice said. Jimmy didn't move. He was staring at the Magician's narrow chin and pale cheeks. It was a woman's face, he realized, and a woman's voice.

"Who..." the Magician whispered, sitting up slowly, wrapping the blanket around her shoulders. "Who is it?"

"I'm... I'm..." Jimmy wasn't sure what to say. He'd been looking into her eyes, contrary to Fox's warning. But it didn't seem to matter; the lady's eyes were half-closed and distant, as if she were in a trance.

"Don't be afraid," she said to him. She was young, Jimmy realized, younger than his mother, younger than some of his teachers. Her hair was brown and reached to the bottom of her ears and was very messy, as if she'd been sick in bed for a week. Her lips looked dry and cracked. She stared at Jimmy as if she couldn't see him properly.

Then her eyes widened a bit.

"I need help," she said, not quite looking at him.

Jimmy considered this for a moment. Then he said, "Fox says it wants to eat you."

"Fox... something attacked me. It looked like a fox."

"Why don't you just magic yourself out of here?" Jimmy glanced back at the door, making sure it was still open. He'd forgotten the questions he'd been planning to ask, the questions about his parents and how to get them back to normal.

The Magician didn't answer right away. She seemed to sag a bit beneath the sheet; her shoulders slumped and she wasn't sitting up as straight. "What's your name?" she asked.

Jimmy just shook his head, slowly.

"Look... there's something you should know. There's something around here. From... somewhere else." She rubbed her eyes. "I can't concentrate..." For a moment she seemed to shake off her stupor.

"Listen," she said, more urgently now, "you have to listen to me."

"I already know all about it," Jimmy said to her. "And it's too late for you to do anything." He'd made a mistake, he realized. He'd come to ask for some way to fix things, a way that didn't involve doing what Fox wanted him to do. But the Magician couldn't help him. She couldn't do anything. Jimmy sat down on the floor. Despite his disappointment, he felt like he should do something for her. So he began to recite one of Fox's stories:

The Mannequin in the Closet

There was a girl whose parents died when she was young, so she was sent to live with her aunt, who was a dressmaker, and her uncle, who was a tailor. The girl spent every day alone in the house while her aunt and uncle were working in their shop. They had told her that she was welcome to play anywhere in the whole house, but that she was never to open the closet door next to the big chest of drawers, up in the highest room of the attic.

Soon enough she'd explored every nook and cranny in the house several times over, and her curiosity got the best of her. She decided that she had to see what was in that attic closet. She climbed three flights of stairs, entered the attic, stood in front of the door, closed her eyes tight and then turned the knob. When the door was open, she opened her eyes and saw two eyes looking right back at her. Leaning inside the closet was a mannequin, the same size as her, with glass eyes as blue as hers and blond hair as gold as hers and wearing a pretty dress just like hers. The little girl shrieked and turned and dashed for the attic staircase.

As she ran, she could hear the steady patter of footsteps following after. She ran down the stairs, and behind her she could hear each step creak in turn. She ran into the parlor, closing the door behind her, and as she reached the kitchen she could hear the parlor door opening again, and as she exited the kitchen she heard behind her the slapping of feet against the kitchen tiles. She ran around to the back stairway and up to the second floor hall. She ran into her bedroom and slid beneath the big four-poster bed.

From her hiding place, she heard the kitchen door fly open, and then the sound of footsteps coming up the back stairway, and then the pitter-patter of footfalls coming toward the bedroom. Then she had an idea. She fled the bedroom and ran up the attic stairs and dashed into the closet and slammed the door closed. She crouched down in the darkness and gripped the doorknob with both hands and pulled the door as tight as she could. She heard the attic door open, and heard footsteps coming closer to her, and closer and closer. And then they stopped.

Then the girl heard a voice, and it said:

"You nasty mannequin. You won't get out of that closet ever again."

And then she heard the sound of the big chest of drawers being pushed tight against the closet door, and the attic door closing, and footsteps fading away down the attic stairs.

After the story, Jimmy rose. "You can tell me a story if you want to."

"What... would you like to hear?"

"Tell me about the day you came to town."

He didn't expect her to comply, but she began talking. "I was exploring. With my mind, with my senses, with my body. I explored in every way I knew how. First I heard the cry of an infant, echoing through time. So I retrieved it from the bottom of a well, but it wasn't an infant. Not anymore. It was just... flesh. Shaped like a baby, wearing its clothing... animate, but not alive. Its head was like a mass of ground beef, squirming like worms..."

"Then I went into the school. All the classrooms were empty. All the children and teachers were gathered in the cafeteria, sitting at the long tables, silent, staring. There were... heaps of bloody, butchered meat, piled on the tables. Every so often, someone reached over and ripped off a piece. They'd put it in their mouth and chew, not even brushing the flies and maggots off first. At three o'clock a bell rings, everyone springs to life, running and laughing and unaware of what they'd been doing..."

"Then something took hold of my mind, and it pulled me... down a long, steel-plated hallway, marked with rust-colored handprints. It became narrower and narrower, and at the end... hooks and chains, the smell of rot, flies crawling on lips and eyelids. Decapitated cows wandering listlessly, the stumps of their severed necks opening and closing like mouths, vomiting clouds of horseflies and hornets. And the kill floor, strewn with fingers and toes. And... a faceless mound, marbled pink, white. The fleshy pile, ragged, raw muscle and gristle and grease... it rears and unfolds itself into a vast maw... and

the people walk in... a soft lipless mouth, rows of maggots hanging like teeth, a long throat that stretches into infinity..."

"Tell what you did then." It was Fox's voice. Jimmy jumped to his feet, opened his mouth to explain what he was doing there, but Fox interrupted. "Go ahead, Juna. Tell what you did then."

"It was horrible... I..."

"You offered yourself to It, didn't you? Offered yourself to the Meat God, the King of Flies, the Flesh That Devours. Begged it for power in exchange for service. Am I wrong?" It was the first time Jimmy had ever heard Fox sound angry.

"I..."

"Admit it." Fox paced around the cage as he spoke. "You expected this entity to be something you could bargain with. Something you could outwit. Something you could trade favors with, a fast track to knowledge and strength if you didn't mind getting your hands dirty."

"All right. Yes. But it's different now." The Magician's voice was stronger, steadier. She didn't seem half-asleep anymore.

"Is it?"

"Yes! I saw the thing, I felt its... its breath on my soul. My God... I fouled myself and maybe I'll always be tainted, but all I want now is to send that abortion back where it came from. I'll fight it to the end. I'll fight it. Just give me a chance." She staggered to her feet, gripped the mesh of the cage.

Fox looked at Jimmy. "I put her here because this place is so close to the Meat God that magic is difficult to make," he said, "but she can't stay for much longer, or the thing will sense her presence." Jimmy nodded, not sure he understood. "Our options are few and we could use the help. This is your town, Jimmy. Your people. What do you think? Can we trust her?"

He wanted to say he didn't know. No adult had ever invited him to participate in one of their arguments before. He looked at the Magician, barely able to hold herself upright. Humbled, defeated, eyes downcast. And she reminded him of himself. Of how beaten he felt after the local bullies had their fun with him, how shamed he felt when his mother and father brushed his fears and aspirations aside like crumbs. How foolish he felt when his teachers sent him back to his desk after he'd failed miserably to solve some math problem at the blackboard. He knew that feeling, and he knew it came with a determination to never make the same mistake again.

"Yes. I think... yes."

Fox stared at Jimmy for what seemed like a long while. Then Fox's left ear twitched. "All right then," he said. "She and I need to talk. I'll see you at home."

When he got to the house, Jimmy hopped off his bike before it came to a full stop. He slowed down as he entered, catching the screen door so it wouldn't slam shut behind him. He didn't expect his mother to be waiting in the living room. He'd imagined that he would slip inside, grab a few important things and slip out again. But when he saw her he couldn't keep himself from approaching.

"Mom," he said, his voice cracking, "I need to tell you something..."

His mother looked at him quizzically. She was holding bag of trash; something was leaking out of the bottom and creating a dark stain on the carpet. She didn't seem to notice.

"Mom," Jimmy said. "I have to go away. I have to leave town because Fox wants me to do something that I don't want to and... well, I wanted to say... remember last year when you

and Dad said I'd be having a little brother or sister soon? Remember? And I got mad and said I didn't want it and I ran put of the house? Well I..." He sniffed. "I wanted to say I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I really am. I —"

She dropped the bag, crossed her arms. "You're the one they talk about in the hotbox," she said. "Aren't you? The boy who won't go to Meat Church? What was your name again? No, names don't matter any more."

"Mom?" He rubbed the tears from his eyes.

His father entered the room. "Oh. Have we met? Are you — you live here, too?"

She blinked at him. "Yes. It doesn't matter. Today's the day. We all become It."

"That's the boy." His father stood next to his mother. They didn't look at each other, they looked only at him. "That's the one we need to bring. The one that Our Lord of Butchered Flesh has been waiting for."

They moved toward him, calmly, patiently, and a pink, watery liquid was dripping from their hands. Even as Jimmy ran out the door, climbed shakily onto his bike, he was wondering if he could ever forget the putrid stink of the juices dribbling from his parents' fingers.

The metal hallway leading into the Processing Center was very long, and its plated walls made sounds bounce around at odd angles. There was a faint humming that sounded almost like music.

"Wait," Jimmy said.

Fox stopped walking. "Do you want one more story, then, before you do what has to be done?"

"Yes. Yeah, just one more, please."

"All right then. This one is called:

The Whispers in the Alley

Once there was a boy named Jimmy. Jimmy's father was the manager at a meatpacking plant, and his mother was in charge of the plant's finances. Jimmy was very unhappy because it seemed as if his mother and father didn't like each other anymore, and didn't like him, either. After school Jimmy would ride his bike to the edge of town where his parents worked, and try to imagine what his parents were doing inside.

One day Jimmy was coasting alongside the chain link fence in the back of the plant, when he thought he heard someone calling his name. He stopped his bike and walked up to the fence. And then he heard it again: "Jimmy..." It was a faint voice, not much more than a whisper. It seemed to be coming from the other side of the fence, where there was an alley between two of the plant's larger buildings.

"Jimmy..."

There was a gap in the fence where someone had once cut through some of the links. Jimmy was able to separate the edges and slip through.

"Jimmy..."

Jimmy followed the sound of the voice, walking slowly down the alley, holding his hand over his nose and mouth because of the stink. At the far end was a kind of loading dock, and a long row of Dumpsters and a huge pile of sagging trash bags. Jimmy walked closer, following the whispers. He found a small green trash bag toward the bottom of the pile, with grease and blood spots all over it.

"In here, Jimmy," whispered the voice, and Jimmy could see the bag move as the thing inside it spoke. "Help me."

"Where did you come from?" Jimmy asked the bag, crouching down to hear it more clearly.

"I was born, same as you," said the thing. But I was born alone, with no one to talk to. If you'll be my friend, and tell me stories, I'll do great favors for you."

So Jimmy brought the bag home. The thing asked many questions, and Jimmy told it how unhappy he was. The thing in the bag said it could make Jimmy happy again, that it could make his parents forget about being mad all the time. It told Jimmy to untie the bag and reach inside, and he did. He only put the tips of his fingers in, and immediately Jimmy felt something cold and wet. He yanked his hand out and saw, stuck to his little finger, the tiniest bit of raw, greasy meat.

"Feed this to your parents," the thing in the bag told him, "And they won't be angry anymore."

Jimmy thought and thought about this, and decided he would bury the meat, and then take the thing to the river and throw it in. But when his father got home he shouted at Jimmy for not putting away his bike, and when his mother got home she yelled at his father for something Jimmy couldn't understand, and the two of them began their usual argument about someone called "Miss Carey" and Jimmy decided he'd do what the thing in the bag said after all. So he dropped the little bit of meat into the Crock-Pot where dinner was simmering. Neither his mother nor father seemed to notice anything different about the meal. Jimmy wasn't hungry, so he threw away his food when nobody was looking.

The next morning, Jimmy came down to breakfast to see his mother and father sitting at the table. For the first time in as long as he could remember, they were talking to each other in calm, polite tones. This seemed like a miracle to him. But then he noticed that every so often his mother would look at his father with a strange expression on her face, as if she wasn't sure who he was. And he caught his father, now and again, with the same expression. This scared Jimmy. So that night he took the bag back to the alley at the meatpacking plant and tossed it into one of the Dumpsters. And as the bag fell, it kept whispering, "Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy..."

But that wasn't the end of the story. Because the thing in the bag had grown stronger on what it had taken from Jimmy's parents. It found others, and tricked them, and when they fed on its flesh, it fed on their spirits. Soon it had emptied several people of their memories, their stories, the things that made them who they were. And then it had slaves that carried it deep into the plant, and they brought more people to taste its offerings; any who were able to resist got chopped to pieces and fed raw to the Meat. And it grew stronger and bigger, and soon everyone in town was feeding on it, and it was feeding on everyone.

Everyone except Jimmy. Because Jimmy's friend Fox had come to town. And he protected Jimmy from the Meat. In the end it would be up to Jimmy, who had been first to feed the Meat, to kill the thing. Fox had figured out a way to do it. But they had to do it soon, because the Meat had found a way grow little bits of itself inside the people whose minds it had hollowed out. The Meat had first tried it with the body of a little baby, changing it into something the Meat could understand. Soon it would do the same to all its slaves. And then the Meat would have hundreds of bodies and would be unstoppable.

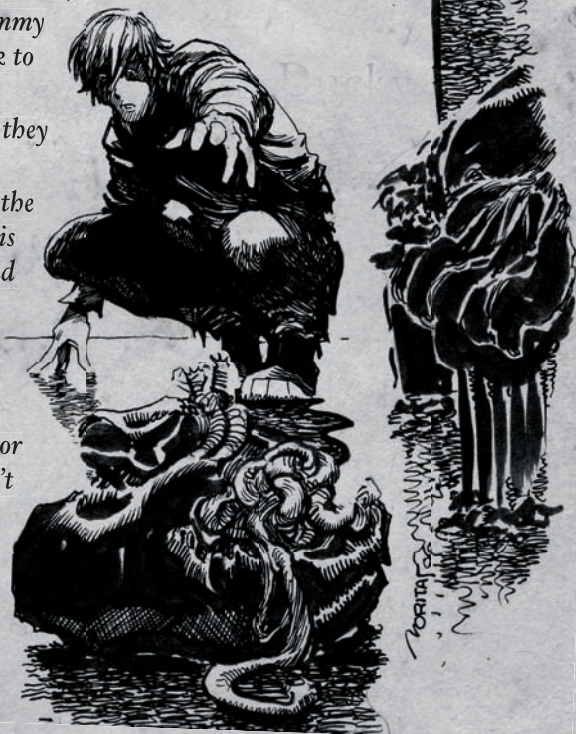
"And now the time has come," Fox finished.

"Are you really the same Fox I used to talk to when I was a little kid?"

"Does that matter?"

"I guess not." The echoing chorus of flies and flying insects was louder now. "I think I'm ready."

"I would do it if I could," Fox said. "But I'm a magician. My stories are too strong, they would make that thing too powerful, make it unbeatable."



"Sure," Jimmy replied. They had reached the end of the line. Jimmy stopped at the door. "Will I see my parents again?"

"I'm not certain," Fox said. "But everything that made your parents who they were is inside the Meat." Fox didn't look like a fox any more; he was a tall man with red hair, dressed something like a cowboy, in a long, reddish-brown duster coat and wide-brimmed hat. He had a pistol holstered on each hip. The lady magician walked next to him, alert and self-assured now, looking something like a nurse because she was dressed all in white.

Jimmy said, "I can feel them in there." He bent down to grab the handle, then stood up, raising the gate. It slid upwards like a garage door. "Can you come in the room with me?"

Fox shook his head. "Once things get going, the Meat will call on its servants to defend it," Fox said. "Juna and I will have to stay out here to keep them from getting to you."

"Oh. All right." Jimmy raised the door until it was just higher than his head.

Juna knelt next to him, placed a hand on his shoulder. "Jimmy," she said, "I'll go in with you if you want me to." Behind her, Fox crossed his arms and frowned.

Jimmy looked into her eyes. "No," he said. "I didn't think I could do this. I was going to run away today."

"Why didn't you?" she asked him.

He licked his lips. "I thought... I thought if I run, I'll never be able to stop running. And I'll always... in my head I'll always carry everything that happened here, without knowing how it all ends."

"That's my boy," Fox whispered. He laid a hand on Jimmy's other shoulder, gave it a squeeze. Then the two adults stepped back. "Good luck, Jimmy," Fox said. "I know you can do it. I'm proud of you."

Jimmy walked through gateway. The door slid closed, softly, after he passed.

He didn't hear what they said next:

"Does he stand a chance?" Juna retrieved a palm-sized mirror from her pocket as she asked.

"Of surviving? No. The thing will swallow him whole. That's what I'm counting on."

"You are?"

"I've been preparing him for weeks. Seeding his mind with stories. Special stories, carrying subliminal engrams to traumatize the creature with conflicting accounts of its own existence. I crafted them as best I could, based on what I've learned about its nature. It's the best hope we've got. You can't fight a thing like this conventionally..."

"Maybe," she answered sharply. "Or maybe the time you've spent in this thing's sphere of influence has warped your judgment, and you just gave it exactly what it wanted." She held the mirror in her left hand and moved it in a slow figure-eight, frowning. "Something's not right..."

Fox shrugged, drew his guns and cocked the triggers. "The world is just information, Juna. Stories. When you eat something, you're making its story part of your story. When you work magic, you substitute one story for another. But we'll have to debate all that later, if there is a later." He handed one of the guns to Juna.

"With luck, spells will come easier once the Meat is distracted. If not..." He shrugged again. "They're coming. It will be the housewifeflies who arrive first. Ignore their eyes and aim for the thorax."

INTRUDERS™

ENCOUNTERS WITH THE ABYSS

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INTRUDERS™

ENCOUNTERS WITH THE ABYSS

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INTRODUCTION

*I've seen horrors . . . horrors that you've seen.
But you have no right to call me a murderer. You have a right to kill me.
You have a right to do that . . . but you have no right to judge me.
It's impossible for words to describe what is necessary to those who do not
know what horror means. Horror. Horror has a face . . . and you must
make a friend of horror. Horror and mortal terror are your friends.
If they are not, then they are enemies to be feared.
They are truly enemies.*

— Colonel Walter E. Kurtz, *Apocalypse Now!*,
written by John Milius and Francis Ford Coppola

Horror.

Though mages deal with all manner of terrible, abhorrent things — strange blasphemies from beyond the reach of recorded history, unholy abominations aborted from the seething, bleeding mass of That Which Is Not — the horror of **Mage: The Awakening** is not found in these things. Rather, these provide the mirror against which **Mage's** horror might be reckoned.

Why is it that human horror is still so powerful in this game? Why is it that the ability of people to enact violence on one another, of people to degrade themselves and those around them in an effort to fill some internal void, that simple human calamity and tragedy are capable of holding such horror for the Awakened? How can human horrors possibly hold a candle to the sanity-shattering vileness spawned in a nothingness beyond human understanding?

As Above, So Below. As Within, So Without.

In the macrocosm of the Awakened world, the monstrous things mages encounter hold the same place as the very human horrors of mortal existence. The things of the Abyss, while obscenely varied and uncaringly violent, are still nothing more than the monstrous potentiality of the human condition. The Abyss takes root in human endeavor, human emotion, human experience, human degradation.

Some avenues of Awakened thought that suggest that the Abyss's presence in the mortal world is the reason for the misery that exists here. When a force anxiously severs instances of magic and wonder, pruning them away, leaving only the cold gray of "reality," which is the greater horror? That force? Or its handiwork?

The truly wise among the Awakened understand that these things affect one another. If the Abyss has helped to shape the darkness of the world today, then it must also be acknowledged that the hubris of men has brought the Abyss into the world. On some level — though rare is the mage willing to speak in such terms — the Awakened themselves are responsible for the horror of the world.

This should be reason enough to fight the powers of the Abyss. Understand, then, the horror that faces the Awakened, though too few mages are ever willing to acknowledge it for what it is. Mages possess tremendous powers, yet they squander those gifts on petty factionalism, infighting and the preservation of secrets. The horror of **Mage** lies in the fact that the Awakened are caught in a double-bind: they cannot openly work their magics, for fear of the influx of the Abyss, and yet by keeping their magics hoarded away, they do not make the world a better place.

This book is about stories. The stories that feature the Abyss, and the ways in which it squeezes into the world like a virus, puncturing that which it would intrude and squirting some of itself into that host, poisoning it from within. The Abyss, like the virus, breeds more of itself within its victim, hoping one day to rupture its host — leaving only itself in existence.

Though all of these intruders are from the Utter Nothingness of the Abyss, they have one thing in common — they are grounded in very, very human horror. Abuse. Creative genius mocked. Incest. Insanity. For nearly every ailment and difficulty humans suffer, it might be fairly claimed that there is an Abyssal manifestation, leaving the Awakened to face the question:

Are these ills caused by the influence of the Abyss? Or do our miseries simply invite it into the Fallen World?

Researching the Abyss

Chances are good that other people – usually other mages, but sometimes even Sleepers – have encountered the intruders found in this book before. It might even be argued that the recording and preservation of this sort of information is one of the primary directives of the Mysterium and Guardians of the Veil.

The research rules on p. 55 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook** present some basics for performing research, but this is generally research of the mundane sort. Below, we present an optional set of research rules, an extrapolation of the basic research rules, to reflect the secretive and oft-times confusing nature of Abyssal manifestations.

Each entry in this book is accompanied by a sidebar titled “Researching the [Intruder Name],” with the following format:

Capping Skill: Though this research roll uses the basic rules presented on p. 55 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**, it possesses a capping Skill. In essence, the researcher’s player (and those of any assistants, when using Teamwork) rolls Intelligence + Academics or Intelligence + the Skill listed here, whichever is less. If the researcher does not possess the Skill, his player rolls Intelligence –3, for an unskilled roll.

Action: All research rolls are extended actions. In addition, this section will tell how many total successes are necessary to discover the information.

Any given library is going to present limited resources for discovering this information. A researcher seeking information about Abyssal intrusions (and perhaps other similar occult lore) may only make a number of research rolls equal to the rating of the Library Merit +1 before needing to seek another Library.

Research Time: Though normal research rolls are made once every 30 minutes, the kinds of topics a mage delving into Abyssal manifestations must go through are wide-ranging and varied. Indeed, much research begins before the researcher even knows he is dealing with an Abyssal manifestation. This indicates the time between such rolls. Most times vary between an hour and a day per roll. The time listed is the basic time; the time after the semicolon is the research time for those mages who are doing research in Libraries they themselves own through the use of the Library Merit.

Appropriate Libraries: Most of the information to be found on the manifestations included in this book is not available in public libraries and the like. This lists

the areas of focus a Library must have (see the Library Merit, **Mage: The Awakening**, p. 85, or **World of Darkness: Second Sight**, p. 113) in order to allow research on that topic there.

At the Storyteller’s discretion, a bit of information may be found on some manifestations that are usually noticed by mortals. In these cases, a mage might begin researching among more mundane sources of information, but these rapidly dry up. Each such roll is made at a cumulative –1 penalty, usually forcing the researcher to abandon a fruitless Internet or mundane library search and go seeking the specialized lore kept by his cabal or other seekers into Mystery.

Possible Modifiers: Potential modifiers to the research roll are listed here.

Information by Successes: Part of the fun of playing through research is the slow revelation of information. To aid in this, this section lists bits and scraps of information, revealing what the researcher may be discovering, by accumulated successes.

How to Use This Book

We believe ourselves safely ensconced, protected from the terrible Beyond, when in reality it is always here, always seeking a way in, always finding it and unleashing horror when it does. This book is about the stories that can be told about those eventualities, and how to tell them.

Chapter One: Otherworldly Dread presents a wealth of useful advice for using not simply the intruders in these pages in your chronicle, but for finding a place for the Abyss as a whole there. Interspersed with a variety of perspectives from Awakened, Sleepers, spirits and everything in between, this chapter also presents a short history of interactions with the Abyss and hints at previous manifestations. And, of course, where exists a thing of power, there will be those who desire to use it, so this chapter also touches on those who seek into the terrible Void for the fulfillment of their desires: how they do so, what they seek and the rewards they invariably sow.

The next section lays bare the strange, unwholesome manifestations of the Abyss. In these pages are twisted horrors, strange families and breeds of men warped by the Abyss and even the very un-laws of the Void made manifest in the Fallen World. These are the things mages whisper about to one another, the things that apprentices must be made to fear – but carefully, because all too often what is awakened in the young mage isn’t caution, but curiosity. These entries use the following formatting:

Name: This is the primary name by which the entity is most often known. It is followed by a variety of other names by which it may be referred to in research, spoken

of by spirits or described in more mundane terms.

· *Introduction*: After a short piece of fiction that helps set the tone for the manifestation, the intruder is described in general terms, touching on anything that might be commonly known.

· *Form*: This describes how the manifestation appears to senses both magical and mundane. The things of the Abyss are both canny and subtle; they are almost never what they appear to be.

· *Means of Passage*: This describes the set of circumstances that permit the intruder access to the Fallen World, whether that be physical reality, Twilight, the Shadow or even the Astral realms.

· *Means of Intrusion*: Each manifestation does different things once it has punctured the barrier between the Abyss and the Fallen World. This section focuses on what the manifestation's modus operandi is while there — the thing's goals; and how it goes about achieving them. This section generally ends in a sidebar titled "Mortal Response," which touches on how Sleepers react to these signs of the manifestation's presence, whether they call the CDC, dismiss the thing as a prank or remember it enough to allow an urban legend to develop.

· *Means of Exile*: Likewise, not all Abyssal manifestations can be banished the same way. Certainly, some must be destroyed, but the means by which this can be accomplished vary widely for each such intruder. This section generally ends in a sidebar titled "Researching the [Intruder Name]," which presents the research rules for mages who seek information on this creature. This invariably requires access to a variety of strange collections, usually reflected in the Library Merit. See above for details on how to use these sidebars.

· *Story Hooks*: This describes a number of short story hooks, ideas for using the intrusion in your chronicle.

· *Traits*: Finally, some of the intrusions have physical (or simply spiritual) forms that require some set of statistics. We present those here.

Useful Sources

The very nature of the weird and horrific is in its departure from normal frames of reference. Thus, the Storyteller is encouraged to hunt up stories — fiction or otherwise — that astound or horrify her, and look for a way to bring that to the table. Below, we present some of the inspirations used in this book as a starting point.

Nonfiction

The Fortean Times. A periodical named for Charles Fort, this magazine carries on his studies of the strange and unusual. Though its headlines often end up reading like

something from one of the lurid tabloids on the news-shelves, the magazine prides itself on the correct identification of original sources — a defining trait of Charles Fort's own inquiries into the strange and unusual. That said, the magazine does not claim that any of these stories are true or untrue; it simply presents the firsthand accounts of strange tales, and does not attempt to demonstrate the "objective reality" of any of them. More often than not, this is the sort of thing you'd never find in one of the supermarket rags, either — most of it is much stranger than fiction.

Fiction

Books of Blood short stories, by Clive Barker. Okay, nearly anything by Clive Barker, who is a master of strange, occult, otherworldly horror.

The Invisibles, by Grant Morrison. Practically required reading for **Mage: The Awakening** to begin with, this excellent comic series has a huge variety of strange and weird phenomena that might serve as inspiration for Abyssal manifestations. The Archons of the Outer Church come immediately to mind.

The various works of HP Lovecraft. Stop. Don't think about pantheons of strange elder beings, intelligences that project through time and all the rest of it. That knowledge won't help you here — there is altogether too much sense made of Lovecraft's universe when viewed through such a perspective. Instead, narrow your focus to what is presented to his protagonists: strange, unearthly manifestations that are simply ripples of the cosmos impinging on our inconsequential world not out of some kind of maliciousness, but often *because* we are beneath notice. That is the Abyss.

House of Leaves, by Mark Z. Danielewski. A strange, twisted read, with what seem to be a thousand hints at things going on behind the narrative, *House of Leaves* is highly recommended. This kind of confusing, half-madness, half-academia richly embodies precisely the sort of feel that comes of doing research into Abyssal phenomenon. How can you trust the writings of those who witnessed the events that drive mortals mad? And who precisely is doing the writing? The House, of course. Always the House.

Movies

The Evil Dead. Something of a cult classic, this movie's core premise — that dismissing the mysterious as something frivolous or funny can result in horror — is quite appropriate to this book.

In the Mouth of Madness, by John Carpenter. An author touches on something unreal and brings it into this world through his writings. Plenty of chills, and the image of

a maddened protagonist who has scrawled protective symbols on every surface of his padded cell is too good not to use.

The Thing, by John Carpenter. A fascinating look at the horror fear can create, the paranoia and suspicion that the appearance of the creature in this movie causes are far scarier than the thing itself. Certainly, they think it's from

outer space, but that's a reasonable conclusion that many Sleepers might have about Abyssal manifestations.

Ringu, *Ju-on*, their English versions (*The Ring* and *The Grudge*) and similar Japanese horror films. Though they are ostensibly about ghosts, they are gloriously strange, capturing the kind of freakish feel that should accompany Abyssal intrusions.





CHAPTER ONE: OTHERWORLDLY DREAD

He had stared at the mirror for what must have been nine days now. Not all the time, of course, just for 10 minutes an hour. The rest of the time was spent preparing the materials. He had stared at his reflection for so long he no longer knew it. Paradoxically, it became something other than him, a stranger whose every pore was intimately familiar.

For the third and sixth day of the nine he had taken mushrooms that weren't listed in any mycology book. Even now, he couldn't fully remember what he had seen on those days, but he couldn't control the involuntary shudder that traveled his spine when he came close to grasping that memory. To some, that bodily reflex would signify horror. To him, it meant ecstasy.

Now, the rite was near completion. He did what had to be done with the rune-marked sword, and raised his left hand — his sinister hand, as the Latin would have it — and made the mudra. He had killed a man dear to him to learn the hand sign from the man's restless spirit, but the tears he had shed as he forced his friend's shade to divulge the secret now served as a libation. The time was finally upon him. He no longer saw the stranger in the mirror. The silver had gone black, and something writhed there, reflecting...what? His soul? Or something else?

Black tendrils poured from the mirror onto the floor, as if it were a window onto an ocean storm. In mere moments, it would touch him, and he would have his answer.

Pity he no longer remembered the question.

Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate.
— Dante Alighieri, the Divine Comedy, Inferno

The Abyss.

It is the emptiness that stands between the two worlds that were once one, the wound that resulted when man's hubris tore creation itself asunder. Many Awakened like to think of the Abyss as a nonexistence, but that perception is one of comfort and convenience; it dismisses the Abyss to the level of something less than the universe with which we are familiar. In fact, the Abyss is more of a separate and distinct cosmos, made up of its own substance, filled with its own biology and subject to its own laws. It just happens to be a cosmos that hungers for more than the nothing it was given and of which it is composed, a stillborn reality that intends to glut itself on life and being until it possesses those things in truth, rather than just in seeming.

In this, the Fallen World is like an old house, dilapidated and worn. The Abyss is the cold wind that blows in through the gaps near the windows; it is the rain that seeps into the walls and foundations. The Abyss is Outside, the undefined and infinite reaches of That Which Is without, seeking desperately to get in. In time, the house must either be fortified and made to resist this intrusion, or it will collapse under the weight of the elements. Regardless, the Outside will keep trying to get in, for that is its nature.

But *how* does the Abyss encroach upon the Fallen World? What are the rules of the Abyss's intrusion? Despite what some might think, the Void *does* have its own laws, which are as inviolate to its denizens as the fact that, in this world, the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. And, just as the rising and setting of the sun, these rules are so intrinsic to the entities of the Abyss that they scarcely consider the rules; they are the physical and magical laws of the gaping chasm between the worlds, nothing more and nothing less.

The Helpless Masses

This book was written with the Awakened in mind, though ordinary mortals can certainly run afoul of the Abyss and its denizens; in fact, it might be argued that they run afoul of the Abyss more often, denied the awareness of its dangers as they are. Of course, any game involving Sleepers against the Abyss probably has a much different flavor than one involving mages. Mages, after all, can actually take steps to fight directly against some of the more trivial Abyssal horrors; Sleepers rarely have such recourse.

Instead, such a chronicle likely focuses on clashes with those ordinary people sworn in service to malevolent and alien intelligences — after all, a crazed cultist with a gun is terrifying if you're a paranormal investigator with no supernatural abilities to speak of. This makes the rare indirect (or *almost* direct) confrontation with Something Unspeakable all the more exceptional and terrifying. And, should an intruder fully manifest in the Fallen World, such characters must use knowledge, cunning and sheer resolve to triumph, or even just survive, rather than resorting to the use of paranormal abilities.

As Sleeper characters, unknowing of the great struggles of the Awakened, end up with nervous tics, prematurely white hair, paranoid delusions and wounds that modern medicine cannot heal, they can continue to search from the moldering tomes and ancient amulets that bar these timeless horrors from our vulnerable world. Or, perhaps, they finally break under the strain, and become those supplicating themselves before such powers, or maybe even become those seeking to master them...

Infection

The Abyss doesn't simply manifest within the Fallen World; that would be far too simple and, were it such a possibility, would have long since led to a confrontation that may well have laid waste to the cosmos. Instead, the Abyss must insinuate itself, bit by bit, into our reality. Like a virus, the Abyss seeks vulnerabilities to attack, gradually weakening resistance and giving rise to sickness within the Fallen World itself. In some cases, these vulnerable systems are forgotten corners of the world: sleepy and long-isolated villages, fathomless caverns or ancient forests. In other areas, such systems might be weak minds or damaged souls.

When introducing the Abyss into your stories, consider the means by which it infects the Fallen World. Every entity native to the great gulf between the Fallen and Supernal Worlds has its own means of egress, its own vector into the universe as we know it. And, like a disease, each such being begins to spread upon contacting our world, growing steadily more powerful and more pervasive — sometimes, such entities even reproduce. Of course, all save the most potent Abyssal beings (which,

thankfully, only very rarely manage to intrude, and even then only in part, into the Fallen World) must exercise some modicum of caution in their invasions, lest various forces, both sentient and otherwise, eradicate them or otherwise banish them back to their source.

Twilight

The state of Twilight is an almost ideal place for an Abyssal being to enter this reality. The Twilight is, metaphysically speaking, close to the Material Realm — closer than Shadow, at any rate, and *far* closer than the Abyss itself, though not so close that the entity need necessarily worry about constantly contending with willworkers and others bound and determined to either destroy it or drive it back into the endless dark. For all save the most voracious of Abyssal creatures that must feed on spiritual power in the form of Essence in order to survive, there are enough ghosts and spirits near at hand to subsist on. Closeness to the Material Realm also allows many such beings to perceive the world of the Sleepers, and so extend unseen influence over them. Some entities fashion cults for themselves, while others give rise to dangerous lunatics and others still subtly inspire modes of thought that contribute to the rise of the Abyss and its triumph over the Fallen World.

Twilight, however, is not wholly safe for the denizens of the Abyss. The Awakened are known to walk at times in the Fallen World's immaterial reflection, and some ghosts and Twilight spirits are, in fact, quite powerful; some more so than those lesser Abyssal intruders that manage to slip through the tiny cracks that allow them escape from the boundless dark. Thus, the most cunning such entities find means of concealing themselves or otherwise ensuring their own safety. For any given Abyssal being, this could, for example, mean hiding in an inconspicuous place, striking bargains with Twilight-bound spirits or perhaps disguising itself as, or even somehow possessing, a ghost.

Shadow

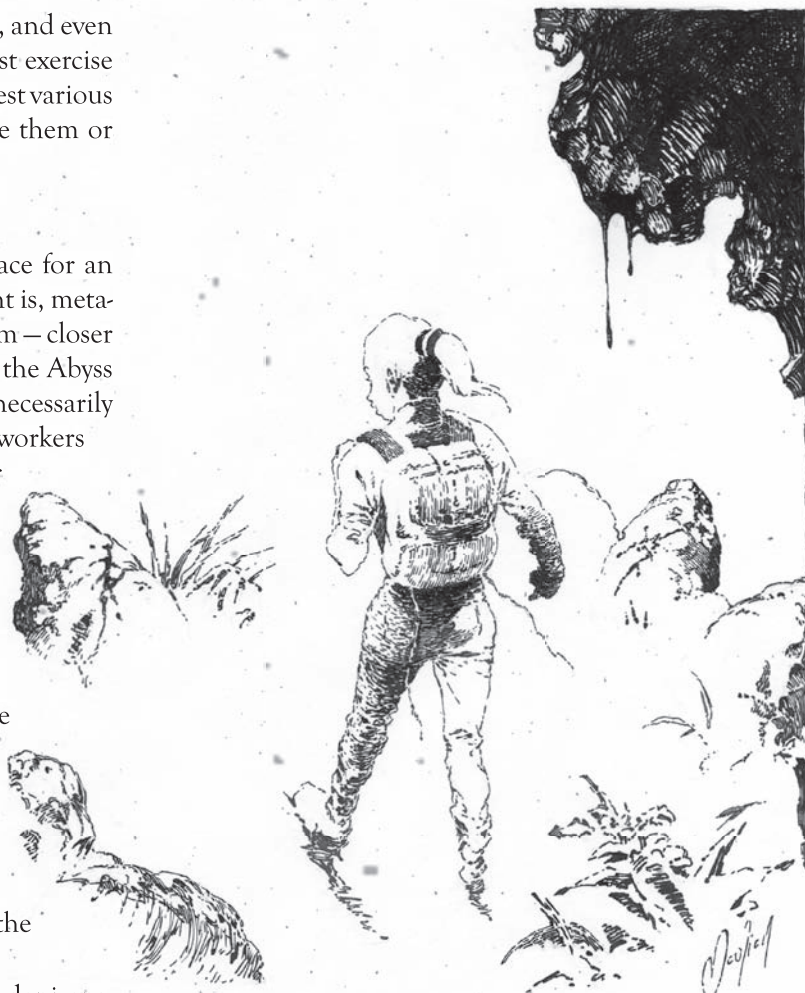
Although the state of existence most remote from material reality in the Fallen World, Shadow can also be appealing to Abyssal entities as a place to thrive outside of the endless Void of their native realm. Sources of Essence are relatively plentiful, provided that the entity in question is capable of deriving sustenance by consuming ephemera, and there are a number of spirits that will readily serve a more powerful being, out of fear of destruction if nothing else. A few locales in the Shadow Realm are

virtually devoid of other spirits, as well, so an intruder might find such a place and entrench itself there.

Given its relative remoteness from material existence, the Shadow is the state to which some of the more potent Abyssal escapees end up fleeing, since many of them are incapable of sustaining themselves any closer to physical reality — at least, not without genuinely extreme measures. Of course, powerful gods and spirits, those not born of the Abyss and resentful of such interlopers, walk in Shadow, as well, and so would-be invaders must exercise caution, lest they fall prey to those native to the ephemeral realm.

Material Reality

Given the choice, most Abyssal entities prefer material existence (as much as they are truly capable of such, at any rate) to any other state. However, a number of factors conspire to make this a less-than-ideal arrangement for the denizens of the Abyss. Perhaps most importantly, the majority of them simply lack the resources necessary to incarnate within the Material Realm. For most, such a feat would require esoteric alignments of mystic forces — stellar conjunctions, ley line confluences and the like



— or else a massive continuous supply of Essence, and a number of usually difficult, and likely dangerous and morally repugnant acts on the part of mortal servitors.

Further contributing to Abyssal entities' difficulties in achieving material substance is the very real threat of destruction. While normal materialized spirits return to the Shadow if disincorporated through damage, Abyssal beings do not belong *anywhere* within the Fallen World, including within the Shadow. While some would automatically reconstitute within the Abyss, others would be destroyed outright if their physical manifestations were to succumb to violence. While what they possess cannot rightly be called "life," most of the native entities of the Abyss would rather keep what little existence they *do* have than to have none at all.

The rewards of material existence are substantial, however: access to Hallows, cults of followers close at hand and, of course, the other pleasures of the flesh. Some Abyssal entities revel in the ability to make use of earthly technologies or consume terrestrial food, for instance, or even just to experience touch within material reality. The desires of such creatures are as varied as they themselves are, and there is nothing preventing one from deriving satisfaction from things that even we would consider banal, though their precise *reasons* for doing so are likely beyond mortal comprehension.

More intelligent Abyssal creatures have been known to treat material incarnation as a rare treat, similar to visiting a fine garden or a game preserve. According to these creatures, the world as it is exists now is the result of incessant, subtle Abyssal influence. The modern world is a place of absolutes that is the equivalent of a finely pruned shrub for these creatures—the result of carefully snipping away

potentiality, consuming possibility into the Abyss, until there is nothing left but the gray misery that is the world. Most mages dismiss this ridiculousness, of course, but for some, it strikes a little too close to home.

Because their Bans tend to be less restrictive than those of more powerful entities, lesser Abyssal spirits often have an easier time of achieving material existence than their more potent brethren. This isn't to say that it is *easy*, however: merely easier. The Fallen World, by its nature, rejects the non-being of the Abyss, and, from the least to the greatest among Abyssal entities, the Fallen World's laws are anathema. Only by bending, or even breaking, the rules that hold the cosmos together, can something native to the Void find purchase within physical reality.

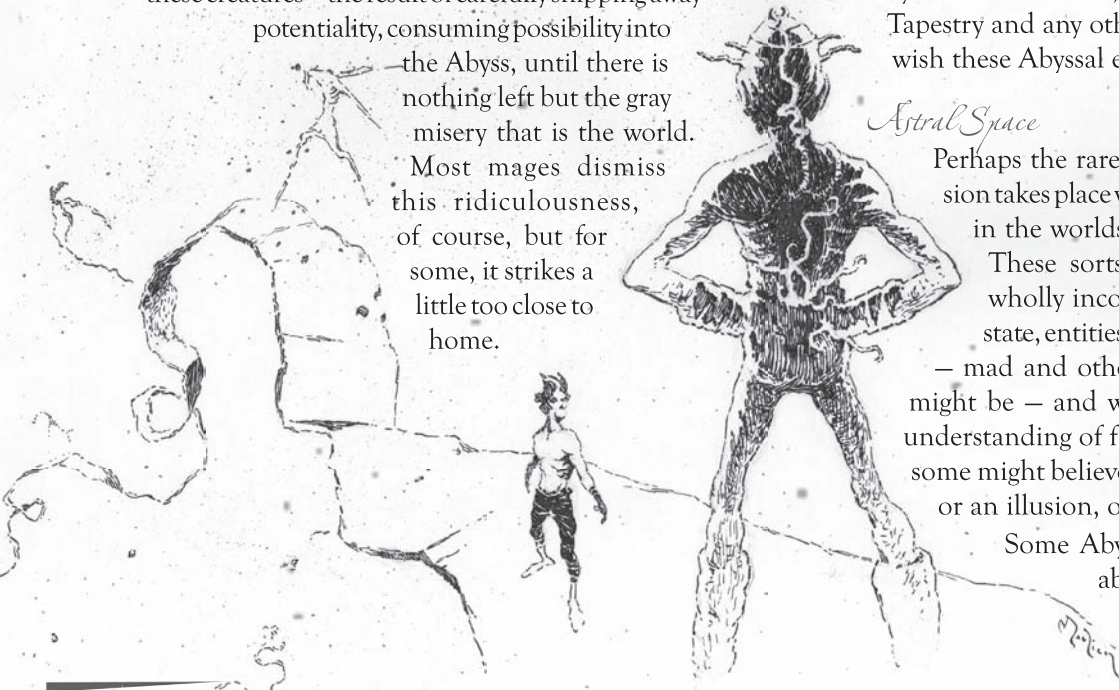
Intruders seeking incarnation within material reality often do so in out-of-the-way places: cavern complexes, the ocean depths, high mountains and so on. Still, even places inhabited by humans can be quite isolated, provided that the spirit is willing and able to conceal itself or else otherwise find a means of evading the notice of those that would do the spirit harm. Perhaps the entity feigns benevolence and wins the trust and admiration of an extended family inhabiting a lonely homestead, and they come to think of it as a sort of "guardian angel." Maybe the entity infests the solitary cell in a harsh old prison, making pacts with the most disturbed inmates to be locked up in "the pit" for weeks on end, offering freedom and power in exchange for service.


Ultimately, no intruder can long maintain itself among the bustle of ordinary humanity; the chance of being discovered by someone who will wish to destroy or banish it is simply too great. Instead, such beings must insinuate themselves into the Fallen World slowly, subjugating slaves or (as distasteful as most such beings reckon things) making allies with which to protect themselves from the scrutiny of the Awakened, the spirits native to the Tapestry and any other creatures that might wish these Abyssal entities ill.

Astral Space

Perhaps the rarest sort of Abyssal intrusion takes place within the Astral reaches, in the worlds of the mind and soul. These sorts of beings tend to be wholly incorporeal in their natural state, entities of thought and emotion — mad and otherworldly though those might be — and without any appreciable understanding of fleshly existence. In fact, some might believe that such a state is a lie or an illusion, or perhaps even a myth.

Some Abyssal beings possess the ability to lurk in individual Oneiros. In certain in-





stances, this is part and parcel with the possession of the person in whose dream realm the entity resides, though such is not always, or even necessarily often, the case. Still, whether directly possessing an individual or merely inhabiting her Oneiros, such a creature is almost certainly attempting to exert some manner of influence, subtle or blatant, upon its host. In fact, certain particularly uncommon entities might use the refuge of the human spirit as a staging ground from which to wreak all sorts of havoc in secret, returning to the shelter of the soul, to which few might pursue them, whenever trouble threatens.

The Temenos can be a frightening place for many Abyssal entities, as it encompasses so many of the archetypes that comprise the many different conceptions of reality. For entities saturated utterly with hatred and jealousy toward all That Which Is and are dedicated to consuming the variation and possibility of reality, a realm so filled with reminders of the existence enjoyed by the Fallen World can incite feelings of rage, covetousness and confusion. Still, there are those intruders that might manage to find a foothold within the Temenos. Some of them revel in the agonizing near-connection to the substance of the Tapestry, while others seek to undo its weave by attacking the concepts that comprise it.

Lastly, certain exceedingly rare intruders might enter the Dreamtime, interacting with beings and ideas as old as time, if not older, as well as those few mortal minds capable of accessing such a place. If, indeed, the Astral reaches are, metaphysically speaking, “near” the Abyss, then this is the closest that intruders might be to their native realm without actually returning. But why would an Abyssal entity want to be so distant from the material reality that the being craves? Some have no choice in the matter, being incapable of taking on “denser” shades of substance. Others prefer such a state, because of the seeming chaos and timelessness of the Dreamtime, or because they can interact with creatures there a bit closer in nature to themselves than would be found in other strata of the Fallen World.

The Underworld

If, indeed, any sort of intrusion is rarer than one in the Astral realms, it would be one found in the Underworld. So far removed from the Fallen World as to be nearly as distant as the Abyss itself, the Underworld nevertheless can have a certain appeal for Abyssal entities. Some might be capable of moving between the Underworld and one of the other, more accessible realms of the Tapestry, granting an entity a virtually guaranteed means of escape should things even go poorly. Other entities feast upon the souls of the dead, causing subtle disruptions in the spiritual landscape of other realms that can only be discerned by the most astute masters of the Death Arcanum.

Intruders that take sanctuary within the depths of the Underworld tend to be among the most antithetical to existence as we know it. While *all* beings of the Abyss despise the living, and hunger for what they possess, these sorts of intruders may well destroy life by their very passing, or otherwise inherently create circumstances deleterious to corporeal reality. They are also often numbered among the most primal and instinctual of Abyssal entities, being so suffused with their native realm’s nonexistence as to be instinctually attracted to that part of the Fallen World most alike to it.

But How Do You Stop It?

While it’s well and good, as a Storytelling device, to have an intruder that can escape to the Underworld or the Dreamtime (or that dwells in such a place perpetually), doing so can pose a lot of problems for the characters who want to banish or destroy the being. Not all characters are equally well suited to pursuing Abyssal quarry across the worlds, after all; many don’t even have the ability to cross the Gauntlet. So, how do you make use of those other realms without making an intrusion impossible to stop?

First of all, remember that characters can have allies that might be willing to help, more experienced mages with the ability to send the characters through the Gauntlet, for instance, to track down an intruder. Likewise, a mentor can instruct a character in the finer points of entering the Astral reaches through meditation, or may have access to an Artifact that can facilitate the process. Similarly, an object or place of power could open a doorway into the Shadow, or even to the Underworld, so that characters can carry on the hunt, even when their own abilities would otherwise be insufficient to the task. Of course, the perils inherent in going someplace such as the Underworld when one lacks the ability to leave it at will are well beyond considerable, but therein lay no small measure of the heroism of combating an intruder hiding there.

Also keep in mind that the denizens of the Void are bound by certain laws and restrictions, as inviolate to them as gravity is to the average human being. Perhaps an intruder that otherwise hides among the souls of the dead is forced to manifest in material reality on a given night, when the stars are aligned just so. Or, maybe, one that is deeply entrenched in the Temenos can be drawn out, into the Oneiros of a willworker, by enacting a certain ritual. An antagonist who can get away until it’s time for the final showdown is just fine; one that can escape the climactic confrontation is usually much less enjoyable.

Moving Between

In the event that an intruder finds a convenient location in which the Gauntlet is thin, the intruder might attempt to move between the worlds, alternating between material reality and either Twilight or Shadow, or perhaps even both. Some Abyssal entities have the ability to pass through the Gauntlet at will, without the need for a Hallow, locus or other place of power. Others, less common still, might be able to pass in and out of stranger realms, such as those found in Astral Space. The ability to penetrate the walls between worlds without any kind of assistance or mystic conjunction is, needless to say, a potent one. As powerful as such beings tend to be, however, they are also correspondingly rare.

Maybe a world-shifting intruder has a preferred realm to inhabit, or even one to which the being *must* return eventually. It might feed off of the ambient ephemera in Shadow, for example, or be incapable of indefinitely sustaining itself in the rarified atmosphere of the Astral reaches, and so make periodic returns to the material world. Others, however, have no particular limitation, and may come and go between all of the worlds available to them at will, unless prohibited from doing so by other forces, such as magic or the invocation of a Ban. Such beings can be anywhere, at any time, and most make use of their tremendous metaphysical mobility to the greatest possible advantage, striking at their enemies from unexpected angles and fleeing from powerful foes to sanctuaries in other worlds.

A Two-Way Road?

It is likely that a player is eventually going to ask what it takes to go to the Abyss, rather than just banishing Abyssal beings back to their native reality. This book, however, isn't intended to address that question. Indeed, journeys to the Abyss — as a destination, rather than an unremembered part of the road to the Realms Supernal during the Awakening — are practically unheard-of. While the occasional unreliable account of such a sojourn might crop up, such an undertaking would be legendary in both its scope and in the dangers to be faced.

In the end, a trek into the Abyss is not really a thing that should happen within the context of a chronicle. Instead, a mage might spend the entirety of the chronicle seeking passage into the Void, for the purposes of attempting the crossing to the Realms Supernal, only to make tearful goodbyes at the end of the last session of the game, knowing that, one way or the other, she

will never see the other characters again. For the time being, though, suffice it to say that the Abyss is so far beyond description as to render any attempt to codify it a virtual impossibility.

The great struggle of the Awakened is in the Fallen World: in the Abyss waits only madness, suffering and, if one is truly fortunate, death.

Combating the Abyss

There is no such thing as an invulnerable compelling antagonist. Even the mightiest Abyssal beings have their flaws and weaknesses. For instance, the Bans of more potent spirits tend to be extremely limiting or in some way potentially fatally harmful to the entity in question. But mechanics alone don't adequately define the shortcomings of an antagonist. The selfsame mad logic that makes an Abyssal denizen's movements so hard to predict can be turned against it, the great strength of its inborn madness turned into a liability.

It can be difficult to balance the need for the possibility of victory over the Abyss (or at least one or a few of the things originating within it) with the horror that the Void is meant to evoke. Hopelessness is an important tool in the creation of horror, but can make for less than enjoyable gaming if used improperly. Only you can determine what ratio of risk to reward best suits the characters, and players, in your game, and how much they're willing to sacrifice in what looks, right up until the end, like a futile struggle.

Some things to consider:

Bans

In the case of the most potent Abyssal natives, a Ban is the only way to, even temporarily, overcome such beings. Naturally, some Bans are easier to make use of than others, and some, while relatively simple, might be truly loathsome in their implementation. If the alternative to the full manifestation of one of the demon-gods of the Abyss is the slaughter of 77 innocent people, the question of which is the greater evil rapidly gets muddled.

Bans can also be used against lesser spirits of the Abyss, though such Bans tend to be both less grandiose and less harmful for the entity in question. Still, knowing that an Abyssal denizen cannot cross any threshold cut from fire-hardened oak, or that the sound of a particular tune, played on a bone flute, will compel a single service from it, can come in quite handy at times. Sometimes, even in dealing with the least among intruders, such knowledge can mean the difference between life, death and fates worse than death.

Perspectives on the Abyss: Atlantean

I never wanted anything to do with the Abyss. My mentor taught me that from Day-Fucking-One. He'd lost someone to a drawn-out struggle with something from the Abyss; he never really got into the details, but it killed him inside. All of the older mages that I've talked to around the Consilium said that he used to laugh before that. I've never so much as seen him smile.

When I sensed that something was wrong with Sif, I figured that it might have just been on account of the recent troubles with two of the other local cabals. I should've known better. We all should've. Whatever it was, it crept into the back of her soul and just started sinking its teeth in wherever it could. Later, after she died, we found out that it all started with the necklace that she'd inherited from her great-aunt six months before. We never even saw the thing. All we could do was follow the trail it left after it killed her. It was fucking horrible. I still can't think back to what happened with that kid on the farm without wanting to scream.

When it was all going down, I wished I knew more about the Abyss. When it was all said and done, I wished I knew less.

— Mithras, Mastigos Adamantine Arrow

Unfamiliarity

Even the most knowledgeable Abyssal being possesses little more than an academic understanding of the Fallen World. Such beings have dwelt in the hidden corners of this world for centuries or millennia, but they truly know little more about our world than we do about the world of ants. While we might categorize their castes and even predict their behaviors, we can't really get inside their thoughts, and so know the world as they do. So, too, for Abyssal intruders. They might understand that a human being is likely to react in a certain way to a given situation, and they might even possess an inkling of why, but the intellectual and emotional components of the mortal's decision-making process exist to such entities purely as abstractions.

One who would contend with an Abyssal intruder can use her familiarity with the Fallen World's laws and realities to her advantage. For instance, a given intruder might not fully understand that fire is damaging to it (not all such beings are necessarily affected by fire, or

any other given harmful phenomenon, of course, but many are), or that it cannot cross a ward. Such entities tend to learn these lessons as they spend more time in the Fallen World, but some lack the reasoning abilities to arrive at such conclusions, even after lengthy exposure to the Tapestry. In any case, a newly arrived entity, of whatever level of intelligence, is apt to require time to adjust to its surroundings, unless the being has skilled and knowledgeable minions at hand that might help to instruct it in the ways of this world.

Old Magics

Some of the magics descending from the Realms Supernal, in the form of Artifacts, have special power over Abyssal beings, and are capable of causing harm to them in ways that sorceries channeled through vessels native to the Fallen World — such as mages themselves — might not. Likewise, grimoires penned in the days of Atlantis, or similar magics, predating the intersection of the Abyss and the Fallen World, are sometimes able to do great damage to the things of the Void. Some of the Atlantean refugees, powerful beyond anything known to the willworkers of the modern age, created spells and bindings that might still be used to great effect against the denizens of the Abyss.

Of course, these sorts of things aren't exactly common, though they can sometimes be found by determined seekers who do their research and learn where to look. On rare occasions, those who seek to do battle with the Abyss find "trails of breadcrumbs," metaphorically speaking, that guide them toward such magics, some of which almost seem to indicate the work of a sentient mind. For the most part, such mysterious benefactors, if indeed they exist, never turn up, leaving mages to speculate on who, if anyone, guides willworkers to these resources. Some claim that it is the Oracles themselves, while others scoff at the notion and say that such is far likelier the work of potent spirits or mages who do not wish to sully their own hands with such distasteful work.

Corruption

Contact with the Abyss, however pure one's intentions for doing so, is a horrific thing. Those who draw near the great Void, in whatever way, almost always find themselves becoming somehow tainted by it; "looking long into the Abyss," and all that. Keep this in mind as characters wrestle with the quandaries of knowing the enemy. Is such knowledge worth its inevitable price? Is it better to be scarred by the lore of the Abyss than to confront its denizens in ignorance? Is it even possible to achieve victory over that which crawls out of the long dark without being marked, in some way, by one's struggles?

Of course, corruption by the Abyss is something that needs to be handled carefully. Though this is the World of Darkness, players like to feel that they have a hand in controlling their characters' destinies, and influences that erode the mind, body and even soul can take choice away from a player in that respect. Naturally, if a character throws herself headlong into such dark learning to satisfy her own desires, then she'll probably get what she deserves, but you should probably exercise at least a *little* mercy toward a character who only studies what she absolutely must in order to banish an Abyssal manifestation for unselfish reasons. The Abyss is more a place of thought than substance, and pure intentions can go a long way toward safeguarding against its corruptive influence.

But, how *do* you play up the Abyss's destructive siren song without robbing players of their choices? Even the best-intentioned seeker *should* come away somehow touched by the darkness of the Void, after all, even if only in a small way. Some suggestions follow.

- **Derangements:** Yes, it's a classic, but the tried-and-true ways are sometimes best. When characters see Things Man Was Not Meant To Know, their minds sometimes come away injured by the things they've perceived. Even the most minor derangements can hamper a character in his day-to-day life, and serve as a reminder of the terrible cost of delving into the secrets of the Abyss. Most such afflictions are probably temporary, even if they are severe, though repeated exposure, or a single, truly nightmarish manifestation, may inflict a more permanent derangement on a character.

- **Paradox Effects:** Paradox descends from the Abyss, and so willworkers who truck overmuch with things native to it might begin to find such "snags in the Tapestry" clinging to them. Perhaps the Paradox effects afflict the character, or maybe even just those around her; maybe they affect *everyone* (Sleepers included) within her vicinity. The character might take on physical deformities, for instance. Or, perhaps her very presence creates weird happenings that derive from her Arcana; a Master of the Time Arcanum, for example, causes those near her to lose track of time easily and to experience an uncomfortable and almost perpetual sense of *déjà vu*.

- **Subtle Manifestations:** Those figures that the mage glimpses out of the corner of her eye whenever she's alone; are they signs of insanity, or something else entirely? The Abyss can infect the fabric of the world in ways other than through Paradox. Maybe what the character sees isn't derangement — which is a flaw that crops up solely within an individual's mind, a coping mechanism — but instead hallucinations that have been inflicted upon her

by an outside source. Perhaps they're not Paradox, but rather Abyssal beings slowly poking through the weave of the Tapestry.

The taint of the Abyss can manifest in almost any way, however. Just be certain that it makes sense and preserves the genuine horror of the Void. The Abyss is never funny or truly benevolent, and effects of its touch shouldn't be, either. Even when Abyssal corruption seems to manifest in such ways, it does so only superficially; the awful nature of its presence is usually apparent to any with a bit of understanding and the willingness to look.

The Old Standby

The works of Howard Philips Lovecraft are, without a doubt, tremendously easy to use as inspiration for Abyssal horror. Within such writings, one finds unfathomable demon gods, swimming through the bleak and vast gulfs of space, architects of a universe without hope or reason. Humanity is, in Lovecraft's reality, a small, ignorant and frail race, alone in its fight for survival, a struggle that is doomed to inevitable failure. All told, a sentiment that the natives of the Abyss can get behind wholeheartedly.

However, easily used ideas are invariably the first ideas to become tired clichés. While there's nothing inherently wrong with having your Abyssal cultists chant the names of the Elder Ones in their dark rites, names that sour the air and scourge the sanity from mortal minds, there are always other possibilities. The Abyss makes manifest its hideous power in innumerable ways, and colossal deities of writhing flesh, crawling madness and insatiable hungers are just one such possibility.

The Abyss is, to one degree or another, impressed upon every aspect of the Fallen World: an all-pervasive infection. The Abyss doesn't confine itself to reality-shattering displays of unholy power. Denizens of the Abyss might be found in the most innocuous of places, such as in the subtle sonic modulations of a nonsensical children's rhyme passed down for centuries in a lonely little township, or hidden in a pair of seemingly "junk" chromosomes in a heretofore undiscovered species of subterranean amphibian. For every phenomenon known to humanity, there is likely some Abyssal entity with an interest in it, power over it, or substance within it.

In summary, don't hesitate to play the Lovecraft card when appropriate, but do keep in mind that you've got a lot more in your hand than that. While it might be comforting to believe

that the Abyss insinuates itself into the Fallen World in a few familiar and expected, albeit alien and horrific, forms, nothing could be further from the truth, and that is a most discomfiting thought. Just as it should be.

Fear Made Flesh

Inhuman nightmares are as much native to the state of Abyssal "existence" as self-awareness is to the human condition. Depths of fear, pain and madness literally incomprehensible by the human mind are as natural to the denizens of the Abyss as daydreams, emotions and basic reasoning are to us. For the most part, these beings find human thoughts and feelings to be as alien, disconcerting and unfathomable as we do theirs. Almost all of them can understand and articulate, at least among their own, 10,000 subtle shades of unearthly terror, but few would be able to distinguish a laugh of sincere good humor from a polite chuckle; most can't really distinguish laughter from tears. What they know of human existence, they learn almost completely through exposure and, in the case of those that can invade thoughts and dreams, direct exposure to and theft of memory and consciousness.

While this remoteness from the human condition makes Abyssal entities quite terrifying to the average sane person who knows of their existence, it also means that we are, in some sense, nearly as strange and unknowable to them as they are to us. When such beings enter this world, they can only be what they are. They do not, in the strictest sense, possess being, and so they cannot grow or change. They are fixed in their natures, incapable of truly existing, and thus without the capacity to become more or less, better or worse, than they have been since the time when the world was torn in half and each piece of it landed on the opposite side of the Void in which they were born.

Means of Incarnation

No one is really sure how it was that the first Abyssal beings managed to worm their way into the Fallen World. Some speculate that the tenuous connections remaining between the Fallen and Supernal Worlds, those of the human spirit, exploited by the acamoth and their ilk through the pacts that they make, constitute the ties necessary for the Abyss to bleed into our reality. Others believe that deliberate summonings were initially to blame, although how the first Abyssal summoners developed their craft is anybody's guess. Most who favor the latter theory believe that the barest fragments of unholy lore somehow descended from the Void, or were

perhaps left here at the sundering of the worlds, and so laid the groundwork for their conjurations. Ultimately, however, the reasons behind the "how" and the "why" are meaningless, lost to time.

What is known is that there are likely as many means of incarnation for Abyssal beings as there are entities within the Abyss. While one might manifest only when called within a flawless circle, anointed with the heart's blood of nine infants, each exactly nine days of age, another might come when two people are united in a proper confluence of fear, rage and jealousy. Yet another is summoned only by the accidental death of a loved one, while still another waits on the proper pronunciation of a single word, inscribed on the lid of an empty sarcophagus in an Atlantean ruin. Some commonalities do emerge, though.

Sacrifice is common for entities that directly offer something to human beings; one must prove one's willingness to engage in barter with the Abyss, after all. Some beings require a sacrifice on the part of the summoner (whether of time and effort, or else of the flesh or even the spirit). Generally, the more powerful the entity and/or the more is can offer, the more significant the sacrifice. Thus, a minor Abyssal spirit might only be able to command a single, trivial service or a small sigil carved into the forearm, while one of the great demon-gods of the Abyss may demand the ritual slaughter of 51 people, or that the summoner first tear out his own eyes and then bite out his own tongue. Sacrifices need not always encompass outwardly malevolent acts, however. An Abyssal entity may require that its would-be summoner perform seven good deeds, for instance, but that all of them be undertaken with the hope of reward. Conversely, transcribing a text by hand over the course of a lunar cycle, irrespective of how vile the book's contents might be, is not usually an *inherently* evil act.

The convergence of forces, especially those of a cosmic nature, or those that are invisible to ordinary mortals, often come into play. Some Abyssal beings can only manifest in the Fallen World when certain stars are set in certain alignments, for instance, or when ley lines intersect in a particular pattern. For lesser entities, these requirements are usually less stringent: a full moon, a ley line of a particular resonance, the summer solstice. For more powerful beings, however, more exotic conjunctions are necessary: a grand convergence of all of the planets in the solar system, the appearance of a supernova visible to the naked eye, the realignment of ley lines over vast distances, the alteration of the tides. Of course, many of the actions that could call forth these stillborn gods from their unhallowed thrones, for those circumstances that

can be actively brought about, would be calamities unto themselves, irrespective of the devastation that would be wrought in the wake of such an entity's coming.

Of course, not all such forces need be esoteric in their nature. It is entirely possible for an Abyssal being to be called up by, say, channeling one hundred million volts in a particular pattern, or by creating a terrifically destructive sonic frequency in a given place through entirely mundane means. Given that Sleepers can have recourse to such powers, this makes the threat of Abyssal incursion all the more forceful and frightening.

Not all Abyssal manifestations require volition; some come about as the result of happenstance or unintentional summoning. A given spirit, drawn to violation, may be called forth through no one's conscious effort when a member of the staff at a home for troubled youths sexually abuses her third victim. Likewise, someone taking a dip in the old swimming hole might touch bare skin to a stone at the bottom of the pond and so wake the consciousness metaphysically trapped behind that stone, in the depths of the Abyss. Or, the last tree in a given grove dies or is felled, ending 1,000 years of imprisonment. Abyssal beings that can be called up in this manner tend to be of lesser to middling status, as the Bans of the greater entities are usually far too restrictive to allow for this sort of incidental summoning.

Mystic rituals, whether using the Arcana or not, are also common. Some of these rituals require only that certain books or scrolls be read from, or that a word be spoken or a symbol inscribed, but most are used in conjunction with sacrifice and/or alignments of forces. In the case of realigning unseen powers, the rituals are occasionally used to artificially create or simulate such alignments. (While the North Star won't be in the south until the magnetic poles of the planet shift, for instance, the Fallen World might be able to be "tricked" into *believing* that this has happened.) The key difference to remember is that some rites use the existing patterns of unseen energies, or else reshape those patterns, while others create or unleash the needed powers through their enactment.

Sometimes, multiple methods of summoning are required. Likewise, the means of calling forth some Abyssal beings mandate that one or more methods are used to realize one or more other methods. For example, a particularly powerful entity might only be called to the Fallen World when 11 women are killed with the same ritual dagger, at the same time and at 11 different points, scattered over the space of 100 square miles, thus resetting local ley energies into an inharmonious alignment. A Scelestus might accomplish this task by magically co-locating the weapon, thus fulfilling the seemingly-impossibly

criterion of having the same dagger being used in 11 different places at once, while a Sleeper cultist might just break the dagger into 11 pieces and coordinate the killings via radio.

Perspectives on the Abyss: Sleepwalker

Ivy asked me to look into a particular mausoleum in the old Autumn Hill burial yard. She'd asked me to do that sort of thing before, so it didn't seem that out of the ordinary. Sometimes, I got into unpleasant situations, but nothing I couldn't handle, so long as she bolstered me with some of her magic beforehand. This was completely different. This was like nothing I'd ever dealt with before. I don't think Ivy and her entire cabal would've been able to deal with it. I'm lucky to be alive, even with what happened to me.

Ivy told me that the people I found there were servants of the Abyss, and that the creature that attacked me had actually been called up from it. I was terrified. I feel no shame in saying that. The wound on my arm has never really closed. It bleeds a little less, sometimes, usually when there's a new moon, but that's when the pain gets worse. I tried to get away, but it had whatever passed for its mouth locked onto me. I was sure I was going to die. Then, that woman showed up: she looked maybe 45 to 50, very dignified, almost matronly. Definitely not what you'd picture when you thought of a servant of the Void. She called it off. At least, she said something I didn't understand, and it stopped hurting me. She smiled at me and said, "Your soul is not yet ripe, child, but it one day will be. Return to your mistress and tell her what you've seen." I passed out. When I woke, I was alone and my arm had been bandaged.

So, yeah, I've had a brush with the Abyss. It was the scariest shit that ever happened to me. How scary? I'd die for Ivy, but I wouldn't look something like that in the face again if she asked me to, even if I knew I'd survive.

— Keith Locke,

Sleepwalker servant to Ivy of the Silver Ladder

Fetishes

Another way for the Abyss to encroach upon the Fallen World, given the ability of mages and certain other creatures to compel such entities into objects, is in the form of fetishes — material objects infused with the essence of such entities. Because of the ready source of power

that they represent, such items can be a tempting lure for characters. Without the proper education and mystic senses, even the Awakened can fail to notice the difference between an Abyssal fetish and one empowered by a more mundane malevolent spirit. Even worse, a mage possessed of such an item and aware of its nature might mistakenly believe that his ownership of the fetish gives him the upper hand in his dealings with the spirit, that he has mastered it and rendered it all but harmless.

Further, since a fetish can be used by anyone, Sleepwalker servants of Abyssal powers might turn up with fetishes. In a chronicle in which the protagonists are all Sleepers, it might be that such an object ends up in the hands of one of the characters, who begins to unknowingly succumb to its corruption. (For an example of this, consider the One Ring from *The Lord of the Rings* — an object infused with every dark passion and a terrible will, one that twists even the noblest heart in time.)

Unusual Intrusions

Not all intruders appear in shapes that can be readily understood and contended with. Some Abyssal entities are ideas and concepts, rather than beings and objects. Other Abyssal entities are places: not just physical locations, which can be demolished or otherwise dealt with, but an actual volume of space in the Fallen World. Still others are times of day — an intruder that exists only on in a given second, once every 24 hours — while some are patterns, such as a series of footsteps or musical notes.

An Abyssal manifestation might have to be combated in some way unfamiliar to the characters. How do you destroy a concept? Can you stop the 14th second of 4:12 AM from coming each day? These sorts of intrusions can usually only be overcome through creative thinking, careful research and the clever use of unorthodox resources. Some possibilities follow.

- **A Left-Handed Legacy:** The Scelesti serve the Abyss through their actions, but what about a Left-Handed Legacy that is an intruder? Each mage who adopts the Legacy draws more of the entity down, into the Fallen World, spreading the being's corruption and facilitating the arrival of something unspeakable. Perhaps the inevitable result of the intrusion will result in all new Awakenings near the largest concentration of such Accursed willworkers being somehow inherently tainted by the Abyss? Maybe Paradox within that area will become worse — more vicious, almost intelligent? (An example of a Legacy such as this is the Cult of the Doomsday Clock, found in **Legacies: The Sublime**.)

- **A Poem:** Perhaps it's a nursery rhyme, or maybe it's an epic work in a dead language, but an Abyssal intruder

may manifest in the form of a work of art. It may be that the intruder creates certain effects when read aloud, or it might force some deleterious condition upon any that reads or hears it. You have to be very careful with this sort of intrusion, though, and determine the means of banishment, since exceptional means are required to dispense with an idea once it has entered into the human consciousness on any large scale.

- **A Computer Program:** The Abyss has no fixed form and time is meaningless therein, meaning that the Abyss not only adapts — it already encompasses every development that the Fallen World has ever experienced and will ever experience. An intruder may take the shape of a computer virus, moving from system to system as an email attachment. Of course, the intention behind such a virus is likely far darker than acquiring credit card information or crashing a system. Consider also the possibility of an intruder lurking within software produced by a legitimate firm: what sort of havoc could such an entity create when hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions, of people worldwide install the Void-touched program on their computers?

- **A Historical Event:** Perhaps the intrusion in question is something that has already transpired, an event anchored in time the repercussions of which ripple outward, into the past and future simultaneously. So long as the event is allowed to have ever taken place, the intrusion, and thus its aftereffects, cannot be banished back to the Abyss. But how does one alter the past? Normally, this sort of thing is beyond even the power of Masters of the Time Arcanum, but the Tapestry violently rejects the presence of the Void. Maybe some creative thinking, combined with powerful magic, can be used to end the Abyssal incursion, making it as though it never took place at all.

Most important to keep in mind, however, is that every intrusion has both a means and an end. While the Left-Handed Legacy may be both the intruder and the means of intrusion, the Legacy's objective is almost certainly more elaborate than simply to lead a few willworkers down a dark road. Likewise, a malevolent work of fiction may spread the presence of an intruder to every mind that reads it, but it is only the delivery system for that intruder's goals.

Creating Horror

Bringing the Abyss and its denizens into play is nothing more than an exercise in churning out new antagonists to fight if you don't work to establish a sense of fear and horror. In order to use the Abyss as it is intended to be used, you need to make it *scary*. Naturally, this can be a

daunting proposition, especially if you're working from a deficit, such as that inherent in, say, meeting for your weekly game on Sunday afternoons, in a well-lit dining room. So, how do you make the Abyss terrifying?

Perspectives on the Abyss: Sleeper Occultist

There are worlds other than that in which we live, secret domains of the spirit. Ancient peoples called these places heavens, hells and the abodes of beings beyond the ken of mortal man. And, even among these peoples, scattered here and there in their mythologies, are references to gods, demons and other entities identified with spiritual agonies, nightmares given form, violence without purpose and death without either reward or rebirth. It is not so difficult to believe that such things have their origin in a single place, a vast nothingness, its substance defined by hatred, pain and madness, in the same way in which our cosmos is defined by matter, energy and the interactions between the two.

I have looked into the face of this nothingness, seen its terrible realities echoed back to me in the eyes of those enslaved by it and in the awful forms of things conjured up from its depths. I have come away with scars, for none can contend with oblivion without being in some way marked by their struggles, but the lore that I have pried from its inhuman hands is worth the cost. My waking hours are dedicated to driving back that darkness, the worthiest cause of which I can conceive; so what if my dreams are a ceaseless torment?

Still, there are times, when I'm alone, in the dead of night, poring over my books, that the shadows at the corners of my sight move against the light, and voices whisper to me, somewhere between my ear and my mind. The shadows beckon, and the voices speak to me in some tongue never meant for humanity; they say, "Come back to us. Come home." And, when they do, I wonder if I ever truly walked away from that night along the waterfront. Maybe, instead, I died there, and that thing, born in the unholy heart of a lifeless universe, dragged my soul back with it, and the terrors that I have endured since are simply a show for its amusement.

— Indira Singh,
occultist and supernatural investigator

Isolation

Anything frightening that we can face is always scarier when we have to do it alone. You can impose feelings of isolation on characters in several different ways. You might bring one player aside when her character wanders into an unknown situation by herself, thus highlighting how alone that character is, should the situation take a turn for the worse. Even if you don't choose to spring anything on the character, you can use her physical separation from the rest of the group to help that player get a sense for what kind of danger her character might be in, and the fact that there's no one there to help her. Of course, this is a technique best used sparingly, since other players will tend to resent whomever gets the most "solo time" if you don't keep everything carefully balanced.

Likewise, you can isolate an entire group of people. If a cabal of mages or group of ordinary paranormal investigators goes wandering into a remote community in search of an Abyssal incursion, perhaps the people there react to the characters with suspicion and simmering hostility, or maybe the locals do their best to ignore the characters completely. When the third store owner turns the sign on his door to "closed" as the characters approach, they will sense that something is terribly wrong, and that no one here is going to help them. When they check into the one decaying hotel in town and notice that there's no one else staying there, they'll wonder about that strange stain on the peeling wallpaper, and hesitate to check on the sound of footsteps in the hall in the dead of night.

However you do it, isolation is key to creating a sense of the horrific. The feeling that help is far away makes people cautious and even paranoid, since they know that no one will be there to bail them out if things go badly. It's why horror movies separate the characters from one another and gradually kill off the cast until there is only a handful, or even just two or one, of the original characters left. While you don't need to go killing characters off in order to get your point across, the threat of dying alone, at the hands of something unspeakable, can be enough to help a player understand the fear and horror that his character should be experiencing.

Isolation in Crowded Settings

Let's face it, making someone feel cut off and alone in the middle of a busy urban center is difficult at best. While the Abyss *does* encroach on such locales, the wiser and more self-aware of its denizens are often loath to do so. More people means more potential scrutiny, and more chances for someone with the proper knowledge or mystic

proWess to end an Abyssal manifestation to chance upon it. It is likely, however, that your chronicle is set in a city, rather than far off in the countryside.

It's one thing to make the characters feel isolated if they tend to gather at an old hunting lodge high up in the mountains. It's another entirely if they do so in a well-maintained brownstone in the trendy part of town. So, how do you make them feel abandoned and friendless when they're in the thick of things?

Physical remoteness, however, is not the only solution: psychological and spiritual isolation also have their place in setting the tone for stories touched by the Abyss. It is certainly possible to be alone in a crowd when something pulls a person away from the comfort of the known. Once the characters find themselves on the trail of the Abyss, begin to play up the way in which they feel out of sync with the world, and forever a step apart from others. The terrible knowledge that they possess and the clinging metaphysical pollution of the Void make others uncomfortable — maybe strangers avert their eyes or unconsciously give a character a wide berth, or her cat suddenly becomes skittish around her.

And also remember that not every place can be as well populated at two in the morning as it is at noon. What is by day a bustling city street in a rundown neighborhood can seem a lot more forlorn and menacing in the middle of the night, under the dim glow of flickering streetlights, and in which any shadow can conceal something terrible.

The Unknown

Horror is often found in what you don't show and what you don't tell. More so than any other thing, people fear what they don't understand. The Abyss is, by its very nature, incomprehensible; the Abyss is literally beyond the ken of any terrestrial mind. Thus, it is fitting that you be as sparing with details as you need to be in order to help players to know how scared their characters should be, without tipping your hand as to exactly what they're afraid of. Familiarity breeds not only contempt, but also

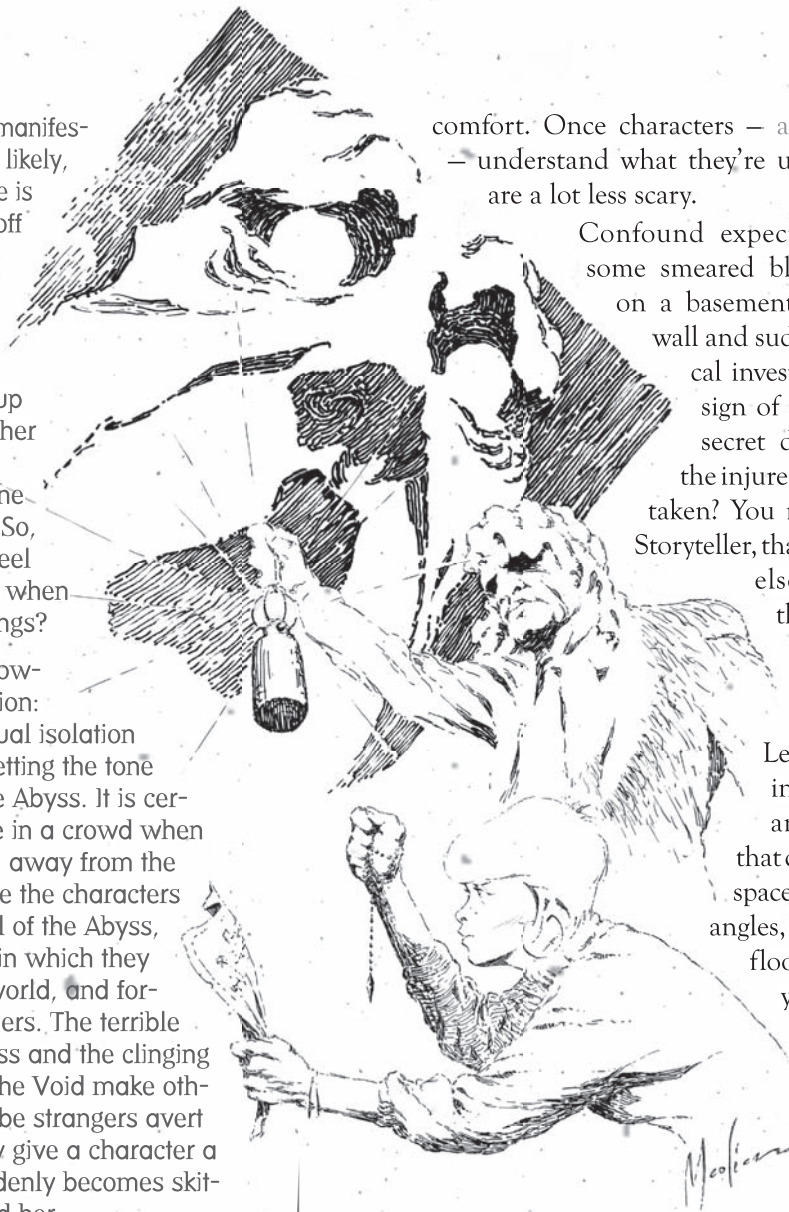
comfort. Once characters — and, thus, players — understand what they're up against, things are a lot less scary.

Confound expectations. Perhaps some smeared bloody handprints on a basement floor lead to a wall and suddenly stop. Magical investigation yields no sign of either magic or a secret door. Where was the injured (or dead) person taken? You might know, as a Storyteller, that he was conveyed elsewhere through the use of a Space Arcanum Attainment practiced by a Left-Handed Legacy of your devising, or perhaps by an Abyssal entity that can tracelessly fold space at intersections of angles, such as where a floor meets a wall, but you need not reveal as much to your players. At least, not until it's time for them to confront the magic or spirit in

question. When the usual methods of unraveling such an enigma don't work, people begin to question and grow nervous about the capabilities of their enemies.

Purposefully obscure details. Perhaps the owner of the claustrophobic little curio shop in which an Abyssal relic turned up wears a wide-brimmed hat and always keeps his head down. He might tend to mutter, and refuse to meet anyone's gaze, or even lift his eyes to the point that anyone can see them. Maybe he keeps one arm under his coat at all times. Is something wrong with him, or is he just eccentric? If the characters need him as a source of supplies or information, they can't necessarily afford to offend him. Likewise, the appearance of a pale and perhaps deformed face momentarily glimpsed through the badly dirtied pane of a third-story window of an abandoned mental institution by dim moonlight in the dead of night asks more questions than it answers.

Be evocative with your descriptions, but not to the point that you give things away. When you tell play-



ers what their characters are seeing or hearing, you're painting a sensory picture for them. The characters only perceive as much of their world as you describe to them; use that power to put forth details that disturb, while withholding information that might comfort or concretely answer ominous questions. Don't just evoke the characters' fear with what you show them, but also with what you conceal.

That terrible pounding, during a thunderstorm, at three in the morning at the front door is only *truly* fearsome until a character opens it and sees what's on the other side. What's there might be scary, but the potential for horror disappears as soon as the thing in the night becomes quantifiable.

"Realistic" Evil

Almost without exception, save for the most deranged of people, no one actually *believes* that they're evil. Virtually no one sincerely sets out with the intention of furthering the "goals of evil," however one might choose to define them. Even the denizens of the Abyss, antithetical to life and existence as we know it, aren't truly evil; that would be too limiting a concept for most of them. They simply are what they are: nonbeing personified and given an overwhelming lust to either claw their way into the existence that the Fallen World enjoys, or else drag that world down, and so annihilate the object of their jealousy and hunger.

While a Scelestus may act in a manner that could be described as "diabolic," "wicked" or "malevolent," odds are he's not setting out with the specific goal of working evil. Evil, in his case, is a means to an end. He might see himself as more of a victim of his circumstances than their architect. In fact, he might truly *be* as much a victim as he is a monster. Evil is far more compelling when it has a basis in humanity, because only human beings are really capable of such. A cackling and hateful madman with no redeeming qualities whatsoever is easy to hate and perhaps even to fear, but the horror inherent in more realistic villains, that they are what others could become, is absent.

Also remember the critical distinction between the evil of those that serve the Abyss and the inhumanity of those that dwell therein. Just as the entities of the Abyss cannot comprehend hope, joy or peace, so, too, is the notion of human evil simply beyond their grasp. While they can be despised for their monstrosity, to do so is really no different from hating the rabid dog that killed a loved one; their destructive actions are simply a part of their nature and are as ordinary and normal to them as breathing, eating and sleeping are to us. While many

of them might describe themselves as wanting to do harm to the Fallen World and those that exist within it, such is not truly accurate. They *need* to sow horror and suffering; it is an instinct, so deeply ingrained as to be unquestionable. And, while that may be loathsome, it is not evil, because evil is a choice, and one that is unique to humanity and those beings that were once human.

Thus, the wickedness of your Abyssal encounters should focus on the cruelty and viciousness of people. Evil lay in knowing what is right and deliberately choosing to do otherwise, whether for the best of reasons, or the worst. Perhaps a cultist was lured into his current life because his infant child was kidnapped by a Scelestus and kept as collateral; to preserve the life of his progeny, he commits atrocities. He might be agonized by his circumstances and the things that he does, but he is nonetheless willing to do evil in order to try to accomplish some good.

Evil is almost always selfish. Even in the example above, the man in question harms others so as to protect his own offspring. Evil need not be so gray in order to be compelling and sympathetic, however. A young woman, in the throes of a terminal disease, might be willing to work the will of an Abyssal being that offers her hope of prolonged life, because she is scared of dying. Is she right to do so? Absolutely not. Is she sympathetic? For all save the most stony-hearted, probably. Conversely, a young child, with undeveloped concepts of right and wrong, might submit to an Abyssal entity to get toys, to harm the people who hurt him or even to get a semblance of the affection that he doesn't receive from his distant or even abusive parents. The boy is still choosing evil, even if he doesn't fully understand it, in order to have the things that he desires.

Alienness

Even when the creatures of the Abyss act in a manner that seems logical to a human mind, they do so for reasons that we cannot fully grasp. Often, however, their actions and, by extension, those of the people and things that serve them, will seem insane or, at the very least, irrational. Their emotions, such as they are, are nothing like our own. Their thought processes do not follow any course that would make sense to a terrestrial mind.

The bodies that they use in this world are not their true flesh, for such a thing is beyond them and forever denied to them. When they speak to creatures of the Fallen World, only the barest fragment of their Abyssal consciousness roughly understands what the Fallen World denizens are saying – like a human being imitating animal sounds with enough skill to elicit desired responses. These creatures no more understand us than

we do them. The key difference is that death and pain, while undesirable to such beings, holds no particular dread for them. Their existence, if it truly can be called such, is a lifeless eternity of torment, a jealous yearning for that which we take for granted as an inherent facet of our nature. In light of that, suffering or even destruction is not so much a thing to be feared as an inconvenience to be avoided if possible.

Now, it can be difficult at best, as a Storyteller, to get inside the mind of a thing that has never known life or being, and that reasons according to logic barely worthy of the name. In fact, this might be the most difficult facet of the horror of the Abyss to portray, if for no other reason than the problems inherent in trying to act like something that cannot reason like a human being. It is the same sort of quandary intrinsic to Storytelling the severely mentally ill — that of illustrating the barest hints of an irrational, yet internally consistent, worldview — but to a far greater degree than that required for any mortal mind, no matter how disturbed.

For the purposes of Storytelling an Abyssal entity's goals and motivations, it can be helpful to establish certain chains of irrational behaviors that the being will cling to (as they make perfect sense to the creature in question), confounding the characters opposing it as they try to make sense of why the murderous spirit that they've unwittingly unleashed flees in terror, for instance, from prepubescent redheads. You don't even necessarily need to determine *why* the entity does such things, at least not initially, so long as these actions and reactions aren't tied into its means of intrusion or its Ban. Don't worry so much about making sense of an Abyssal entity's actions as of making it seem as though there is some deeper reason behind why it acts as it does.

Those that serve the Abyss also frequently become corrupted by it, their minds fragmenting under the weight of urges too terrible to contemplate. The more and more closely that a given individual accepts the Abyss into her life, the likelier she is to finally break under the strain. Inhuman voices speak in her dreams, inspiring her to undertake acts that serve to further infect her world with the touch of the Void. The things that she once considered indisputably true seem less sensible, more trivial — even insane. She begins to have trouble distinguishing truth from her delusions and, eventually, stops caring about the distinction. For a great example of alienness in a human being, take a look at the character of Hannibal Lecter (from Thomas Harris's series of novels and the movies adapted from them: *Red Dragon*, *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Hannibal*); in place of morals, he has aesthetics, and he divides the world not into good and evil but instead into proper and improper

behavior. An acamoth would be fortunate to have a servant so discerning, cunning and amoral.

In order to play up this aspect of the horror of the Abyss, you need to show the players something that they don't expect, something that deviates from the norm in a disturbing, though not necessarily violent or even dangerous, way. Sneaking up on an Abyssal cultist in his basement while he meticulously stitches a human eye into a hole in the chest of a dead bluebird is certainly disconcerting, but so is glancing out one's window, late at night, to behold a smiling old man in the driveway, next to the mailbox, looking up, while ripping up a character's mail and eating it. In some ways, the latter example is more horrific; the flesh-stitching cultist is behaving in a manner consistent with the mindset of a violent madman, while the old man's actions are not only bizarre but also offer no context as to his reasons for acting as he does. Rest assured, characters will wonder nervously about the list of names found in the pocket of an acamoth's servant when they realize that all of the individuals on it died of natural causes on July 6th, last year. Especially if today is July 2nd.

Perspectives on the Abyss: Sleeper

Please, don't tip over any of the crosses! They can come inside when you do. God keeps them away. See? That's why I've cut these crosses into my skin. I mean, once you know that God can keep them out, it'd be stupid not to do something like that, right? Of course, they come close to the edge of the circle sometimes, and it hurts to look at them. I've tried closing my eyes, but I can see them through my eyelids now. I think I might cut my eyes out. That'll probably make it so I don't have to look at them.

Then again, I'm not sure. Maybe I'd see them all the time, then. That'd probably be fine, too. I mean, it really has to be one or the other. No more of this waiting and dreading. If they're going to come for me, I'd rather they just do it. But that's why they wait, I think. They want me to be ready, you see. And I'm not ready yet. But I will be. And, then, I can take these crosses off. I've already got a fresh pack of razor blades. That'll be nice; they itch, sometimes. What? Why are you looking at me like that? Like I'm nuts? Haven't you heard a word I've said? Don't you get it?

Or maybe you're with them. Are you? I think you are, even if you don't see that yet. Don't worry. You will. You can borrow one of my razor blades if you like...

— David Espinoza, Sleeper

Despair

In the absence of hope, horror flourishes. The trick is in taking away *nearly* all hope: take it all and the characters have nothing left to lose. Take all but the last ray of hope in their lives, and they will cling desperately to it. To be clear: there is a distinction between sorrow and frustration, fear and genuine despair. While the loss of a beloved family member, for instance, is tragic, most respond to such with a period of mourning, followed by a time of healing, rather than plunging into abject hopelessness. On the other hand, despair is probably the only reasonable human response to watching one's life, and the lives of everyone a given individual cares about, fall apart, piece by piece, until nothing is left save the promise of even greater suffering tomorrow.

This is a delicate line to walk, since despair is often contingent upon a concrete belief that any action one takes is doomed to failure – not a mindset conducive to enjoyable gaming. While portraying a character's descent into hopelessness can be enjoyable, not all players enjoy this sort of story. As a Storyteller, you need to know your audience and the point at which your players will stop regarding your tale as one of the character-building process of hitting rock bottom, and begin looking upon it as a chore to be endured.

Important to note is the fact that you can use the despair of Storyteller characters to help insinuate Abyssal horror into the game. When a character receives a letter from his estranged brother, written in a shaky hand and begging for reconciliation, only to find him holed up in a cabin in the woods, surrounded by a circle of silvered iron nails, and speaking of “the futility of trying to keep the Shadows out,” that character gets a taste of despair. The same sort of thing could be done with a character's mentor, sibling, lover or child, allowing you to touch that character's life with a feeling of hopelessness without having to actually destroy the character himself in order to do so.

Strike at what the characters love, rather than the characters themselves, and they'll learn despair. But be careful in doing so, lest they begin to figure out that they'll eventually have nothing left to lose. When you seek to instill a feeling of hopelessness, don't forget that they need something to look forward to, something that they can believe in, if only so that you might threaten it, defile it and, eventually, destroy it. Without that, all you have are soulless automata, raging against the Abyss until they finally succumb to it, in mind, body or spirit.

Perspectives on the Abyss: Ghost

Once I looked at it, I could remember what it was like to die. I haven't been able to forget since. I used to just wander these halls, doing things like I did when I was alive. You know – looking at my books, sitting in my chair, staring out the windows. It was peaceful, and I felt safe and content. But, then, it came. I don't know how it got here, or why it did. Now I can't stop remembering that car wreck – the blood, the pain, the machines they hooked me up to. I remember; and I just want to forget again, and walk the halls like I used to, without purpose, without any yesterday or tomorrow.

I was too scared to look at my books, sit in my chair or go to the window. I hid in the darkest shadows I could find, but it looked for me, and the walls felt as though they were turning thin, like my house was falling away, into a pit from which there would be no return. It never found me, because you came. You and your friends. Whatever you did, you made it go away, but I still can't forget. And I want to.

Please, if you have any mercy, destroy me. Make me nothing at all, so that I don't have to have those memories scratching at the inside of my mind. I don't want to remember. I don't want to know that I'm not alive. I have to be able to escape the memory of that thing, wandering the corridors of my house – that evil, deeper than death. Death is natural. Nothing about that thing was.

– The words of the ghost of Cory Ng, as recounted by Bastion, Guardian of the Veil

Violation

As human beings, we instinctively react with revulsion and horror whenever we are touched in a way that we don't like, whether physically, emotionally or spiritually. The Abyss's contamination is a hideous thing, propagating itself upon the willing and unwilling alike, with equal abandon. When it does so to those whose loyalty it does not command, it is natural for the victim to feel loathing and terror. A classic example, used in many stories, is that of the woman who becomes mysteriously pregnant after an encounter with an evil force, or who is pregnant beforehand, only to learn that her child is, or might be, the vessel of some kind of malevolent force.

Of course, as is the case with so many tropes, the story of a woman's pregnancy turned evil can get tired (and is not necessarily something with which all players

would be comfortable, on an out-of-game level), though the essential flavor of the idea remains. Consider the possibility of a wound inflicted by an Abyssal intruder, resistant to all healing, and from which an unknown corruption spreads, not infecting or destroying tissues, but instead somehow transforming them, to some unknown end. The subject's own body becomes his enemy, and the object of his disgust. Likewise, imagine the feelings of a character whose soul stone falls into the hands of an Abyssal entity — a fragment of her human essence, in the grasp of something so hateful and unclean. What might such a being do with a portion of an Awakened soul? What might it force *her* to do?

Atmosphere

Perhaps the most critical component in the quest for horror, atmosphere is the distinction between good stories and great ones. Certainly, in telling tales touched by the Abyss, atmosphere can make or break a scene and, indeed, a chronicle.

Consider the following example:

The whole cabal closes in on the playground behind the abandoned school, lit by the noonday sun. Not far off, you can hear the sounds of traffic and the spring air is cool, but not cold. The place looks as though no one has been here in several days, if not longer; the heavy rain late last week has made it impossible to discern any tracks that might have been made before that.

As all of you scan the area, you notice some movement in the trees nearby. You watch as a figure slowly emerges from the foliage: a little girl, perhaps five years of age. Her style of dress looks years out of date. She approaches cautiously, looking from one of you to the next as she does. Finally, she breaks into a smile.

"Play with me?"

It's got a couple of elements that could potentially be a bit spooky (the little girl's slightly anachronistic mode of dress and her boldness with strangers), but, overall, it's not a terribly fearsome scene.

Now, however, consider this example:

While the rest of the cabal checks on the burnt-out tenement, you've decided to look in on the location marked on the road map that the old man was carrying. After pulling your car onto the dirt path that branches off the isolated road, you emerge into a small clearing. You step over a tumbled-down low stone wall, pushing aside some low-hanging branches as you do so. The fading twilight still provides enough illumination for you to make out the mist of your breath in the late autumn air.

The rusty remnants of a playground are here: a swing set, a seesaw, a small merry-go-round. Why such a thing would be here is anyone's guess. You are surrounded on all sides by trees; with the dim light, you can't even make out the street from here. As you survey the area and your eyes become more acclimated

to the deepening dark, you note what looks to be a freshly dug hole, just beneath the boughs of a towering dead tree. Sensing something amiss, you turn to behold a girl, maybe five years old, sitting on the swing. She is dressed in vaguely antiquated clothing, and she meets your gaze with an eerie confidence.

"Play with me."

What's different?

The atmosphere pulls together several of the other elements of horror: isolation, alienness, despair and the unknown. The character is alone, having been separated not only from her cabal-mates, but also from human contact in general. She is far enough away from the possibility of help that, should something go terribly wrong, she's on her own. The way that the child acts is strange and unlike that of an average little girl. The freshly dug hole in the ground is also worthy of thought. Is the girl dead and disinterred and, yet, somehow animate? If so, who dug her up and why, and how did they imbue her lifeless body with motion and speech? Otherwise, what is the significance of the hole, so close to this incongruously placed playground? How did she get to be on the swing without the character noticing her approach? The dim and rapidly fading lighting, the dead trees and the coldness of the late fall all create a feeling of loss, loneliness and sadness.

Of course, the way that you end a description probably does more to cement atmosphere in the players' minds than all that which came before. Note that the girl uses the exact same three words in both instances. In the first example, she is vivacious and lively, and her questioning tone implies that she hopes that the characters will accept her offer. In the latter example, the girl's eerily calm demeanor intimates that her tone is somehow both deadpan and demanding; suddenly, whatever game she has in mind seems quite menacing. By carefully considering how you will end a description, you can set the mood of a scene, and so draw the horror of the Abyss into your game.

But Why?

Everything about the Abyss seems deliberately designed to invoke fear, hatred, discomfort and disgust, and that's pretty much the truth. Why do Abyssal conjurations require the blood of the innocent, the still-living disembodied eyes of madmen and the utterance of syllables that foul the air by their passing? Because these things express the nature of the Abyss as it is meant to be perceived. Certainly, there's nothing keeping you, as a Storyteller, from deciding that an intruder can be called with, say, a ritual that involves a circle of iron dust and a few phrases in Latin, but that sort of thing doesn't capture the essence of a realm of insanity and horror — a

reality that never was and never will be, reaching out to offer an unwelcome caress to our world.

Awakened scholars who dwell overmuch on the subject believe that the Abyss is what it is precisely because of the darkest passions of human souls; born of the hubris of man, the Abyss arose out of the shattering of the world, into a time of terror and madness. Just as the child becomes the product of the lessons that she is taught, so, too, might the Abyss have been impressed at the instant of its inception by the godlike arrogance and selfish desires of those that became the Exarchs, unwitting artisans of the broken cosmology of the Fallen World, married to the chaos, confusion and fear of those left in the wake of the collapse of the Ladder to Heaven.

From a game-design perspective, the Abyss *needs* to encapsulate every loathsome emotion, every base and contemptible urge, bound up in an alien longing and the primal need of the meanest form of life to feed, to grow and to survive, at the expense of all else, if need be. It would simply be inappropriate under most circumstances for such abject corruption to be called up by any save the most willfully cruel or otherwise abhorrent means. Likewise, once the Void has found a foothold, the Void can only act according to its instinctive mandate: debase, devour and destroy. *Nothing* in the Abyss is even capable of working toward any end that we would consider ultimately beneficial. An intruder may use means that seem good, or at least harmless, and it might, intentionally or otherwise, bring about occurrences that have the *seeming* of benevolence about them, but the intruder can no more avoid causing harm to the things of the Fallen World than the scorpion can be taught not to sting.

The Abyss is the ultimate expression of the fundamental wrongness of the World of Darkness against which those who cleave to the path of Wisdom must struggle. Far more so than the Watchtowers, the Atlantean orders or even the Arcana themselves, the Void is the legacy of the Awakened, the unhappy birthright that they have inherited and the greatest evil of their kind. And whether or not they can undo that evil, they have an obligation to fight it; the alternative lies down the Left-Handed road, and culminates in a darkness so deep there is no coming back from it.

How Far Is Too Far?

Only you and your players can determine what you consider to be an appropriate upper limit for your comfort level in dealing with the Abyss and those beings in whole or in part native to it. However, that said, there are a number of things that go beyond the scope of what the Abyss and its denizens are *intended* to be.

The great Void between the Supernal and Fallen Worlds is not meant to be an endless source of splatterpunk horror, *à la* the *Resident Evil* series (the games or the movies). Likewise, the Abyss doesn't spit out a ceaseless torrent of anime tentacle porn — most such creatures exist to perpetrate violations far more discerning and far-reaching than those of the flesh. This is not to say that an Abyssal intruder might not make use of the animate dead, or that the intruder would not use rape as a tool for furthering the being's goals; rather, that these things should not be portrayed as cavalierly as in those sources cited above and similar sources.

You have to be *especially* careful in playing up the violation angle, since there are a lot of ways that this Storytelling device can go very wrong, very quickly. Remember, first and foremost, that this is a *game*, and it's about enjoyment, not about how uncomfortable you can make your players. While some players might be fascinated by a story element that also pushes some instinctual buttons and makes them uneasy, others aren't. Respect your players' boundaries, and be willing to dial it down, if need be.

The central theme of the Abyss is one of alien and incomprehensible horror. Invariably, horror is cheapened whenever it is overused, as the audience, whether reading a book, watching a film or playing a game, grows desensitized. Furthermore, feelings of horror are enhanced when they are personal and individual; you just don't get the same kind of mileage in that regard out of mass slaughter as by the methodical and harrowing stalking of a single player character. The former is likelier to incite feelings of righteous anger and heroic struggle against evil than any sense of fear, while the latter can leave a cabal of willworkers forever glancing over their shoulders, waiting for a nightmare incarnate to emerge from the shadows and claim its gruesome toll.

Get Inspired

A lot of fine creative minds have done a lot of work that can help you to bring horror into your game. In general, you can dismiss much of what's been done for mass commercial consumption (your standard-issue slasher flicks, for instance), since it's much easier to cater to the lowest common denominator with more explicit content than it is to create *genuine* horror. Instead, focus on the works that create fear through what they don't show or tell, rather than those that try to shock with what they reveal.

There are great works, both new and old, that can help you to get a feel for your particular brand of Abyssal horror. Some people might prefer special-effects-heavy films (for example, *The Grudge* or *The Ring*), for instances, while others go for a more minimalist approach (*Nosferatu* and *The Blair Witch Project* are both examples of this sort of horror). Some may disdain movies entirely as a source of inspiration and make use of the works of such authors as Stephen King, Clive Barker or even Edgar Allan Poe. In the end, it's really up to you to determine what works for you as a source of inspiration for horror, and what helps you to get your players in the mindset of their characters as they approach the darkness beyond their doorstep with the degree of trepidation that any sane person should feel.

Perspectives on the Abyss: Spirit

I remember the shadow. It came into my territory, and I was frightened of it. It spoke to me in ways that I did not understand. I asked to which court it owed fealty. Hand of Night sometimes keeps such frightening things in its employ. It laughed at me. It got inside my thoughts and said that its servitude was sworn to the vastness of the Abyss. I ran away. That seemed wiser than staying and fighting.

When I went to ask Bear Who Walks with Thunder for help, I found that it was gone from its grove. I looked for Smokeless Fire, but it was also nowhere to be seen. I sought out every warrior I knew, but they had vanished completely. When I finally located Wind at Sunrise, my liege's liege's liege, I was told to stay away from the darkness and not to confront it. I asked what had become of Bear and the others. Wind at Sunrise replied, "They stayed and fought. Now, they are gone."

I have no territory of my own, anymore, but I am still glad that I ran away.

— Starlit Oak, spirit of the Shadow Realm,
as recounted to Raphael Boone of the Mysterium

Violence

It is vitally important to remember that not every encounter with the Abyss need involve violence. In fact, the entire story arc of an Abyssal manifestation can play out without the characters ever once directly taking up arms against the Void and its denizens. Maybe Sleeper characters are able to get the Abyss-tainted madman committed to an institution, where he'll never again

have access to his forbidden tomes. Or, perhaps, through diligent research, a Mysterium scholar manages to discern the hidden name of the Emperor Unborn and Robed in Sorrows, the only means by which the entity might be truly banished back to the Abyss.

In some cases, not only is it unhelpful to engage in violence against the Abyss but doing so might actually be actively detrimental to the characters' goals. Perhaps a demon feeds on the slaughter of its servants, and so those who put down such deluded cultists actually magnify the power of their ultimate adversary. Alternately, maybe the Scelestus calling up the unholy powers of the Void also happens to be a senator — not the sort of person that one can blithely murder without serious repercussions in the Sleeping world. In contending with the Abyss, the most expedient answer is rarely the right one.

Because games revolving around ordinary mortals tend to have little in the way of quick fixes for the health consequences of violence, such chronicles are often better suited to more intensely cerebral and investigative mandates. Chronicles that use the mortals supplement **World of Darkness: Second Sight** have more options for swift healing and the like, however. In the broadest terms, think of it similar to the difference between *The X-Files* and *Alias*. Mulder and Scully spent a lot more time looking for clues than kicking ass and taking names, while Sidney does a fair bit of both. In such a chronicle, the scarcity of violence, as well as the impact that it makes on the characters and those around them, drives home its severity and makes it something to be feared and avoided whenever possible; which is, of course exactly how most sane people view it.

Even when you introduce exceptional abilities, such as the Arcana of the Awakened, into the equation, you can do a lot to tone down the role of violence in the chronicle, and to dissuade characters from considering it to be the first — or even second or third — recourse. Even the cockiest Master of Life is apt to think twice about rushing in again after the spirit that nearly killed her with resistant aggravated damage. Likewise, making the Abyssal entity in question one that tends to possess the friends and loved one of those who hunt it makes the "kill 'em all" option a lot less viable, save in the case of the most brutally amoral or fanatically dedicated enemies of the Abyss.

Ultimately, the "default" setting for **Mage: The Awakening** (both normally and, specifically, in regard to the Abyss) is that this is a *storytelling* game, one about character and setting, theme and mood. Most of the best stories aren't slaughterfests from beginning to end, and this is really no different. Characters who react to the servants

and denizens of the Void with hair-trigger tempers and a ready stockpile of mystic armaments may end up having more “successful” results (in that they achieve victory over their enemies) than those who feel trepidation, try to talk before fighting and suffer the sting of each loss incurred during the conflict, but the latter sorts of characters are almost always better developed and more rewarding to portray, from a roleplaying perspective. No matter how you slice it, Hamlet is a richer character than the Terminator, and certainly much better suited to the role of a protagonist in the World of Darkness.

This is not, however, to say that there’s anything wrong with running a *Hellboy*-esque pulp action war against the Void, even with ordinary mortal characters. Such a chronicle is likely to have a high attrition rate, but if that’s what you’re looking for, then go for it. Such a style of play is, naturally, better suited to “exceptional” mortals, those benefiting from the powers in **Second Sight**, for example, or the Awakened, who have more and more useful means readily at hand to deal with the kind of firepower that the Abyss can throw at them. But, again, this sort of chronicle is more of a variation on the theme than the core theme itself.

Cultivating Subtlety

Players, first and foremost, have *your* example as a Storyteller when they think of the ways in which their characters will act and react to the events of the chronicle. If their first hint of a brush with the Abyss is a gruesome scene of butchery, with the scattered pieces of dismembered victims festooning an entire house, then they’re going to have an expectation of savage violence. If, on the other hand, you give them a single bloody handprint on the inside of the torn-off front cover of an ancient tome, you give them the intimation of the possibility of harm, without automatically setting their minds to “combat mode.”

Give the players sedate situations to deal with; a bookstore owner may be a touch strange and might set off warning bells in the characters’ minds, but there’s no need for them to hurt him or even kill him, so long as he does nothing that warrants a violent response. Likewise, there’s not much that can be done to beat an ominous statuette with befouled resonance into compliance with the cabal’s wishes. Part and parcel with this is allowing the characters’ nonviolent solutions to situations to work, or, at least, to work better and more often than more combative solutions do in similar situations.

When beginning a chronicle that will focus on conflict with the Abyss, you can also tell your players that you’re looking to run a more intellectually focused and char-

acter-driven game, one in which characters with a lot of weapons and the willingness to use them at the drop of a hat might not have very much to do a lot of the time. That way, players know to build their characters as talkers, investigators, facilitators and other types better suited to working through their problems with their minds and their charm, rather than with their fists.

Perspectives on the Abyss: Libertine

Oh, I thought I could handle most anything back then. I was still riding high on helping the Free Council to finally claim a seat in the local Consilium. We’d heard that a Scelestus had set up shop somewhere in town; the Guardians of the Veil apparently got wind of him and, counter to type, they had actually shared that information with us.

Anyhow, we did some digging into the guy and what we learned scared the hell out of me. He had all kinds of people working for him: Sleepers and Sleepwalkers. Rumor had it that one member of the Council was in his pocket. We kept looking into that last bit; to tell you the truth, I looked as much for the chance of proving something about the Atlantean orders as to find the Scelestus. Of course, when we actually figured out who it was, it was devastating. Benjamin, the man we had trusted, the man we’d put on the Council, was the one we were looking for. Worse still, he had been the one to start the rumors that put us on his trail. We never figured out why.

When we came to confront him, what was found was... nightmarish. We confirmed that it was what was left of him. There was a note, “If I can’t see the Golden Key again, at least I’ll get halfway there. It’s more than I can say for you sorry bastards.” All of the Sleepers and Sleepwalkers working for him committed suicide, apparently right around whenever whatever happened to him happened. It just didn’t make any sense. Still doesn’t. But it’s as scary to remember now as it was to see it then.

— Daedelus, Obrimos of the Free Council

When Violence Is Appropriate

Even if you’re going to run a subtler game, one more focused in research and investigation than armed combat, remember that the Abyss doesn’t pull any punches and its denizens are, for the most part, intelligent enough to recognize and exploit a weakness. In fact, even the most intellectual of chronicles can benefit from some well-timed violence; when

the wheelchair-bound scholar of the group is badly beaten in her home by the Sleepwalkers bound in service to the Scelestus antagonist of your chronicle and his otherworldly master, the players will stand up and take notice.

Suddenly, the tempo of the game has changed. No longer will hard-won facts and rituals in forgotten tongues alone suffice. Most people aren't particularly skilled at combat, and so the players will feel the sort of nervousness about losing their characters that can help to stimulate the sense of fear that many human beings would normally have when they walk, full knowing, into a life-threateningly dangerous situation. The less often and more dramatically appropriate the placement of violence in a chronicle focusing on the Abyss, the more you're apt to get satisfyingly real human reactions from the characters, even in the midst of situations utterly beyond the ken of any real person.

One of the keys to running a good Abyss-focused chronicle is to keep the players guessing and to make them feel that their characters' abilities may not be up to the task at hand. By using violence sparingly and dramatically, you can illustrate the depths to which the servants of the Void — as well as some of those fighting against it — are willing to sink. Further, you demonstrate the Abyss has far more and far subtler weapons in its arsenal than the mere application of brute force; if that was all that was needed to win the war against the Fallen World, after all, the Abyss may well have already triumphed.

Abyssal "Cosmology"

As a place that is not a place, the Abyss doesn't truly possess any kind of reality as we understand it. Nevertheless, the Awakened are as prone as anyone to the need to categorize and classify that which they don't understand and, thus, fear. And so it was that the first generations of Atlantean exiles put their considerable power to the task of defining this terrifying new phenomenon that brought ruin upon willworkers, in the form of Paradox, and that was the source of terrifying beings the likes of which their ancestors has never known.

Common wisdom, among those who study such things, at any rate, maintains that the Abyss is simultaneously existent and nonexistent. In other words, to its denizens, it has some manner of substance and reality, but the Abyss is also a place of nonbeing, and the things that reside therein are somehow aware of and can reconcile that paradox. This school of thought has been pervasive among Awakened scholars of the Void for nearly as long as the subject has been researched. What mad thoughts that have been wrenched out of the minds of Abyssal entities and at least partially deciphered seem to bear this theory out. Still, since terrestrial beings, or

whatever power or intellect, fundamentally lack the requisite psychological and spiritual makeup to truly understand such ideas, the theory is apt to remain such forever.

A few rumors persist of mages who have actually entered the Abyss (usually, as such tales go, their journeys are to the avowed end of crossing the Void and locating the Realms Supernal), only to return with tales of horror. Some claim to have fallen into an infinite nothingness, a realm of such aggressive desolation as to be almost instantaneously insanity-inducing. Others claim that the nature of the Abyss conforms to certain metaphysical assumptions about the hells of one or more cultures. Some say that it is a great darkness, while others say that the very concepts of light and darkness are simply insufficient to explain the Abyss's nature. Of course, most such stories end with the willworkers in question never finding their way out, but there are enough myths of entering and then successfully leaving the Abyss that the speculation persists.

Given the conflicting stories of the substance and nature of the Abyss, attempting to classify any sort of structure to that realm is pointless. If it has such things as worlds and stars, for instance, they are of a nature incompatible with our understanding. No material quantifiably certain to have its origins in the Abyss has ever been found in the Fallen World. Even when beings of the Abyss enter this realm, they seem to do so by assimilating and corrupting terrestrial materials, both physical and ephemeral, rather than by manifesting their true forms, which may or may not exist at all. Despite this, there are scholars of the Void who claim to possess "Abyssal relics." Some are chunks of inert matter that look like metal or stone, while others are liquids of uncertain composition, and a few even appear to be organic in nature. While most of these objects are obvious fakes — the Awakened equivalent of Fiji mermaids — there are a few that defy all attempts at classification. Perhaps they are leftovers from older days, when stranger things were common in this world but, perhaps, they truly *are* what they are said to be. If so, such artifacts would represent one of the best chances the Awakened have of coming to understand something of the nature of the Abyss.

The Truth

The most important truth about the Abyss is this: there *is* no truth about the Abyss. Every perspective that can possibly be represented about the Void between the Fallen and Supernal Worlds is accurately countered by its inverse, both contained within the whole of the Abyss. Everything that can be said about the Abyss is simultaneously both fact and fiction — the Abyss

has consumed probabilities and potentialities of 1,000 different sorts from the Shadow, Twilight and Material Realm over the years, and contains within itself contradictions and the contradictions of contradictions. The mad realm is one of perfect and infinite negation and genesis of potential, the very wellspring from which Paradox flows.

While there are those who fancy themselves "scholars of the Void," the sad reality is that their observations and theorems, ultimately, mean very little. From the neophyte Sleeper occultist with one brief brush with the Abyss under his belt to the most terribly wise and learned Scelestus, no mortal being actually comprehends the enormity of the forever protean lie that is the yawning chasm between the worlds. And none ever will.

A Brief History of Oblivion

According to the orthodox teachings of the Diamond Orders, the Abyss did not exist before the sundering of the realms. Or, if the Abyss did, it was so metaphysically remote from the world known to the Atlanteans as to be completely distinct from it, incapable of any kind of intersection, no matter the steps that any being, whether terrestrial or Abyssal in origin, might take. In fact, if the Void did, to whatever degree, exist before the collapse of the Celestial Ladder, the denizens of each world likely knew nothing about the other reality.


There exists some small proof, however limited, though, that some of the nations that existed at the same time as Atlantis may have had truck with these forces. Those scholars who claim such things admit that these proofs are vague — indeed, these proofs are as

solid as any other evidence where the Abyss is concerned, which is to say, hardly at all. Still, some Abyssal entities have hinted that there stood wicked black nations of sorcerer-tyrants, who delved into the blasphemous lore of the Abyss and sought the terrible depths of sin and madness as the Atlantean sorcerer-kings sought the heights of wisdom and enlightenment.

Whatever the case, the existence of the Abyss became known shortly after the fall of Atlantis, probably due to a combination of magical experimentation and intrusions from that Void. Likely, though, several generations passed before any kind of useful codices on the Abyss existed, as mages were just learning about the nature of that realm. Willworkers may well have taken centuries to discern the fact that the soul of a Sleeper had to pass through the Abyss to make a connection with the Realms Supernal, establishing a significant facet of Awakened cosmology. However it was that they learned it, mages eventually discovered that the Abyss is, metaphysically speaking, "above" the Fallen World, and is, in turn, surmounted by the Realms Supernal and the Five Watchtowers.

Of course, the entities of the Abyss started out with no greater knowledge or understanding of the Fallen World than terrestrial beings did of the laws and denizens of the





mad reality of the Void. Many of the Abyss's first forays into the Tapestry ended disastrously for the intruders. Some could not sustain themselves and so withered; the fortunate ones returned to the Abyss, there to contemplate how best to attempt a return, while others were annihilated utterly. Some were bound into service by cunning willworkers who overwhelmed the Abyssal beings' considerable power with superior knowledge of the metaphysical nature of the Fallen World. Others fell prey to the more powerful denizens of either Shadow or Twilight.

As time rolled on, however, the things of the Abyss learned far more about the laws of the Tapestry than the creatures of the Fallen World did about those of the Void. Lesser beings in the unknowable hierarchies of the Abyss returned to their lords and tithed knowledge, which was traded between minds older than time and mad beyond mortal reckoning. Ultimately, the lore of how to cross over, into the Fallen World, became almost commonplace within the Abyss. Fortunately, though, such knowledge is largely meaningless without opportunity, which, as the natives of the Void learned, can be infrequent at best without intervention.

And so it was that the more devious and insidious of Abyssal minds began to reach out, into the Tapestry, to contact those souls receptive to their corruption. In this manner, the first true cults of the Abyss began, mortals devoted to bringing about the means through which oblivion's denizens might seep into this reality, to conquer and consume. At first, these cells of madmen and would-be priest-kings of the Void made manifest were scattered – outsiders who dwelt in solitude on the outskirts of settlements or who had to conceal their true allegiance. Eventually, though, some individuals attained positions of prominence and esteem within their communities, and a few even managed to subvert their neighbors almost completely to the service of the Abyss.

Sleeper cultists were more numerous, though mages, given their comparatively far greater power and the potency of their Awakened souls, were much more prized by most Abyssal beings as slaves. Each, however, had his role to play, and each contributed to the proliferation of Abyssal power in the Fallen World. The rational mysticism of Atlantis was gone, and had been replaced by a less certain system of magic. Those who bent knee to the Void were learning the nature and limitations of their masters as surely as the descendants of the Atlantean Diaspora were re-learning their powers, and Sleepers were coming into a power of their own.

When the ancient empire of the Awakened collapsed, the world was put more or less in the hands of the Sleepers. Awakened conspiracy theorists can point to this event

or that as being “evidence” of the hands of either the Oracles or Exarchs in the Fallen World, but the simple truth is that mundane humanity has shaped almost the entirety of its own history. Politics and societies were advanced by Sleepers, as were science, economics, art and warfare. What were to the denizens of the Abyss, when taken singularly, unappealing creatures, became a great prize when considered in great numbers, or even as a whole. They were driven by reason that was essentially subverted wholly to the satiation of instinct, and were more or less blind to the mystical consequences of trafficking with the Abyss. Eventually, they became the currency in which the Void measured its success in its never-ending war against the Tapestry. Awakened agents continued to be more individually valued – as much as such beings could value *anything*, anyway – but ordinary mortals became regarded as worthwhile prizes, as well.

While metaphysically almost inert, Sleepers have always had the advantage of numbers and the desire to innovate for the sake of ease, comfort and personal advancement. Those latter three factors, more than any others, contributed to the slow insinuation of the Abyss into the Fallen World. Were all the Scelesti, worldwide, from the time of Atlantis's fall to the modern day, gathered up in one place, their numbers would not even begin to approach those of the Sleepers currently sworn to the service of the Abyss in the United States alone. The modern culture of greed, paranoia, arrogance and moral bankruptcy that is gradually infecting the entire Sleeping world does more to advance the cause of oblivion than any Accursed mage, isolated Abyssal spirit or relic of unholy power. The Abyss, after all, promises the fulfillment of *all* lusts, whether for flesh, money, power, respect or even immortality. All one need do is bow down and betray Creation itself.

And, in these unhappy times, the number of people who are willing to do just that, consciously or otherwise, is staggering.

Abyssal Lore

A number of scholars over the ages, many of them well-meaning, but no few interested primarily in fame (or infamy), power and respect, have drafted texts on the nature of the Abyss and the beings that dwell therein. Most of these are unworthy of mention, being the result of sloppy scholarship or the mad scribbles of magi too deeply entrenched in elaborate insanities to form a cogent sentence. A few, however, seem to be nearly as full of truths and concrete rules, inasmuch as such can possibly apply to the Void, as they are of spurious leaps of logic and outright fallacies.

A sampling of the more well-known writings:

- **The Unutterable Word:** Allegedly penned by a powerful Scelestus in the mid-19th century, the *Unutterable Word* is a primer for the would-be Abyssal summoner. It would be an unremarkable example of its type, save for the accuracy of the many summoning rites contained therein. According to one Mysterium scholar's research, which she painstakingly compiled over the course of decades, cobbling together scattered accounts, most of the 60 or so rituals within actually seem to work. The entities whose rites of conjuration are contained within range in power from a score or so of comparatively small horrors to one or two genuine nightmares.

- **Blasphemous Rites:** Written, probably during the 17th or 18th century, by an anonymous hunter of Scelesti, Tremere and other practitioners of Left-Handed Legacies, *Blasphemous Rites* is the title that has been given to this unnamed work. Originally composed in Latin, the text has been transcribed seven times, and translated into at least three different languages (English, French and German). A total of 10 copies of the work are believed to exist, all but perhaps one or two of them in the libraries of Awakened collectors. The original *Rites* has changed hands a number of times, and is now widely considered by experts to reside in the United States, likely somewhere in northern New England or upstate New York. While a copy of *Blasphemous Rites* is a rare find, it is held to be the definitive word on the practices of several varieties of Abyssal willworkers.

- **El Libro de Hierro:** *The Iron Book*, as it is called in English, this work was drafted in the early 1400s by an Andalusian Warlock who went by the shadow name of Encadenado ("Chained"). Encadenado was clearly insane, and claims in the book to have once been the master of the so-called black academy of infernal magics rumored to have once existed somewhere in Spain. Only one copy of the text exists, and it seems to be cursed, as each of its owners has died under deeply unpleasant circumstances, though all attempts to discern fell sorceries upon the book fail. Allegedly, the book contains instructions on how to create intruders (see **World of Darkness: Antagonists**, pp. 36–39), inhabited by Abyssal spirits.

- **La Couronne de Rois:** A French occultist, going by the pen name of Vérité ("Truth"), penned this tome (*The Crown of Kings*) sometime during the Reign of Terror. The book is distinguished primarily due to two details. The first,

that its author was, apparently, a Sleeper, given the utter lack of clues, subtle or otherwise, that would indicate an Awakened mind. The second, that he or she was a particularly *insightful* Sleeper when it came to matters of the Abyss. The book contains only a single Abyssal evocation, but it is remarkable in that it actually *works*, calling up a demon whose purview seems to be fulfilling the ambitions of its summoner.

- **The Liber Nihil:** Currently, this series of essays, written by an author identifying him- or herself as "The Benighted Master," is making the rounds on the web. It is full of the usual bad Latin, slapdash occultism and dubious scholarship that one normally associates with Internet Satanism. The difference, however, is in the fact that the essays' rites and rituals, when performed exactly as written, have actually, albeit rarely, resulted in Abyssal summonings. It remains to be seen if the writer is a Scelestus, a Sleeper would-be mage of some sort or just some fool who knows more than he should.

Of course, these writings are simply among the better-known of the Abyssal tomes believed to contain useful lore, their names uttered in hushed tones by students of the supernature. Countless texts exist, a few more accurate, or otherwise more noteworthy, than most of the drivel that is passed off as knowledge of the Void and its creatures. Would-be collectors, however, should consider themselves forewarned: one never knows when a new find might contain worthless speculation, potentially harmful misinformation or even true lore that scars the soul and erodes the sanity simply by the perusal of it.

To Reign in Hell

Just as the Atlanteans developed a system of classification for spirits with their origin in this world, the refugees descending from those willworkers put a hierarchy to those beings with their origins in the Abyss. And, just as with the system put forth by the sorcerers of the lost empire, the groupings of Abyssal entities have changed and evolved over time. Of course, the lore of the Void is considerably harder to come by for most mages, and so, nowadays, those who have dealings with the spirits of the Abyss often just use the standard system of 19th century titles common among the Awakened.

Some Scelesti and other practitioners of Left-Handed ways make use of bizarre titles, words that can only barely be pronounced by human tongues. Many such willwork-

ers claim that these titles are rude approximations of the terms used by Abyssal entities themselves. While such claims are of dubious veracity at best, what is known is that the beings of the Abyss do seem to subscribe to some sort of hierarchy, with more potent entities commanding the obedience and fear of their lessers. Certain chains of fealty seem to exist within the madness of the Void, as some spirits are expressly servants to others, and are protected by those that they serve. Whether this servitude is chosen, or is fundamental to such beings, however, is unknown. Those few who have managed to successfully interrogate Abyssal entities on the subject have gotten conflicting answers, or else were met with puzzlement by their unwilling informants; perhaps they simply did not understand the concept of choice.

As to the apexes of these labyrinthine tangles of obedience and subjugation, none can say for certain. Even the most eloquent of those Abyssal beings that intrude upon the Fallen World lack the ability to express such vast concepts to the comparatively limited minds of human beings; the god-kings of the Abyss are as much ideas and constants of their realm as they are individual entities. The mightiest of those things that lurk in the depths of oblivion beggar the imagination, and encompass realities literally incomprehensible to creatures not native to the stillborn universe in which the monstrous beings dwell and which they comprise.

Some Awakened maintain that there are magics, native to certain Left-Handed schools of mysticism, similar to the "Spirit Court" spell, that can be used by willworkers to acquire rank among the entities of the Void. If such powers exist, they are surely the closely guarded secrets of the Legacies that practice them, and are probably more a dissuasive measure than any ironclad protection; many of the entities of the Abyss will surely destroy even their superiors if they can get away with doing so.

Accursed Beginnings

The many disparate Legacies that comprise the Scelesti had to begin somewhere, and the origin of many is doubtless to be found in the days just after the annihilation of Atlantis and the severing of the realms. Many of the world's surviving willworkers were afraid and uncertain. For the first time, their magic was unreliable, the very exercise of their power hazardous to their well-being and that of those around them. All they knew at first was that an unknown force descended from a terrible place, defined solely through pain, fear and madness, to strike at the very act of drawing upon the Awakened will. Unsurprisingly, there were those who sought out the beings of that netherworld, in the hopes of gaining some power over the Abyss and its manifestations.

These proto-Scelesti came from all walks of life; many were not even native to Atlantis, and they counted among their number everyone from former slaves to fallen kings. Their reasons for turning to the Abyss were many. Some surely even did so out of a sincere desire to do good, to protect the people, places and causes that were important to them. In the end, however, most of them fell from grace and were consumed by the power that they wished to harness. The Abyss, as they eventually discovered, does not offer up its secrets lightly, or without exacting the direst cost.

No few of these traditions died out. Some faded away as the willworkers who created them realized the terrible price of their bargains and resolved to allow such lore to die with them. Most of those who disappeared, though, ended on account of less beneficent circumstances. Many Abyssal patrons could not check their unnatural hungers, and so devoured the minds, bodies or even souls of their would-be servants, while other cults were hunted to extinction by Atlantean exiles and their descendants. Still others fell victim to the vicissitudes of fate and the normal sort of attrition that kills off isolated religious and cultural practices.

Still, the legacy of these Accursed mages lives on, in the form of the multiplicity of traditions that identify themselves, or are identified by others, as Scelesti. In the end, despite the brutality of their lords, the best intentions of those who sought to exterminate them, and history's power to grind all things beneath its great wheel, the Scelesti have proven that one does not slay the Hydra simply by cutting off its heads.

Why Deal with the Abyss?

Different people have a lot of different reasons for dealing with the Abyss and the beings native to it. There are, however, a few common motivations, those that are attributable to the vast majority of people who seek to interact with such unearthly powers. While not every Void-ridden willworker or Sleeper cultist falls under these categories, most do. In no particular order of importance, the commoner reasons are the following:

- **Knowledge:** The things of the Abyss sometimes possess information that can be found nowhere in the Fallen World. Conversely, they also know secrets that have been all but lost in this realm; secrets about the days just after the fall of Atlantis, lore regarding Legacies that no longer exist and the like. Mages are sometimes willing to gamble with their souls in order to possess such understanding.

- **Power:** Perhaps the most banal and easily understood motivation for those who pursue dealings with the Void,

the lure of power is seductive and can quickly become all-consuming for an intemperate individual. Sadly, the lust for power is also perhaps the commonest reason for trafficking with Abyssal entities. Just as in the old tales of “deals with the Devil,” the price to be paid is steep, indeed, though some consider the benefits to be worth the terrible cost. More information on using the Abyss as a source of power for the Awakened can be found in **Tome of Mysteries**.

- **Perversity:** One cannot discount the desire to do wrong, simply because it is wrong. Some people like to do something for no better reason than that it is forbidden. It might be the thrill, or even the sophomoric sense that one is actively “serving evil.” These sorts do not often last long, though their service to the Abyss is among the most valued, since so many of them think nothing of receiving any reward for their works, beyond an eternity of torment within the Void.

- **Insanity:** Almost all those who deal with the Abyss are at least a bit unhinged. For some, however, their madness also serves as their primary motivation for calling up such unwholesome powers. Perhaps the siren song of oblivion somehow calls to the mentally unstable on some level ill-understood by saner souls. It might be that the most deeply disturbed of people identify more with the denizens of the Void than they do with their fellow human beings.

- **Ignorance:** No few of those that have truck with the Abyss do so out of a lack of understanding of the consequences. Some don’t even know that it is the Abyss that they’re invoking; this is especially common for intrusions brought on by Sleepers. If an Abyssal entity can manifest in a way that isn’t immediately obvious, such as through subtle suggestion in the subconscious, or in a pleasing shape (like an angel or a trusted authority figure), the entity can conceal the truth of its nature. Doing so may enable such a being to carry on indefinitely in the Fallen World.

- **Tradition:** Some servitors of the Abyss inherit their practices, whether through a bloodline or through an unbroken line of tutelage, passed down from mentor to student, generation after generation. The desire to do as one’s forebears have done can be a strong one, especially when one knows no other life. This is the case for children born into slavery to the Void, as much as for those newly Awakened who are taken in by a seemingly kindly mentor, only to be taught all the worst things.

- **Reward:** Distinct from both the desire for knowledge and that for power, in that the longing for a reward is usually quite specific. For instance, an individual may be convinced to serve an Abyssal entity in exchange

for the resurrection of his infant daughter. Likewise, a crippled and disfigured woman might long for the love of the handsome young nurse who spends most of his Wednesday afternoon shift every week talking to her and keeping her company. More flatly and crassly selfish desires, such as those for sex or money, are probably more accurately described as the lust for power.

Those who seek to fit seekers of the “favor” of the Abyss into neat little categories, however, should bear in mind that all is only rarely as it seems in dealing with the Void and its servitors. Perhaps the grieving father, trying so desperately to save his deathly-ill son’s life is actually a sociopath, hungering for immortality, both willing and able to convincingly play up his child’s plight for pity. Further, many slaves to the Abyss serve for a combination of reasons; maybe the thrill of the forbidden compounds a given cultist’s elation at calling up unearthly powers in the hopes of ruining his political rivals and obtaining the power that they possess.

Perspectives on the Abyss: Scelestus

What is the Abyss? It is the reconciliation of hope and hopelessness; both what we aspire to and what we dread. It is hatred, suffering, fear and insanity; but don't be fooled. They'll tell you that these are things to be avoided, as though such is possible. Rather, you should embrace them, as I did. After all, were it not for hatred, I would not have found the conviction necessary to survive my father's abuses. Were it not for suffering, I would never have been strong enough to survive after I killed him and fled to the streets. Fear kept me alive, while insanity preserved me through that which reason could not. You see, the Abyss is within us all.

When I set my mark upon the Tower of the Lead Coin, I crossed through that vast darkness, just as you did when your soul wandered to the Realms Supernal. Why is it, do you suppose, that it is the nature of the Awakening to require such a journey? Do you think that it's because the Oracles love us? A fairy-tale. The truth is this: your soul longs for the Void, just as mine did.

Ah, I'm sorry. Did you suppose that this was the part where I offered to show you these secrets, to convince you to join me? Please. I'm not interested in the competition. The power is there for those who claim it — it can't be given. It can only be taken — or prevented from being taken.

— Noah, Moros Scelestus

Out of the Frying Pan...

An interesting potential concept for a chronicle involving a powerful Abyssal intrusion could be to begin with ordinary Sleeper characters. Not the sorts with command of psychic phenomena and hedge wizardry, but instead completely normal people, with little or no awareness of the terrible realities hidden behind the mundane world.

Perhaps everyone plays the characters taking the 116 bus at 11:30 PM on a Friday night. Someone might take the role of a clubgoer, on her way out, while someone else plays the kid who's just arrived home on summer break from his freshman year of college, now working checkout at the local grocery store. Maybe there's a homeless man sleeping at the back of the bus, someone who has a vague sense of how unpleasant the world *really* is, how some shadows go even deeper than they seem, but who has been too afraid to explore further.

When the intrusion begins, the characters have no idea of how to combat it, and the mood becomes one of desperation. Likely, a number of the Sleepers will die or otherwise be rendered unplayable, as the monstrous power of the Abyss overwhelms their abilities and sanity. This, however, isn't the end of the story, merely of one chapter.

How It Starts

An intrusion almost always becomes apparent to the Awakened through indirect means. That is to say, mages usually first discern the presence of an Abyssal entity not through confrontation but rather through rumor or a subtle sense that things are somehow wrong. Sleepers in a given neighborhood begin to act strangely, or all of the water within several blocks of the old house on the hill starts to taste ever so slightly acrid and metallic. Maybe all of the stray cats in town disappear, only to be spoken of in hushed tones by those who swear they've seen scores of the animals out of the corners of their eyes, staring upward at a particularly dark patch of the night sky.

Because the relative scarcity of the Awakened makes it unlikely at best that willworkers will be the first people to come into contact with an intrusion, Sleepers are, more often than not, the medium through which the signs of Abyssal contamination become apparent. Spiritually and psychologically, Sleepers are for the most part ill-equipped to handle the touch of the Void, and so they become an unfortunate sort of dowsing rod for Abyssal phenomena.

...And into the Fire

After the Sleepers in the example story above are decimated by the intrusion, you can begin a new chapter of the chronicle, bringing in Awakened characters, who must now deal with the Abyssal entity in question. Perhaps one or two survivors — who can be Storyteller characters now, or who might still be portrayed by their original players, if those players are up for a challenge — have unique insights into the situation, and might be willing to share them with those who offer them the chance to see this nightmare ended.

Depending on the nature of the intrusion, this new phase of the chronicle could take place hours, days, weeks, months or even years after the first chapter. Maybe the young woman who was on her way to her favorite club on that fateful night has now gone gray. She might have lost control of her casual drug use, by way of a coping mechanism for the awful things that she now knows, things that she can't forget, no matter how hard she tries. Perhaps the kid from the grocery store never went back to school; in fact, he never leaves his room in his parents' house, anymore. He keeps the door locked with three deadbolts, and obsessively researches the occult, specifically demonology, in the hopes of understanding what went wrong and discovering how he can possibly fight back against the evil that he now knows exists.

This sort of chronicle creates a sense of continuity, as well as giving the players the sense that their characters exist in a vital, changing world, one in which actions have meaningful consequences. Maybe one of the Sleepers sacrificed her life in such a way as to bestow some sort of vulnerability upon the intruder, an Achilles' heel that is exploited by the mages to great effect in their efforts to banish the entity. Or it might be that the character discovers the digital camera of one of the being's victims, dropped in terror, which reveals a portion of the entity's appearance, something that can potentially be researched, so as to gain a greater understanding of its nature.

Perspectives on the Abyss: Ancient

It has been three full turnings of the moon since I first conjured the unclean spirit. It answered my questions that night, questions regarding the strange affliction that has beset us and poisoned our magic. Now, however, I feel that it is watching me, returning when I do not wish it to. I cannot prove that it is there, but I

sense it and I sometimes see it in my dreams. I have spoken to An-Shu-Kada, the Shaman, and she tells me that these dreams are important, and that I should be vigilant.

In my most recent dream, the spirit came to me while I was within a tall tower. The spirit told me that the tower in which I stood, and others like it, were to be found on the far side of a vast nothingness, an endless empty sea in which, in one instant, it was both born and died. The spirit has offered to convey me through that darkness, to the gates of lost Atlantis, once my homeland and the fastness from which our kind ruled over the whole of the Earth.

I have not told An-Shu-Kada of this last dream, for I am certain that she would think me poisoned by the dark spirit's lies. But what if it does not lie? What if Atlantis still stands, now in some other world, far from this one? Should not I, who was once a prince of the mightiest and most wondrous of empires, return home, there to greet my mother and my father, who remained behind to do battle with those that would sunder our Ladder to Heaven?

— Excerpted from a translation of carvings found in an Atlantean Diaspora settlement in North Africa, authenticity disputed

Omens and Signs

Nature itself rejects the touch of the Void, just as a body rejects the intrusion of foreign organisms. And, just as with the body, infections arise, as the body attempts to combat the offending intruders. In the case of the Fallen World, however, the "infections" that it inadvertently

creates are usually manifestly evident only to those that have the means, the training and the desire to look for them. Most Sleepers, for instance, might write off an attic full of dead birds, their skeletal bodies contorted in agony, as evidence of poisoning, perhaps, and leave, never to return to the abandoned house at the end of the cul-de-sac again. Likewise, five stillbirths in a year at the decrepit old hospital on the edge of town may be adequate cause for malpractice suits, but not, in the eyes of most sane Sleepers, anyway, for a paranormal investigation.

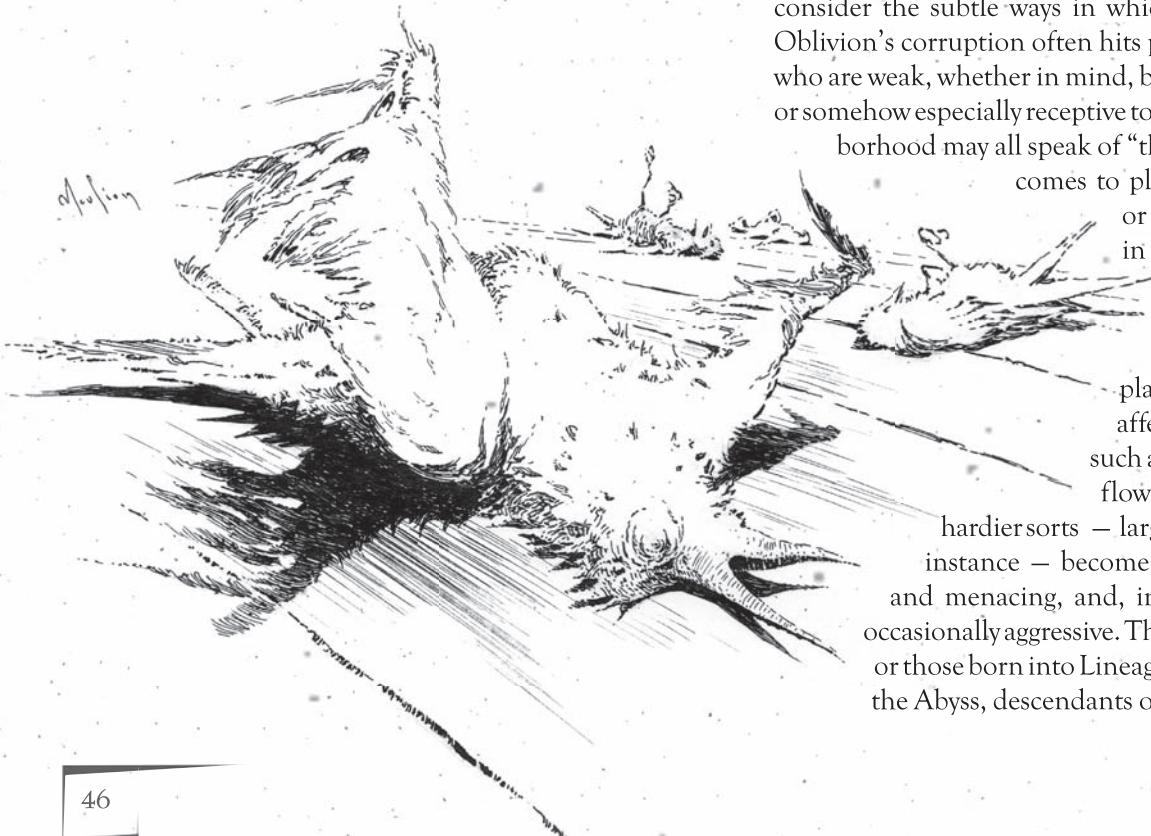
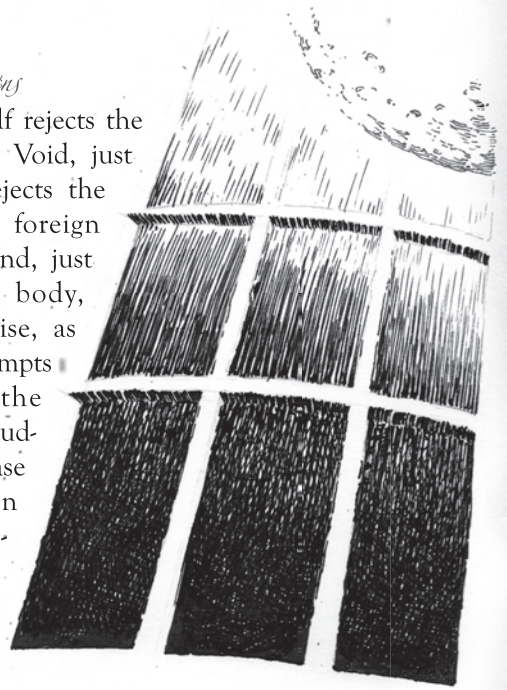
When incorporating the Abyss into your stories, consider the subtle ways in which its presence is felt. Oblivion's corruption often hits particularly hard those who are weak, whether in mind, body or spirit, innocent or somehow especially receptive to it. Children in a neighborhood may all speak of "the Shadow Man," who

comes to play with them at night or the elderly and infirm in a local nursing home might all begin dying

off of an unknown ailment. Animals and

plants can be adversely affected; frail specimens, such as field mice or delicate flowers, usually die, while

hardier sorts — large dogs, or kudzu, for instance — become twisted, turning ugly and menacing, and, in the case of animals, occasionally aggressive. The hopelessly deranged, or those born into Lineages somehow tainted by the Abyss, descendants of those once possessed



by Abyssal spirits, or bloodlines descending for Scelesti, are often sensitive to the presence of the Void.

Other natural phenomena are, likewise, readily polluted by the touch of the Abyss. Perhaps autumn comes too quickly and too cold to the town of West Oldham, nestled in a mountain valley, and the winters are particularly frigid, even for that part of the country. During the frozen season, daylight is thin and weak, and only seems to last for a few hours, before darkness swallows the town up once more. Parents caution their children to hurry home, before twilight sets in, and the air lies still and lifeless over the frost at night, beneath the wan light of a tiny and distant moon. Elsewhere, a river's waters taste foul and the mud upon its banks is an ashen gray, despite the utter lack of any quantifiable contaminant, or an ancient burial ground in the old swamp somehow begins to push the bones of the dead up, out of the earth, and willow-the-wisps dance in the dark.

Sometimes, those sensitive to the vagaries of fate, Sleeper and Awakened, can pick up on the presence of Abyssal taint. Sometimes, even charlatans subconsciously manifest an awareness that they don't normally possess; imagine the mounting fear of a fraudulent "professional psychic" when all of his Tarot readings, even the ones he does to while away the time when no one is with him, begin turning up dire predictions. Those truly attuned to destiny may have visions or even just "bad feelings" when the corruption of the Void encroaches, though other intrusions offer no such insights into their existence. Still, when hunting for the denizens of the Abyss, it occasionally pays to look into the happenings in the occult community.

The Intrusion Progresses

When an intrusion moves beyond the point at which it is initially noticed by the Awakened or others trained to discern the presence of Abyssal entities, the intrusion is usually entrenched, widespread or both. Still, the wiser of Abyssal entities will do their best to avoid notice whenever possible. Exposure can yield up the useful resources of willing, or even unwilling, followers, Essence, Mana and other such commodities, but, just as often, it entails confrontation with spirits native to the Tapestry, willworkers and even ghosts and Sleepers, any of which might learn an entity's vulnerabilities. Less subtle Abyssal beings tend to be either small and of extremely limited power (and, thus, not capable of wreaking havoc on a vast scale) or tremendously powerful (and, thus, easily detected).

Naturally, the manner in which events unfold from this point depends largely upon the nature and goals of the entity in question. One that flits from mind to mind,

possessing whom it will, may leave a wave of inexplicable atrocities, committed by seemingly unconnected individuals, in its wake. A spirit that serves a far more powerful master might gather up cultists and direct them to bring to it potent relics of mystic power, so that it might lure in a cabal of willworkers and sacrifice them, in the hopes of using their deaths as a gateway through which its lord might manifest.

At this point in the intrusion, the entity likely has resources at its disposal that go beyond the being's own personal powers. Some cultivate flocks of loyal worshippers, while others subvert animals or animate the dead. Still others have the ability to secure the service of terrestrial spirits or to create cryptids through which to work their will. Not all such beings make use of other creatures in so direct a fashion, however. Some lack the intelligence, as we would understand it, anyway, to work toward their objectives in such a manner. Instead, an entity might simply inspire people to acts of cannibalism or murderous sadism, for example, or cause all insect life within a mile to act in its best interests, within the physical limitations of such creatures.

At this point, to put it in terms the Guardians of the Veil would understand, an intrusion commonly becomes a threat to the secrecy of the Mysteries. The creatures of the Abyss, no matter how secretive and cautious they might be, leave telltale signs in their passing and by their very presence that disrupts the natural flow of mystic forces through the Tapestry. Even if the entity manages to wholly conceal its existence from humanity, people will start to feel "off" or otherwise disconcerted. Strange and unwelcome phenomena will begin to crop up nearby. The very essence of the Void is corruption, and the beings native to the Void cannot help but to sow that corruption wherever they might go.

Perspectives on the Abyss: The Void

We shall speak this thing that it asks, and then it shall set us free, yes? Good. It wants to know of our self-place, whence we came, and unto which we might yet return. Dangerous knowledge, what it asks, but we are compelled by it, and so we shall say these words.

Our home, what it calls "the Abyss," is not a place as it understands, and neither is it a thought, or a thing. It is nowhere and nothing. It is not hell, as its kind understands the idea, but something else entirely, and yet not. It is broken and whole, all at once. It is utterly empty, and may be filled only by itself, or not at all. We

would be pleased by neither possibility. We hate to be there, and yet long to return. We hate it, for being not as we are: for knowing, and feeling, and, most of all, for existing.

Whence we come, there is pain and anguish and sorrow and despair. No light shines, but neither is there darkness. Shadows have substance, though most of its kind understands this not, and no substance is there in our home. There is Void so immense that "emptiness" and "oblivion" are meaningless. Most of all, though, there is the longing for all that it, and all of its kind, has, and the anger that we will never possess such.

— Found among the bloody tatters of the diaries of Remus, scholar of the Mysterium

Bait and Switch

The Abyss doesn't always manifest in ways that are immediately apparent as such, even to those trained to look for such things. In fact, some of the more successful intruders are those that can convincingly masquerade as other sorts of entities. Consider some of the following possibilities:

- **Ghosts:** Certain intruders are "native" to Twilight, and can take on human form, allowing them to pass as ghosts. A few even possess the necessary abilities to confound mystic senses, appearing, even to willworkers, as the unquiet dead. These sorts of Abyssal entities usually inhabit the places in which one would expect to find ghosts: graveyards, abandoned houses, the sites of murders and other violations, the dark corners of old prisons and mental institutions and the like. Many such intruders have power over ghosts and can surround themselves with such, adding to the credibility of the "haunting."

- **Fallen World Spirits:** Since the spirits native to the Tapestry are comprised of essentially the same ephemera out of which Abyssal spirits must construct their forms while within the Fallen World, some intruders attempt to hide their taint and make themselves out to be spirits of Shadow, rather than the Void. Of course, even with Numina of concealment and misdirection, most intruding spirits can, at best, make themselves seem to be the darker and less pleasant sort of Shadow Realm entity. There are those, however, with such refined powers of concealment that they can hide among less malevolent spirits. While the ruse will rarely hold up to the intense scrutiny of a willworker versed in the ways of Shadow, the mage must not only find the entity in question, but also think to study it for powers of occlusion that she may or may not even know that the being possesses.

- **Scelesti:** An intruder capable of possessing human beings can, if its spread of powers is sufficiently diverse, act the part of a Scelestus. While doing so doesn't exactly make the entity any safer than it would be if its true nature were known, such a ruse can make any would-be enemies look in the wrong directions and draw the wrong conclusions, potentially fatal errors in dealing with the creatures of the Abyss. Of course, there is nothing to prevent a particularly powerful entity capable of doing so from possessing an *actual* Scelestus (or Tremere, or any sort of mage, really), only "sitting in the driver's seat," as it were, part of the time, and so genuinely adopting the seeming of a willworker.

- **Paradox Manifestations:** Paradox descends from the Abyss, and many Abyssal entities lack any physical form. For the most part, mages try to steer clear of Paradox effects, as lingering near, or within, one usually affects their magic in ways as unpredictable as they are unpleasant. Some Paradox effects are particularly long-lived, leading to prolonged "no fly zones" for local willworkers. Under the guise of such an effect, an intruder can potentially dwell in the Fallen World for quite some time, occasionally making use of its abilities to lash out at any Supernal magic in the vicinity, thereby reinforcing the notion that it is simply some sort of strange Paradox manifestation.

In the end, there are innumerable possibilities for intruders wishing to hide the truth of their nature, though some lies require work, and far more power, than others. The only thing that is certain is that an Abyssal entity will do whatever it can get away with, especially if doing so will lead others to misinterpret its nature and so compromise their ability to oppose it.

Crescendo

At some point, most intrusions reach their peak. Intruders, whether through the works of sentient beings, or through the gradual pressure exerted by the Fallen World itself to expel them, tend to be banished back to the Void or else destroyed. Before that happens, though, they usually inflict some amount of damage upon the Tapestry itself. By Abyssal standards, many are quite weak, and their works are often limited in scope. They are no less horrific for their scale, however. The harm inflicted when one of the least of Abyssal spirits finally compels a character's younger brother to take his own life, so that his soul can be dragged back to the Void, can be every bit as telling, and far more personal, than the butchery of a dozen people unknown to her.

If characters haven't managed to stop the intrusion by this point, then the Abyssal entity is likely poised to accomplish whatever it has come to the Fallen World to

do, which may be accomplished quite quickly, or over a much longer period of time, depending upon the nature and power of the spirit in question. Some intruders try to work in the macro scale, but most lack either the means or the motive to do so. Most have a particular *modus operandi* to which they are inextricably bound, and they cannot break out of that mold; for them to attempt to do so would be akin to an average human being attempting unassisted flight — it simply cannot be.

Consider the objective of your intruder: what is it trying to accomplish? This will say a lot about the methods that it uses to get to this point. If it's just trying to harvest as many souls as it can before it either gets banished or else loses its foothold in the Fallen World, the intruder is probably hasty and undiscerning, with a crude approach. If the intruder wants to leave a cell of worshippers behind, then the entity likely cultivates a stealthier and more exacting design. Most of the more intelligent intruders know that they're not going to be in the Fallen World forever, no matter how much they might desire that. The duller or most instinctual of them usually don't plan for the future, but most Abyssal entities *are* clever enough to quickly develop at least an idea of their limitations within the Tapestry.

In terms of story pacing, this is usually the point at which the characters come directly into conflict with the intrusion, creating a sense of urgency in their struggles. Of course, you don't ever need to allow an Abyssal incursion to get this far, especially if the characters have been particularly intelligent and insightful in their pursuit of the antagonist. Conversely, the Abyss pulls no punches and you might not, either. If the characters haven't put two and two together, then the intrusion may reach its zenith unhindered, whereupon they must contend with the aftermath.

Time to End the World... Again

While you can pit the characters against an Abyssal intrusion intended to do unimaginable damage to the Tapestry, perhaps even to destroy it, this is a well that you can only go back to so many times before it gets old. Players like to have their characters save the world, but it's never quite the same after they've already done so once.

Consider the desired scope of your intrusion and the extent to which it can potentially affect the Tapestry right from the outset, before the characters first get wind of an Abyssal manifestation. You'll be happy that you did. If you have firm guidelines — for your own reference, if nothing else — regarding the scale of the intru-

sion, then you don't need to worry about things getting out of hand, and escalating to a level that your chronicle wasn't designed for.

There are a lot of possibilities for intrusions *not* designed to usher in the apocalypse. In fact, this book is primarily written to deal with calamities on a much smaller scale. While one town vanishing halfway out of the Fallen World and into the Abyss doesn't seem like a tragedy on a cosmic scale, remember that every inch of ground lost to the Void is an inch that this world isn't getting back. The Abyss's war is one of attrition. Further, you'll never get that much mileage, in terms of personal horror, out of blowing up an entire country that none of the characters have ever been to with the manifestation of an Abyssal god. You're far better off hospitalizing their beloved mentor with a beating at the hands of fanatical cultists. It's *only really* a tragedy when it strikes close to home.

Equilibrium

While such an occurrence is rare, an intruder could possibly achieve a measure of equilibrium with its surroundings. Perhaps the intruder locates a ready source of Essence unknown to other local spirits. Maybe the entity's requirements for remaining in the Fallen World are relatively minor. The intruder might be quite skilled at concealing itself from notice. In this fashion, some Abyssal entities have remained within the Tapestry for years. Some have done so for centuries and perhaps even millennia.

In isolated locales, fearful townsfolk conduct sacrifices in the name of their otherworldly patrons, while other Abyssal spirits slumber fitfully deep beneath the earth or under the waves, in places that have never known the touch of the sun. Most such beings lurk in hidden corners of the world, doing little to expend their power that transpires on any scale shorter than the generational. The alternative is to move more quickly and obviously, which necessarily involves too much potential for discovery. Given that most Abyssal entities are effectively ageless, the ability of a given intruder to maintain this patient stance depends almost entirely upon its nature; despite their virtual immortality, few Void-born spirits have the self-restraint necessary to carry on in such a manner.

Another option for equilibrium is the entity (just as the intruders presented in **World of Darkness: Antagonists**) with no particular agenda beyond infecting the Fallen World with the horror of the Abyss, by whatever means are available to it. No schemes to end the world, and no

aspirations to build a ziggurat built from the bones of the dead from atop which it might rule over all – just as much low-key inhumanity as it can get away with. Such beings can make particularly good antagonists for a chronicle involving mundane Sleepers, or even those with a few exceptional abilities, since such beings are often less powerful than their more ambitious kin, and capable of a greater degree of patience, subtlety and understanding of human nature.

Conclusion and Aftermath

Even without the intervention of the Awakened or others versed in the arts of combating the Abyss, intrusions often end on their own. Only the most cunning, powerful and/or resourceful entities can maintain a presence in the Fallen World for vastly protracted periods of time. As befits their nature, most Abyssal beings cannot depart the Tapestry without leaving some kind of scarring by their passage. Even long after they either wither or return to the Void, the mark that such entities leave on the world tends to express itself in deeply unpleasant ways. An intruder whose entire manifestation was confined to an ancient mausoleum, for example, might vastly increase the likelihood of a haunting by the ghost of anyone buried there. One conjured in the sub-basement of an apartment complex might make children, the elderly and pets prone to sickness, nightmares and psychoses.

Most intrusions that end on their own do so with a whimper and not a bang. They tend to leave the Fallen World just a little worse off than it was previously, but not on a large enough scale that most people would take notice. A place might seem a little drearier than it was before the Abyssal entity arrived, the colors slightly faded and the world a bit less lively, but not so much that most would notice anything particularly out of place. In the end, the unseen lords of the Abyss are more than willing to play a waiting game, eroding the Fallen World, picking the Tapestry apart, thread by thread. They have eternity, by our reckoning, and each such manifestation brings them that much closer to victory.



Abyssal Assistant

Abyssal Apparatus; Deadly Assistant

I remember this story from when I was a kid, about Mr. Kelly down the block. All the kids liked him, because he was pretty much an inventor – he used to say that he was going to get rich off one of his inventions one day, but he never did. Probably because what he really liked working on wasn't really marketable. He made toys, mainly, things that kids loved, but nothing that might make you rich. Still, several of us poor kids always got cool presents from him around Christmas, and those kids whose parents could afford to bought other things from him.

When I was about eight, he'd started talking about this great idea he had. For a while, he would just kinda chuckle when we asked him about it, but he wouldn't say anything because he didn't want to ruin the surprise. But then, he stopped coming out to sit on his front porch with lemonade; that was always the signal for the neighborhood kids that we could come over and bother him. In fact, he missed Christmas entirely, and when we came around asking questions, he told us to get lost.

My older sister said that someone had found a bunch of dead birds on his front lawn, and the people next door to him started getting sick. A rumor popped up, wondering if he was messing with poisonous chemicals or something. People started really freaking out, and then someone called the police. We were all there to watch when they pulled up, of course.

The cops showed up and asked him to come out, and he closed the door on them. They knocked again, and he just kinda... lost it, I guess. He came out, swinging a golf club at them. He looked like shit – like he was over 100 years old. His hair had fallen out, and his cheeks had sunk in really deep, matching the dark bags under his eyes. His voice was really hoarse and old-sounding as he came out swinging the club, and the police took him away.

Everyone else went inside, to make dinner and stuff, after the police left. Some of us kids snuck over there, however. The door was still open, and we found all kinds of weird stuff inside. All of our favorite toys had these chunks missing from them, like they'd been pulled apart and their pieces used. Sara thought they looked like they'd had bites taken out of them.

Mickey was the one who found the Big Invention, though. It was covered with a big piece of canvas, and was about the size of a dog. Mickey pulled the cloth away, and the Big Invention lunged at him, tearing a big bloody chunk of his hand. Its eyes shined at us, like they were flashlights, and it blinded us. Scared the hell out

of us. We took off out of there so fast, no one really pulled the door shut. Sara said that she'd seen it chasing us, but that it unfolded some wings from its back when it got outside and flew away.

I'm still not sure what I believe to this day. I just know that when I went back the next day, all his inventions were gone.

The desire to create is not evil. The most creative people in the world – amazing inventors, engineers, tinkers – never encounter this creature. Rather, it is the hollow desperation that comes from the inability to create, that comes when a maker's genius is never recognized by those around him, or when his clumsy hands never quite manage the wonders that his mind dreams up, that causes the manifestation of the so-called Abyssal assistant.

The Abyssal assistant always appears first as a small tool that the inventor can use to help create this invention, like a screwdriver or a scientific calculator. When the inventor touches this device, he become utterly obsessed with his invention and will stop at nothing to complete it. The deadly assistant allows the inventor to attain success, creating his masterwork.

The Abyssal assistant's influence doesn't stop here, however. The Abyssal assistant also causes the inventor to become obsessed with creating new inventions – the creation of his true masterpiece seems to open a floodgate of wondrous ideas in his fevered brain. These inventions drain life from the world around them, feeding on the vitality of the Fallen World to continue to fuel the inventor's creative mania. Eventually, the inventor can think of nothing except creating his latest invention and can only avoid the physical decay produced by these inventions by continuing to invent more.

Form

At first, this Abyssal being takes the form of an inanimate tool integral to the creation of the inventor's masterwork project. This object can be something simple such as a straight edge or a screwdriver, or it could be something complex such as a pen, small flashlight, or even handheld magnetometer, a PDA or a pocket calculator. This object is always small enough to be comfortably carried on the individual's person, and fits easily in a pocket.

The device also appears to be a perfectly ordinary example of its type and can only be distinguished by the



fact that the device is always exceptionally reliable. Such an object functions as well as the best such device ever made, and its batteries (if it has any) never need to be recharged. The only way to determine that this object is something other than it seems is to use the Matter spell “Dark Matter.”

When examined using this spell, the device will appear to be in some way unreal as well as being obviously disturbing and unnatural. Some strange power permeates the material that makes up the object. It is clear from examining its resonance that this isn't simply a matter of some spirit taking up residence within the object — it is something within the physicality of the object itself.

The object is quite durable, needs never be recharged and doesn't actually do anything. The inventor considers it to be utterly indispensable, however, and will attempt to recover it at all costs. Should the object be destroyed, however, it will simply re-form at some point when no one is looking, appearing near the inventor, who simply starts using it anew, with no memory of it having been destroyed previously.

Means of Passage

This intruder is only capable of manifesting in association with a person who possesses a profound and overwhelming obsession with creating some mechanical or electronic device. The would-be inventor desperately wants to create the object, either for its own sake, to gain fame or fortune or to use the object for some end. Regardless of his motive, the inventor's mania is such that he thinks about this invention while awake and dreams of creating it at night. Mages who study this particular manifestation theorize that the tension of attempting and continually failing to transform an idea into a physical object causes a weak point in the fabric of reality, allowing the Abyssal creature to enter the Fallen World.

The Abyssal assistant always appears in the inventor's home or workspace. When the inventor first notices this device, she finds herself compelled to touch it and to keep it with her at all times (the inventor's player may roll the character's Resolve + Composure at a -3 dice penalty to allow the character to resist touching this object). Once

the inventor has touched the creature's physical form, she instantly feels that it is the perfect tool for her project. This feeling is soon borne out as the inventor suddenly gains new inspiration.

This object is a perfect tool: it inspires the inventor, though she obsesses over the project as long as she is touching or carrying the object. The effects of this obsession fade if the inventor is isolated from the Abyssal assistant for three days. However, until the three days are up the inventor retains a strong desire for this object — made worse by the fact that the object has an uncanny knack for finding its way back into the possession of the inventor.

Even if the inventor is persuaded to avoid this object, it will continue to reappear in places that encourage her to touch it by accident, including appearing by her bedside table or even the pillow next to her while she is sleeping. This object never appears in physical contact with any person; the inventor must always initiate the contact.

The Abyssal assistant allows the inventor to create his masterpiece invention. A criminal may find himself able to construct a tiny electronic device that allows him to predict the spin of a roulette wheel with near perfect accuracy, or an automobile engineer may finally be able to realize his dream of building an automobile engine that is five times as fuel efficient as any conventional engine. These devices cannot break any obvious physical laws such as defying gravity, permitting time travel or allowing teleportation. However, these inventions can accomplish almost anything else, including such wonders as fully automatic cars that can speak, understand speech and seem intelligent or backpack-sized jet packs that allow the wearer to fly for 15 or 20 minutes at a time.

Alternately, the wearer could reanimate a corpse, invent a drug that cures any disease, physically restore an aged user to her early adulthood or cause a subject to temporarily become her will-less slave. Mages researching the history of this entity have discovered medieval and Renaissance records of people who supposedly sold their souls in return for forbidden knowledge that seem as though they are records of Abyssal assistants.

Rules of Intrusion

While this entity allows the inventors to succeed in creating their desired invention, these inventions always come at a high cost. The inventor focuses all her attention on her invention, ignoring her home, family and job (unless her work is closely connected to the invention). The creator also ceases to care about either laws or ethics — if the invention requires expensive components or exotic ingredients such as human body

parts, the inventor will do her best to acquire them by any means necessary, whether through theft, grave-robbing or murder. The inventor is aware of laws and will do her best to avoid getting caught, but as long as there is little chance of discovery, committing theft or even murder will not bother her. While many inventions do not require any such extreme measures, those that do lead the inventor to perform all manner of illegal or even heinous acts.

The inventor's mania to create continues even after the invention is complete. If the inventor desired to use the invention for some specific purpose, she is free to do so. The inventor may do anything from using her invention to win vast sums of money from Las Vegas casinos to using it to disable a complex alarm system in order to rob high-class jewelry stores. However, even while she is doing so, she is also planning her next invention. Since this Abyssal creature compels the inventor to ignore ethical concerns, the inventor is almost certainly going to eventually attempt to create an invention that will require her to steal money or possibly commit other more extreme crimes such as grave robbery or even murder.

One possible invention is creating one of the Imbued (see **World of Darkness: Antagonists**, p.29). This process usually requires all manner of unsavory ingredients. Regardless of the purpose of the invention, the inventor will keep inventing and keep using the Abyssal being as a tool. Most mages believe that this entity feeds on the inventor's obsession; others think that the entity gains strength through the process of transforming an idea into physical reality, or through feeding on the degradation of the inventor's morals, ethics or way of life that inevitably comes through pursuit of his obsession. Regardless of the reason, while the entity appears to be a tool, in reality, the inventor becomes the tool.

Other than someone taking the tool away and preventing the inventor from taking it up again, the only way out of this endless cycle is for the inventor to decide to stop inventing and reclaim his life. Unfortunately, doing so is exceptionally difficult. In the brief joy the inventor feels upon completing an invention, he can make a Resolve + Conviction roll to throw off the entity's influence. The inventor can cease inventing if he makes an extraordinary success on this Resolve + Conviction roll. If the inventor manages to do this, the Abyssal assistant becomes inert, a normal tool without any spectacular properties. Mages theorize that the sheer joy of completion banishes the entity; this success is untainted by a sublimated dissatisfaction with this accomplishment and the desire to keep creating that normally comes with completing these projects.

Mortal Response

Inventors who steal valuables in order to build or finance their inventions or who engage in kidnapping or murder may be arrested, at which point the inventor will almost certainly be unable to complete her invention and will rapidly go insane unless she is separated from the Abyssal assistant. However, most inventors engaging in illegal activities avoid arrest and imprisonment. In such cases, government officials only become involved if someone in a position of power notices the existence of an exotic device that can crack codes, predict roulette wheels, drive a car or perform some other unusual and difficult function.

Naturally, various governments and corporations, as well as organized crime all wish to obtain such devices. However, the fact that others cannot reproduce these inventions and that only their inventor can repair them limits such interest. The U.S. government is rumored to have dozens of such devices locked away in one or more secret warehouses.

The Inventions

Inventions created by characters under the influence of this entity can be quite powerful. They are also completely unique. Mages who examine these devices cannot understand or even discern the reason the invention works as it does — it seems to work entirely contrary to understood principles of engineering and science. Scientists or engineers who examine such inventions will be similarly baffled. While almost all of these inventions appear to be ordinary devices that can perform unusual functions, closer examination reveals that some of their parts are completely non-functional and there is absolutely no reason for the devices to behave as they do, or, in most cases, to perform any function at all.

Scientists who examine such devices may declare them to be powered by magic, but it is a type of magic that is impossible for either thaumaturges or the Awakened to understand or duplicate. Even if skilled engineers carefully examine and then perfectly duplicate the invention, the duplicate will not have any of the unusual capabilities of the device. In addition, if the device is broken or disassembled, it ceases functioning unless its original inventor repairs or reassembles it.

The inventor's explanations as to how or why it functions are obviously incorrect to anyone with a sufficient knowledge of science or engineering who examines the device. The invention works, but not according to the

principles set out by the inventor. Also, even the inventor cannot mass-produce these devices. Each device is the product of its inventor's obsession and after he has made one (or at most two or three), the inventor's obsession will either shift to some other device.

Some inventors, however, embark on a new project wherein their first invention is simply one component of the final piece. Though the mania that seizes the inventor who desires to create such final mechanisms allows him to create the individual components and put them together, he cannot always articulate the final purpose of such an amalgamated invention. Indeed, he does not always know it himself, though it always seems at the tip of his tongue.

The Affects of Abyssal Inventions on Life

In addition to being mysterious devices that can neither be duplicated nor understood, these inventions are also inherently inimical to life. Mages who have examined them theorize that these devices draw their power directly from the Abyss itself and that this unnatural connection between the Fallen World and the Abyss causes the area around the device to become contaminated with harmful emanations. A single device only affects a region 100 feet or so in diameter and only harm insects, small plants such as ferns and herbs and seedlings of larger plants.

These small and simple life forms are far more susceptible to the invention's emanations than more complex life and only live half or a third as long as normal if they remain within 100 feet of the device. Unfortunately, the effect produced by these inventions grows both larger and considerably more powerful if multiple inventions are within 100 feet of one another. As a result, the home of an inventor who has created three or more of these inventions can become an exceptionally unhealthy location.

The more inventions there are in one location, the larger the area they affect and the worse their effect on living things becomes:

- **One Invention:** Small base life (creatures no more than an inch or two long) sicken within 100 feet.
- **Two Inventions:** All base life and small median life sickens within 100 feet. Small base life sickens within 200 feet.
- **Three Inventions:** All base and median life sickens, and humanoids receive a -1 die penalty to Stamina rolls to resist disease within 100 feet. Within this area, people regularly complain of mild headaches. All base life and small median life sickens within 400 feet.
- **Four Inventions:** All advanced life receives a -2 dice penalty to Stamina for the purpose of resisting disease within 100 feet. Within this area, people also regularly

complain of severe headaches, fatigue and nightmares. All base life, median life, and people receive a -1 die penalty to all Stamina rolls to avoid illness within 800 feet. Within this area, people regularly complain of mild headaches.

• **Five+ Inventions:** All life ages rapidly and receives a -3 dice penalty to all Stamina rolls to avoid illness within 100 feet. Allergies, headaches, severe fatigue and all manner of other chronic health problems are common among anyone who regularly spends time in this location. All base and median life rapidly sickens and humans suffer a -2 dice penalty to Stamina rolls to resist illness within 800 feet. Within this area, people also regularly complain of severe headaches, fatigues and nightmares.

The effect does not noticeably increase if more than five inventions are in one place. Any mage using the Life spells “Pulse of the Living World” or “Sense Life” within or in sight of the area affected by one or more of these inventions instantly notices that there is some widespread affect sapping the vitality of life within this region.

If the inventor is living and working in the vicinity of three or more inventions, she is also affected. She suffers from headaches, nightmares and exhaustion, but all these problems vanish while she is actually work-

ing on or acquiring parts for her inventions. Over time, the inventor’s physical condition continues to erode, especially if her house contains five or more inventions. The long-term effects of being within the proximity of five or more inventions resemble radiation exposure or a wasting illness — the inventor’s hair begins to fall out, and her body starts to literally waste away. However, she suffers absolutely no impairment or discomfort as long as she is in contact with the Abyssal assistant and continues working on or acquiring parts for her inventions.

If the inventor has been in the proximity of five or more inventions for several months, she may die if the Abyssal assistant is banished. See “Means of Exile,” below.

Owning Abyssal Inventions

Characters who have had experience with this particular type of Abyssal creature can own these inventions. Inventions of this sort should not seem either obviously magical or like something from superhero comics — even inventors who have been touched by the Abyss cannot create disintegrator beams, power rings that allow the wearer to fly or belts that teleport the wearer from one location to another.



Instead, these devices all seem like something technologically possible within the next 20 to 50 years. Such devices are quite rare, and their inventors are rarely willing to give them up. As a result, no character can start play with more than one of these devices. Also, given the risks associated with keeping multiple inventions near one another, few mages are willing to keep more than one Abyss-inspired invention in their home.

Owning a device that is only a slight improvement over existing technology, such as a wireless Taser or a pocket-sized PDA that has all the capabilities of a state-of-the-art desktop computer is a •• Merit. Devices that are both more advanced or that are more widely applicable are ••• Merits; examples of such devices include a suit of heavy clothing that protects the wearer as much as flak jacket, but without the Defense penalty, or a large, bulky and noisy jet pack that allows the character to fly for 20 minutes before it needs to be refueled. Truly impressive devices such as computers that can crack any code or a small stock of half a dozen doses of a drug that can reverse aging are ••••• Merits. More powerful devices are exceptionally rare and should only be encountered in the most difficult and extreme circumstances.

Characters will need to be careful when using any of these devices, since anyone openly using a device that looks like highly advanced technology will attract the attention of everyone from organized crime bosses to the NSA.

Means of Exile

Other than the inventor being able to find the extraordinary force of will necessary to walk away from her Abyssal assistant, all other ways of dealing with this creature involve outside help. During the brief period after the inventor has successfully completed an invention, someone who attempts to talk the inventor into giving up inventing may make a Manipulation + Persuasion roll as Teamwork (see the **World of Darkness Rulebook**, p. 134) to augment the inventor's Resolve + Composure roll.

Someone may keep the inventor away from any of her equipment, including the Abyssal assistant (though destroying it will only cause it to return to the inventor). Alternately, someone seeking to aid the inventor may seize the device and keep it away from the inventor. As long as the inventor and device are kept separate for at least three days, the connection is severed. The manifestation fades, leaving behind a normal device without any supernatural abilities. At this point, the inventor's player

must roll his Resolve + Composure, at a penalty equal to the total number of remarkable inventions she created while in possession of the Abyssal assistant.

Roll Result

Dramatic Failure: The inventor falls unconscious for three days, awakening with absolutely no memory of the time after the device appeared. Indeed, for a week after she reawakens, she suffers from amnesia, slowly regaining her memories over the period of that week. She immediately loses all available points of Willpower.

Failure: The inventor falls unconscious for a day or two, awakening with little memory of the time after the device appeared. She immediately loses two points of Willpower.

Success: The inventor falls briefly into a daze, realizing how much of her life she has let slip away. She immediately loses a point of Willpower.

Exceptional Success: The inventor understands what has happened, and is bolstered by her ability to throw off its influence. She does not enter a daze and does not lose a point of Willpower.

In addition, if the inventor spent at least two months in the vicinity of five or more inventions, she must make a Stamina + Resolve roll at a penalty equal to the number of months spent in the vicinity of five or more inventions when the device is banished — the connection is strong and has wedged itself into her very pattern, and the sudden severing thereof is quite traumatic.

Roll Result

Dramatic Failure: The inventor dies, howling in agony.

Failure: The inventor slips into a coma and will die within a day. Only a conjunctive Life 4/Prime 2 "Partnering" spell can heal this ailment, literally severing the connection between the inventor and the Abyss.

Success: The inventor's connection with the Abyss is severed. However, if the inventor has been around five or more inventions for more than one month, the trauma scours her health, reducing her Stamina by one dot (to a minimum of one dot).

Exceptional Success: The inventor's connection is severed, and she loses no Stamina, regardless of her proximity to the inventions.

Researching the Abyssal Assistant

Capping Skill: Crafts

Action: Extended — 10 successes

Research Time: 1 hour; 20 minutes

Appropriate Libraries: Engineering, Inventions & Inventors, History of Science

Possible Modifiers: The researcher is an Initiate of the Matter Arcanum (+1), the researcher possess no dots in Science (-1)

Successes	Information
0-9	Nothing.
10-14	According to the notes from a presentation by a technostic Obrimos, there are some Abyssal manifestations that take the form of an inanimate tool, enabling an inventor to create otherwise impossible inventions that cannot be duplicated.
15-19	In an investigation of some of these inventions by the Guardians, mages discovered these inventions are inimical to life, placing several near one another makes the problem worse. Destroying the item is useless; it will re-form and reappear in less than a day.
20+	According to the findings of a Mysterium researcher, the only way to dispel this manifestation is to either persuade the inventor to stop inventing or to isolate her from the device for three days.

Story Hooks

The sudden influence of the Abyssal assistant may seem like a great boon to humankind, but as is often the case with manifestations of the Abyss, the harm the Abyssal assistant can inflict far outweighs the potential benefits. Some ideas for incorporating this intruder follow.

The Employer

A somewhat obsessive and eccentric electronics researcher named Dave Riley who works for a small private electronics firm became obsessed with developing a highly durable, full-color computer display that is as thin and flexible as a thick plastic bag. When all of his efforts failed, he became sufficiently upset and desperate enough to attract an Abyssal assistant. This being took the form of a small, highly advanced PDA that Dave never lets out of his sight.

His employer Janice Sutherland was both surprised and overjoyed to discover that he'd invented a device that everyone predicted was at least five years beyond current

technology. Her joy rapidly faded when she realized that the device did not work as he described and could not be reproduced. However, instead of dismissing him as a crackpot or the perpetrator of a hoax, she was interested to see what else he could do.

While Janice studied this device, she encouraged Dave to try his hand at another project – a handheld language translator. He completed the device, much to her continued amazement. Janice now realized that she has a source of unique and potentially valuable devices. She praised him lavishly, told him that his new computer display and translator would be sold in stores everywhere and then suggested to Dave that he attempt to invent something that she knew she could easily sell to someone unscrupulous – a device capable of cracking almost any online password. Being completely in the grip of the Abyssal assistant, Dave gave no thought to the odd nature of the request and immediately set to work creating this device. Once the device was completed, Janice found a buyer with ties to organized crime, demonstrated the device's uses and sold it for several hundred thousand dollars.

Next, Janice asked Dave to create a device that she has an immediate use for. Janice enjoys betting on horse races and asked Dave to create a handheld device that could reliably pick winners in horse races. When the characters first encounter this situation, Dave has just completed this device and is spending a week considering which of several possible new projects to pursue, while everyone in the complex who works near him has begun complaining of frequent headaches and fatigue and both Dave and Janice have begun to look somewhat unhealthy.

The characters can find out about these events in several possible ways. They might learn of the password-cracking device and uncover where it came from. Alternately, one of the characters may know someone working at the electronics firm who has been complaining about feeling bad at work, who mentions that everyone seems to be feeling bad at work while also talking about the unusual amount of secrecy surrounding Dave's department and how Dave is now working alone on projects that no one else understands.

Alternately, Dave may require a small sample of blood or tissue from a thoroughbred racehorse to complete his latest device and so he and Janice will break into a thoroughbred stable and take a small tissue sample from one of the horses. If any of the characters own or have any other association with racehorses, or even simply live near a racing stable, they may notice these two obsessed and somewhat unhealthy and furtive-looking individuals lurking around the stable. If the characters do not investigate, the acquaintance working in the factory continues

to sicken and once Dave completes his next project, the person will begin to look distinctly unwell — examining him with Life magic will reveal that something has drained his health and vitality. An examination of the factory with Life magic will reveal both the severity of the problem and that Dave’s laboratory is the source of the problem.

Janice has become increasingly greedy and also increasingly paranoid about someone attempting to take either Dave or his inventions away from her. She will be exceptionally suspicious of unknown people looking around her facility. If the characters do not have an ironclad explanation for their presence, she is likely to inadvertently reveal information as she accuses them of industrial espionage, while also threatening them with the police.

While the characters are investigating this facility, Dave will finally overcome his compulsion to continue inventing. However, his PDA does not vanish as it otherwise would, because his employer is now sufficiently obsessed with his inventions that the force of her obsession can temporarily keep the Abyssal assistant from vanishing. Once she learns of his change of heart, Janice will attempt to convince or even coerce Dave to go back to inventing. She will eventually succeed in talking him into picking the Abyssal assistant up and continuing to invent, unless the characters intervene. However, even if they help Dave give up inventing, unless they also keep Janice away from the PDA that forms the Abyssal entity’s tie to the Fallen World, she will be using the assistant and creating her own inventions a day or two after Dave ceases inventing.

Grief and Reanimation

A grief-stricken older woman’s husband recently died of a heart attack. A physician specializing in medical research before she retired, Martha Sandoval is now obsessed with reanimating Louis, her husband. She immediately chilled his body in a chest freezer until the corpse was just above freezing. Then, she attempted to work the procedure she would need to attempt reanimation. She soon began to despair and started to accept her husband’s death when she discovered the Abyssal assistant in the form of a brilliantly gleaming scalpel.

Now, she is not only certain that she will succeed; she has a clear plan of action. Unfortunately, this plan involved obtaining a number of fresh, living body parts, including a heart, several major blood vessels, a kidney and a liver. In addition to keeping her husband’s death a secret, she has also begun to volunteer at a local hospital and plans to steal organs waiting to be transplanted, which could easily result in the deaths of the intended recipients of the transplants, since the patient might need to wait for several weeks for doctors to locate a new organ. Also,

she realizes that she cannot safely freeze her husband, and keeping him very cold will only keep his body fresh for several weeks. She needs the organs before that time. If she cannot find organs awaiting transplant, she will attempt to harvest them from recently dead or possibly even dying patients.

If she succeeds, she will create an Imbued Item (see **World of Darkness: Antagonists**) that will look and sound like her husband, but is a created being and not her husband revived. If she succeeds and remains undetected, she restrains the created being and begins work on an invention using a combination of stolen electronics and a living human brain, which she can use to “program” the Imbued to act more like her memories of her husband. She believes that she is restoring him “back the way he was” but can easily be fooled by the appearance of his familiar mannerisms.

The Hunter

Robert Lowell is a young man whose girlfriend was killed by a powerful Tremere lich. Robert is both a gun collector and a Sleepwalker and while unsuccessfully trying to save his girlfriend, he learned of the existence of magic. After seeing what the mage could do, Robert knew he could not simply shoot the mage with a normal weapons. Instead, Robert set to work create a special weapon capable of killing a mage.

He had no idea how to proceed until one day he found a new screwdriver waiting on his workbench. Then, he set to work creating the rifle. This rifle causes any bullet fired from it to ignore all Arcanum-based armor-granting spells. In addition, the gun provides five dice of counter-magic against any magic intended to affect the gun or its attacks. In addition, this rifle folds down to Size 2 for transport and has Armor Piercing 3 for all attacks. Use the statistics for a Rifle on p. 169 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**.

After killing the Tremere lich, Robert’s obsession continued, and he built a telescopic sight that could detect mages. Once Robert completed this device, he went up to the roof of a tall office building, looking for mages to shoot, not realizing their rarity. Not finding any, he set to work on a pair of sunglasses with a special coating that will allow him to identify mages (the telescopic sight and the sunglasses duplicate the Prime spell “Supernal Vision”), so he could spot them at any time. Now, he is looking rather drawn, but he is armed with his rifle, glasses, and sight and has begun hunting any mages he can find.

Traits

Objects that become the focus of an Abyssal assistant manifestation are changed in the following fashion.

Abyssal Assistant

The device retains its basic abilities and structure, at least outwardly. It does not change in appearance at all. It does, however, register to the “Dark Matter” Matter-based Mage Sight as a strange material of some sort, as if the substance it is made up has been altered somehow.

Durability: Increase the object’s Durability by +2.

Enticement: The object has the ability to entice the inventor to touch it. This may be resisted with a Resolve + Composure roll, at a -3 dice penalty.

The object also has the ability to discreetly change its position in the Fallen World to bring it closer to the inventor. This only happens when no one is watching.

Functionality: If the object is taken apart, it seems to be a normal device. It can be reassembled normally, and will continue to function. However, if it has batteries, they never need to be charged.

Restoration: If the object suffers significant damage, it ceases to function, and can only be repaired by the original inventor. The remains seem perfectly normal when examined by both magic and scientific instruments. Should the object be rendered inoperable or destroyed entirely, it will subtly reform, simply appearing somewhere in the vicinity of the inventor, per the Enticement power, above. The object leaves no trace of its original fragments in the location where it was left damaged. This generally takes between eight and 12 hours to happen.



Abyssal Spiders

*Mind Parasites, Subdural Organisms,
Slave-Riders, Enticers*

She never speaks. She just stands there in the corner of the club. The smoke, the music, the crowds – none of it ever seems to affect her. I've been watching her for a month, and I always leave with a headache and her face in my mind's eye. Every time I try to look into her mind, the headache gets worse. Is she another mage? A Warlock like me, maybe a plant of the Seers? Is she one of those undead things I've heard about? I have to know.

So I follow her. Usually I leave before her, but tonight I wait, and she stays until the place closes. She walks to a bench at a bus stop and sits to wait. The buses don't run this late... she's waiting for the first morning bus.

I sit next to her. "I saw you at the club."

"Yes," she says. Monotone, and yet alluring somehow. I inch closer.

"You stayed so late, but you never danced or talked to anyone."

"The noise helps me clear my head." That's strange.

I shudder. There's that feeling of tickling legs on my neck, like a spider had landed there. I wipe my neck, but nothing. I move closer, and she turns to face me. The buzzing in my head is getting worse. Is it coming from her?

She doesn't speak and I feel... angry? Hurt? Scared? I can't place the feeling. I want to get up, to escape that noise, and yet I feel drawn to her. I reach out my hand, and I'm not sure if I'm going to stroke her face or slap it. She takes my hand and kisses the palm. At first it's just warm and wet, but then it tickles, and then it burns.

I jerk my hand away and start running home. My hand feels as if I've grabbed a handful of nettles. And I can still hear that goddamned buzzing in my head.

Abyssal spiders are tiny creatures that slip through the barrier between worlds directly into the brains of human beings. Their hosts, however, must be prepared first, their minds made ready by a frequent regimen of supernatural mental control. Once the spiders break through into the brain, they boost their host's sensitivity to magic and the supernatural and can even injure those around them with a kind of psychic "static." The static, though, is just a lure so that the spiders can infest their true targets.

Form

Abyssal spiders resemble normal spiders, but they are not visible to the naked eye. These creatures are no bigger than the point of a pin, but if seen under magnification or with appropriate magic, they are spiders with translucent skin and pinkish-yellow fluid coursing through them.

A human being playing host to one of these spiders typically has a dazed expression and an unfocused gaze, though if the spider perceives a threat, this person can become quite attentive. Hosts are prone to bleeding from the nose and gums, runny and bloody eyes, tinnitus and other similar symptoms in the early stages of possession as the spider's movements disrupt the sinus system. These symptoms vanish about the same time the psychic static begins (see below).

A Brief Lesson in Neuroanatomy

The geography of the brain isn't exactly simple to explain, and it's well beyond the scope of a **Mage** book in any case. Still, a few basic facts are necessary to use the Abyssal spiders to their full potential, so indulge us briefly as we point out some of the relevant structures in the human brain. If you want to see pictures, a quick Internet search can provide plenty, as can a trip to the reference section of your local library.

The central nervous system, which includes the brain, is protected by three layers of tissue called meninges. The outermost layer is called the dura mater, which is itself made up of two sub-layers. Where these separate, sinuses form, enabling blood flow around the head. The dura mater is tough and fibrous, and rather resembles cabbage if peeled off from the rest of the head.

The next layer is called the arachnoid. This layer, which is the area with which the Abyssal spiders are chiefly concerned, is nearly microscopic. As the name would suggest, it's web-like in appearance and does not follow the brain's contours and does not contain any blood vessels.

The final layer is called the pia mater. This layer is thin, but still thicker than the arachnoid,

and follows the convolutions of the brain closely.

The pia mater contains blood vessels and is in fact pinkish in appearance (in a living brain) due to the blood flow. The space between the arachnoid and the pia mater is called the subarachnoid space, and it is here that one finds cerebrospinal fluid (CSF), the material that lubricates, protects and moistens the central nervous system. This fluid also serves as food and an information transmission system for Abyssal spiders.

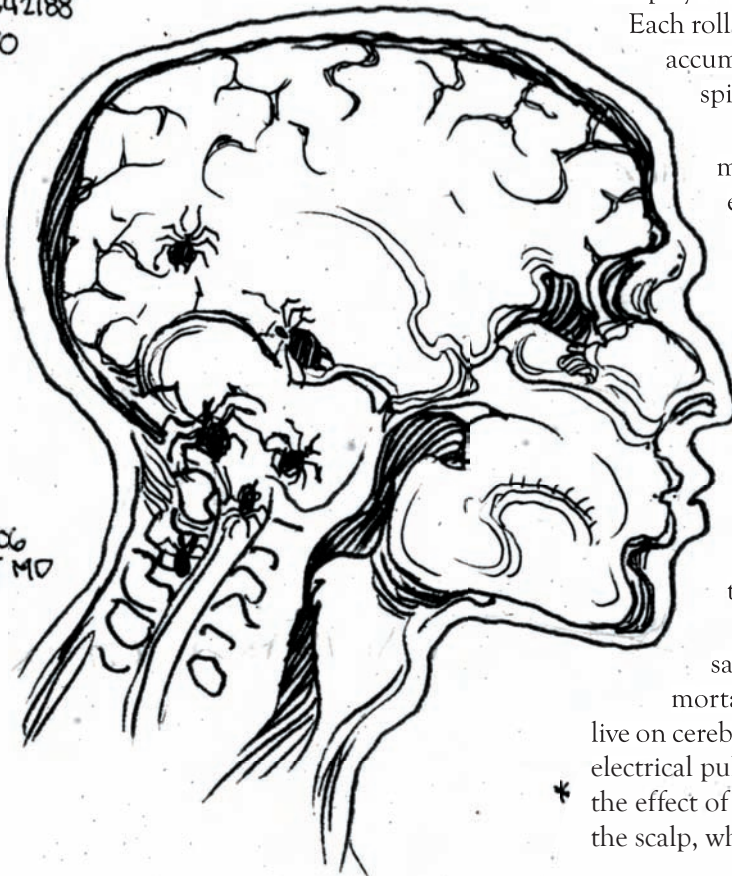
Means of Passage

The Abyssal spiders can only enter the Fallen World through the subarachnoid space in the human brain. Not every brain makes an acceptable conduit, however. Only a person who has been repeatedly mentally dominated by a supernatural being serves as an appropriate vessel. This domination can come from any supernatural source: a vampire's Dominate Discipline, a werewolf's Dominance Gifts, a mage's Mind Arcanum or even ghostly or spiritual possession.

How often is enough to allow for the Abyssal spiders to slip through? As a rule of thumb, if a mortal's will is subjugated (that is, a power is used successfully) more times

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in a single week than his Willpower rating, he becomes a good candidate for infestation. This is simply a yardstick, however — a mortal who is dominated less frequently in the short term but regularly over a long period of time can also become infested.

The stages of infestation are painful and unpleasant, but not usually so much so that the mortal seeks medical attention. First, the person suffers itching and pain in his head. His sinuses feel as though living things are crawling through them (which is exactly what's happening). Headaches develop with no warning and last for several hours, sometimes inflicting enough pain that the victim can do nothing but lay in the dark with a cold compress over his eyes. If the victim has previously suffered migraine headaches, he probably won't be able to notice anything different about these attacks, and takes whatever medication he's accustomed to in order to fight them off. This initial stage consists of the spiders crawling from the Abyss into the mortal's brain through imperceptible fissures opened by the supernatural tampering with the mortal's neurochemistry. During this stage, the mortal has a chance to fight off the infestation (this assumes that the mortal is a character for whom someone, a player or the Storyteller, has Traits — if the victim is a supporting character who needs to become infested, the Storyteller can just take infestation as read). The player makes an extended Resolve + Stamina roll.

Each roll represents one day, and the player needs to accumulate 10 successes in order to fight off the spiders. The following modifiers apply:

Possible Modifiers: Mortal is subject to non-manipulative, non-Awakened supernatural effect (-2), mortal is subject to Awakened magic (-3), mortal is subject to a supernatural effect that affects her thoughts or will (-5)

A dramatic failure at any point in this process negates all successes and prevents the mortal from fighting off the infestation.

If the mortal manages to fight off the infestation, he might become susceptible to it again if supernatural beings continue to alter his mind.

Once the infestation has taken root, thousands of Abyssal spiders now squat in the mortal's subarachnoid space. These creatures live on cerebrospinal fluid, and communicate using tiny electrical pulses conducted by this same fluid. This has the effect of occasionally stimulating random nerves in the scalp, which causes sensations of tingling, pain and

itching across the head. Hair loss is also common, and any event that causes a large number of the spiders to signal simultaneously (mortal danger, the presence of the supernatural) causes more powerful bursts of electrochemical energy. This can stimulate deeper neurons, causing the mortal to experience auditory, visual, tactile or olfactory perceptions without stimuli (that is, the mortal hears, sees, feels or smells things with nothing to trigger the perceptions).

The spiders begin weaving webs across the mortal's brain. These webs, constructed from concentrated cerebrospinal fluid, make his brain more hospitable to the spiders. During this stage, as the spiders are weaving, the mortal might experience the nosebleeds and other symptoms mentioned above. Likewise, at this stage the mortal most commonly seeks medical attention (see "Mortal Responses," below, for what happens should an infested mortal have an MRI or CAT scan).

Rules of Intrusion

Once the Abyssal spiders have infested a mortal's brain, they must work to propagate their species. Abyssal spiders, just as mundane spiders, are predators. The initial specimens, the ones that actually cross over from the Abyss, live on cerebrospinal fluid, refining and using this fluid to create their habitat inside their hosts' brain. The "second generation" of the spiders, though, cannot survive in the brain of a normal human being. These spiders need the cerebrospinal fluid of a supernatural being.

To attract supernatural attention, the Abyssal spiders alter the brain chemistry of their host to produce low levels of "psychic static" at all times. This static is easily detectable by any being with a hint of supernatural awareness, because the static resonates with a part of the brain that is largely inactive in normal, mortal human beings. Supernatural beings are often curious, or at least paranoid, about phenomena they do not immediately recognize, and the static attracts these beings. Once they get close enough to the spider's host, the static changes frequency, attracting the supernatural being in much the same way a flytrap exudes an odor that attracts insects.

Supernature and Science

Abyssal spiders bring a slightly more medical or scientific vibe to the World of Darkness than is usually presented. This can be a nice change of pace for troupes used to pursuing hoary secrets of the supernatural, especially if any of the characters (or players) work in a medical profession or have some background in anatomy. Likewise,

horror stories that take scientific precepts and add a hint of the supernatural can be quite effective, provided that the science doesn't miss some critical fact that suspension of disbelief can't cover (which hopefully isn't the case here).

With that in mind, players might wonder which part of the brain is responsible for receiving the psychic static that the Abyssal spiders generate and reacting to it. Popular wisdom wrongly states that human beings only use a small percentage of their brains. In fact, we use all of our brains, but the functions of some areas aren't fully understood. In particular, the parietal lobe of the brain (on the sides, toward the back) is believed to be connected to spatial awareness and body position sensation, but the parietal lobe also has functions that physiologists don't understand yet. Perhaps the spider-static stimulates this lobe?

Any supernatural being can feel the psychic static, as can mortals with a hint of supernatural sensitivity. This means that vampires, werewolves and mages can feel the static, as well as ghouls, wolf-blooded, Sleepwalkers and any mortal with the Unseen Sense Merit, regardless of the focus of their sensitivity. When such a being is within a 20-foot radius of an Abyssal spider host, the being senses the static automatically. How this sensation presents itself depends on the type of creature:

- **Mortals:** This includes ghouls, wolf-blooded, Sleepwalkers and mortals with the Unseen Sense Merit. Such characters receive tactile sensations, similar to the almost imperceptible but still frightening feeling of a spider landing on one's skin.
- **Vampires:** Vampires are dead, but their brains still function, including the mysterious area that receives Abyssal static. The Kindred perceive this static as a feeling of creeping, pervasive dread, as though something were watching them hungrily.
- **Werewolves:** These feral shapeshifters experience the static as an olfactory and auditory sensation. They smell something similar to, but not exactly, human blood. At the same time, werewolves hear a high-pitched whine, much too high in frequency for human beings to hear normally. The sound isn't loud, but is pervasive and discomfiting, much like a muted television monitor.
- **Mages:** The Awakened experience all of the previously mentioned stimuli: the paranoia, the scent and sound and the gentle brush of spider's legs. In addition, a mage's player can make the usual Wits + Composure roll to determine the source of the static.

Supernatural beings who simply flee the area don't experience anything further until they are once again in the host's proximity, but once a being senses the static, she typically tries to pinpoint it. Mages are the only beings who receive a reflexive attempt to pinpoint the host. Other beings must actively follow the sensation, which requires a Wits + Composure roll from the player.

Roll Results

Dramatic Failure: The character is lost in the psychic static's stimulus and receives a -2 modifier on all Wits rolls for the next hour. At the Storyteller's discretion, the character might also misidentify where the static is coming from.

Failure: The character fails to pinpoint the source of the static.

Success: The character tracks the source of the static to the host's general vicinity. If the host is standing in a crowd of people, the character will obviously be hard-pressed to guess which person, if any, is responsible, but if the host is alone, the character probably suspects something.

Exceptional Success: The character pinpoints the host as the source of the static.

If the supernatural being approaches the host, the spiders, receiving "feedback" from the being's thoughts and perceptions, increase the intensity of the static. The stimuli listed above become stronger, and a slight feeling of pain and an auditory buzzing sound (even for characters who don't normally experience auditory stimuli) occur. In addition, though, the spiders change the frequency slightly to entice the target to come closer. This change in frequency does not, however, dictate a particular feeling or emotion for the supernatural being, and so a mage might feel fascinated by this strange person. A vampire might look at him as a threat or a meal (or both), while a werewolf might see a challenger for her territory. The player of the supernatural being rolls Resolve + Composure + Gnosis (or Primal Urge or Blood Potency, depending on the type of creature).

If this roll succeeds, the character is free to act as is his will around the host, fleeing or attacking as the character sees fit. If the roll fails, the being becomes fascinated or obsessed with the host, and while the character may leave, he dreams and thinks about the host until he can find her again. The player must make this roll the first time in any scene that the character is within sight of the host, though the static might start sooner than that (when the character is within 20 feet of the host).

Eventually, the character probably comes close enough to the host to touch her. The context in which this happens is unimportant. Maybe it happens within the context of a fight, maybe a kiss or maybe just a casual handshake.

At the moment of physical contact, the spiders release a powerful burst of psychic static, taking control of the motor neurons of the host's body and forcing her to put her mouth against the character's skin. At this point, the character feels a burning sensation, as though hundreds of tiny pins had been stabbed into his flesh. This is the spiders forcing their way through the skin. They lay their eggs and promptly die. Meanwhile, the former host's player rolls Stamina + Resolve with a dice pool penalty equal to the number of days the host was infested (often this will be a chance die).

Roll Results

Dramatic Failure: The character suffers a number of points of aggravated damage equal to the number of days he was infested. An autopsy will reveal that the meninges of the brain were dry and brittle.

Failure: The character managed to keep enough cerebrospinal fluid in his system to survive, but permanently loses dots in Mental Attributes equal to the number of days he was infected. If this brings any of the Attributes to zero, the character falls into a permanent vegetative state.

Success: The character survives and retains his mind, but loses all memories of his time as an infested host.

Exceptional Success: The character survives and remembers everything, though probably has little context for what happened. The character gains the Unseen Sense Merit with a focus in mind-altering powers. This, of course, makes the character susceptible for infestation as a supernatural being.

When a supernatural being is infested with Abyssal spiders, that being finds that developing powers meant to control mortals' minds is simpler. Infested vampires can develop the Discipline of Dominate at a rate of new dots x 5, or new dots x 4 if Dominate is an in-clan Discipline. Ghouls can learn Dominate at a rate of new dots x 9 (in-clan) or new dots x 12 (out of clan). Werewolves don't get a break on experience costs for Gifts (which have nothing to do with their neuroanatomy, and are thus out of reach for the spiders), but receive a +2 modifier when using Dominance Gifts. Mages receive a +2 modifier to any Mind spell meaning to alter or control another person's thoughts or emotions (so while the Mind 2 spell "Emotional Urging" qualifies, the Mind 3 spell "Augment the Mind" does not).

Of course, not every supernatural being is equipped to alter the minds of mortals, and beings such as Sleepwalkers and wolf-blooded have no access to such abilities. If the carrier does not show a proclivity toward mental domination after infestation, the spiders simply use the supernatural creature as a breeding host, much like the initial mortal. Passing along the spiders, though, doesn't

harm the supernatural being. The spiders simply overwhelm the host's will for a split second, causing her to kiss or bite another supernatural being, and then leave her to explain her actions.

Infestation has three main drawbacks, aside from the obvious notion of playing host to a race of supernatural parasites. First, the psychic static that the spiders emit is constant, and the uncomfortable feelings it engenders cause a -2 dice penalty to all Social rolls made against beings who can perceive it. This is true whether or not a listener knows the source of the static. Second, the spiders' very presence destabilizes the characters' spiritual and moral center. No infested character can gain Morality by spending experience points. The characters can behave in ways that would facilitate doing so, and they can certainly lose Morality, but attempt to act within their particular understanding of moral or spiritual equilibrium feels hollow and unnecessary. Finally, the spiders can occasionally override the host's conscious mind, taking control of the body for one turn. The spiders can only do this once per day (or night), but for those few seconds, they can force the character to undertake any action of which she is physically or magically capable. Everything that a person is—whether the person is supernaturally touched or not—is contained in her brain, and the spiders have access to everything within that brain.

Mortal Response

Unless a host is subjected to an MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) or a CAT (computed axial tomography) scan, normal mortals have no way to know about Abyssal spiders. Normal mortals are not able to pick up the psychic static that these creatures generate, and since the spiders aren't generally interested in infesting normal humans, hosts pass unnoticed among the human throngs.

If, for whatever reason, a host is subjected to such a test, it reveals what appears to be a thickening of the cerebrospinal fluid (in truth, this is the webs that the spiders create). If the technician or the doctor interpreting the test is especially astute (Intelligence + Medicine with a -3 modifier), she notices tiny pockets of material in this fluid. These pockets are actually egg sacs containing millions of Abyssal spider eggs.

It is occasionally necessary to draw a sample of a person's cerebrospinal fluid (normally for testing for various bacterial infections). If this is done to a host, the test results indicate particles of foreign matter in this fluid. Again, provided that the analyst is willing to put the time and

effort into analyzing this matter (Intelligence + Science as an extended action, each roll represents 30 minutes, eight successes necessary), it can be identified as spider webbing. Needless to say, there is no medical antecedent for such an event, and discovering such would probably result in the test data being discarded as "tainted"—unless the technician or doctor happened to be a Contact or Ally to a supernatural being and be "in the know" enough bring it to his attention.

Means of Exile

Getting rid of Abyssal spiders is difficult. The spiders are microscopic, and so one human being might contain several million of the creatures. Surgical removal, then, isn't an option. Detecting the creatures with magic isn't difficult (they do advertise their presence with the psychic static, after all), but affecting them magically in such a way so as not to hurt the host is much trickier. The spiders take on the supernatural aspects of their host, meaning that spiders infesting a vampire feed off the creature's blood and enter a state of quasi-undead, whereas spiders infesting a werewolf's brain take on her half-spirit nature. In order to excise the infestation, some method must be found to injure the spiders but not the host. Below are several suggestions for methods of killing the Abyssal spiders; clever players will doubtless come up with other ones.

Mental Domination

Any being capable of affecting the mind of a human being can potentially kill the spiders. All that is required is that the manipulator wrest mental control of the host away from the spiders, just long enough to implant a command to expel them. Almost any supernatural power capable of forcing the human will can accomplish this, but the greater the control, the more quickly the infested host can be cured. System: The character uses whatever mental power she has at her disposal; the player makes the appropriate roll. The Storyteller rolls any resistance Traits for the host, adding one die for every week the host has been infested. Regardless of what kind of action the mental power usually requires, this action is extended and contested. Every roll requires one turn. The dominating character's target number of successes is equal to the host's Resolve + the number of days the host has been infested. The host's target is twice the dominator's Composure.

Roll Results

Dramatic Failure: If the Storyteller rolls a dramatic failure for the host, the spiders immediately die, over-

whelmed by the dominating character's power. The host, however, is now completely subservient to the will of the dominating character (which that character might or might not view as a bad thing). If the dominating character rolls a dramatic failure, the spiders gain a unique insight into that character's mind and tailor the static to her for a single turn — probably long enough to force the host and the would-be dominator to kiss, and thus pass along the infestation.

Failure: No successes are garnered in this roll. If the host wins, the spiders are unharmed and probably overtake the host, forcing him to flee or fight.

Success: Successes are garnered toward the goal. If the dominating character's player accrues the necessary number of successes, she breaks through the psychic static and communicates directly with the spiders. This is an extremely disturbing experience, accompanied as it is by the sensation of spiders crawling all over the character's skin (which might trigger certain derangements), but the character is capable of using whatever power she was employing directly on the spiders. The Mind 2 spell "Beast Control" could be employed to force the spiders to leave the host's brain, though unless the mage specified a destination they will just try to re-infest the character. The spiders are highly susceptible to mental commands, however (once the static is overcome), and can be ordered to undertake suicidal actions.

Exceptional Success: Many successes are garnered toward the total.

Suggested Modifiers: Power only allows control of emotions (-1), power can force a human to take a physical action (+1), power can force a human to take a complex

action (+2), power alters human's beliefs or thoughts directly (+2), power can force a human to take an action directly harmful to himself (+3)

Static Feedback

The psychic static can be reversed and fed back toward the spiders. This causes a mental backlash that quickly kills the spiders. Creating this feedback can be accomplished with a Mind 3 "Weaving" spell, after the mage has spent at least 10 minutes (not necessarily consecutively) being subjected to the static. Other beings might also be able to create this feedback through bartering with spirits or obscene experiments using mundane spiders, vampire blood and echo chambers. Such attempts should be the result of a story's worth of investigation and bitter experience with the spiders' host, and probably involve an extended roll of some kind (Intelligence + Occult for the reverberation chamber, Presence + Persuasion to barter with spirits, etc.).

Mental Attack

Powers that inflict damage to a target's body by attacking the mind, such as the Mind 3 spell "Psychic Sword," can damage the spiders. The difficult part is hurting the spiders without killing the host. Any attack rolls are made normally, but only one point of damage per attack is applied to the spiders. Three points of damage kills them, but this requires three successful attacks, after which the host might be in bad shape as well. Once the spiders die, the host's player rolls Resolve + Stamina, subject to any appropriate penalties for wounds. If this roll fails, the host goes into shock and will fall into a coma in minutes (a Wits + Medicine roll can prevent this). If the roll succeeds, the host passes out, but will recover normally.

Surgery

The spiders are much too small and numerous for a normal surgeon to excise without killing the host. If magical measures are brought to bear in order to keep the host alive during the surgical process of exposing



the arachnoid, removing and filtering the cerebrospinal fluid, clearing away the webs in the skull and stitching the poor soul back up again, this direct approach might be possible. The Storyteller is left to adjudicate how many different spells would be required for this feat.

On the mundane side of things, the patient needs to be drugged to prevent the spiders from taking control and forcing him to flee. The surgeon's player makes an extended Wits + Medicine roll. Each roll represents one hour of surgery, and 25 total successes are necessary. The player may only make a number of rolls equal to the character's unmodified Wits + Medicine pool (see "Roll Limitations," p. 128 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**). A dramatic failure at any point kills the patient. If the surgeon fails to achieve the required number of successes, he kills many of the spiders but not all of them, and thus the infestation continues.

Kill the Host

Killing the host also kills the spiders. Any normal rolls for degeneration apply, of course.

Researching the Abyssal Spiders

Capping Skill: Medicine

Action: Extended – 15 successes

Research Time: 4 hours; 1 hour

Appropriate Libraries: Abyssal Creatures, Mind Control, Supernatural Diseases, Possession

Suggested Modifiers: Neuroanatomy Specialty (+1), CAT Scans or MRI results for a host (+2), host available for study (+3), currently infested (-2)

Successes **Information**

0-3

Nothing.

4-8

Article published in a medical journal with very small circulation discussing brain-borne parasites that feed on CSF and cause odd neurological activity. This article was never followed and was later discredited by a doctor who claimed the "odd activity" was just the result of lesions in the brain.

9-12

Newspaper article from a small-town paper describing a woman who shot herself outside her home. The gruesome description indicates that she was "fighting with herself," almost

wrestling with the gun, as if her right arm were trying to prevent the suicide while her left were trying to facilitate it. In the end, the left arm won, and she shot herself in the head. Her diary indicated that she had "gotten sick of doing that sick bastard's bidding" several months prior, but that she had lost time quite often in the time since and commonly heard stories of herself biting or licking other people. She had no memory of these instances, and came to believe that she was possessed.

13-14


Recording on a conspiracy theorist's website about "vampires among us," archived on a "News of the Weird" site (the original site was taken down following the death of the creator). The recording features two people talking about a woman named "Rita." One asks the other if he had "fed her this month." The other replies that he had, but that she was acting strange, and that whenever he got near her he felt a "weird buzzing feeling" under his skin. The first man then reacts with surprise and fear, saying "I've heard of that shit. You need to kill her now, before she bites you. You don't want these things in your brain."

15+

Treatise written by an unnamed Mastigos of the Adamantine Arrow about the "Ethics of Mind Control" includes notes in the margins by man claiming that "deliberate mind control of Sleepers can, over time, summon beings from the Abyss that take up residence in their heads and there propogate."

Story Hooks

Abyssal spiders can serve several roles in a World of Darkness story. Obviously, as tiny spiders infesting people's brain, they make for good horror and gross-out creatures. Many people are afraid of spiders, and the no-



tion of the tiny beasts riding around inside one's head has already spawned several different urban legends. For instance, one tells of a woman with a beehive hairdo who walked through a spider web without noticing it – and later died as the arachnids burrowed through her scalp into her brain.

As mentioned above, the spiders are also a way to bring a little science into your magic. Neuroanatomy is a fascinating topic, and the notion that every conceivable feeling, thought or action corresponds to a chemical process in the brain is at once amazing and a little humbling. We are our brains, the totality of our lives contained in a few pounds of meat. What does that mean, though, for mages? What part of the brain responds when a mage alters reality? Is it the brain that allows a vampire to command the hearts and minds of her victims, or some property of the blood? What about werewolves – what must their brain chemistry be like to enable their shapeshifting? Neuroscience and magic are an uneasy match, and any such discussions require a good dollop of suspension of disbelief, but then, so does the World of Darkness in general. The Abyssal spiders, hopefully, provide a bit of a bridge between nature and supernature.

The Abyssal spiders have another, subtler story possibility, of course. Remember that they enter our world because supernatural beings subjugate the minds of mortals. When human brains are beaten into submission – tenderized, if you will – by magic, Disciplines or the Gifts of the spirits, the tiny Abyssal spiders skitter through. The supernatural beings who make human puppets dance, then, are responsible for these tiny horrors, and responsibility is a running theme of **Mage** in particular.

Better Living Through Pharmaceuticals

A biochemist becomes infested, and enlists the help of his sister, a neurologist, to find the source of his headaches when normal remedies don't work. Together, they discover the true nature of the spiders, up to a point; they know that tiny organisms in his brain are causing the biochemist's problems, but that they don't seem to be endangering his life at present. After much experimentation, the pair actually discovers the psychic static that the spiders emit, and design a way to record it. Meanwhile, the host designs a drug that he believes will kill the creatures by making his own cerebrospinal fluid inhospitable to them.

The result is... not quite what he imagined. Instead of driving out the spiders, the drugs force them to adapt to other parts of his brain. Moving deeper, they settle in the limbic system and tap into his memories, his emotions and his capacity to learn. They also bring with them their

normal penchant for producing supernatural effects. The biochemist now has an intrinsic understanding of how neurochemistry relates to the supernatural, and sets about designing another drug to kill the creatures. This new drug works to much the same degree the original one did; it drives the spiders out of the limbic system and into the forebrain (the seat of personality). The drug has the side effect, however, of amplifying the biochemist's id – he has a hard time focusing on his work, consumed as he is by lust, hunger and other base emotions.

Now possessed of an understanding of what the spiders are and what they want, and ruled by a part of his brain that has no notion of morality or responsibility, the biochemist sets about trying to pass along the infestation (and hopefully get it out of him). He designs drugs that affect supernatural beings in ways not normally possible. He might create a drug that inhibits magic use, blocking the neurochemical reactions that allow for drawing down the power of the Supernal Realms. He might develop a serum that interferes with a werewolf's flesh/spirit balance, which could have any number of detrimental effects (inhibiting shapeshifting, preventing Gift use, knocking out regeneration). He might go the other way, though, and develop drugs that awaken magic-like abilities in Sleepers – or amplify Sleepers' effects on vulgar magic.

The characters can become involved with this story at any point along the way. They might know the biochemist or his sister, or they might have medical contacts and hear about the strange MRI results through the hospital grapevine. The characters might simply be on the receiving end of his drugs. Perhaps the characters know someone who signed up for a pharmaceutical research study and wound up infested (and possibly Awakened). The biochemist is not an evil man, but he is growing ruthless, lascivious and addicted to his own medications. Also, consider that for him to have become infested in the first place, something must have been dominating him. Who or what was it, and has this entity kept abreast of what has happened since?

Synergy

A Mastigos mage started a cult several months ago, mostly in the interest of seeing how far she could push people with the Mind Arcanum. Over time, she has grown addicted to the feeling of mentally coercing others, and the cult, composed of masochists and sycophants, has fed into her delusions of grandeur. The members of the cult – all 10 of them – recently became infested. Of course, it didn't take long after that for the Mastigos to become infested as well.

But a curious thing happened then. The Mastigos generates the psychic static at a slightly different frequency than her followers. The “harmonics,” as it were, between these two frequencies awakened psychic powers in the cultists. No two have the same power, and the powers are subtle. One might manifest weak telekinesis, for instance, about the equivalent of Strength 2. Another’s touch inflicts burning, searing pain without causing a wound. (Storytellers, if you have **World of Darkness: Second Sight**, you can easily make use of the Merits found therein to simulate this phenomena. If not, **Mage** spells work just as well. Simply ignore Paradox and assign rolls for the powers as appropriate.)

The Mastigos still follows her old agenda — that is, recruit members to the cult and bask in the adoration that follows. But the spiders living in her brain have an agenda as well, and it involves finding other supernatural beings. Just as she is slowly manipulating the cultists into loving and worshipping her, the spiders are nudging her toward using her followers to kidnap and infest other mages. And who knows what will happen when other Awakened become infested by this cult? Their frequency might awaken further changes in the cultists. A Thyrsus mage’s psychic static might cause physical aberrations in them, while an Obrimos might render them invisible to Mage Sight.

The danger in this story hook is that it might begin to feel like a superhero game, which is a bit out-of-genre for the World of Darkness. As Storyteller, you can avoid that by stressing two things. First, this is a cult. These people are sick, degraded and utterly dependent on the mage for validation. All cults have ceremonies, and this one is no exception. Maybe the cultists rub themselves against their “queen” in a quasi-sexual display of subservience. Maybe they are asked to give of themselves, which could mean flesh, blood, urine or simply service. Second, the strange powers that the people display are because they have otherworldly spiders in their brains. Using the powers should have some strange and possibly painful effect on them. Nosebleeds, strange changes in eye or skin pigment, uncontrollable drooling, rapid breathing and hand tremors are all possibilities. These abilities are not gifts from on high; they are random, freakish side effects of the Abyss intruding upon the Fallen World.

Lost Time

Start this story in the midst of another one. One of the characters experiences the psychic static (but of course has no idea what she is perceiving). Try to plant the host in a place that the character is sure to frequent: a place of business, a favorite hangout, a class, etc. The character finally winds up being kissed or bitten, and thus infested,

but nothing else ever comes of it. Investigations lead to dead ends, and the characters have other fish to fry at the moment anyway. This takes some delicate work on the part of the Storyteller. You want the infestation scenes to be memorable, but not distract from the present storyline too much. Depending on the dynamic of your troupe, it might actually be something better handled in private correspondence with the appropriate player.

As the chronicle progresses, repeat this type of occurrence with the other characters. Slowly but surely, they become infested. They notice the psychic static, but don’t trace it to the other player-controlled characters (which might require you to fudge some rolls, but that’s fine; it isn’t as though being infested is immediately fatal), until finally it stops altogether. Characters who have mind-controlling powers notice that they seem to be working more consistently, but beyond that they see very little change.

The trigger event that really starts this story is when one of the characters is forced to make a degeneration roll. If the roll succeeds, the character is wracked with pain suddenly. She retains her Morality, in whatever form it takes, but realizes that something within her is affecting her ability to tell right from wrong. If the roll fails, the character realizes that she just doesn’t care, and that apathy is frightening to her. At this point, the characters might realize that they are losing time occasionally. It’s just a minute or two, maybe even less, but they’ll find themselves standing up when they were sitting, facing a different direction or losing track of time during a menial task.

Other clues might show themselves as well. Maybe the characters note that spiders always crawl away from them. Maybe one character notices two others staring at each other as though communicating, and then walking past each other and going on with their activities as though nothing happened. The point of the story is that the characters are realizing that, to some degree, their wills are not their own. If these characters make a habit of subjugating mortal minds, even if for their own protection, this might be a study in poetic justice. More likely, though, it’s a story about the horrors of losing one’s own mind.

As the story progresses, the spiders gain the ability to take the characters over for slightly long period of time (this is a deviation from the material presented above, true, but it serves the story). What are the characters doing during their “lost time?” Is there a way to snap someone out of it? Are the characters all entering this fugue state together? Perhaps the spiders are working toward that, sending messages over the static and trying to coordinate

their efforts to get the whole cabal (or coterie, or pack or whatever) under control at exactly the same time. If that happens, what then? Will they kidnap another supernatural being to infest him? Can the spiders make the control permanent?

Maybe, instead of permanently taking control, the spiders make it the default state. The characters could become trapped inside their own bodies, able to communicate with whispered conversations over the psychic static, but unable to access any of their sensory or motor

faculties except for the brief moments when the spiders are distracted. Then, for a few minutes at a time, their control slips, and the characters are themselves again. What can the characters do during this time? How will they spend their few precious moments of freedom? Obviously, this isn't a state of affairs you'll want to keep going for too long, but it can grant a beautiful sense of tension and panic to a story. And even once the characters manage to get their bodies back for the majority of the time, they still have to find a way to kill the spiders.



Anumerus

*Al-Mujabala, Mister Nine,
the Oddity, the System, Unglück*

So the board members beat the rap. They pinned the accounting scandal on an underling and retired to some tropical islands, or to southern France or to wherever. They were living the good life, getting fat off our pensions. Then the weird stuff started happening. A few of them went bankrupt when their investments went sour. One of them became a recluse, canceled his phone service and went to live in the desert. Another guy went crazy. Sounds like justice, right? But here's the thing – I hear the same stuff is happening to all the old stockholders, now, and to all the ex-employees....

Numbers control the world. Forget their mystic significance – forget magical and numerological theory, at least for a moment – and focus on the mundane. Every transaction involving cash or credit, every phone call, every entry on every schedule, every roll of the dice relies on numbers being right. A little slip, a miscalculation here or an under-the-table adjustment there can throw off everything.

Ever wonder what would happen if the numbers were out to get you?

Anumerus is the herald of numbers gone wrong. His power comes from bad investments, missed meetings, overdoses of medication and gamblers' despair. He delights in the pain caused by everyday mistakes and the mathematical machinery of war and genocide. He gives metaphysical weight to equations, turning what should be neutral and reliable figures into forces that serve the Abyss.

Only a few historical documents reference incidents that could be attributed to Anumerus, and some mystagogues believe he is a purely modern phenomenon. Experts of the Free Council disagree – they say that Anumerus first entered the material world when humanity invented the number zero, or that he was the secret god of Incan *kipu* counting devices – but many mages still believe that Anumerus would have been powerless in an earlier era. Modern society's reliance on numbers is unique in history, they say, and giving numbers tribute through fear and worship has created a monster.

Practitioners of Left-Handed Legacies sometimes look to stories of Anumerus and assume that his intelligence,

his human-like manifestation and his orderly nature mean that he can be contacted, bargained with or controlled. But Anumerus is no more than the sum of his parts. He is the components of whatever never-been concept of numbers exists in the Abyss, and he doesn't think like a human, an animal or a spirit. Any mage doing business with him and expecting to come out ahead just doesn't get the math.

Abyssal Numerology

Around Anumerus, each integer from zero through nine gains significance and meaning. Some mystagogues familiar with the power of numbers believe that Anumerus's "anti-numbers" directly oppose the mystic attributes of numbers in the Supernal Realm, and assign the following meanings to his creations.

Zero: Oblivion – inescapable and endless – from which nothing new can be created. Often associated with the Prime Arcanum.

One: Loneliness, weakness, despair. One is forever separated from all else, and is doomed to ignorance. Absolute solitude, rather than absolute unity. Often associated with the Life Arcanum.

Two: Schism and antagonism. Where there are two, there is opposition that cannot be overcome. Often associated with the Forces Arcanum.

Three: Fragmentation, schizophrenia, miscommunication and madness. The dispersal of self into multiple, conflicting aspects. Often associated with the Mind Arcanum.

Four: Distance, emptiness, vertigo and material decay. The gaps between the elements and the cardinal points. Often associated with the Matter Arcanum.

Five: Void, dangerous secrets, left-handed magic. The inverted pentagram, drawing upon the Abyss. Often associated with the Spirit Arcanum.

Six: War, factionalism, irresponsibility. The inability of a society to endure. Often associated with the Fate Arcanum.

Seven: Black insight, Abyssal nightmares, the illusion of understanding. The ultimate lie

as the ultimate truth. Often associated with the Time Arcanum.

Eight: Confusion, inability to progress, work left undone. Eight is the maze without end, the path without a destination. Often associated with the Space Arcanum.

Nine: The urge to destroy, to break down that which has been built up. The determination to bring about ruin. Often associated with the Death Arcanum.

Form

Anumerus can only materialize after gaining enough power during a prolonged intrusion. Until then, he exists in a disincorporated, semi-conscious state within the area he most strongly affects. His domain has no clear borders – although the symbolic seat and center of his power could be a corporate boardroom, his influence might extend to the surrounding building, neighborhood or city, so long as his works harm enough residents.

If and when Anumerus does manifest, he does so in Twilight. He usually appears as a tall, thin man dressed in archaic formalwear appropriate to his locale. His head is smooth and hairless, and without significant features, like that of a mannequin. A glowing circle frames his face, like a cross between a halo and a wheel of fortune. The numbers zero through nine cycle there eternally, forward and backward.

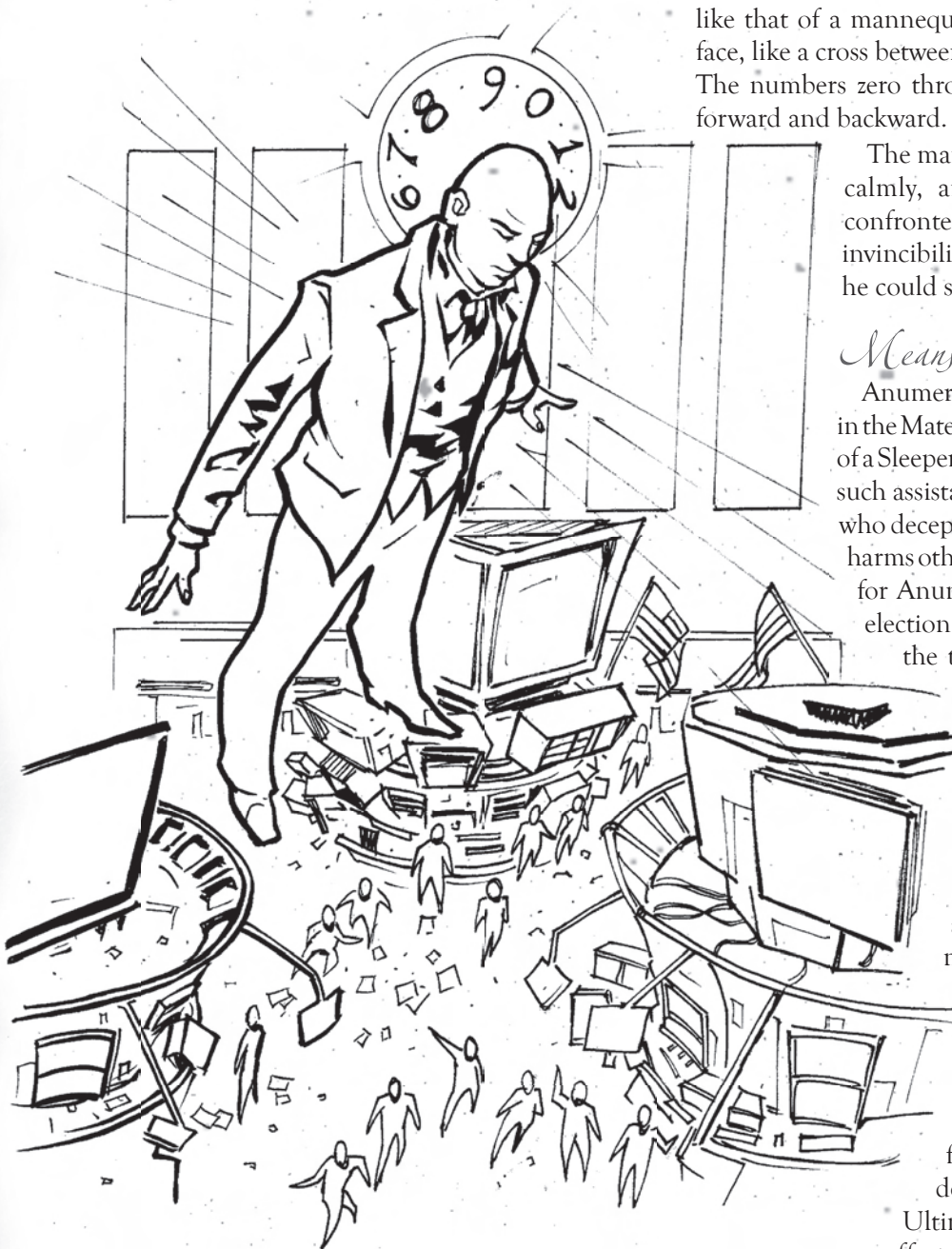
The manifest form of Anumerus speaks calmly, articulately and confidently if confronted, asserting his belief in his own invincibility. If not for his sadistic nature, he could seem quite genial.

Means of Passage

Anumerus can't normally gain a foothold in the Material Realm without the assistance of a Sleeper—but given the way of the world, such assistance is easy to gain. Any Sleeper who deceptively manipulates numbers and harms others as a result may open a gateway for Anumerus. A politician who rigs an election, a cashier who steals money from the till, a pollster who fakes results or the purveyor of a pyramid scheme might open this gateway. All Anumerus has to do is find it and go through.

This initial act alone doesn't allow Anumerus to manifest his power, however. Until the pain and suffering builds to a critical mass, Anumerus can only observe. He must wait the months or years required for a Sleeper's initial action to have consequences; and with every person touched by the initial action, with every further manipulation performed down the line, he grows stronger.

Ultimately, one minor manipulation may affect dozens, hundreds or thousands



of people — and at last give Anumerus the power to act on his own.

Of course, not every minor manipulation actually summons an intruder from the Abyss. But every minor manipulation has that potential. Anumerus has the luxury of picking and choosing his gateway, watching for the situations that offer the greatest potential for damage. He can lurk for ages in the Abyss, waiting for his chance. Odds are that his time will come.

There is one other way for Anumerus to enter the material world, but it's exceedingly rare. When a mage causes a Paradox manifestation by using Fate magic to manipulate numbers, Anumerus may hear the call. If he does appear, he uses his brief time on Earth to foment as much chaos as possible, abandoning his usual subtlety.

Rules of Intrusion

Anumerus's goals are simple: He wishes to further the manipulation of numbers, and to feed on the suffering such manipulations cause. He doesn't care what the numbers are used for. He doesn't care who helps him. He only wants to perform his sacrament.

Early on, Anumerus's actions are disguised so well that only the most paranoid mages can discern a supernatural force at work. Within Anumerus's domain, things don't add up as they should. Struggling families struggle a little more to pay their bills, without understanding what's changed. Televisions drift to channels broadcasting news about crimes and disasters. Clocks always seem a little too fast or too slow, making everyone late. Vending machines always require a little extra change. The strongest effects appear in figures that should be random; gamblers are often the first people convinced that something's gone wrong, but who would trust a gambler suffering a run of bad luck?

While Anumerus shifts odds on his own, he encourages others to do the same. He appears in dreams, quietly urging people to commit acts that increase his power. He may set up situations in his favor: drain an office worker's finances to encourage him to embezzle or skew a student's test results so that she'll cheat later on. Anumerus is careful not to appear to too many people, however, fearing discovery by spirits, mages or other mystic foes.

As the intrusion continues, the symptoms of Anumerus's presence become more severe. Telephones aren't very useful when every call is a wrong number. Airports and bus stations grow more and more crowded as late arrivals never turn up. Cash machines always run out of cash. Street addresses confuse and mislead. Elevators disappear into limbo. The machinery of modern society

breaks down. The cumulative effects on communication, transportation and trade may drive a population to riot or take shelter, abandoning civilized ways for superstition and desperate survivalism. At this stage, Anumerus manifests in Twilight to fully enjoy his creation.

Although Anumerus prefers to work alone and behind the scenes, he doesn't avoid confrontation once he's able to manifest. If a mage or other supernatural being opposes him, he focuses upon her and does his best to ruin her daily life. Every small task becomes a terrible burden when numbers are stacked against you. If Anumerus can convince a foe to give up without ever coming face-to-face with the enemy, so much the better.

Mortal Response

Few Sleepers ever witness anything overtly supernatural while under Anumerus's influence. During most of his intrusion, his manipulations appear trivial, and any single incident can be explained away as the product of exhaustion, forgetfulness, computer problems, bad luck or another mundane cause. When Anumerus's presence causes more significant effects — when checks start bouncing or deadlines are missed — Sleepers pick obvious scapegoats for the problems and go about their business. Cashiers and operators are fired, imaginary computer hackers are blamed for all ills and accusations of incompetence cling to those unable to defend themselves. Machines are replaced, and pipes are cleaned.

Inevitably, though, some mortals begin seeing a pattern in their bad luck. Often, these are the same mortals who've been made into scapegoats (and thus lack credibility). They search for the "real culprit," or for a software bug that doesn't exist. They may wonder about their own mental health, or feel that they're cursed. Only the most unhinged and paranoid ever think to blame numbers themselves.

Means of Exile

So long as Anumerus remains weak during the early stages of his intrusion, banishing him is relatively simple. His successes must be countered, and the numbers he's twisted must be set right. Damage must be repaired. Mistakes must be corrected. When this is done, his power drains away. In the best case, he loses his grasp on the material world and is forced back through his gateway.

By the time Anumerus manifests an ephemeral Twilight body, the damage caused is too great to easily undo.

Instead of driving him back, a mage's best option may be to trap him. Powerful magic or clever trickery would be required to force him into a prison, however, and finding a prison could be more difficult still. It might be possible to hold Anumerus in a mathematical trap, such as a magically manifested constant like pi. Research might reveal Anumerus's ties to an ancient Artifact that could hold him, such as a magical abacus that served as his first gateway. If Anumerus were far enough removed from civilization, he might become powerless without nearby numbers — but it's an open question whether anywhere so isolated exists.

Lastly, there is the possibility of ritual banishment. Exiling Anumerus magically would require a Supernal counter for each of his anti-numbers — a spell or Artifact empowered by the same principle and Arcanum that Anumerus twists. A Prime spell of creation could counter the anti-zero, for example, whereas a Space spell that straightens a path could counter the anti-eight. Crafting each spell's Imago would require extensive study and research, of course; some Free Council numerologists spend their lives searching Astral Space for a number's deeper meaning. However, if a cabal could discover all 10 counters and use them to correct Anumerus's misdeeds, the intruder might be rendered powerless and shunted back to the void.

Researching Anumerus

Capping Skill: Investigation

Action: Extended — 12 successes

Research Time: 1 hour; 20 minutes

Appropriate Libraries: Conceptual Spirits, Numerology

Possible Modifiers: Researcher is an Initiate in the Fate Arcanum (+1), research takes place within Anumerus's area of influence (−1 to −3; researcher may be unable to follow numerical references to volumes or pages containing information about Anumerus)

Successes	Information
0–2	Nothing.
3–5	Numbers are tied to particular concepts and Arcana, and in civilizations where numbers are commonplace, magic can travel along numerical "paths."
6–8	In the Roman, Chinese and Incan empires, mages noted incidents in which numbers seemed to

turn against mortals. These incidents started small, but snowballed into crises.

9–11

Some mystagogues believe that numbers possess a Supernal essence. If this essence were corrupted, it might make numbers dangerous. This would explain cases of numbers turning "wrong."

12+

Scelesti believe that the Abyss contains counterparts to Supernal numbers. A spirit called Anumerus embodies these anti-numbers.

Story Hooks

Since numbers are so ubiquitous, a Storyteller has many opportunities to emphasize Anumerus's oppressive presence in a game. Pay close attention whenever numbers come up — watch for moments when characters address an envelope, record a license plate number, flip to a certain page in a book or make a phone call — and consider using those moments to remind players that something isn't right with the world.

Keep these reminders subtle, at first. The goal shouldn't be to inconvenience or harm characters, but to ensure healthy paranoia. Use Abyssal numerology for inspiration: If a character is driving down 6th Avenue, she spots a car accident immediately after seeing the street sign; a character dialing a phone number in area code 333 misdials the number of a mental institution. Eventually, players will start to catch themselves whenever numbers appear and worry that something worse is coming.

One to Many

A young mage recently used Fate and Time magic to boost the profits of a local corporation. Her hope was to reap a substantial return on investments in the company, and to pool her resources with those of an area cabal. But things didn't work out as she planned. The company collapsed and filed for bankruptcy, leaving the mage broke. She was furious, and refused to accept the situation. She set off to investigate, looking for somewhere to lay the blame. No one's heard from her since.

A mage's disappearance isn't something to be ignored, and the characters will likely look into the matter. They may be asked as a favor by the lost mage's friends or superiors, or the characters may have invested money in the corporation themselves. On the surface, the search seems straightforward enough.

The company went bankrupt partly as a result of schemes enacted by members of the board of directors; magic and mundane investigations easily uncover this truth. But the former board members blame one man in particular for the downfall of the company — the corporation's once-brilliant Chief Financial Officer, who has (the board members say) suffered a mental breakdown. None of the board members are in good financial shape, though they can't explain what happened to their money.

As the characters spend time investigating the corporation, they begin to be affected by Anumerus's presence. At first, the cabal may ignore its bad luck, but the more the characters learn, the more apt they are to see a connection between the strangeness befalling them and the ailments suffered by the company. The company's former employees, too, are being haunted by bad numbers, but are mostly reluctant to discuss it.

The trail leads to the Chief Financial Officer, who is currently out of town. His home is a wreck: everything with a number on it, from clocks to phones to books to stereo controls, has been destroyed or removed. Marked magazine articles, printouts and scribbled notes indicate his interest in a dead culture whose language lacked defined numbers; the language had words only for "a few" (or "small"), "some" and "many" (or "big"). All signs indicate that the CFO left for an archaeological site once populated by this extinct people.

Tracking down the CFO isn't especially difficult, although it takes the cabal out of its home territory. At the same time, however, the characters are removed from Anumerus's domain, which doesn't yet extend far beyond the bankrupt corporation. At the dig site, the CFO (broken, haggard, starving and unwashed) admits to what he knows: When he implemented the board's plan to artificially inflate the company's earnings, he opened a doorway for something horrible. At first, he doubted his sanity, but eventually he knew he had to get away. He came to the site hoping to leave all numbers behind. He's convinced, however, that the evil is spreading, and that it will eventually envelop his whole city.

At this juncture, the cabal may well know enough to research what's going on. A well-stocked Arcane library, consultation with powerful spirits or a bargain with a Scelestus might reveal Anumerus's name and his connection to the Abyss. Having a name isn't the same as having a solution, however, and research won't solve the characters' problems.

Instead, the secret to Anumerus's defeat is locked within the archaeological site. Although the local culture is dead, its memory and its language linger in Astral Space. Dreams point the way, and the cabal can visit the

shadows of the old culture in the Temenos. Fragments of Anumerus — incarnations of the evil numbers zero through nine, unconsciously carried to the site by the CFO — block the cabal's progress through the Astral planes, but drinking from the Spring of Language fills a character's soul with an understanding of a numberless world. With this knowledge, a mage's spells can irresistibly affect Anumerus... if the mage can get close.

Upon returning home, the cabal finds the city fully within Anumerus's thrall. Travel isn't easy, as transportation and communications are a mess, and the streets are dangerous where they're not deserted. Sleepers blame the chaos on a single source, although different individuals and news organizations point to different culprits: Some say a power failure at a vital government installation caused clocks to desynchronize. Some blame a Y2K-style bug. Some blame striking workers looking for attention. Some call the situation mass hysteria.

If the characters haven't figured it out already, it's easy for them to deduce where Anumerus has finally manifested. The intruder's throne is the boardroom of the bankrupt corporation. In the corporate offices, Anumerus's influence touches everything. Even reaching the floor where the boardroom is located requires magical help, since elevators and stairwells skip the right number. When the cabal at last encounters Anumerus, he reveals his Abyssal origins and points out how easily he destroyed the first mage who sought him. If the cabal plays its cards right, though, he has more of a challenge in store this time.

The Golden Abacus

The guardian of a lost Atlantean temple is bound to perform 10 million tasks over the term of 10,000 years. After spending so long in servitude, however, the guardian is torn between duty and the need for escape. A mage seeking access to the temple convinces the guardian to twist the terms of its contract, to make all the numbers fit so it can be free a little early.

In so doing, the guardian opens a crack in the Fallen World and gives the temple over to Anumerus. The mage was, in reality, a Scelestus aiming was to trick the guardian. Desperate to redeem itself, the guardian struggles to find aid in the modern world while Anumerus's power seeps through time — Artifacts tied to the ancient past are the first to be affected by Anumerus's magic, then those who've been touched by such Artifacts and then those who've known the touched.

The guardian believes Anumerus will be banished if the guardian can make up for its misdeeds, but it cannot calculate the tasks left undone and the days it lost while

under Anumerus's power. To determine the needed reparations, the guardian must make its calculations with numbers as they were in the age of Atlantis. The guardian needs the Golden Abacus: a beaded disc forged of pure thaumium, still resonating with the pure energies extant before the formation of the Abyss. The Abacus is calculator, map and grimoire alike; each of its beads is aligned with a number, an Arcanum and a celestial object, and its configurations reveal magic and lore long-since lost.

The Abacus is held within another Atlantean ruin, and the players' cabal must seek it out while keeping the fading gatekeeper alive, avoiding the Scelestus and his allies and resisting the powers of Anumerus. When the characters finally acquire the Abacus, they must lead the guardian back to the place of its crime, and protect the guardian while it fulfills its obligations.

Countdown

In the middle of the 20th century, the world's superpowers raced to develop more and more powerful nuclear weapons. Timers clicked to zero whenever the military tested a new bomb, heralding doom. These countdowns drew the attention of Anumerus, yet they exceeded his power. One simple, digital timer, used over and over again, freed Anumerus from the Abyss — and promptly fettered him in its mechanisms.

The Timer disappeared, abandoned in a storeroom, placed in a museum, sold at auction and finally stolen. To mortals, the Timer is a historical curiosity. To a few mages who've heard of the Timer's curse, however, the Timer is a valuable and powerful Artifact. Now, the Anumeral Timer has fallen into the hands of a cabal of Seers of the Throne. The cabal members are experimenting with the Timer, attempting to focus its might against their enemies — never realizing that they work with Abyssal forces.

According to rumor, the Timer resonates with the power of anti-numbers. It was broken long ago, and anyone using it must manually roll the counter from one digit to the next. When each digit appears, a new disaster strikes, corresponding with the power of the number reached. An eight may cause the user to be lost forever the next time he goes for a walk; a five may cause a violent Paradox. No one's ever set the counter to zero, for fear of causing the mystic equivalent of a nuclear blast.

No one wants the Seer cabal to retain possession of the timer. Even fellow Seers are reluctant to give such power

to a single cabal, and the Scelesti — the only mages who realize the true nature of the Timer — want Anumerus free. Different factions compete or ally to wrest the Timer away from the cabal, and ultimately decide the Timer's fate. Perhaps the only way to destroy the Timer is to bring it to zero and somehow survive the result.

Traits

Once Anumerus manifests in Twilight, the following Traits apply to him.

Anumerus

Rank: 4

Attributes: Power 6, Finesse 12, Resistance 8

Willpower: 14

Essence: 25 (max 25)

Initiative: 20

Defense: 12

Speed: 23

Size: 5

Corpus: 13

Influences: Numbers 3. Anumerus can control and alter all numbers and equations.

A mage with four or more dots in Fate can use unfettered countermagic (see **Mage: The Awakening**, p. 158) against uses of Influence and Numina directed at her by Anumerus.

Numina: Fetter, Harrow (dice pool 18)

Bad Luck: Whenever a nearby character makes a dice roll, Anumerus can attempt to reflexively alter the roll's result and negate that roll's successes. Roll Anumerus's Power + Finesse versus the target's Resolve + Gnosis and spend one Essence for each success Anumerus wishes to negate. The target then re-rolls each "successful" die affected, using the new results instead (even if they're an improvement). Dice that have already been re-rolled (because of the 10 again rule, for example) cannot be affected. (Dice Pool 18)

Ban: Once a mage has reversed one of Anumerus's anti-numerical manipulations by using the proper Arcanum (Death to counter an instance of destruction and the number nine, etc.), Anumerus can no longer influence the number in question. He can regain his power once a Sleeper in Anumerus's presence knowingly manipulates that number to the detriment of others.

The Crossways

*The Black Line, the Dragon's Tail,
the Left-Handed Path, the Long Road,
the Sigil of A&K Kejil*

He worked at the station seven years before he spotted the Black Train. It didn't stop; it just went on through the tunnels. Over the next seven years, he saw it now and again, but he never said a word to anyone. He figured it was owned by the company or the police or the gangs, and he didn't want to attract attention. Besides which, the thing creeped him out.

Then the train started stopping. People got on – tourists, mostly, folk who thought it was something else – but no one ever got off. He watched them, and he decided he had to know. One day, he got on, too.

He was gone for seven more years. He got off at the same station where he'd always worked, and he won't talk about what happened. But they say he has a map....

Bodies get lost. You turn down an unfamiliar street, forget where you're going, lose track of where you live. You're suddenly helpless, at the mercy of an uncaring cosmos. It can be terrifying, even if the feeling barely lasts a minute before you spot a known landmark.

Souls get lost, too, though it's harder to tell. The world looks the same, but the people and ideals you value seem out of reach. You're adrift, searching for a way to achieve your desires but always returning to the same old places.

The Crossways is the road walked by men and women who've gotten lost, body and soul, in the Abyss. The Crossways doesn't discriminate between good and evil, or between mage and Sleeper. No matter who you are, all it takes to get lost is one wrong turn.

Unlike many Abyssal beings and phenomena, the Crossways doesn't actively seek to destroy mages or bring about misery. The Crossways is a passive force, harming only those who stumble into its web. The Crossways has no intelligence, no malevolent instincts or goals. It is a product of the Fallen World, an inevitable result of reality's strains, similar to a mountain or a fault line.

A common theory is that the Crossways is a sigil. Some mystagogues claim that if you map the pattern of the Crossways on a piece of paper, the pattern becomes a magically charged symbol of the Abyss. Most mages

would rather not test this notion, but some say there's wisdom to be gained by reading the true name of the enemy. Over the centuries, sorcerers have sought the Crossways and walked its path, hoping to recover treasures both gross and subtle. Often, they don't return, and their apprentices follow in their footsteps.

Many Scelesti have a special relationship with the Crossways – namely, it was the place of their Awakening. A Sleeper on the verge of enlightenment is often pushed over the edge after drifting into the Crossways, and the twisted insight gleaned on that path allows her to journey to a Watchtower. A mage who Awakens in this way is likely to suffer from spiritual and psychological scars, and may eventually turn to the Abyss to soothe the pain. In the past, this has given substance to Sleeper stories and myths about unholy sites where folk went to traffic with demons; in modern times, cults (both Awakened and Sleeper) still use the Crossways in initiations.

The Keeper of the Maze

Some mages speculate that the Crossways didn't originate in the Abyss. They point to ancient letters and fragments describing a Mastigos sorcerer born after the fall of Rome. Supposedly, this Mastigos sought immortality, and turned to the Abyss for a solution. He ultimately inscribed his name in the darkness and became his own sigil.

This legend holds that the mage's mind still exists within the Crossways, and that the so-called Keeper of the Maze watches those who walk the path. Having achieved his goal of eternal life, he uses the Crossways' victims as tools.

To what end, none can say.

Form

The Crossways isn't a location. It's a path – an invisible trail that overlaps the Fallen World. The Crossways loops and twists and crosses itself, running for miles and miles before leading back to its beginning. Completing its circuit on foot can take anywhere from a day to a month.

In a city, the Crossways passes through poor, busy neighborhoods filled with street vendors and decaying

shops, winding into alleys and empty lots. Underground, the Crossways is a subway train without a driver, following tracks that shouldn't exist and stopping at empty stations, or a vast maze of sewer and maintenance tunnels. In the wild, the Crossways is a faint trail atop an enormous mesa, tracing a drunken, dancing pattern for weary hikers and would-be shamans.

The Crossways always has a single entrance and exit: a gateway that leads to and from the Fallen World. The gateway is both a location and a direction. The gateway may be the northwest path leading out of a grove of trees, a circle around a park statue, an exit and a right turn off a highway or a leap over an alley fence. After walking the full length of the Crossways, a person may depart at the gateway, if she can recognize it.

Usually, though, a person has no way of knowing where or how she entered the Crossways. There's no obvious change in the world's appearance — at least, not until a person's been in the labyrinth too long already. Early on, the only clue is the position of the stars, and the strange constellations that replace familiar arrangements. Even underground, the constellations still appear, taking shape in graffiti, mold and water stains.

Means of Passage

Whatever Abyssal force empowers the Crossways can't create a path on its own. Instead, the force must wait for a mortal to draw a sigil over reality. Only then does the Crossways fill the space provided, similar to water pouring into a canal.

Different instances of the Crossways are built in different ways. In populated areas, the path is often the route taken by a Sleeper day after day. If the Sleeper is sufficiently exposed to the Abyss — if he's brought about Paradoxes through his presence, if he's vehemently rejected and Disbelieved every instance of the Supernal — he may wear a path into the fabric of reality through repetitive, unthinking process. A bus driver who never takes a detour or misses a day of work can unknowingly pave the way for evil. A millennium ago, a water-seller who carried his wares down the same streets each morning could bring about the same fate. In much the same fashion, a person driven mad by Abyssal powers can leave a path, too.

A single, powerful act can also cause the Crossways to manifest. An individual exposed to supernatural horrors — or a participant in those same horrors — may open a gateway at the scene of her crimes, and lay a path down during her flight and return. A mage whose psychic projection meanders through a city, wreaking havoc before returning to her dying body may leave a truly complex and twisted trail.

Lastly, sometimes an old, banished incarnation of the Crossways is returned to Earth through ritual. If a person — a misguided Sleeper, a mage seeking lost secrets or a Scelestus serving his masters — can reconstruct or map an old path, the Crossways may be summoned by walking that path again. The summoner must lay down a physical trail resonant with the power of the original path: drops of blood, burnt offerings or mystic oils work best to mark the way. In some places, the Crossways is called and called again over generations, until the original cause of its intrusion is long forgotten.

Rules of Intrusion

A person could live all her life in a location overlapping the Crossways and never notice anything wrong. A person might wander by a gateway to the Crossways 100 times without seeing anything unnatural. It's the 101st time that's the problem — that time someone makes a misstep, veers left a little early or tries a new shortcut. And once a person has unknowingly passed through the gateway, the Crossways are almost impossible to escape.

A person who first enters the Crossways doesn't appear in some alien realm. Until she completes a full circuit of the path, the traveler exists in a sort of limbo. The world around her seems the same, but she feels compelled to follow the Crossways — maybe thinking it's the route she knows best, or a way to avoid traffic. She may unconsciously turn and walk down streets while daydreaming, or have trouble locating roads or signs that would return her to her usual route. She can overcome this compulsion for a while, but she's not in the real world anymore.

During this first passage, the people the traveler meets tend to ignore or forget her. If she resists the pull of the Crossways' path, she may return home and find that loved ones can't remember her coming back. Each time she goes back to the path, she passes from people's notice faster and faster. She becomes like a ghost, remembered for her "life" before the Crossways but unseen after. Mages seeking the Crossways often hurry this stage by following the path intentionally.

This effect is akin to Disbelief. The traveler who appears to walk the material world is a sort of projection; in reality, the traveler cannot leave the Crossways, but can only peer into the physical plane. And as the traveler effectively disappears from the real world, people begin disappearing from the traveler's view on the Crossways — a few at a time, here and there. The farther the traveler walks along the path, the more people disappear. Once the traveler finishes her first circuit of the Crossways, no one is left. A once-busy city becomes a ghost town. A bike trail becomes abandoned. And in the real world, the traveler vanishes completely.

Once the Crossways is emptied of people – or, more accurately, once the illusion of people fades – subtle changes occur in the world along the way. These changes are reminiscent of those experienced in a Mystery Play, reflecting the Abyss in everyday mundanity. Street signs are written in incomprehensible runes. Vending machines dispense soda cans filled with putrid ichor. Monuments depict bizarre, inhuman beings or take on Escher-esque dimensions. Mosquitoes and leeches pollinate flowers with stolen blood, and birds sing cacophonous, complex melodies. In some incarna-

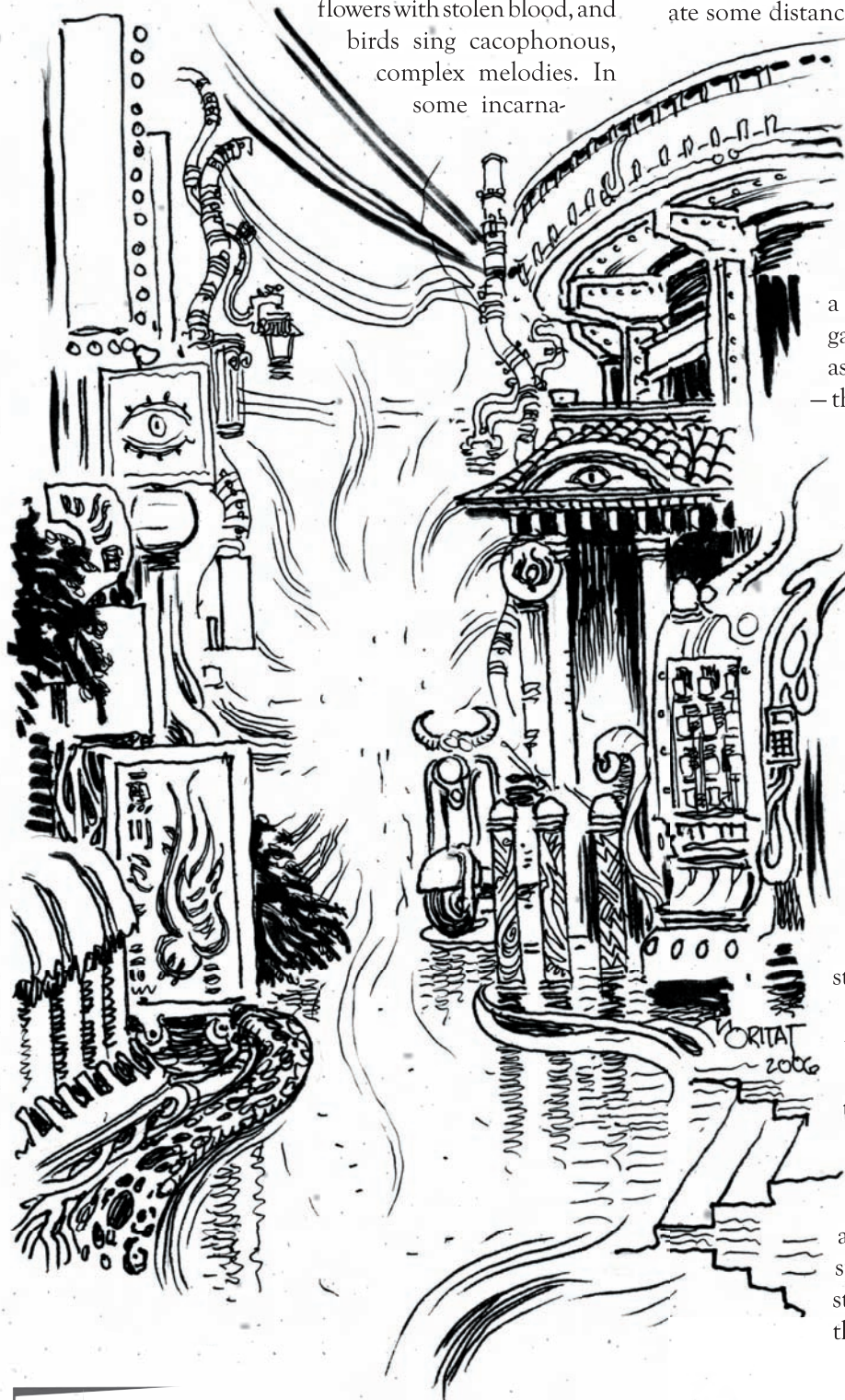
tions of the Crossways, the local Sleeper population is replaced by caricatures such as dangerous monsters, loony street preachers or clerks selling tainted goods.

At last, the edges of the path physically manifest. When the traveler wanders too far from the road, she reaches the limit of her self-contained world. In a city, the edge might be an endless stretch of desolate asphalt or desert. In the wilderness, the edge might be a cliff-edge that plunges into gaping darkness. The traveler can still deviate some distance from the path, but what's the point? There's nothing else out there.

At this stage, a traveler has no choice but to wander the Crossways endlessly, living off whatever food she can find. Without knowing the location of the gateway, escape is purely a matter of luck. Most victims grow old and die, or kill themselves in despair. If a second traveler ever passes through the gateway – whether by random chance or as part of an Awakened rescue mission – the first may not have the clarity of mind to understand what's going on.

A person who does know the location of the gateway can depart without difficulty at the proper point, so long as he's traveled the full length of the path (backtracking more than a short distance during any given circuit renders the gateway useless until the path is fully traced again). Unless the traveler somehow notes the gateway before going in, however, this knowledge is difficult to come by. Mystagogues speculate that a clever mage might be able to locate the gateway by interpreting a map of the path. Sleepers would be best advised to watch the dreamlike elements of the Crossways, and to seek clues in the strange world.

The progression through the Crossways' stages is sometimes described as a descent through Abyssal "layers," though different mages define the layers using different criteria. For some, each completed circuit moves a traveler down one layer. For others, the layers are defined by the traveler's state and surroundings – whether the traveler can still interact with the real world, whether the traveler is experiencing the Mystery



Play elements and so on. Mages who use this terminology also tend to support the notion of a final layer: one where the Crossways becomes the Abyss itself.

Magic on the Crossways

The Space and Spirit Arcana function differently on the Crossways. Space spells can't penetrate the Crossways' boundaries — attempts to scry beyond the Crossways reveal only black void, and teleportation to locations off the Crossways fails altogether. In addition, the "Spatial Awareness" spell allows a mage to perceive the Crossways' path and to determine its direction.

Many Spirit spells are useless, as the Shadow Realm simply doesn't exist on the Crossways. Spells that affect Twilight are unaffected, but few spirits exist in Twilight to call; the Crossways' only ephemeral residents are lost, trapped spirits who found the gateway in the material world, and strange, monstrous beings twisted or spawned by Abyssal power.

When combined, however, Space and Spirit allow a mage to penetrate the Crossways' Abyssal boundaries. A mage with at least three dots in Spirit can use Space spells and sympathetic magic normally — mostly. Even this combination doesn't allow a mage to transport living beings to or from the Crossways — only to reach out to the real world.

Mortal Response

People disappear every day, and people who disappear into the Crossways aren't special.

Sleeper authorities may investigate, but even if officials track a missing person to the region of the gateway, it's unlikely the investigators will follow the exact path necessary to enter the Crossways themselves. There are occasional exceptions: expert park rangers who discover the tracks of missing campers or professional "psychics" who stumble upon real maps to a gateway.

If a gateway swallows enough people, urban legends may grow around it. People may ascribe the disappearances to a dangerous animal or serial murderer in the area. A park, neighborhood or bridge may gain a reputation as being haunted, and garner mentions in occult websites or tourist guides to local mysteries. Nonetheless, even dedicated mortal seekers rarely locate a gateway except by chance.

Means of Exile

In order to escape the Crossways, one need only find the gateway. In order to close the gateway to the Crossways

in the Fallen World — to remove the unholy sigil from reality — a bit more effort is required.

The Crossways must be sealed from the inside. Beginning at the gateway, a person must walk the full length of the Crossways "against the current" — that is, reversing the normal direction taken by the route. The traveler cannot stop walking until the circuit is complete. Once he reaches the gateway again, he must exit immediately. When he returns to reality, the gateway disappears and can no longer be used.

It's a simple task in theory, but one much more difficult in practice. Depending on the length and complexity of the path, a traveler may have to walk for several days straight. Even magical and mundane support can't change this unpleasant fact. More importantly, the Crossways seems able to sense the impending unmaking and works against a traveler. Storms and fog and too-long nights slow a person down. Bridges crack. Highways swarm with driverless cars. And mysterious apparitions offer temptations of food and rest and pleasure, or call out pleas for aid and rescue.

Mages who aren't able to erase the Crossways (or who aren't familiar with the ritual required) often substitute a cruder means of banishment. Instead of sealing the gateway to the Abyss, they seal the physical gateway in the Fallen World. But while a concrete wall or a pile of rubble isn't a bad temporary solution, such half-measures don't tend to last. Eventually, time, humanity or darker forces open the gateway again, and the Crossways returns to Earth.

Researching the Crossways

Capping Skill: Investigation

Action: Extended —9 successes

Research Time: 1 day; 3 hours

Appropriate Libraries: Haunted Places, Runes and Sigils

Possible Modifiers: The researcher is an Initiate of the Space Arcanum (+1), the researcher possesses map of the Crossways (+1 to +3, depending on accuracy), no information on the location of the gateway (–2)

Successes	Information
0–2	Nothing.
3–4	Magical portals similar to Verges sometimes take wanderers to strange labyrinths neither material nor Shadow, overlapping the physical world.

Successes Information

5–6 These labyrinths always follow the same path, no matter where they're located. Each time a person follows the entire path, he's drawn farther from material existence.

7–8 Scholars call the recurring labyrinth "the Crossways," and say it exists partly in the Abyss. People trapped inside face many strange perils.

9+ The only way to escape the Crossways is to follow the entire path and leave at the point where one entered.

Story Hooks

The Crossways presents a subtle and strange puzzle to solve. Below are some suggestions for using the Crossways in your chronicle.

As Above, So Below

Beneath the city stretches a series of narrow passageways that runs for many miles. A century ago, the tunnels were used for construction: work crews traveled through them on their way to build the subway or to lay foundations. Not surprisingly, people died. Most of these deaths were the product of cave-ins and industrial accidents. Some were drunken mishaps or intentional killings. Even after construction was completed, the workers suffered from pollutants and carcinogens they'd inhaled below. Today, the tunnels are mostly abandoned, used only for maintenance and as a home for the destitute.

One route through the tunnels travels along the Crossways, and still swallows the occasional wanderer – including a homeless man who entered the Crossways long ago. When he emerged years later, he was changed by his experience. He rose to a position of power in city government, and began to implement a series of radical alterations to the city's traffic system. Over the past decade, he's planned new highways and closed off old streets, all in the pursuit of his ultimate goal: the reconstruction of the Crossways on a larger scale. Once thousands of cars, trucks and buses begin to trace the Crossways' sigil every morning, the Abyss will gain unprecedented power.

It won't be long before the last road is completed, and the local Consilium has no idea what's about to happen. Luckily, another problem has drawn mages' attention to the construction; the last stretch of soon-to-be-built highway is destined to reroute a key ley line and alter the

resonance of nearby Hallows. Whether to protect their sanctums or to potentially inhibit other sorcerers, the characters now have reason to investigate.

What ought to be a simple matter of questioning a few construction crews and influencing a few local bureaucrats turns out to be more complicated. There have already been numerous attempts by unrelated groups – neighborhood associations, unions, homeless advocates and so on – to reroute parts of the planned system. Not one of these attempts succeeded, and many leaders of the groups mysteriously disappeared. This ugly track record means that no one in charge wants to delay work further. Some people suspect the involvement of organized crime, others say that city leaders were bribed by construction firms to stick with the original plan and a few think the whole system is cursed.

Contacting the mastermind behind the traffic plan isn't easy, either. His assistants at City Hall say he's too busy to meet with anyone, but they're concealing the fact that they don't know where he is; either. In fact, he's gone underground, to the Crossways entrance in the tunnels. There, safe from magical detection, he now walks the path a final time before the path is brought to the city above. Some detective work reveals that the man has been disappearing underground on and off for years.

The homeless residents of the tunnels can confirm that they've seen the mastermind. They also talk about the disappearances in the tunnels; although they don't know of the Crossways per se, they've certainly seen unusual things. One resident remembers when the mastermind lived among them, and how he changed after his disappearance and return. The local spirits are frightened of something, but even they can't explain what.

Old maps of the tunnels allow the characters to match portions of the paths below with the roads above, and to come away with the sigil of the Crossways. Researching the sigil reveals its presence in other locations throughout history, as well as the sigil's connection to the Abyss. With some knowledge of what they're facing, the characters must decide what to do.

Three separate problems face the characters, and little time is left in which to solve them. The first problem is the construction. The roads can't be allowed to open to traffic, but the authorities are unwilling to stop work without approval from the mastermind. The characters have any number of magical ways to slow down progress, however, and might – given time – be able to exert its own influence over the bureaucracy. On the mystical front, some texts suggest that the sigil could be permanently disrupted if its "weak point" were destroyed. Unfortunately, finding the weak point would require entering the Crossways....

...Which leads to the second problem. Sooner or later, the characters will need to go inside, whether to find the weak point, locate the mastermind or close the gateway. The Abyssal tunnels are haunted by the ghosts of those who died during the construction, along with half-crazed wanderers lost or trapped by the mastermind. Along the Crossways, mold covers the walls in enormous tapestries depicting inhuman parodies of life underground. Where the tunnels cross the subway, a horrible monster races down the tracks. A single circuit of the tunnels takes only a day, but most of those inside stick to their own tiny dominions.

The third problem is the mastermind himself. Whether he can be maneuvered into shutting down the construction depends on who he really is: An innocent, driven to madness by his experience on the Crossways? A sadistic or power-hungry Sleeper who wants to inflict his pain upon the world? A Scelestus who knows the Crossways for what it really is? His fate may be death, insanity, redemption or eternal imprisonment in the sealed Crossways, depending on the will of the characters.

The Road to Ruin

In an earlier era, an isolated tribe practiced an important rite: When a boy came of age, he climbed atop a great rock and followed a path worn into the stone by his ancestors. He carried a gift, laid it upon a slab midway down the path and then continued until the path returned to its beginning. Tribal shamans said that the path was first walked by a dying god, and opened into a realm of that god's creation — a realm that could only be touched by walking the path seven full times.

More recently, a mage — a friend or mentor to the characters' cabal — went to the rock, believing that the tribespeople's sacrifices had been tass or other magic. Each time she completed the path's circuit, more of the treasure came into view. On the fifth pass, however, she was confronted by the treasure's acamoth guardian, and realized she'd misjudged the path's nature. She was able to send only a hasty, vague message to the characters asking for help.

Following the mage's footsteps and duplicating her research allows the characters to find the Crossways, but the only people who ever knew how to seal its gateway

were the shamans of the old tribe. One of the tribe's modern descendants might have the lore the characters need. The real challenge, however, will be deciding how far to travel down the Crossways before reversing the circuit and closing it off. Just once, to be certain? Five times, to rescue the lost mage? Or seven, to claim the ancient treasure...?

The Kingdom of the Blind

It's been more than a year since the first person disappeared from the campus of a private recovery clinic. The victim was a mentally troubled teenage girl, who'd been admitted along with a friend. At the time, everyone assumed the girl had run away. Her friend said nothing.

The truth was, the girl stumbled upon an entrance to the Crossways. The path was laid long ago, when the clinic was an asylum. A Sleeper who'd been institutionalized after his mind-wracking exposure to magic toured the grounds every day, never deviating from his route, and created a doorway to the Abyss. All the girl knew was that the Crossways was a place where no one else bothered her, where she could do whatever she wanted. During the days before she faded away, she passed the secret of the gateway on to her friend, asking her to come, too.

Her friend couldn't bring herself to do it. But now that she knew how to escape the clinic, she sold that knowledge to other patients — just one person every month or two, in exchange for money or contraband.

On the Crossways, many of the patients don't mind their imprisonment, and they live under the benevolent dictatorship of their Queen — the first girl, transformed and given power by the Abyss. Sure, patients are swallowed up by mysterious beings now and then, but the path otherwise provides everything the escapees want.

The characters' involvement may begin when a friend or family member disappears from the clinic, or when a character becomes a patient. The mouldering journals of the Crossways' maker hold the secrets of the path, and the Queen's friend knows the "how" and "why" of the disappearances. But rescuing the victims and sealing the Crossways forever will require a visit to the wrathful Queen herself... and she may not be willing to cede her domain easily.

Dark Angel Aphasia

Abyssal Aphasia, Contagious Global Aphasia

My mother used to collect rare and antique books, you see. Two years ago, she told us about this rare find, a handwritten edition of the last book of her favorite author – some literary type that no one else has ever heard of... you know the kind. Lives a life in poverty, writes books full of insightful bullshit that no one else can get three pages into without desperately needing a dose of Dr. Seuss or reality television. That sort of thing.

She loved him, though, and she was really excited. She spent weeks poring over that book. Every time she called, that's all we heard about. She even stopped asking about the kids, which was weird. God. She loved her grandkids, you know?

That book was all we heard about, though. And then, she started getting... incoherent, I guess. My partner, Lydia, wondered if it might not be Alzheimer's or something similar, so I insisted that Mom see a doctor, but he couldn't find any indications of anything other than an old lady who was just really taken by an old book. Harmless enough, he said.

Then, she got to the point where she... to where she couldn't talk. Or rather, she didn't make any sense. Her voice would go from a mumble to a scream; these desperate-sounding yells, as if she were trying to get us to understand what she was saying by talking louder. Like she was making perfect sense to herself, and we were the ones talking nonsense.

Eventually, she stopped talking altogether and we had to hospitalize her. In the hospital, she had a seizure. She's been... non-responsive ever since.

I haven't told anyone else this, but... I blame the book. I think it drove her crazy, doctor. I know that sounds stupid or paranoid. Like maybe I'm in denial – people just go crazy. Things don't drive them crazy. Logically I know it's stupid, but...

I burned it. I never wanted to look at it again, and I couldn't risk... I couldn't risk that it might make someone else crazy, you know? God, that sounds so stupid....

It may begin with a book, a music recording or some other sort of media recording the disturbingly fascinating ramblings of its creator, who is likely insane. It may begin with an encounter with such a creator, whose attempts at communication are jumbled, strange – almost glossalalia, rather than true speech.

The memory of the encounter keeps coming back, hauntingly. Fascination turns to obsession, free time is spent recording conversations or thoughts on the work.

Handwritten notes become a shorthand scrawl, and then a jumble of strange, twisted words. Soon, speech and writing are affected, as total global aphasia sets in. The world seems to grow further and further distant.

Often, the victim grows so distant he falls into a coma. Other times, he spontaneously recovers, and is at a loss to explain what happened. But sometimes, the distance grows so great that the victim simply disappears when no one is looking, never to be seen again.

This is the dark angel aphasia.

Aphasia

Aphasia is the loss or reduction of a person's ability to produce and/or comprehend language. It is caused by damage to the language centers of the brain. Such damage is usually caused by a stroke, brain injury or occasionally disease, notably the growth of tumors in the brain. It can occur suddenly or it can develop slowly, with the subject gradually losing the ability to use language.

Depending on the type and severity of the brain damage, someone suffering from aphasia (known as an aphasic) may be able to speak but not write, or vice versa. In addition, many aphasics can understand more complex sentences than they can produce, or the reverse. In the most extreme form, known as global aphasia, the aphasic completely loses the ability to produce or understand language and is completely cut off from all human communication.

Form

Awakened scholars note that the Abyss is ultimately unknowable and beyond the ability of language to describe. The existence of dark angel aphasia proves that this statement can be literally true – individuals who come into contact with this particular Abyssal phenomenon gain fragments of knowledge about the Abyss while simultaneously losing their capacity to communicate.

Dark angel aphasia is an Abyssal mental illness that infects humans through communication. This is a unique aphasia caused not by medical conditions but by exposure



to the Abyss. Dark angel aphasia is literally contagious: it can be passed from someone who has already contracted it to those she speaks with, by reading the writings of a dark angel aphasic or by listening to the recordings that someone suffering from the Abyssal aphasia makes. The newly infected victim first becomes utterly fascinated with the source of her aphasia, and then progresses into the deeper symptoms.

Affected individuals gain an increasingly direct connection to the Abyss, but the nature of this connection renders them increasingly unable to understand human communication or to express themselves using comprehensible words or images. Even the origin of the name for this aphasia is mysterious. Many people suffering from it initially report having an exceptionally vivid dream involving seeing or becoming a vast and strange being whose body is a clear moonless night sky and that they usually describe as being an angel. No one has an explanation for this, but it is a dream mentioned by most Abyssal aphasics — indeed, this angel usually becomes the focus of the aphasic's maniacal attempts to communicate in the later stages of the contagion.

Means of Passage

For centuries, mystagogues and various other mages have attempted to document independent incidents of dark angel aphasia. In all known cases, the obsession and subsequent aphasia were produced by exposure to the writings, art or speech of someone already suffering from Abyssal aphasia. This pattern remains true as far back in history as any mage has been able to document.

Research confirms that extensive examination of words or pictures produced by dark angel aphasics causes an Abyssal manifestation, or opens the victim to influence by an Abyssal entity — perhaps even the “dark angel” that most aphasics dream about. One of the most popular theories is that this entity first appeared in the immediate aftermath of the Fall, and that its origin is in some way linked to the Fall and the poisoning of the Fallen World by the Abyss. As a result, dark angel aphasia is an extremely popular subject of research for mages who seek to understand the Abyss and the Fall. This same theory maintains that the reason that words or pictures produced by dark angel aphasics open observers up to the Abyss is closely connected to the innate aversion to magic possessed by all Sleepers. However, mages are just

as susceptible to this creature as Sleepers – researchers must be especially cautious when dealing with these aphasics or anything they create.

For most of history, the primary mode of transmission of dark angel aphasia has been through books or art. Few aphasics remained capable of communication long enough to affect others directly – thus, most victims encountered an aphasic-created book or work of art. As a result, mages interested in keeping this aphasia from spreading routinely lock away or destroy any paintings, sculptures or books created by one of these aphasics.

The Guardians of the Veil firmly believe dark angel aphasia's spread widens the Abyss. Therefore, they have a strict policy of destroying any works created by or obsessed over by its victims, as well as isolating or occasionally even killing aphasics the Guardians encounter. In contrast, the leadership of the Mysterium is convinced that work produced by these aphasics holds the key to understanding the Abyss, and so mages belonging to this faction regularly collect and carefully study works produced by dark angel aphasics, often attempting to acquire the work before the Guardians of the Veil can destroy it.

Unfortunately, identifying aphasia-induced works can be dangerous. Careful study is often necessary to identify them. It is often difficult to distinguish a novel or a series of essays written by someone in the grip of dark angel aphasia from works written by someone mentally ill or suffering from non-supernatural aphasia. Casually reading a book or looking at a painting has no chance of producing the initial obsession. Instead, careful and lengthy study is required. As a result, researchers, book and art collectors are all particularly susceptible to this Abyssal being, as are mages who attempt to study it.

In the past decade, containing these works has become considerably more difficult. Both the Internet and public access cable television allow aphasics to reach many people at once. While many aphasics merely feel compelled to attempt to record the strange revelations they learn, a few wish to share their newfound inhuman knowledge with the entire world. In the past, seeming lunatics who rambled in street corners rarely spoke long enough for anyone to become obsessed with them. However, such recordings and websites are now easily accessible and aficionados of the bizarre and the grotesque from all over the world can access – and occasionally become obsessed with – the strange mixture of ramblings and revelations produced by these people.

Rules of Intrusion

Victims affected by dark angel aphasia are at their most contagious shortly before the aphasia renders them completely unable to communicate. At this point, they

perceive truths about the Abyss, and the nature of magic that they cannot acquire in any other fashion. However, this knowledge is profoundly dangerous.

Listening to someone with dark angel aphasia speak or looking at something he has written or drawn can produce profound insights, as can listening to a high-quality recording of the person's speech or reading a scan or photo of something he wrote or drew. However, this speech or writing exposes the person listening to or reading it to the risk of contracting this aphasia. Transcriptions or low quality copies of either the speech or writing of one of these aphasics carries neither risk nor information, because some of the information comes through intonation or details of handwriting.

Because anyone affected by dark angel aphasia loses the ability to communicate clearly in exact proportion to the degree that he gains a direct connection to the Abyss, anyone hearing or reading anything produced by such an aphasic must make a Wits + Occult roll to gain meaning from the words or images. A single roll will allow the character to understand the most basic ideas contained in the words or images and also allows characters to ask the aphasic questions in such a way that she will understand them.

Merely gaining a vague understanding of the aphasic's meaning is only the first step in attempting to probe the mysteries of the Abyss. To gain important truths, the character must study the material or engage in lengthy conversations with the aphasic. In either case, the process is an extended Wits + Occult roll requiring at least 20 successes to succeed in learning the answer to a specific question, with one roll permitted every 30 minutes.

Every five successes on this roll gains one of the following, based on the questioning:

- One point of Arcane Experience, which may be used to increase Gnosis. A researcher may gain no more than eight Arcane Experience points in such a fashion.
- One point of Arcane Experience, which may be used to increase Mind, Prime, Space or Time Arcana. A researcher may gain no more than eight Arcane Experience points per Arcanum in such a fashion.
- Information about an Abyssal manifestation or creature. At the Storyteller's option, more information may be available with more accumulated successes.

However, every time the character rolls at least one success on a Wits + Occult roll, she must also make a Resolve + Composure roll.

Roll Results

Dramatic Failure: The researcher immediately contracts dark angel aphasia.

Failure: The researcher becomes obsessed with the aphasic or his creations, and continues to speak with the aphasic or study his works until exhausted. This obsession can be set aside with the expenditure of a Willpower point, but the aphasic will return to work as soon as possible. The compulsion fades once the character is isolated from the aphasic or his work for three days.

Success: The researcher remains unaffected by the dark angel aphasia.

Exceptional Success: Not only does the researcher resist the dark angel aphasia, but she gains a point of Willpower from the experience.

Initial Infection

If the character botches any of the above Resolve + Composure rolls or fails a total of four rolls over any length of time, she has contracted dark angel aphasia and progressively develops aphasia unless cured. Dark angel aphasia fascinates many mages, but also places those who study it in great danger. Mages can easily use Mind magics such as Telepathy to determine if someone studying an aphasic or his work has become obsessed with him. However, because of its completely alien nature, only Adept or Master spells such as Read the Depths will reveal if someone has developed progressive aphasia. At this point, only powerful Mind magics or carefully listening to the person will reveal if he has dark angel aphasia or some mundane mental or neurological condition.

First Stage Advancement

The initial stage of this aphasia is quite subtle. At first, affected individuals have only minor difficulty speaking and understanding speech, reading and writing. These are usually attributed to simple mistakes, stress or exhaustion if they become noticeable. These problems grow progressively worse. In nearly all cases, the aphasia affects either verbal communication or reading and writing first — the other remains comprehensible for at least a week longer. Within a week or two from the initial onset of aphasia, affected individuals become unable to communicate verbally or in writing; within another week, they are completely unable to communicate in any fashion. Aphasics attempt to speak to anyone who will listen, and if they wrote stories or kept a diary or blog before they were affected, they will continue to do so. However, the results gradually become a series of difficult-to-understand ramblings, and from that point, all communications degenerate into a totally incomprehensible word salad in which the aphasics arrange nouns and verbs at random.

Second Stage Advancement

Once the aphasia has become complete, all of the individual's writings and speech seem suffused with important meaning, but are both harmless and totally incomprehensible, even if a mage uses the most powerful magics to attempt to translate it. The aphasic is not speaking in any sort of code or secret language and Mind spells such as Telepathy and Universal Language cannot be used to make communication easier. Instead, the aphasic's words are now completely devoid of any meaning — contact with the Abyss has completely removed the aphasic's ability to communicate. In addition to being progressive, the affects of this aphasia also grow faster the longer the person has been affected.

Final Outcome

Once the character's aphasia has become complete, the last stage of the process comes within four or five days. At this point, one of three things happens to the individual. More than three-quarters become totally catatonic, undergo several moderate seizures and then enter a permanent vegetative state. Using Mind magics to examine these people reveals that both the Abyssal aphasia and the individual's mind are completely gone, leaving behind a totally empty shell. No trace of the individual's memories or personality remains. The body can breathe and drink on its own, but requires a feeding tube to avoid starvation. No one has ever recovered from this state. The character's body is a potentially useful subject for the "Possession" or "Psychic Genesis" spells, but is no longer home to the person who previously inhabited it.

Occasionally, other fates await sufferers of dark angel aphasia. Approximately 12% of the time, the person simply vanishes. This does not occur if someone is continually with the person. However, if the person's caregivers leave her alone for a second, any cameras and other equipment used to monitor her briefly flicker and in this moment, the person vanishes without a trace. No amount of searching and no known magics can find these people. Finally, those who do not suffer from either of those outcomes spontaneously recover with no symptoms and absolutely no memory of the time from the beginning of the aphasia. Any skills, Merits, Arcana or other abilities learned while they were aphasic are lost.

Some of the mages studying dark angel aphasia believe that while the progressive aphasia is clearly the result of increasing mental contact with the unknowable Abyss, the events that occur after the aphasia is complete represent a psychic mating or blending between the aphasic individual and the dark angel itself. In the case of those

who spontaneously recover, the blending failed, and the Abyss rejected the individual. Those who do not recover are assumed to have their minds or their bodies claimed by the Abyss.

Mortal Response

To mortal eyes, dark angel aphasia appears to be some sort of psychiatric problem. Testing the subject will reveal no disease or brain injury, and psychiatrists are almost certain to diagnose dark angel aphasia as some sort of psychosis. In the early stages, psychiatrists will prescribe various medications for the problem that will have no effect. As the condition progresses, unless the individual has people able to take care of her, she may be institutionalized.

If this occurs before her aphasia has rendered her completely unable to communicate, her ramblings and drawings may infect other inmates and possibly psychiatrists and orderlies.

Mortal psychiatry has no accepted concept of contagious mental illness, but psychiatrists who deal with dark angel aphasics often suspect that something similar is occurring, and most isolate affected individuals until they become catatonic, vanish or recover.

Means of Exile

Before someone becomes aphasic, but once the individual becomes obsessed with a dark angel aphasic or something made by the aphasic, curing the character simply requires isolating the individual from the person, book or recording for three days. After this time, the obsession ends, and the individual realizes that she was acting irrationally.

There are two methods of curing individuals who have actually succumbed to dark angel aphasia. The mundane method involves talking calmly to the person, not about her visions and ramblings, but about ordinary topics, and to keep persisting in doing so until the individual begins to listen.

With persistence, much repetition and a willingness to talk in an exceedingly simple, easy-to-understand but convincing manner, a character can help the person to understand the topic of the conversation. These conversations are all part of an extended action. Characters attempting this must make a series of Presence + Empathy rolls. Characters gain a +1 or +2 bonus to this roll if they know enough personal details about the affected individual to talk about topics that would previously have

fascinated him. The character may make one roll every 30 minutes, and must accumulate a total of 20 successes to help the affected individual focus his attention away from the Abyss and back on the Fallen World.

Only the most powerful magic can replace this conversation, but even relatively minor Mind rote can greatly help convince the individual to look away from the Abyss that now surrounds him. Although Mind magic cannot be used to transfer words or concepts between the mage and the aphasic, until the aphasia is complete, the aphasic still possesses the normal human range of emotions and Mind rote that affect emotions will affect the aphasic normally. The Mind spell "Emotional Urging" can cause the aphasic to become interested in and to want to listen to the speaker. This gives the speaker one additional success on the extended action for each success the mage rolled for this rote, and also reduces the time needed for new rolls from 30 minutes to 10 minutes.

The Mind rote "Psychic Reprogramming" can completely cure dark angel aphasia in both Sleepers and mages. When used in this fashion, the rote's duration is lasting, even for mages. However, the character makes all future dice rolls to resist dark angel aphasia at a -2 dice penalty. A susceptibility to this aphasia has been forever burned into the mage's brain. All of these potential cures only work as long as the aphasic can still communicate in some fashion. Once individuals lose all ability to communicate, they are beyond any cure.

Researching Dark Angel Aphasia

Capping Skill: Occult

Action: Extended – 11 successes

Research Time: 30 minutes; 10 minutes

Appropriate Libraries: Angels, Insanity, Medicine

Possible Modifiers: Library researched in belongs to a member of the Mysterium or the Guardians of the Veil (+1), researcher is an Initiate in the Mind Arcanum (+1)

Successes	Information
0–4	Nothing.
5–7	Dark angel aphasia is a progressive global aphasia caused by exposure to other aphasics or documents they have written.
8–10	Studying these documents or listening carefully to the aphasics can also reveal profound truths about both magic and the Abyss.

Successes Information

11+

If not stopped, aphasics eventually vanish, become vegetables or (on rare occasions) spontaneously recover. The only treatment is to get the person to focus on the Fallen World, often through an intensive barrage of reminders about the victim's normal life.

Story Hooks

Dark angel aphasia is a subtle and highly contagious psychic contagion that has the potential to cause a great deal of confusion in the chronicle. Below are some potential story seeds for using this aphasia in a chronicle.

The Trapped

The characters encounter a case that seems to be a classic example of someone who has been affected by dark angel aphasia. The subject is an intelligent young woman named Helen, who can no longer read or write and only communicates verbally with difficulty. If the characters look into her background or spend sufficient time with her to learn about her, they discover that she is a thaumaturge who practices Ceremonial Magic (see **World of Darkness: Second Sight**, pp. 83–86). She recently acquired a copy of a mysterious book known as the *Ascension Tome*.

This book promised to help her transform herself into a transcendent spiritual being. Unfortunately, something about either the book or about her has caused the process to do awry. She became obsessed with the book and developed partial dark angel aphasia, but the progressive aphasia has stalled. Her aphasia not progressed to the stage where she is completely incapable of communicating with others. As a result, she is both dangerous to others and cannot attain the goal that she still so desperately desires. Despite the difficulty she has in communicating, Helen is a kind, intelligent and exceedingly likeable person who is also somewhat shy and bookish.

Because she has no close relatives, she is being kept in a state institution. However, if the characters can provide even flimsy proof that they have some right to take her from the institution and Helen is willing to accompany them, the institution's director is more than happy to free up a bed in an already overcrowded facility. He is already looking for an excuse to remove her, because she is not dangerous to herself or others, and she is beginning to have an oddly compelling affect on both the doctors and

the patients she interacts with. When the characters first encounter her, another patient has become obsessed with her but has not yet begun to develop aphasia, and her attending psychologist is clearly on the verge of becoming obsessed with her. The director suspects she has a negative affect on the other patients and will go as far as to suggest the paperwork the characters need to take Helen out of the institution.

If the characters talk to Helen for any length of time, she will beg them to help her "ascend." If the characters tell her that they will help her do so, she agrees to come with them; otherwise, she will become violent and will attempt to tell her orderlies and doctor that the characters are attempting to kidnap her. She instantly ceases such protests if the characters agree to help her.

She will refuse any efforts to "cure" her aphasia and will ignore appeals of the joys of returning to normal. She will promise to attempt to share some of her transcendent knowledge with the characters if she successfully "ascends." Unfortunately, the only way to help her "ascend" is to talk to her and read the *Ascension Tome*, which she stored in a rental storage space when she realized that her landlord was attempting to have her committed because she was disturbing him and his tenants with her increasingly rambling and disturbing speech.

Characters who help her risk becoming aphasic. However, if they talk with her about what she is experiencing and read the book, they can discover how to help her. Find a way to help Helen "ascend" is an extended Wits + Occult action. The characters may roll once every hour and must gain a total of 20 successes to understand how to create a ritual that will allow her aphasia to come to completion so she can "ascend." The resulting ritual is a work of Ceremonial Magic.

Performing the ritual requires an extended Intelligence + Occult roll. Helen also placed has her library of occult books in her storage space. Referencing them before performing the ritual allows the characters to gain an additional +2 dice to this roll. To perform the ritual, the characters must make an extended roll and accumulate 10 successes. Each roll takes 10 minutes of chanting, drawing complex sigils, and burning incense. A botch on this roll has no affect on Helen but instantly causes one of the characters performing the ritual to become aphasic. This character's aphasia then progresses normally.

If the ritual succeeds, Helen speaks clearly for a few minutes as she begins to glow. At this point, she thanks the characters profusely and cries tears of joy. Then, she reaches out to touch the shoulder of each of the characters involved in the ritual unless they deliberately avoid her touch. If someone avoids her touch, she will tell this

person she has a gift for him. The exact nature of this gift is ephemeral understanding of some aspect of magic and reality, probably most easily reflected through the award of five points of Arcane Experience, but it may also be the first Attainment in a Legacy, knowledge of a rote or some other benefit.

Alternately, a character could gain some profound insight about the nature of the Abyss, a dot or two in the Dream Merit or perhaps simply be infected with the first stage of dark angel aphasia in a way that will cause the character to be certain that he will become a transcendent being.

If the latter occurs, talking the character out of doing so will be difficult. There is no need for each character Helen touches to receive the same "gift." After she attempts to touch each person in the ritual, she tells them that she freely gives them all of her books, including the *Ascension Tome* and then gradually fades from view with an expression of beatific joy on her face. The characters cannot prevent her from vanishing. Once the ritual is over, Helen becomes completely immune to all magic, and once she vanishes, the characters cannot contact her by any means, including magic. However, she may return to one or more of the characters in dreams, bearing cryptic warnings of Abyssal intrusions or similar information.

The Revealer

A mage obsessed with personal power and healing the Abyss managed to find an extensive library of videotapes made of a recent victim of dark angel aphasia who later disappeared. In the mage's search to understand the mysteries of the Abyss, he has disregarded all warnings about working with any recordings of people affected by this creature and contracted the first stage of aphasia. The aphasia has begun to seriously affect his writing, but he can still speak and understand speech relatively normally. However, his speech is starting to sound as if he suffers from a mild form of schizophrenia or some similar mental illness.

He understands that he has been affected, but he has decided that his condition may allow him to help rejoin the Supernal and Fallen Worlds, or at minimum to reduce the damaging power of the Abyss. The mage plans to broadcast his descriptions of the Abyss on live public access TV and to use a powerful sympathetic

Mind rote to give anyone flipping past the program an almost overwhelming desire to watch it. The mage hopes that by causing many hundreds or even thousands of individuals to suffer from dark angel aphasia that the psychic contagion will spread uncontrollably across the nation and eventually the world. He believes that if the aphasia affects a sufficient number of people, the rift between the Supernal and Fallen Worlds will grow less. The characters cannot talk this mage out of this belief, and so the must either forcibly cure him or confine him until he becomes catatonic, vanishes or recovers.

The Mentor

A mentor or close colleague of one of the characters approaches the character and asks for help. The mentor has acquired the diary of a pulp horror writer from the 1920s who became a dark angel aphasic. The mentor wishes to explore this knowledge and offers to share it with the character in return for assistance and secrecy. If the character is interested and wishes to include his companions, he can convince his mentor to allow them to work on this project if he can provide proof to the mentor that these companions are both skilled mages and trustworthy.

The mentor wishes to study the diary extensively and to purposefully become obsessed with it. He is interested in learning more about the nature of the Abyss and, if possible, using this knowledge to help him increase his Gnosis. However, he has no interest in becoming a vegetable or vanishing mysteriously. As a result, he wants the character or characters to help him avoid becoming aphasic and to both keep the book away from him and use Mind magics to help restore his sanity before he becomes lost in aphasia.

In return, he offers to do the same for the characters and to pool any knowledge they gain to help them better understand the Abyss. Unfortunately, this mage is a rather overconfident individual who attempts to dismiss worries that he is becoming too lost in aphasia. He is similarly dismissive of the dangers to others and is inclined to allow them to continue to become increasingly aphasic until it is very close to the point where it is too late to help them if they also seem to be making important discoveries.

The Electric Animator

Living Lightning: The Gremlin

I remember that old house I lived in when I was a kid. Shortly after we moved in, we noticed weird things – appliances and electronics shutting themselves on and off, even when no one was home. Lights coming on and off. Dad eventually had to disconnect the central air, because it would change temperatures all day long, going from hot to cold to hot again.

We'd been there for a couple of months when it got really strange. Not just things flickering on and off anymore. I remember waking up late on night, hearing something. I looked over, and the TV in my room was on. The static there was strange, all black-and-white. I remember moving, and then the static got... I'm not sure how to describe it. Calmer. Less like static and more like some kind of pattern, I guess. I could have sworn that it was moving and changing pattern as I moved. It was like it had become aware that I was awake and was watching me.

I moved the TV out of my room that night, and my computer followed it within the week. My sister swore she could hear voices in her radio static. My Dad called in an electrician to look at things. He ended up accidentally electrocuting himself; the strange thing is, I knew it was going to happen. I saw it in the flickering of the porch light.

The last straw was when the blender suddenly turned on – while my mom was cleaning it. It wasn't plugged in. I can remember the blood everywhere in the kitchen.

We moved out after that. Dad had the house demolished, and sold the lot. I still don't like most electronics these days. It's like there's a hum that I can't miss, and sometimes, I think the hum is trying to tell me something.

Living lightning is an Abyssal manifestation that takes the form of an animate electrical field capable of entering the electrical systems in the world around it and manipulating them. Strange and erratic disturbances in the operation of various devices and appliances gradually become more common, and if someone tries to correct the problem, the entity turns on the inhabitants.

Form

An electric animator is a bodiless entity whose existence is only noticeable because it inhabits electrically powered devices. Research by scientifically minded mages has revealed that this being is actually an animate, self-organizing electric field. However, an electric animator cannot exist alone; it must find a home in various electrical devices or a few specific natural phenomena.

Mages who study this entity are certain that before

the widespread use of electrical power, intrusions were quite brief. In those times, these beings could only exist in thunderstorms. Electric animators prolonged their existence by altering conditions sufficiently to cause ball lightning to become somewhat more stable, but they always vanished in less than a day. Their control of ball lightning is responsible for many of the stories of strange lights moving in the night that gave rise to legends of will-o'-the-wisps that would lead travelers astray or perform strangely compelling aerial dances before vanishing.

However, some archaeomancers point to the Baghdad Batteries and the bas relief of the so-called



Dendera Light, suggesting that these devices may once have provided electricity for ancient peoples, likely for religious or electroplating purposes. The technology may very well have been abandoned due to the devices' ability to provide a home for electric animators.

Today, the prevalence of electricity and devices powered by it as well as the presence of continent-wide electrical power grids allows these beings to intrude upon reality both more often and for far longer. Also, intrusions can be far more difficult to detect. A typical intrusion is limited to the electrical system of a single building or in some cases, a single office or apartment. The largest and most powerful manifestations can possess an entire factory or office building, but most can only possess a large apartment, a single office in an office building or a modest home.

Means of Passage

Unlike many creatures from the Abyss, breakthroughs by electrical animators are essentially random. They almost always occur during electrical storms and are usually associated with ball lightning or other unusual electrical activity. They are most common during periods of sunspots severe enough to interfere with radio broadcasts, or during times when the aurora borealis is especially brilliant. While the Free Council has clear evidence that inventor Nikolai Tesla accidentally summoned an electrical animator during one of his experiments with broadcast power, almost none of these creatures come into the mortal world due to anything except natural causes. Before the 19th century, they almost always vanished as soon as the thunderstorm that called them to the Fallen World was over, but since the spread of electricity and electrical devices, they now usually move into the wiring and devices near the point where the creatures entered the world.

Rules of Intrusion

Other than the effects the electric animator produces in machines, the only way to detect the presence of an electric animator is through the use of magnetometers or any other device capable of detecting electrical fields or an Unveiling Forces spell meant to detect free electromagnetic phenomena. Using such a spell to study the electrical resonance of this being has a die penalty of -2, but is the only form of Unveiling or Knowing that grants the ability to detect it. Success allows the mage to see an obviously unnatural zone of electrical interference that looks somewhat like a large, somewhat shapeless creature, much like an amoeba whose body is a living electrical field.

Although completely invisible to anything other than magic and instruments designed to detect ambient

electrical fields, this creature can reach out and touch any nearby electrical device. It then gains control of this device. The degree of control the creature exerts over a device grows with the amount of time the creature spends in this world. At first, the entity merely causes random disruptions in the device's function - TVs and radios experience periodic static and change channels at random, computers crash and other electrical appliances flicker on and off.

Over time, the entity's control grows. After a week or two, the gremlin learns to control these devices. It can turn them on and off and cause them to operate in any possible manner, changing settings, speeds and other factors of its operation at will. At this point, the creature begins to engage in activities that are increasingly complex but also seemingly random. TVs display strange and compelling images composed of several different overlapping broadcasts, radios and other music players produce oddly patterned static that sounds like some form of unusual music, while kitchen appliances and power tools flicker on and off in unison or in sequence.

Eventually, these disturbances increase in both frequency and complexity. After several weeks, almost anyone observing this activity will be convinced that the various devices seem to be attempting to communicate or to perform some similarly unusual action. Unfortunately, no one has ever managed to communicate with this creature and the complete failure of all attempts indicates that while it may be highly intelligent, it is likely both completely unaware of the possibility of corporeal creatures being intelligent and its mind is exceedingly alien. An electrical animator reacts as a living being and can seemingly plan in an organized and detailed fashion that suggests human-level intelligence. However, no magic will allow mages to communicate with it. It treats humans as either potential threats, dangers to be eliminated or, if they do not disturb it, irrelevant features of the landscape.

If the creature is left alone, the various phenomena caused by an electrical animator are annoying and distracting, but rarely dangerous, unless one of the devices it controls is needed for some important purpose. This being usually makes certain not to damage devices or overload their circuits, although it occasionally trips circuit breakers and burn out fuses. Sometimes, especially in factories or wherever it is possessing large and potentially dangerous equipment, the electric animator accidentally harms someone, but this harm never seems to be deliberate.

However, if anyone attempts to fix the problem and disrupts the being's actions or, as occasionally happens, someone damages or destroys one of the affected devices

out of frustration with the device's erratic operation, then the situation can become quite dangerous. The electrical animator seems to have no concept of humans as intelligent beings or is uninterested in the fact that they are. However, harming the devices it controls or otherwise attempting to stop the creature's actions causes it to lash out at whatever interfered with it. Having household appliances turn on or off at exactly the wrong time can be extremely dangerous and having the same thing occur with industrial machinery can be exceptionally lethal.

Mortal Response

Similar to many of the more mysterious manifestations from the Abyss, the effects of an electrical animator are sufficiently strange and subtle that the only people likely to be calling into deal with the problem are electricians and computer tech support personnel. Occasionally, eccentrics whose house or business is possessed call in amateur ghost hunters or even exorcists if the problem persists. Few of these responses are likely to have any affect, except possibly causing the creature to turn hostile. However, a few sufficiently clever and dedicated electricians have managed to detect the presence of the electrical animator as an anomalous electrical field. However, there is little they can do to solve the problem. The only time mortals succeed in banishing one of these creatures is when they begin to seek unusual and fairly drastic solutions.

Means of Exile

Banishing an electrical animator is relatively difficult to do subtly or without causing damage to the affected equipment. Attempting to move affected devices out of the range of the creature always fails. The creature can often move with the devices, and it also can move into the buildings electrical system, where the creature will patiently wait for devices for someone to plug devices back in. However, an electrical animator can only extend itself over an area of a few hundred square yards. If someone unplugs all the electrical devices, then turns off the power to the whole house or building, the creature must either leave the Fallen World or move to a nearby location with power. Because the creature can move as far as 100 yards in any direction, eliminating the electric animator in this fashion requires cutting the power to an area the size of an entire city block.

The creature can survive for as long as 10 or 15 minutes without power and reacts to any attempts to cut off its power as a direct attack. The creature can also temporarily generate power sufficient to operate most individual devices or blow up lightbulbs. In this state, the creature can only operate a single device at a time, and will either attempt to find a way to get to an area with power or attack anything that the creature thinks cut off its power. Fortunately, the creature's ability to generate power is limited, and it can only keep doing so for three minutes before it must either vanish or move to a location with power. Blacking out one or more city blocks will leave the creature no place that it can move in the time it has left and will almost always banish it, but doing this can often be relatively problematic.

The least problematic method of banishing this creature back to the Abyss is to use the Forces spell "Control Electricity," while the mage is also using the Unveiling Forces effect to sense the creature. The mage can then specifically direct electricity away from the creature, starving it, while simultaneously minimizing any electrical disruptions. Unfortunately, successfully accomplishing this always requires that this spell affect an area with a radius of at least 16 yards, and possibly as much as 64 yards — the creature can move no faster than a running human and so denying it power in an area this size allows the mage to follow the creature around and continue starving it out.

The fastest and most direct method of banishing an electrical animator is a fairly drastic solution. Generating an electromagnetic pulse in the area that the creature inhabits instantly banishes it back to the Abyss. However, this EMP will temporarily knock out all electrical devices and will damage or permanently destroy most electronics. In addition, the only way to generate an EMP is by using either the Forces spell of the same name or an explosive device. When creating an EMP with magic, the mage must either use this rote multiple times or create an EMP 16 yards in diameter.

Researching the Electrical Animator

Capping Skill: Science

Action: Extended — 15 successes

Research Time: 30 minutes; 10 minutes

Appropriate Libraries: Engineering, Physics

Possible Modifiers: Researcher is an Initiate of the Forces Arcanum (+1)

Successes**Information**

0–9

Nothing.

10–14

This creature is a living electrical field and can control electrical and electronic devices.

15+

It enters the Fallen World during electrical storms and must have an external source of electricity to survive.

Story Hooks

In the modern age, electric animators can be incredibly dangerous intrusions, causing havoc on a wide scale, particularly in urban areas. The following are some ideas for using these creatures.

Strange Devices

One of the characters either works at or knows someone who works at an electronics research lab where the technicians and scientists are using advanced supercomputers to design various sorts of automated machinery. The latest projects involve the researchers having the computer design and then build various systems, including small self-mobile robots by programming the computer to automatically select desirable traits for the device, in a process designed to mimic natural evolution but on a vastly faster scale. The results of this research have been exceedingly promising. The computer creates automated devices that resemble nothing a human would ever design, and that often operate in an eccentric manner but usually work as well or better than a device designed in a more conventional manner.

A week ago, a series of unexplained power fluctuations and unusual electronic phenomena, including computers and robots activating on their own, indicated to anyone who knows what to look for that the lab has become home to an electronic animator. Moving the equipment out of the laboratory is completely impractical and turning off the power to the lab would disrupt several important ongoing projects, so the two obvious solutions are impossible.

Characters attempting to find a way to send this creature back to the Abyss will notice that shortly after their investigation begins, the entity withdraws from the rest of the laboratory and moves into the largest computer. This computer is currently running a program that is designing a basketball-sized, computer-controlled robot that can maneuver over a variety of terrain. If any of the characters understands the detailed working of this

computer or uses a Forces spell such as “Tune In” (cast conjunctionally with a Mind 1 Knowing effect to allow the mage to interpret the data), the character will realize that the electric animator is influencing the design of the robot the computer is creating.

If the characters attempt to interfere with this computer, the electric animator reacts quite violently. However, if they allow it to continue influencing this program, the creature will do nothing else, and the previous problems will appear to have ceased. After several days’ work, the design is complete, and the computer then uses rapid prototyping machinery to actually create this robot. The creature is especially active during this process, and as the robot nears completion, any mages observing will see the Abyssal being physically move into the completed robot. Characters examining the plans for the robot will notice that it contains circuits and various pieces of machinery that seem to have no obvious use. Although this is typical of devices created in this manner, this robot seems to contain more inexplicable parts than usual.

When the being first moves into the robot, the characters may be able to send the creature home by teleporting it far from electricity and destroying it. If they continue observing the creature, the robot will perform normally during the first tests, which occur shortly before the lab closes for the night. The creature waits until the lab is closed and the lights are off and then activates the robot. The creature does not understand humans, and as long as the lights are off, it will activate the robot, even if the characters are all standing nearby chatting. Because the being is actually in the robot, the robot does not need to be in wireless contact with the computer that would normally control it. Also, the creature can draw on electrical lines in the building’s walls to power it, so the robot’s batteries do not need to even be in place.

Because all of the doors in the building are electrically operated, the creature can open them to allow the robot to pass through. The robot works its way out of the lab and onto either a large window ledge or the roof, whichever is closer. The robot ignores all attempts to stop its progress unless these attempts either begin to harm the robot or are so vigorous and effective that they prevent the robot from moving toward its goal for more than a couple of minutes. If either happens, the building’s electrical system and all nearby machinery will attack the characters. If the characters figure out where the robot is going and carry it to the roof or a window ledge, the robot will allow them to do so.

As soon as the robot is in the open, it unfolds a trio of long, slender antennae. The surrounding region crackles with static electricity and smells of ozone. As both the

static and the ozone smell continue to increase, spheres of ball lightning between the size of a grape and a golf ball will begin to fly down from the sky and swirl around in complex patterns. Any character who uses Forces magic to determine where these spheres are coming from discovers that they first appear high in the upper atmosphere where lightning normally forms and then fly down at high speed to the robot.

Over the course of the next hour, the characters see an increasingly impressive light show. However, somewhere along the line, anyone with Science 1+ or Crafts 2+ will realize that the situation could become exceedingly dangerous as more balls of lightning cluster around the robot. A successful Intelligence + Science roll or a successful use of Forces magic reveals that the ball lightning is beginning to come together into a single huge sphere that will explode with the force of a several sticks of dynamite.

Spells that enable control over electricity can slow this process. The robot will not react as long as the characters do not attempt to slow down the process by more than a factor of four. The robot reacts with extreme violence to any attempts to use more powerful magic either to harm it or to stop this process. The characters can attempt either to dispel the creature in the laboratory or to move the robot to a safe location, preferably far from any people or buildings. The laboratory is on the edge of town, and the robot does not resist being moved, as long as it is not placed in a totally enclosed space. The creature will attempt to resist if the characters attempt to use Space magic to teleport it, but they can safely move it in a car with open windows or strapped onto a car's roof rack. If the characters move it, the ball lightning will follow them, which may result in the characters having to deal with puzzled or worried police officers.

The ball lightning explodes shortly after the characters stop slowing down its accumulation. Shortly before the explosion, almost 100 small spheres of ball lightning whirl around the robot with increasing speed in a series of highly complex patterns. At the Storyteller's discretion, anyone who photographs or studies these patterns may gain some insight into the Abyss, and they will likely gain at least a point of Arcane Experience.

Then, the entire cluster of spheres begins to pulse (giving the character's warning that it is time to get well back), and the many small spheres of ball lightning merge into a single sphere almost eight feet in diameter that hovers directly in front of the robot, and then touches its antennae. The instant the huge ball lightning touches the robot, it explodes with the force of a high explosive device (see the **World of Darkness Rulebook**, p. 179).

Anyone near the center of the blast is either killed or badly injured, and at the Storyteller's option, anyone on the edge of the blast is either injured or possessed by one of the Abyssal beings in this chapter that possesses or inhabits humans.

Also, at the Storyteller's option, the area within a few hundred yards of the explosion may become a locus, or a place that is either proof against further intrusions by creatures from the Abyss, or a weak spot that attracts them. If the characters duplicate the robot, it proves to be a robot that meets its design goals but contains a few inexplicable and seemingly non-functional devices.

The Hospital

This incident occurs when one of the characters or a friend or relative of one of the characters must go to the hospital for some urgent but not life-threatening surgery. After the character needing surgery checks in and is scheduled for surgery in a day or two, the first incidents begin. The entire hospital is affected, but if no one attempts to solve the electrical problems, they remain relatively minor until the patient's surgery. Although these problems inconvenience and worry the doctors and patients, no one is harmed.

However, before the surgery, the hospital director, who is inclined to be both anxious and overcautious, calls in several electricians and asks Homeland Security agents to check over the hospital for possible terrorist sabotage. At this point, the characters face the possibility that the electricians will anger the entity and provoke a violent response that might result in multiple deaths or serious injuries. In addition, unless the characters have an official reason for examining various pieces of hospital machinery and working with the hospital's electrical system, they will have to explain their presence to a pair of inexperienced and somewhat paranoid Homeland Security agents.

To further increase the tension, the character's friend or relative's surgery is rapidly approaching. To avoid deaths or serious injuries, the characters need to find a way to either deal with the creature before the electricians anger it or prevent the electricians from angering it when there are people in the hospital.

The Factory

An electrical animator appears in a large factory run by a struggling company. This factory uses heavy machinery, for example, an automobile factory or a factory that makes aircraft or weapons system for the military — the exact nature of the factory is up to the Storyteller. At first, there is a story in the news about electrical problems at the factory, and workers are sent home for a day when the

machinery becomes too erratic. However, the situation seems to settle down, and the equipment ceases turning off randomly. As a result, the workers go back to the factory and must now work overtime because the factory has a rush contract that will make the company money it desperately needs. If the factory cannot fulfill the order, then the company is likely to go bankrupt, resulting in several hundred people losing their jobs.

Instead of random power outages, the electrical animator now occasionally operates machinery when no one is around and periodically changes settings so that the parts the factory produces are sometimes dramatically different from those desired. As a result, the owners of the factory are frantically attempting to solve the problem and now suspect sabotage. Tensions among the owners and the workers are becoming extremely high. In addition, one of the maintenance workers sent in to repair the machines was badly injured, and several workers have narrowly avoided injury. Because of the increasingly frantic attempts to fix the problem, the electrical animator seems to be turning hostile. The local media is now treating the matter as possibly due to sabotage by a

rival company. If no one intervenes, the factory loses its contract, but not before the possessed machinery kills or injures several workers and maintenance personnel.

Traits

Though the electric animator uses spirit-style stats, it is not a spirit in any way. The creature is an animate field of electromagnetic energy.

Electrical Animator

Attributes: Power 3, Finesse 3, Resistance 4

Willpower: 5

Initiative: 5

Defense: 4

Speed: 11 (species factor 5)

Size: 7

Corpus: 11

Notes: The electrical animator can affect only electrical devices and can only be harmed by depriving it of electricity or attacking it with Forces magic that manipulates electricity. An EMP will instantly kill the creature.



False Demesnes

Safety Zones, Covert Spots, Supernal Pockets

I opened the cylinder of my gun and checked that it was loaded. It was, of course; I'd been checking all morning. I peeked through the crack in the door again. She was crouched over the corpse, drawing sigils on it, but I was more interested in the jar behind her that I knew contained a human soul.

My cabal was still miles away. This Consilium didn't have much representation from the Arrow. This had to be my play.

I kicked in the door and pointed my gun right at her. I yelled something, probably something lame like "Don't move!" She glanced up and glared... and my gun fell apart.

I just stood there, dumbfounded. That kind of magic always leaves a mark. I should have seen something around her, at least, screaming ghosts or sounds of hollow knocking. She turned away from me and back to the corpse.

"Go away, stupid," she said. "This is Stygian ground. You aren't welcome here."

False Demesnes are places in which the Abyss itself intrudes upon the Fallen World. Instead of interfering with magic, however, the Abyss tries to make the natural laws of its surroundings (i.e., the Fallen World) correspond to the realm of the magic most commonly used there. As a result, vulgar magic that stems from a particular Supernal Realm does not seem to cause Paradox. A mage who stumbles upon and uses a False Demesne, however, is playing with fire — sooner or later, the Abyss "realizes" what is happening and takes steps to correct it.

Form

A False Demesne is a response to magic, but not necessarily vulgar magic. A False Demesne reminds mages that magic comes from the Supernal Realms, not from the mage in question, and that all magic must pass through the Abyss in order to reach the Fallen World. No matter how covert the magic, no matter how careful a mage is to cover her tracks and prevent Paradox, the Abyss notices. Sometimes, it responds.

False Demesnes are not sentient creatures. They do not have survival instincts or agendas as such. They are simply Abyssal responses to a problem — a disparity between the natural laws of the Fallen World and what is actually happening there (magic). False Demesnes tend to be restricted to a small area, and an investigating

mage will not find a spirit or being controlling the effect. Mages can, as mentioned, use False Demesnes to their advantages, at least for a while.

The All-Important Why

Why do False Demesnes change the world in the direction of the Supernal Realms, rather than reinforcing the laws of the Fallen World? Mages who have come into contact with these odd manifestations have their theories, but proving them is difficult. The theories below can be espoused by any sources characters find on the False Demesnes.

- **Confusion:** The Abyss's inclination is toward uniformity, not toward repelling magic or strengthening the Fallen World specifically. As such, when a False Demesne arises, it is because the Abyss "thinks" that the area is part of a Supernal Realm, and sets about trying to make sure the natural laws of that realm are enforced.

- **Balance:** Whenever a magical effect fails due to Paradox (in game terms, the spell fails after a dice pool penalty assessed by Paradox), the magic has to go somewhere. It drifts off into the Abyss, a tiny ripple or echo of magic. Over time, it joins with other such echoes, spells meant to draw down the power of the same realm, as like calls to like. They can't be destroyed, as such, but they can't abide in the Abyss, so they burst back into the Fallen World, alter it for a short time and burn themselves out. (This might make mages think twice before casting vulgar magic.)

- **Errors of the Oracles:** Just as the Ananke are reminders that the great mages of the past are still present, in a sense, the False Demesnes are evidence that the Oracles still make mistakes. Their errors in magic appear in the Fallen World, shunted away by their incredible mystical power. The False Demesnes are therefore magical effects, caused in the Supernal Realms (or wherever the Oracles really are) but grounded here in the Fallen World. Do the False Demesnes have purpose? Could the Exarchs create them as well?

Means of Passage

False Demesnes present a conundrum — they seem to be Abyssal attempts to normalize the governing laws of the Fallen World with those of the Supernal Realms, but approached from the opposite direction that Paradox usually tries. Instead of shunting magic away, a False Demesne apparently works to make magic the norm, if only within a small area. The trouble is that magic left unchecked only escalates until the entire area is gone.

In some ways, a False Demesne can be seen as a metaphor for the Awakening itself. Magic appears in the Fallen World, and must be carefully controlled, else the result is chaos and destruction. Though the magic manifests through a locale rather than a person, the message is still the same: power must be checked with control.

What causes a False Demesne to occur? The metaphysics behind it continue to elude Awakened scholars, but ancient texts and even modern treatises on the subject by occultists and other researchers point to several warning signs:

- **Manifestation Paradox:** A Paradox powerful enough to summon an Abyssal entity can set the stage for a False Demesne. The creature can set the process in motion, provided the entity is sufficiently powerful, but does not (usually) remain to make sure that things are progressing. The Paradox simply causes enough of an intrusion from the Abyss that the process of creating a False Demesne can begin. An Anomaly Paradox, incidentally, does not cause or contribute to False Demesnes because Anomalies are focused on the mages who cause them, rather than on external (Abyssal or Supernal) factors. Anomalies might cause effects that resemble those of False Demesnes in the short term (leading researchers to believe they are connected), but Anomalies die out quickly, whereas False Demesnes must run their courses.

- **Long-term Magic Use:** Obviously, this isn't the only or even most common method of creating a False Demesne, else any given mage's sanctum would soon be rewriting the laws of reality. In order for an area that sees frequent magic use to become a False Demesne, the area must first play host to more than one mage of the same Path, thus creating a strong connection to one particular realm. Covert or vulgar magic (or, more often, a combination of both) can trigger one of these zones, but the area needs to see magic use at least four times a day for a period of several months before the process begins. Even then, some other factor is necessary, but frequent magic use can certainly pave the ground for a False Demesne.

- **Awakenings:** It's rare, but it happens: some places seem to attract Awakenings. Maybe an area resonates with

a given Supernal Realm (see below) and so those on the cusp of Awakening find themselves in that realm. Maybe an Atlantean temple lies buried nearby, some magical working or construct still running after all these years and keeping the path to a given Watchtower clear. In any case, if an area has seen two or more people Awaken on the same Path within a few months of each other, the location might become a False Demesne.

- **Destruction of Soul Stones:** Soul stones are refinements of a mage's more personal essence, and thus have a great deal of sympathy with that mage's Path realm. When a soul stone is destroyed, which is a difficult prospect in any case (see p. 277 of **Mage: The Awakening**), the soul stone sometimes acts as the seed from which a False Demesne can grow.

- **Sympathy:** Some places just resonate to one of the Supernal Realms. A graveyard connecting to Stygia is an obvious example, but a scientific laboratory in which metallurgical work is performed might also connect to the Realm of Shades. Likewise, a virgin stretch of forest might forge a sympathetic connection to the Primal Wild (and might go through all of its stages without ever being discovered, though the mutated inhabitants might still escape).

Rules of Intrusion

A False Demesne is bound to the laws of a particular Supernal Realm. As the phenomenon takes hold of an area, the phenomenon rewrites the laws of nature in that area to fit some Abyssal ideal of the Supernal Realm. This has the effect of mitigating Paradox for mages of the appropriate Path, often leading those mages to assume that the area is a Demesne. Unfortunately, since the natural laws of the area are affected, Sleepers are subject to strange phenomena as well. Disbelief, of course, doesn't erode or affect the strange manifestations and events in a False Demesne. Disbelief is born of the shard of the Abyss present in all Sleepers, and the Abyss is what creates the strange occurrences in the False Demesne.

False Demesnes in Twilight and Shadow

The appearance and nature of Twilight and the Shadow in a False Demesne depends very much on the specifics of that manifestation. Generally, False Demesnes mimicking Arcadia and the Aether don't show any difference, other than high preponderances of spirits appropriate to whatever is happening in the material world. Pandemonium-affected Shadows don't change, but Twilight might play host to the dreaming

minds of anyone sleeping within a few miles of the place, or act as a magnet to Astral travelers.

Stygian Shadows are no different from normal, since reaching into the Shadow is beyond the purview of Death magic (indeed, the Gauntlet actually tends to be thicker in such places). In

False Demesnes mimicking the Primal Wild, though, the Shadow and Twilight both are full of activity. Spirits wander in and out of Twilight without let or hindrance, sometimes manifesting or even materializing in the physical world. A plant might start growing in the material world, continue through Twilight and finish in the Shadow. Spirits of all types flock to such areas, out of curiosity, greed or hunger.

Once a False Demesne is established, it follows a rough pattern of four stages.

Boundaries Stage

In this phase, the False Demesne defines its borders. The area has a clear delineation between where normal reality ends and where the False Demesne begins. Any mage with active Mage Sight can sense this boundary if she is within sight of it; this requires a Wits + Occult roll from the player. If the Mage Sight is cast through one of the Ruling Arcanum of the Supernal Realm appropriate to the False Demesne, the roll receives a +1. If the Arcanum is the Inferior Arcanum to the realm in question, the roll suffers a -1. Success on this roll simply senses the border — the mage knows that something magical separates (for instance) one side of a doorway from the other.

If the mage spends time scrutinizing the border (see p. 278 of **Mage: The Awakening**; this is a normal quality requiring five successes), she discovers that the area on the “abnormal” side of the border (that is, the side which is now a False Demesne) has a resonance appropriate to the Supernal Realm the area mimics. A Stygian False Demesne, then, might exude a feeling of being in transition or of decay, while a Primal Wild area might be vibrant but menacing. The border itself, if the mage focuses her attention on it, seems endless and empty, while the area on the “normal” side of the border simply exhibits whatever resonance is typical for the place.

Thus, the mage might note, the area displays a familiar pattern: Supernal Realm separated from Fallen World by an Abyss. This phase lasts for approximately one month, though a large area extends this time. A month is enough time for an area the size of a two-story house to become a False Demesne.

Minor Changes Stage

After the boundaries are delineated, the False Demesne enters the minor changes phase. The Abyss starts remaking reality in the area to conform to the appropriate Supernal Realm. The changes here are obviously supernatural (or at least strange; some realms call for more overt changes than others), but no Disbelief or Paradox is ever incurred.

- **Ruling Arcana:** Vulgar magic cast here of the Ruling Arcana of the realm in question still runs the risk of Paradox, but all Paradox rolls are reduced to chance dice, no matter how many times in a scene the mage casts vulgar magic. Covert spells are not affected.

- **Common Arcana:** If a mage casts a vulgar spell using one of the realm’s Common Arcana, the Paradox roll receives a -2 modifier. Covert spells are not affected.

- **Inferior Arcana:** If the mage uses vulgar magic based on the realm’s Inferior Arcanum, however, the Paradox roll receives two additional dice. Covert spells are not affected.

- **Duration:** The area remains in this stage for roughly two months, though repeated castings of vulgar magic appropriate to the mimicked realm can speed the process up. A spell a week won’t change the progress considerably, but if a mage uses a False Demesne as a sanctum, the area can progress to the next stage in as little as three days.

Dangerous Changes Stage

As the effect worsens, the Abyss starts trying to mimic the more basic laws of reality from the Supernal Realm in question. This results in the dangerous changes phase. During the previous phase, the odd manifestations aren’t usually enough to injure or kill inhabitants, but this becomes quite possible, even likely, during the third stage.

- **Ruling Arcana:** Vulgar spells are considered covert.

- **Common Arcana:** Vulgar spells from the Common Arcana can still generate Paradox, but begin at a chance die.

- **Inferior Arcanum:** Already extant spells cast through the Inferior Arcanum of the mimicked Realm fall quickly in False Demesnes at this stage (one point of Potency per minute), and any spell cast through this Arcanum is considered vulgar and carries the risk of Paradox. Vulgar spells in this Arcanum receive one automatic success on the Paradox roll (which the mage can still take as bashing damage as usual). Normally, covert spells may result in Paradox as well. These spells, however, begin at a chance die rather than at the mage’s usual Paradox pool.

- **Duration:** This stage lasts until the situation worsens to the point that the area destroys itself, which can take

anywhere from a few days to a few months, depending on the realm being mimicked and the specific manifestations. Again, however, vulgar spells from the Ruling Arcana of the realm, though they do not generate Paradox, do speed up the process.

Destruction Stage

Finally, the False Demesne enters the destruction phase. The magic of the area becomes so intense as to destroy or otherwise remove the area from the Fallen World. If the Abyssal intrusion isn't banished or destroyed before this, it winds up solving the problem itself, usually in a blatant and devastating manner. Those unfortunate enough to be inside the area when it finally self-destructs are probably lost (again, depending on the particulars of the False Demesne), and even those nearby can be injured.

Realms to False Demesnes

Following are some specific examples of how the laws of reality might be rewritten within a False Demesne, based on the Supernal Realm that the Abyss is trying to mimic:

- **The Aether:** False Demesnes based on the Aether cause some truly frightening and dramatic effects, as the very laws of physics rearrange themselves. Fire burns without fuel or refuses to consume fuel. Light, heat and sound all behave strangely. Isolated sounds might move slowly, resulting in long, drawn-out sounds, while visual images blur and shift. Light might start moving slowly enough to be perceivable — a mage might turn on a light switch, only to watch the illumination spread out from the bulb in a glowing mass until it covers the room. Objects might spontaneously become invisible.

Magic within such False Demesnes is tricky at best. A mage's Mana stores can increase dramatically as the area creates tass and infuses the power directly into the mage, or the Mana stores can plummet as the False Demesne siphons the power straight off them. Spells can increase in Potency or fizzle out as though affected by the "Supernal Dispellation" spell. For brief moments, False Demesnes based on the Aether might look to the proper spells like impossibly powerful Hallows, only to resemble magical dead zones at the next glance.

Ghosts, vampires and other beings touched by death often have trouble entering or even approaching False Demesnes of the Aether. This can make them appear as some sort of "holy ground" (and changes in slight and magical-resonance that often accompany them can add to that illusion). Decay and entropy are often slowed or halted in such Demesnes.

If the False Demesne is allowed to progress, the area becomes dangerous. Any electric spark can mushroom

into a lightning bolt. Nuclear radiation can spontaneously arise or disappear, and magnetic pulses can render computers and other devices inoperable. Eventually, explosions, fire and earthquakes typically destroy such False Demesnes, unless they are reversed first.

- **Arcadia:** A False Demesne based on Arcadia skews the laws of probability. The "expected" results of normal randomization become rare; a game of poker in such a place sees people drawing inside straights, royal flushes and other extremely rare card combinations more often than not. Strange coincidences become the norm in these False Demesnes, and weird luck, good and bad, affects nearly every action (this can add a bonus or penalty of one to five dice to any non-magical roll as the Storyteller sees fit). Any spoken phrase can become a sworn oath or *geas*, no matter how innocuous and whether the speaker was being serious or honest when she spoke. Everything that people say in these areas might ring true or, alternately, sound like a lie to listeners.

Time and perceptions of time change in these False Demesnes. Anyone who stays in this area might "lose time," walking out of the area hours or days after she entered but only remembering a few minutes of time spent there. A person might find herself repeating the same actions over and over again or feeling a powerful sense of déjà vu no matter what she says or does. Flashes of the past or the future might play themselves out for all to see, or time might run backwards for several minutes.

In False Demesnes based on Arcadia, light, sound and other natural forces fade in importance. That's not to say that they alter themselves or behave differently from in the Fallen World. Light simply dims slightly; sound fades to the point that everyone seems soft-spoken. The laws of physics behave as they normally would, and manipulation of these laws is more difficult, magically speaking, than usual.

Left unchecked, a False Demesne based on Arcadia sometimes fades out of normal time entirely, reappearing years or decades (possibly more) in the future, perfectly preserved. Of course, any inhabitants of this pocket out of time immediately age to the ends of their lifespans when they try to leave, or possibly become unable to speak about their lost pasts as though under magical prohibition to avoid such topics.

- **Pandemonium:** False Demesnes based on Pandemonium become the combined nightmares of M.C. Escher and Sigmund Freud. Space warps — hallways turn back on themselves in Moebius loops. Openings and rooms become capable of holding objects much larger than they should. A valise can hold a rifle, while a motorcycle fits in a tiny coat closet. A person might walk through a door

only to walk out of that same doorway from the other direction, while another might descend a flight of steps to find herself in the room she just left – or find herself stepping off the stairs onto the roof of the building. Sometimes the result is even more disturbing. A visitor might enter the front door of such a False Demesne and find that the doorway now leads out of a top-floor window. Reaching into a drawer or even a pocket in such an area might allow a mage to pull whatever she happens to be thinking about out of it, which might have pleasant or disastrous results.

Nothing is private or sacred in such False Demesnes. Thoughts are broadcast for everyone to hear. A person who dares to sleep in this area finds her dreams a mad landscape of Jungian symbolism, and might well be unable to awake. Two people might “switch bodies” for as long as they stay in the area, and the smallest desire or whim becomes a magical compulsion. Language in such an area either becomes moot, as everyone understands every spoken (or unspoken) word, or becomes an impenetrable fog as the meaning becomes completely separate from the words.

Matter changes very slowly in Pandemonium-based False Demesnes. Ice melts, but, no matter the ambient temperature, melts slowly. Water might sit for days before evaporating, while a kettle set to boil takes an hour to reach that point.

Over time, False Demesnes based on Pandemonium tend to disappear. They sometimes reappear, allowing other people to enter them, but then they become strange Pocket Realms, not accessible from the Fallen World. Anyone trapped inside eventually dies of starvation (unless she can pull food and water from a pocket or cupboard, which is possible), but might well be so tormented by visions in her head that she welcomes death.

- **Primal Wild:** False Demesnes corresponding to the Primal Wild are dangerous places. Spontaneous mutation becomes commonplace, and so a housecat might become a winged, scaled killing machine quite capable of tearing out a mage’s throat. Moss or fungus suddenly changes into a swarm of bees or stinging flies, only to settle on a person and change back into plant life (now rooted in the person’s skin). Disease either worsens dramatically (often fatally) or runs its course in seconds, and wounds heal themselves in a fraction of the time that such repair would normally take. People in such False Demesnes grow faster, stronger and tougher, but also respond to their base impulses almost exclusively, ignoring their higher brains. Over time, long-term inhabitants take on features from animals and plants. A person who spends too much time in such an area might be massively muscled,

possess long claws and fangs, but have a massive blob of spore-producing mold instead of a tongue.

As grotesque as all of this can be, the spiritual aspect of False Demesnes of the Primal Wild is perhaps more worrisome. Such areas can be considered loci, after a fashion – spirits have a much easier time crossing into Twilight and even the material world in these areas. Material beings, likewise, can slip across the Gauntlet into the spirit world without warning. Spirits of objects brought into the area awaken almost immediately, and often remain awake and empowered even after leaving. Human beings living and working near the False Demesne run a greater risk of becoming possessed or Claimed (see p. 321 of **Mage: The Awakening**) by spirits. Werewolves might mistake such areas for incredibly powerful loci and work to protect them from interference, which of course only makes the problem worse. Then again, these shapeshifters probably aren’t blind to the problems that the False Demesne can create, but they might consider the area their responsibility and exclude mages (whom they might view as opportunistic and ignorant) from trying to fix the area.

People in such False Demesnes have trouble focusing their thoughts, especially putting thoughts into words or writing down their ideas. Complex mental functions suffer in these areas, and basic emotions – rage, lust, protection of the young, hunger – rule. While inhabitants can use their higher mental functions, doing so requires extra effort.

Left unchecked, False Demesnes of the Primal Wild either become the homes of werewolves or the mutated beasts that False Demesnes create, or they open gateways for truly powerful and deadly creatures from the Shadow. At this point, False Demesnes garner enough attention from either shapeshifters or the Awakened that the areas can be destroyed, but the process invariably ends up costing lives. Sometimes a powerful spirit changes the aspect of the area from the spirit-world side, driving away the False Demesne, but usually rewrites the rules of the area in the spirit’s own favor first.

- **Stygia:** Permanence is hard to come by in False Demesnes of Stygia. Matter changes forms or even states easily. Metals might melt at room temperature, only to solidify in new and interesting shapes. Keeping anyone or anything confined in such an area is futile, as their prisons simply warp accommodate their egress. Humidity and moisture fluctuate – the air might be arid and stale one moment, only to become thick and heavy the next. Characters might leave footprints in solid stone or wood, but be unable to bite into a suddenly metallic candy bar.

Ghosts that wander into such Demesnes or that are anchored inside them become more cogent, able to recognize what they are and have lucid conversations with anyone present. Their powers become much more fearsome, and such shades can usually materialize with little effort. Corpses in the area become zombies spontaneously, and might occasionally even become revenants (who are then free to leave the area to cause whatever kind of havoc they wish). Likewise, a vampire who discovers this sort of False Demesne probably claims the area immediately, as the powers of the undead are amplified greatly in such places (the Storyteller can assign dice pool bonuses to such powers as appropriate to the False Demesne).

Stygia-based False Demesnes create an odd sort of friction within themselves, as the energies of Death try to break down the structure of objects but the influence of Matter resists this degradation. This results in objects shattering, eroding and generally ceasing to function, but “healing” themselves in much the same way a wound in flesh closes. Objects break easily, but they don’t stay broken.

Spirits (not ghosts) avoid False Demesnes of Stygia. If the spirits are forced to enter, they fall into slumber almost immediately. Objects with awakened spirits and fetishes become inert within such areas, and possessed people and animals can shake off their tormentors with relative ease. Claimed individuals will not willingly enter these areas, and fall comatose if forced to do so.

Over time, Stygian False Demesnes eventually destroy themselves – the structure of the area degrades, heals, changes states, degrades again and eventually collapses. Of course, if the area has a ready supply of corpses, the False Demesne probably attracts enough supernatural notice to be “cured,” one way or another.

Researching False Demesnes

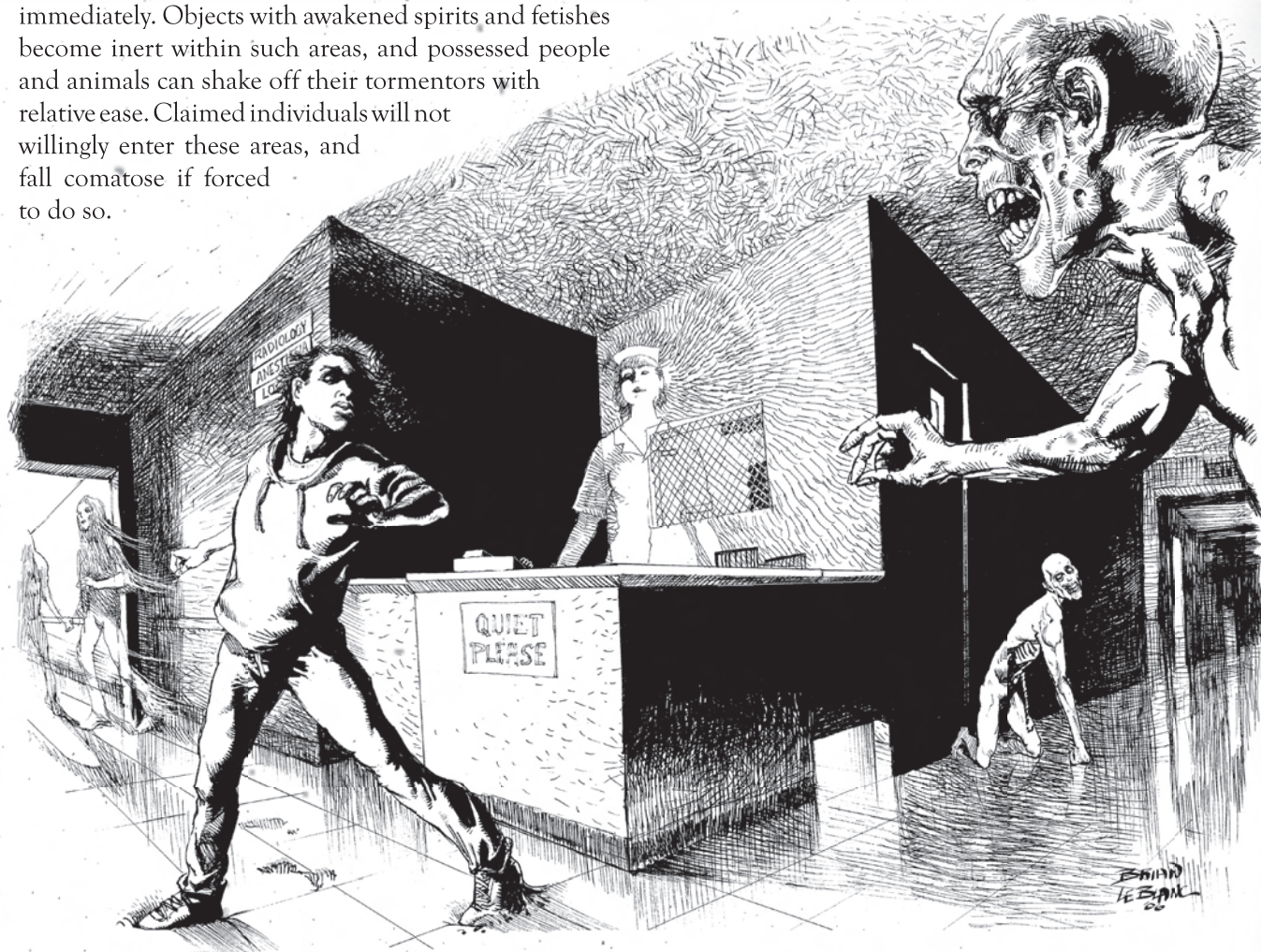
The problem that characters have when researching False Demesnes is that because of their rarity and extreme power, occultists don’t usually connect False Demesnes as similar manifestations. As such, a character is most likely to find information on similar False Demesnes rather than on the phenomenon itself.

Capping Skills: Occult

Action: Extended – 30 successes

Research Time: 1 day; 3 hours

Appropriate Libraries: Abyssal Intrusions, Paradox, Supernal Realms



Possible Modifiers: Knowledge of local history, as it relates to the False Demesne in question, might apply at the Storyteller's discretion.

Successes Information

0–5

Nothing.

6–24

Various accounts of other, similar False Demesnes. These should paint the places in a variety of lights: One account might be written by a cabal that loved the False Demesne for one of its beneficial effects (and what happened to that cabal?), while another might have been writing its intent to sacrifice itself to destroy one. The researcher can find accounts from Sleepers or other supernatural beings, but of course such accounts won't mention Supernal Realms or anything of the like.

25–30

Character finally finds information that indicates that False Demesnes can mimic any Supernal Realm, perhaps a *Mysterium* treatise on the subject or a warning penned by the last survivor of a cabal killed during the destruction phase of a False Demesne. This section should definitely include confirmation that the area is going to destroy itself.

Means of Exile

All False Demesnes eventually exile themselves; the only question is what level of collateral damage to the Fallen World occurs before that happens. A False Demesne mimicking the Aether could conceivably end in a nuclear explosion. While this would destroy the False Demesne, such an explosion would also cause unthinkable human casualties. The problem that a cabal of mages (or indeed any group of supernatural investigators, since these areas are by no means only a concern for the Awakened) has lies in knowing whether a given False Demesne is going to whimper out of existence quietly or take half the state with it. It is generally agreed that it's best not to take chances.

Exiling a False Demesne requires reversing the trend, "convincing" the Abyss that the Fallen World's laws are the ones that should apply. Unfortunately, this isn't a matter of spiritual manipulation, since False Demesnes are

more akin to forces of (super)nature than spiritual entities. Reversing the process, then, is like changing the direction of a river — not impossible, but by no means simple.

In order to figure out how to stop the process, the characters need to learn about it. That means investigating the False Demesne, spending some time there and even casting some spells to test the progress that the area has made. If nothing else, the investigators should determine the boundaries and try to track down exactly when the False Demesne first appeared (hopefully getting some inkling about the events that triggered it). Once the investigators know what is happening and what kind of immediate threat the False Demesne poses, they can decide how best to combat it.

One means of getting rid of a False Demesne is simply to destroy the area affected. If the manifestation is contained within a house, that house could be razed, burned down or blown up. The manifestation does not spread beyond the boundaries it establishes for itself, for whatever reason, and so if those boundaries are made meaningless, the False Demesne usually fades away. Of course, the problem is that the False Demesne's magical effects might prevent this. Burning down a house in which the Aether holds sway might be an exercise in futility as the fire burns but consumes nothing. A bulldozer aimed at a building mimicking Stygia might rust and fall apart while crossing the threshold. And only a fool would take a bomb into a structure copying the vagaries of chance common to Arcadia. Note, however, that a False Demesne is not sentient — it does not possess a survival instinct and doesn't actively work to thwart those trying to destroy. This is why learning about the area and the kinds of effects it creates is so important. If the characters know what to expect, they can better plan their strategy, even if that simply means carrying the explosives in the back door rather than the front.

Another possibility is to cause a big enough Paradox to force another Abyssal intrusion. An Anomaly or Manifestation is probably best for this; Havoc, Bedlam and Branding are too focused on the mages that create them to be of much help. An Anomaly, however, creates a link between the Fallen World and the Supernal Realms on a limited basis before the Abyss scours the area clean, and created within a False Demesne might induce the Abyss to simply normalize the entire place. Again, Anomalies are products of the individual mage casting the vulgar spell, but they can still serve as catalysts — control fires, in a way, to get the unfettered blaze of the False Demesne under control.

A Manifestation is probably even better, as it garners the direct attention of a sentient creature from the Abyss, who

then might look at what the False Demesne has wrought and correct it, or at least halt its spread. The problem with this approach should be obvious, though — it requires creating a Paradox in an area in which Paradox is almost impossible to come by. One method of circumventing this is to use the Arcanum Inferior to the realm being mimicked, but this can cause severe backlash from the False Demesne as the area tries to reject what it sees as a dangerous anomaly. The other issue, of course, is that Anomaly and Manifestation Paradoxes require successes on the Paradox roll, and those might not come right away. Every spell the brave mage casts in a False Demesne is another turn spent courting disaster.

Finally, the investigators can create a sort of “lightning rod,” some object or situation that resonates so strongly with the Supernal Realm in question that the Abyssal energy is forced back into the void whence the energy came. This approach might not immediately occur to mages, because False Demesnes appear to be incursions from the Supernal, but they are not — they are the result of the Abyss trying to mimic the Supernal. Thus, an influx of truly Supernal power and sympathy can drive the Abyss away. Accomplishing this requires some kind of ceremony, best performed without magic so as not to empower the Abyss any further, which sets up a sympathetic relationship with the realm in question. The oblations listed in the Path write-ups in Chapter Two of **Mage: The Awakening** should provide good starting points to the types of ceremonies possible, but the real guideline should be the specific False Demesne and the kind of manifestation the False Demesne generates. The sample False Demesnes listed below each include examples of ceremonies that might banish the Abyss intrusion.

Another means of creating this kind of sympathy, but one that is only available to powerful mages willing to take severe risks, is the creating of a soul stone. Creating a soul stone of the Path the False Demesne mimics while within that tainted area reverses the process and renders the False Demesne inert. Unfortunately, the rush of Abyssal energy channeled through the stone might well destroy it. Once the spell is complete, the mage’s player rolls Stamina + Resolve.

Roll Results

Dramatic Failure: The soul stone explodes, creating a small “black hole” to the Abyss. This portal remains open for one day per dot of Gnosis the mage creating the soul stone possesses. Abyssal creatures can slip through this portal during this time, unless the portal is guarded constantly (and even then, the creatures might be powerful enough to challenge their guardians, or subtle enough to escape their notice). The False Demesne, however, is gone.

Failure: The soul stone disintegrates. This sudden impact to the mage’s soul inflicts one point of aggravated damage per dot of Gnosis she has. The False Demesne is gone.

Success: The soul stone remains intact and can be reabsorbed into the mage’s body as usual. The False Demesne is gone.

Exceptional Success: No special effect.

Suggested Modifiers: Mage is of a Path corresponding to the Inferior Arcanum to the mimicked Realm (-2), mage is of the Path mimicked by the False Demesne (+2), mage has caused a Paradox within the last 24 hours (+1)

Mortal Response

A False Demesne that has spread far enough or become dramatic enough to gain the attention of mortals will probably become famous for a time. Paranormal television shows might film an episode there, newsgroups might run stories and investigators for agencies official and not-so-official might visit. In the end, though, Sleepers are blinded by Quiescence, and even though they don’t Disbelieve or forget what they’ve seen, it doesn’t tend to mean anything to them. They see the strange events and manifestations, but can’t put the pieces together mentally enough to form a clear picture. Eventually, the place destroys itself or disappears, and no matter how many times a Sleeper looks over the notes, pictures and videos, he can’t get it to make sense. Eventually he forgets it, files it away, deciding that the False Demesne is just something he’s better off not understanding.

False Demesnes are creations of the Abyss, and therefore Sleepers are not equipped to study them because Sleepers lack the frame of reference to understand such creations. Of course, some Sleepers are strong-willed and intelligent enough to put the pieces together, even within a limited context, and understand the threat that a False Demesne poses. Such Sleepers might be able to destroy the location or even perform an appropriate ceremony to banish the Abyssal energy, all without knowing any of the nomenclature or theory behind it. All they know is that this area is dangerous and obviously supernatural, and that is enough.

Story Hooks

False Demesnes are deceptive. At first blush, they might appear beneficial to mages. After all, False Demesnes allow

for Paradox-free casting of vulgar spells – surely these creations are some sort of blessing from the Supernal Realms! In truth, though, False Demesnes serve to underline an important point in **Mage**. The Supernal is separate from the Fallen. Maybe at some point in the past this was not so, but it is true now, no matter how unfair or debilitating it might seem. If mages wish to work toward the integration of the magical and the mundane, that is a perfectly acceptable goal, but they would be well-advised to consider the ramifications. False Demesnes can showcase what happens when magic is set loose in the Fallen World.

Below are five examples of False Demesnes, one for each Supernal Realm, along with some notes about their stage of development, how they came to be, how they might be destroyed and how a Storyteller might use them in a chronicle.

The Living Dead (Pandemonium)

“The Square” isn’t actually a square; it’s more like a trapezoid, but that’s just nitpicking. The Square is the center of the university’s campus, with walkways designed by an engineering class to maximize greenspace and minimize work for the snow-shoveling crews in winter. What the university’s administrators don’t know is that one of the students in that engineering class was also an occultist, and designed some of the walkways’ patterns to match the strange symbols that kept appearing in his dreams. That student has since graduated and gone on to Awaken to the Path of Scourging, but his handiwork remains... and has become a False Demesne mimicking Pandemonium.

The Square gets a great deal of traffic. Students and faculty cross through it on a regular basis on their way back and forth to the various on-campus buildings. Tour groups make a circle around the buildings that form the borders of the square. During the warmer months, you’ll find students tossing Frisbees and studying on the grass, preachers extolling the virtues of clean living to sneering co-eds and the occasional job fair or campus Crusade for Christ setting up info booths. But the False Demesne has finished the boundaries phase, and is now seeping into the minds of anyone who sets foot in the Square.

The False Demesne isn’t yet causing any obvious or grandiose Space-based effects; perhaps such a thing would clash too much with Quiescence, even for the False Demesne. It is instead broadcasting thoughts between people on the Square. Simple verbal messages, however, aren’t being perceived. These thoughts take the forms of audible voices, tactile sensations ranging from gentle caresses to vicious blows and emotional urges so powerful that students sometimes break out into fits of laughter or rage.

Subtler, though, is the effect this False Demesne is having on the sympathetic connections of the people in the Square. The Square is strengthening the “threads” of sympathy between people and the objects, persons and places about which they feel strongly. At the same time, Mind-based effects are chipping away at those people, objects and places that the subjects don’t care much about. The victims are becoming single-minded, ruled by emotion and fixated on a few particular “anchors” – much like ghosts.

When the Space-based effects become more dangerous, these “living ghosts” will be able to teleport from the Square to their anchors (and possibly return through portals), but their minds will be relieved of most of their higher functioning. If a co-ed is obsessed with visiting her boyfriend back home, she might appear to him, exuding love (or lust or jealousy) and then disappear just as suddenly. If a professor would rather be researching his dissertation in another country, he might appear in the place that he has performed the most research previously, bask in the feeling of accomplishment and then return home.

For characters to correct this anomaly before people start dying (or killing), they’ll probably need to find the Mastigos mage who designed the Square to begin with. What led him to use this symbol? What does it mean? When the Square reaches the destruction phase, what happens then? Will the “living ghosts” become hosts to Abyssal beings, or will they simply snap, unable to pursue any line of thought except the one that the Square magnified? Altering the Square enough that the symbol changes might banish the False Demesne, but the characters aren’t immune to the effects, either.

The Casino (Arcadia)

There’s a small, ramshackle casino outside of town called the Golden Goose. Maybe gambling’s legal in the state, maybe it’s on a reservation or maybe the casino is illegal and has successfully bribed the local police to stay in business. Mages from several different cities come here to pick up some quick money, and everyone agrees that not breaking the house is best for everyone (“Don’t kill the Golden Goose” is part of the standard orientation for mages in all of the area’s cabals). Over time, though, the regular use of Fate magic on roulette tables, blackjack tables, slot machines and all of the other games of the house has created a False Demesne. It has only recently entered the minor changes phase, but the problems are already apparent. Everyone wins. Slot machines pay out, the house loses at blackjack and the dice always seem to come up 7 or 11.

This particular False Demesne probably won't last long enough to reach the third stage, because the casino can't afford to keep hemorrhaging money. As it is, word has begun to spread, and some of the larger casinos in the area are losing business (if only slightly). More worrisome, though, is that the False Demesne is altering the destinies of the gamblers, allowing these people to take some of their newfound luck with them. This means that the larger establishments may soon see patrons with extraordinary luck. And suppose this luck is contagious?

This might seem benign enough (who cares, after all, if the gambling industry loses some pocket change?), but the False Demesne's laws dictate that luck has to balance somehow. A week or a month after the lucky folks have their windfalls, horrible accidents start befalling them. Car wrecks are a possibility, but chunks of aircraft falling from the sky or mutilations by escaped bears are somehow more likely. The False Demesne, combining Fate and Time, has made sure that everyone who broke the house eventually ends up settling his debts.

Characters trying to correct this have a timetable, because once the False Demesne enters the dangerous changes phase, people are going to start dying. They might be able to banish the False Demesne by playing to lose, dumping enough money back into the casino to normalize the odds again, but without using magic (which is what started this whole mess). Alternately, if enough of the mages who have taken advantage of the Golden Goose in the past contribute a certain amount of money, they might be able to buy off the debts of the patrons. This figure, however, is easily within the millions, possibly the tens of millions. Where are the characters to get that kind of cash?

The Gathering Storm (The Aether)

An Obrimos mage, mad with power, recently tried to siphon all of the Mana in the city into his own Pattern for a spell meant to cleanse the area of "the unworthy" (that is, anyone of a differing religious creed). Holding his soul stone aloft, he began his obscene ritual, but a local cabal of mages (possibly the troupe's) defeated him and destroyed the stone. And that's where the trouble began.

The destruction of the soul stone created a False Demesne mimicking the Aether. Thus far, the area hasn't manifesting any Forces-like effects, but the area is saturated in Mana. The very air is tass, meaning that spending a few moments breathing deeply fills a mage's Mana pool. Actually performing an oblation there allows a mage to collect an especially rich form of Mana (in game terms, a single "point" can be spent three times before being exhausted from the character's pool, meaning an

industrious mage can hold triple the amount of Mana his Gnosis would normally allow). A cabal of powerful mages, used to suffering intense Paradox due to their high Gnosis and tendency toward vulgar magic, has claimed the area to take advantage of the free Mana.

What they don't realize is that the False Demesne is still in the boundaries phase. Once the False Demesne reaches the next phase, the Mana-condensing effects remain, but minor Forces effects begin as well. White lightning arcs across the ground, and all of the mages' nimbuses gain an electrical element to them. Storm clouds hang heavy over the area, and a pervading feeling of danger is palpable. If the False Demesne reaches the next stage, a cataclysmic storm begins. This stage only lasts a few days, however, before the true catastrophe. The False Demesne blows itself apart in a mad tempest of lightning, fire and magic, and any mage in the world currently carrying Mana from the False Demesne finds that a smaller version of this maelstrom begins around him... even indoors.

Creating a soul stone (a lighting rod) would be the best method of dispelling this False Demesne, and one member of the squatting cabal is an Obrimos Master of Forces. Can the characters convince him to craft a soul stone before it is too late?

The Maw (Primal Wild)

A strawberry spring brings on early blooms at the local botanical gardens, including a strange plant that a researcher brought back from the Amazonian jungle, never before seen by human eyes. This plant, and the spirits that accompanied it, has a strong sympathy with the Primal Wild, and over the course of the early spring this creates a False Demesne to the Abode of Beasts. The gardeners don't notice the spirits darting in and out of the Shadow as the False Demesne passes through the first two phases, and even when one of them disappears into the spirit world, they simply assume he finally ran off to Hollywood.

As the False Demesne enters the third stage, however, a dangerous new breed of spirit arises. These creatures, mad amalgams of plant-spirits and spirits of hunger, roam both Twilight and the material world looking for sustenance. The False Demesne exudes a powerful Life-based effect, triggering the primal, reptilian brain of any creature inside the boundary. The impulse the False Demesne sends is simple – walk forward, into the garden. Of course, in the garden the spirits await to drag the unfortunate creature to the center.

There, hidden away from prying eyes by thick underbrush, is a huge oak tree covered vines bearing beautiful,



sweet-smelling flowers. Any creature that the spirits capture is taken here and entangled in the vines. The flowers, granted sentience and an awakened spirit by the False Demesne, slowly digest the prey.

This False Demesne is probably the simplest of the five presented here, easily destroyed by fire, chemicals or even magic powerful enough to make the weather cold again. Of course, any characters investigating the place have to dodge the plant-spirits and environmental hazards before they can take such actions. Think of this story as a way to bring the Forest Primeval to the city.

The River (Styria)

A Moros of the Mysterium, looking for evidence of a destructive undead creature on the banks of a river, ran afoul of that creature's human cultists. The Necromancer died fighting them, but not before unleashing his most powerful (and vulgar) spells. The repeated magic garnered the attention of something from the Abyss, and that thing slithered through and made short work of the surviving cultists. Then, vomiting up their bones into the river, the thing returned to the Void whence it came.

The river, however, was not the same afterwards. From the bend in the river where the creature left its mark to the small waterfall a half-mile away, the water has become a False Demesne. Rocks in the riverbed become gold nuggets or diamonds, and when someone touches the water it sometimes flows upwards into ectoplasmic representations of people important to the witness. Ghosts have begun to drift toward the area, sometimes walking on the water to get there. Any restless shade who goes over the falls, however, is destroyed, its soul feeding the False Demesne. If the area reaches the dangerous changes stage, any living person who touches the water risks losing his soul, and once the soul drifts over the falls, it is truly lost.

Destroying this False Demesne might require a leap of faith — riding in a boat over the falls and going on a kind of vision-quest through an obscene land of the dead. If the characters can ride the river of death to its conclusion, the river loops back upon itself and deposits them on the bank again. Along the way, though, they must confront anyone they have seen die or (especially) killed. They might also be tempted by the riches in the

water or menaced by the undead creature that the Moros died tracking in the first place.

Designing False Demesnes

When using False Demesnes in your chronicle, keep a few points in mind:

- **Define the effects.** Not every False Demesne mimicking Pandemonium creates an M.C. Escher-like labyrinth. Not every Stygia-influenced False Demesne is centered on a graveyard and summons up zombies. Look through the spell list of the appropriate Arcana in **Mage: The Awakening**, pick a few spell effects and extrapolate a little. If you decide on the themes you want to work with first, this choice is much easier to make.
- **Define the cause.** The event that causes a False Demesne to arrive should help determine what spells it mimics and how best to destroy it. Plus, if you know what has come before, you know what the characters can discover in their investigations.

- **Decide on game effects.** A False Demesne mimicking Arcadia might add a +2 luck bonus to any action undertaken in the False Demesne's boundaries... until a character speaks his own name aloud, at which point that bonus becomes a -2 dice penalty. A False Aether might freeze any stray bit of moisture, causing penalties to Athletics rolls involving keeping one's footing. Descriptions of magic are good, but having the magic make a difference as far as game system goes is a good way to make the danger (and the benefits) of the False Demesne more concrete.

- **Pathway to destruction.** The False Demesne cannot abide in the Fallen World. All such areas eventually self-destruct. Use the Dream Merit, Time spells such as "Augury," clues in the magic effects in the False Demesne itself and hints from more knowledgeable characters to indicate that this area is doomed unless the process can somehow be halted or reversed. If any living characters are still in the False Demesne when it finally destroys itself, they are gone as well.



The Final Spell of Eli Ben-Menechem

Virtue's End

You've never seen magic like this. I've practiced the ways of the Key-Bearers for three decades now and I'm still trying to understand what was done to me. It was as though every part of me that's good was cut off from the rest of me, and I was forced to stand in opposition to my nobler nature. I tried to resist whatever magic he'd cast, but the more that I fought it, the worse things got. My resolve faltered, and he began to work other magics upon me. I was lucky to get away with my life, let alone my sanity, but I'll never forget that feeling. It was horrific. I pray that you never encounter the like, my apprentice.

Eli Ben-Menechem was not famed, but most of the best willworkers aren't. He lived his life in obscurity in the 18th century, practicing the craft of the Warlock in seclusion. Few knew of his affiliation as a Clavicularius, or of his lifelong struggle with overweening arrogance and hubris. Toward the end of his life, he codified much of the revolutionary work that he had done with Goetia, recording the names of demons unknown before his day, and pioneering insights into the human consciousness that many of the world's most brilliant modern psychologists would envy. He was, by the accounts of most of the few mages with whom he interacted with any regularity, a kind and virtuous man. Thus, his final spell, inscribed in the grimoire over which he was found slumped, lifeless, at the age of 94, was a source of great puzzlement to those that glimpsed it.

It was Eli's only surviving apprentice, Sandalphon, himself a Clavicularius, who eventually took up the grimoire, and it sat on a shelf in his study, neglected for long years, until he came into conflict with another willworker. This other mage, a Moros calling herself Persephone, thwarted Sandalphon's plans at almost every turn, cheating him out of a newly rediscovered Hallow, laying claim to an Artifact he'd sought for more than a decade and even luring his new apprentice away from him.

Without the firm moral compass possessed by his mentor, and at the end of his patience, Sandalphon conspired to be rid of Persephone. He brought forth his teacher's final grimoire and cast foul magic upon the Necromancer from miles away. Well aware of her penchant for gluttony, he then called her to meet him at his home for dinner and offered her an envenomed cup. Devoid of her normally prudent nature, she accepted and died before she could

bring her mastery of inert matter to bear upon the poison. The Warlock disposed of the body quickly and concealed all traces of his involvement in the murder.

Encouraged by his success, Sandalphon began to make careful use of his newfound magic to confound enemies and rivals, and even to gain the upper hand over allies. Sensing the change in her mentor, Sandalphon's student in the ways of the Key-Bearer, Ayishah, stole into his study one night while he slept. Somehow, the wards and protections that she knew should have been there failed, and he took no notice when she crossed the threshold and opened the weathered tome. She wanted to destroy the thing; indeed, Ayishah held the book over the low flames left smoldering in the fireplace, but, in the end, she could not dispose of the book. Instead, she studied the knowledge that it contained and resolved to only use such power for the best of reasons.

Within one year, the magi of Sandalphon's Consilium degenerated into warring factions, each with one or more sorcerers skilled in the arts of the mind, hurling Eli's baneful spell at their foes. None were fully certain just how the knowledge spread beyond Sandalphon and Ayishah, but all were glad to possess the magic. Only a few took notice when, in the midst of their petty struggles, strange new demons, like but somehow unlike those called up by Goetic magics run amok, manifested.

Form

Virtue's End takes the form of a spell, a variant of the "Goetic Struggle" spell (see **Mage: The Awakening**, p. 324). Instead of calling up an inner demon that personifies the Vice of the individual in question, however, it draws a person into opposition with his Virtue.

Goetic Inversion (Mind ...)

The goeticist can separate her Virtue from the core of her consciousness, compelling her to resist her better nature, or else find her inmost resolve waning.

Practice: Ruling

Action: Instant (contested when cast upon another: resistance is reflexive; roll Resolve + Gnosis)

Duration: Prolonged (one hour)

Aspect: Covert

Cost: None

This spell calls up an inner demon, tainted by an inherent connection the Abyss, and bonds it to the mage's consciousness. Thereafter, whenever the mage's Virtue is called into question, he must resist and deny that Virtue, or else risk losing some measure of his self-confidence and resolve (in the form of Willpower). To defy the "demon of virtue," the willworker makes a reflexive and contested roll of his Gnosis + Mind versus his Resolve + Composure. If the Gnosis + Mind roll succeeds, the mage may act according to his Virtue, but regains no Willpower for doing so. If he fails, he must act directly counter to his Virtue, as well as losing a point of Willpower. Whether or not the mage succeeds in contesting the demon, however, it remains for the full duration of the spell, unless consciously banished.

Note that a willworker may cast this spell upon a willing subject with Mind 4, and upon an unwilling one with Mind 5.

Example: Logos, a Master of the Mind Arcanum, successfully casts Goetic Inversion upon Nero, another willworker. Nero is a Thyrsus, with no dots in Mind, and a Virtue of Fortitude.

While he is still under the influence of Goetic Inversion, Nero's Sleepwalker little sister becomes trapped inside a burning building. Normally, he would charge in, heedless of the danger or any harm to himself to rescue her, but the demon bound to Nero attempts to compel him to deny his Fortitude. Nero's player rolls three dice (Nero's Gnosis) versus six dice (the sum of his Resolve and Composure); the Resolve + Composure roll wins out and not only does Nero lose a point of Willpower, but he also flees the scene, abandoning his beloved sibling to her fate.

When the spell's Duration expires, the demon seems to depart completely, leaving no trace that can be followed, whether magically or otherwise. In reality, it leaves the mind and spirit of its host, fleeing into Twilight, where it recuperates from the strain of passage and gathers its strength before finding an appropriate place from which to propagate its Influence.

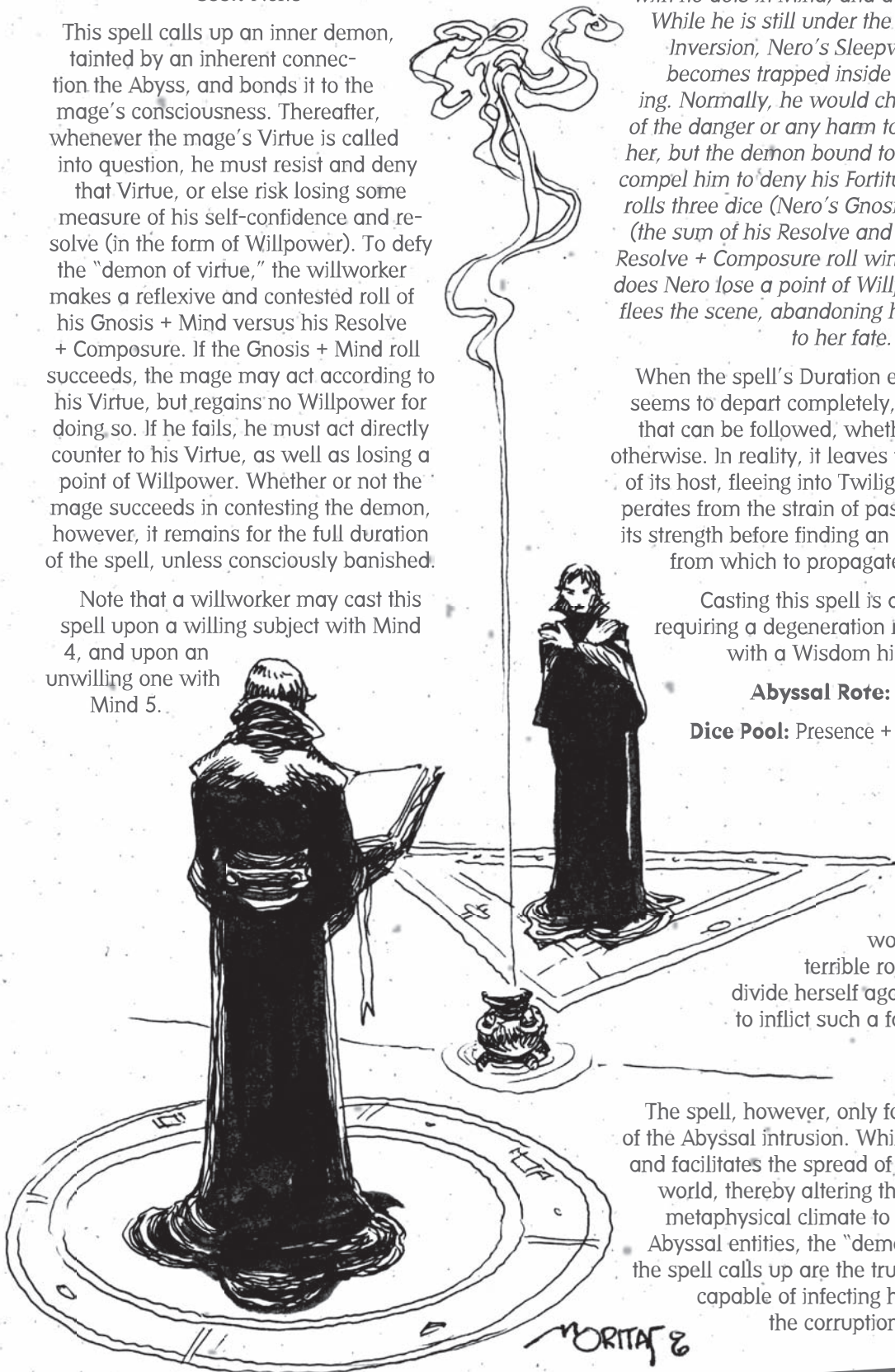
Casting this spell is an act of hubris, requiring a degeneration roll from any mage with a Wisdom higher than 2.

Abyssal Rote: Virtue's End

Dice Pool: Presence + Intimidation + Mind

By studying Eli Ben-Menechem's grimoire, a willworker can learn this terrible rote, enabling her to divide herself against her Virtue, or to inflict such a fate upon another.

The spell, however, only forms the first half of the Abyssal intrusion. While it erodes Virtue and facilitates the spread of wickedness in the world, thereby altering the Fallen World's metaphysical climate to one friendlier to Abyssal entities, the "demons of virtue" that the spell calls up are the true intruders, beings capable of infecting human souls with the corruption of the void.



Means of Passage

In many ways, the Final Spell of Eli Ben-Menechem is unique. It is both an Abyssal intrusion all its own, as well as a means of passage for otherworldly entities. As to how the Final Spell itself gets into play, the grimoire on which the Final Spell is inscribed has an uncanny way of wandering. The Spell often makes its way into just the right hands, the sort of person that would be inclined to make use of it. Under certain rare circumstances, the Spell has been known to act more as an Imbued Item than simply a grimoire, enabling a Sleeper occultist to cast a spell.

Each time the spell is cast, more of its Abyssal substance enters the Fallen World, in the form of the “demons of virtue,” contributing to the downfall of the nobler inspirations that help to hold back the pain and madness of the void. Of the few Key-Bearers who have had any opportunity to study the spell, one of them, Father Leo Gray, speculated that sufficient abuse of the spell “could, indeed, potentially undermine the very moral fabric of the Tapestry, inverting virtue and vice, thus eroding the very concept of goodness as a universal constant.” While it is uncertain as to whether or not such a thing could possibly come to pass, each casting does permit more of the Abyss into this reality.

Of course, the spell can also be taught in the customary manner, passed down from teacher to student; were the grimoire ever to fall into the hands of Scelestus, it is very likely that she would, if offered the proper incentives by her masters, do just that. Strange, then, that the book has never been possessed, even temporarily, by one of the Accursed. Perhaps whatever malevolent consciousness is behind the Final Spell has no interest in those that have already submitted themselves to the “virtues” of the void. It might also be the case that their souls are simply too debased to offer the “demons of virtue” any purchase within them.

Without the “Goetic Inversion” spell, the second half of the intrusion cannot take place. The demons need to be called before they can enter the Fallen World. At no point in history has any willworker ever before noted an intrusion by the “demons of virtue” without Eli Ben-Menechem’s spell first being cast. While certain willworkers have claimed, whether in conversation or just in notes, to have conjured up such intruders, such has always entailed locating and summoning an extant demon from elsewhere. Given that these spirits grow considerably in power, the longer that they remain in the Fallen World, calling one from a prior manifestation is usually a foolish proposition, unless the mage in question is extremely powerful, very cunning or both.

Rules of Intrusion

The “Goetic Inversion” spell exists primarily to erode the virtue that defends the Fallen World from Abyssal intrusion. Its secondary effect actually propagates Abyssal entities within this reality and allows them to further contaminate the morality within the human spirit, on a more lasting basis. Given sufficient numbers and enough time free from the scrutiny of the Awakened, it is entirely possible that the “demons of virtue” can decimate the Virtues of every human being in a given area, rendering it a cesspool of rampant degeneracy.

Eli Ben-Menechem’s spell seemingly wanders of its own accord, sowing sin and discord, facilitating conflicts between otherwise good people, while encouraging the worst people to abandon all pretension of mortality completely. The book, however, seems to seek out those who teeter on the cusp of wickedness, those who believe themselves to be good, but whose conviction and resolve are, ultimately, found to be wanting. The grimoire is a dangerous weapon; that much is clearly understood by any by which it would deign to be possessed. Thus, it is not a thing that most of them would readily give to another. The alternative, short of destroying the book — a measure that may or may not be permanent — is to keep it. But to keep it is to forever be tempted by it, and to yield to that temptation is to invite in the Abyss.

Still, these demons can only be what they are, and they must follow their natures. Even when it would be advantageous for them to act otherwise, they are compelled to deny the given Virtue to which they are antithetical. Of course, if the demons cannot manage to find purchase, in a place in which they are able to indulge and propound their respective “virtues,” then they will eventually wither and either perish, or else accept banishment back to the Abyss. Given the ability of these spirits to create and expand upon the debasement for which they stand, however, it is difficult at best to prevent them from doing so. Still, those of great virtue, who are willing to fight against their flaws, but are unwilling to become discouraged by their failings, whether natural or unwittingly induced, can strike at the power of these intruders, causing them to commit to a battle that culminates in their destruction.

Mortal Reactions

In the case of mortals touched directly by the power of the Final Spell, they will, for the most part, react in the most predictable ways, though these individuals are almost certain to be an overwhelming minority of the people touched by the effects of the “demons of virtue.” For oth-

ers, the repercussions will be more subtle and far-reaching.

Wherever the Final Spell's effects are felt and its intruders given leave to run free, moral degeneracy will grow and eventually, if unchecked, run rampant. A few may have the strength of character to resist the siren song of Abyssal "virtue," but most will submit to such sins, gradually sowing ruin and despair everywhere they go. A spiritual cancer, attacking the human ability to aspire to better things, will set in, as will a growing apathy checking any desire to do anything about it. Everyone knows one of those neighborhoods that has taken a turn for the worse; the Final Spell simply accelerates the process and enhances its effects.

Means of Exile

The simplest (though by no means easy) means of exile for the Final Spell of Eli Ben-Menechem is to hunt down and destroy all of the "demons of virtue" that it conjures, wrest the grimoire containing the "Virtue's End" rote from its current owner and kill anyone with knowledge of the spell's workings. This approach, however, leaves something to be desired, and will certainly cause far more problems than it solves.

It may, however, be possible that Goetic magics can end the manifestation, undoing that which Eli Ben-Menechem's spell has wrought. It is unlikely, though, that a Clavicularius dwells within the characters' Consilium, meaning that they might have to research such spells independently. If the characters are Sleepers, they may have to resort to other rites and rituals, or else seek out one of the Awakened, whom they will likely only be able to identify as some kind of sorcerer, to use such powers on their behalf.

It is rumored by those who have heard of Eli Ben-Menechem's book, that the old Warlock hid a code within the other passages inscribed upon its pages, one that can, if deciphered, end the Abyssal manifestation. Why a man who wrestled all his life with his own darker nature would have concealed the process for ridding the world of the fruits of his most sinister spell is anybody's guess. Perhaps he believed that the willworkers of the Fallen World needed to be tested, and that giving away the answer to the conundrum posed by his grimoire would cheat them of any opportunity to learn a lesson. Then again, maybe he was, at heart, a vicious old bastard, and this was his final jest at the world's expense.

Researching the Final Spell of Eli Ben-Menechem

Capping Skills: Occult

Action: Extended – 10 successes

Research Time: 1 day; 3 hours

Appropriate Libraries: Demonology, Goetia, Psychology

Possible Modifiers: Researcher is a Disciple of the Mind Arcanum (+1), researcher knows the "Goetic Struggle" and/or "Goetic Evocation" spells (+2), researcher is an initiate of the Clavicularius Legacy (+3; see **Legacies: The Sublime** for more information on this legacy), researcher possesses no knowledge of the Mind Arcanum (-2)

Successes Information

0-4	Nothing.
5-7	The last time something like this happened, in Lisbon, Portugal, in 1981, the occultists trying to stop the phenomenon were allegedly looking for a book of some sort when they disappeared. It is unclear, however, as to whether the book was the source of the problem or its intended solution.
8	According to the 1931 research of one John Prescott, dark spirits, called demons by some, seem to proliferate in the wake of the phenomenon, though it requires one sensitive to the "realms unseen" to discern their presence.
9	A man known in certain occult circles by the "secret name" of Raziél and believed by some to have been a rabbi named Joachim Berkowitz, alleged in 1882 that the phenomenon was the result of Solomonian magics gone horribly awry. He would not, however, to the day of his death, elaborate on any details.
10+	The phenomenon has its roots in a tome of sorcery penned in the late 1700s by a man named Eli Ben-Menechem, a Solomonian magus who is said to have specialized in the summoning and binding of demons embodying human

vices. (Any character skilled in the Awakened practice of Goetia will immediately recognize such a reference.) The demons called up by the tome may be somehow bound to it, though the specifics of the matter are unknown.

Story Hooks

The stories most readily explored with the Final Spell of Eli Ben-Menechem are those of right and wrong, good and evil, Virtue and Vice. Not everybody believes in the same standards of morality, however, and so these themes can create conflict, but only fools, madmen and the most irredeemable of monsters willingly stand with the Abyss. Still, what if someone believed that the void-born powers she calls upon are no such thing or, even worse, that she can harness and control the Abyss without succumbing to its corruption?

Personal Demons

While Eli Ben-Menechem's grimoire has traveled extensively over the centuries since his death, the grimoire has never ended up in the hands of willworkers devoted to the Left-Handed Path. Perhaps the grimoire simply takes no interest in those who have submitted so utterly to their darker natures. Unfortunately, all of that is about to change within the characters' Consilium.

A powerful Scelestus, as mad as she is knowledgeable, skilled in the arts of the mind, has tracked the elusive text down, slain its former owner (a reclusive Solitary dwelling on the outskirts of the territory claimed by the characters' Consilium) and claimed the book for herself. She now intends to make use of the grimoire to unleash the book's Abyssal demons upon the city, so that she might study their effects upon the population and, perhaps, create a saturation of deleterious spiritual energies sufficient to facilitate tearing a hole through the Tapestry and into the void itself.

As the infestation of Abyssal entities gradually begins to grow in the least pleasant corners of the city, mages start to take notice of the phenomenon as something that is clearly being directed deliberately, rather than any kind of random intrusion. The characters' cabal is asked by the officers of the Consilium – or drafted into service – to help in seeking out the demons' origin. If the characters refuse to help, and are in a position to make that decision stand, then you can always have the intrusion strike close to home, with a mentor, Sleeper friend or relative, or someone else dear to one or more of the characters.

The Scelestus is quite adept at evading her pursuers, with recourse to teleportation magics, as well as those necessary to flee into both Twilight and Shadow, and allows the cabal, as some of the least experienced and powerful mages in the city, to gradually get closer to her. Her intention is to draw them into a place where they can be bound, and, once there, to cast the "Goetic Inversion" spell on them. She assumes that demons created to invert the Virtues of willworkers are likely to be more powerful than those made from Sleepers, but wishes to test the theory firsthand.

During the hunt for the Scelestus, however, the many precautions that she's taken to keep the book in her possession somehow fail her, and one of the characters (in order of preference, if possible: a Clavicularius, a Mastigos or a character with some proficiency in the Mind Arcanum) ends up with it. At this point, a character with the Dream Merit (alternately, one with the Daimon Merit, from **Tome of the Watchtowers**), with a gift for prophecy – whether through the Fate or Time Arcana, or otherwise blessed with exceptional foresight – comes to realize that there exists, hidden within the text of the tome, a means of ending the intrusion.

Eli Ben-Menechem's writing conceals a code discernable through some combination of Arcana represented among the characters of the cabal instructing those that wish to be destroy the spell and the corruption for which it stands to "defeat their own demons." The old Warlock seemed to have meant this literally: that they should submit to the "Goetic Inversion" spell, and then hunt down and destroy the demons that corrupt and deny their Virtues. Perhaps the characters are the first to discover this cipher, or perhaps others have learned it and never tried to use it or else attempted the means of banishment and failed; whatever works best for your chronicle. In any case, the process requires as many demons as there are characters in cabal, minus one. The character must decide who among them will be allowed to go without carrying the stains of the Abyss upon her soul, by whatever means they collectively deem fit.

If the characters are willing to make the effort, and, as is almost certain, endure the chance of Wisdom degeneration, then one hour of being forced to exist without virtue is the least of their problems. The demons that the characters create flee to the far corners of the territory encompassed by the Consilium, and they must hunt the spirits down in order to destroy them, all the while being pursued by the Scelestus, who has consulted with other Abyssal entities and learned that the characters have "her" book. While the characters stalk their demons, they must contend with the servants of the Accursed mage and, eventually, the Scelestus herself. If, however, the characters can manage to defeat all of the demons, then the true purpose of the book is revealed.

All surviving “demons of virtue” are recalled, into the book, and from there vanish into the void. The tome, which has been attuned as a sort of soul stone by Eli Ben-Menechem, contains instructions necessary for a Mastigos or Silver Ladder mage of the appropriate understanding (per the prerequisites given in **Legacies: The Sublime**, see p. 19) to realize the Clavicularius Legacy without the need for a teacher. After one student has successfully walked the path of the Key-Bearer, the book vanishes from his library, no matter what precautions he takes to the contrary, to find and educate other worthy mages.

If the Scelestus survives, she may continue on as an antagonist, or she might flee, unwilling to combat those that have overcome the Final Spell of Eli Ben-Menechem. If, on the other hand, the characters either do not try to banish the demons or try and fail, the intrusion carries on for a time, before the Scelestus is destroyed by her own experiments and the tome vanishes. The demons linger for a time within the bounds of the Consilium, and the characters may or may not destroy some or all of them. Whatever demons might survive eventually move on, seeking greener pastures, and the intrusion, at least locally, draws to a close, leaving the place a worse — darker and more morally degenerate — than it was before.

A Demon Fettered

One of the characters, skilled in the Arcanum of Spirit, is asked by an ally within the Consilium to bind a spirit into a fetish. It is clearly a dark and unpleasant spirit (a demon created to negate Fortitude; its Influence and Abyssal “virtue” is Submission), but she wants to keep it bound, so that it can be studied further. This other willworker has no idea where the spirit comes from (and will pass magical scrutiny to discern the truth of the matter), though she does have what she would consider to be a good use for the thing. Recently, the Guardians of the Veil discovered a cabal of Scelesti hiding in the city, and she believes that the fetish could be used as a weapon against them when the time comes to strike.

If the character chooses to bind the spirit, it soon becomes apparent that something is wrong. The thing appears quite content in its imprisonment (suitable for a spirit of its Influence), but every use to which the fetish is put somehow turns out to be awful; the thing is aggressively corruptive. If, for instance, it is used to clear out the cabal of Scelesti, one of them, affected by the spirit’s ability to create submission in others, simply lies down during the fight and uses his own magic to shut down his biological functions, killing himself, to the shock and horror of the strike team sent in after them.

Whether or not the character chooses to bind the demon, it will have to be dealt with before it manages

to figure out some way to use its powers to tear down the entire Consilium. If the demon can find the mage who originally summoned it, the demon’s intention is to overwhelm her with its ability to create submission and acquiescence, and then request that she cast the “Goetic Inversion” spell indiscriminately until someone stops her. Depending upon how powerful she is, and how capable she might be at hiding from others, it could take a long time indeed to bring her summonings to an end. During that time, she could potentially call up scores of Abyssal demons, all of which would, naturally, set themselves to the task of laying low the Awakened that can harm them, before crippling the area with a great tide of sin and degeneracy.

A “Harmless” Experiment

A Clavicularius comes to the characters’ Consilium, secretly bearing Eli Ben-Menechem’s grimoire with him. The young and inexperienced (but quite powerful) Key-Bearer, not truly understanding the terrible nature of the “Goetic Inversion” spell, wants to test the virtue of the mages of the city, to discover whether or not they are the sort of willworkers he would be comfortable living with. The young Warlock isn’t stupid, so he first uses the spell on Sleepers, knowing that they aren’t apt to understand what’s been done to them or to have anyone to tell about their experiences when all is said and done.

While this gives rise to some genuinely weak demons, the Mastigos is quite careful in choosing his targets, so they manage to go unnoticed for quite some time, finding places well suited to the Abyssal “virtues” that they represent and there gradually encouraging the development of their respective Influences. In time, the Warlock finds a newly Awakened apostate and casts the Abyssal spell on him, curious to finally see what effect the magic has on a willworker.

He remains within the young man’s mind the entire duration of the spell, an unnoticed observer, to study his thoughts and emotions. At the end of the spell’s Duration, he severs the connection, content with this initial experiment upon a mage. Later, however, the Clavicularius, while peering into Twilight, notices an ephemeral being with features remarkably similar those of the apostate. He clashes briefly with the spirit, and flees, now suspecting that his magic is somehow connected to the manifestation.

Uncertain of what to do, and afraid of the potential consequences should more powerful members of the Consilium discover what he’s done, the Key-Bearer approaches the characters and asks for their help in ending the plague that he has unwittingly unleashed. Are they willing to help? If so, what price, if any, will they ask for their aid?

Traits

The “demons of virtue” ultimately unleashed by the Goetic Inversion spell are created much as Goetic demons, save for the fact that they embody Abyssal “Virtues,” rather than earthly Vices. Thus, their Influences might be Despair (to counter Hope), Nihilism (to counter Faith) or Indulgence (to counter Temperance).

At first, these demons tend to be of low Rank: relatively weak and with only a few dots in their respective Influences. As time goes on, though, and the effects of the spell spread, these demons can become more powerful. A sample demon:

The Iniquity of Cairo Anthony

Quote: *Good and evil are abstractions, understood solely through the eye of the beholder. Why do you do what you believe to be good? Because it makes you feel good to do so; there is no universal standard of right and wrong, and all so-called virtue is motivated by selfishness.*

Background: The woman who would one day go by the shadow name of Cairo Anthony was born into desperate poverty in a bustling metropolis. Throughout her childhood, she watched the wicked and selfish prosper, while the just and compassionate suffered, and were crushed beneath the collective heels of the powerful. Her father, a policeman in the worst precinct in the city, was shot in the face with his own gun and killed when she was 10, by a crack addict whose life he was trying to save from a homicidal wino with a rusty kitchen knife.

When she Awakened to the Path of the Obrimos, Cairo’s road seemed clear. She took up a position as a Sentinel in her Consilium, enforcing law and helping to keep her fellow Awakened honest. A recent shake-up within the Consilium, however, with the death (of old age) of the previous Hierarch left a power vacuum that was quickly exploited by a number of parties. In the ensuing chaos, a local Warlock somehow came into the possession of Eli Ben-Menechem’s grimoire and cast the “Goetic Inversion” spell on the Sentinel, turning her sense of justice in upon itself. The end result was that she was forced to allow him to get away with a crime that should have otherwise vigorously punished, and a demon of the Abyss wanders the city, seeking any opportunity to spread its corruption.

Description: The demon appears much as Cairo Anthony herself: an attractive woman of mixed Irish/North African heritage, with curly dark brown hair, an olive complexion and very pale freckles. Instead of the utilitarian combat gear in which Cairo typically dresses, however, the demon wears a black uniform vaguely reminiscent of that worn by police, though with some not-so-subtle fascist

overtones. Rather than Cairo’s hazel eyes, the spirit’s are a sickly green-gold that seems to shift nauseatingly from one color to the other in different light and from different angles, whenever one meets its gaze too intently. Whereas Cairo speaks plainly and with a calm confidence, the demon minces words and tends to adopt a friendly and disarming (though utterly insincere) tone of voice.

Storytelling Hints: The Iniquity of Cairo Anthony is a subtle creature as Abyssal demons go. It encourages others to follow the path of hurtful self-gratification, rather than haranguing them. It is well aware that one catches more flies with honey than vinegar (in stark contrast to Cairo’s black-and-white, and occasionally off-putting, sense of justice). The Iniquity seeks to muddy any moral issue, clouding a person’s judgment with ethical sophistry; in the end, it doesn’t care what its subjects do, so long as they do so at the expense of any sense of fairness and integrity.

Rank: 2

Attributes: Power 4, Finesse 4, Resistance 3

Willpower: 7

Essence: 15 (max 15)

Initiative: 7

Defense: 4

Speed: 13 (species factor 5)

Size: 5

Corpus: 8

Influences: Iniquity 3

Numina: Materialize (dice pool 8), Harrow (dice pool 8), Inspire Iniquity (dice pool 8)

Inspire Iniquity: The demon can evoke in others a desire to thwart justice and to support acts that deny honor and integrity. A point of Essence is spent, and Power + Finesse is rolled. The subject can resist this effect reflexively with a Resolve + Gnosis roll. Should the resistance roll fail, however, the character must find some way of directly and immediately upholding the iniquity that the demon prizes. If the spirit wins the contested roll by three or more successes, the spirit can direct the character to a specific act of iniquity. The compulsion lasts for a scene or an hour, whichever is less, unless the victim’s Virtue is Justice; in such a case, the effect lasts for a scene or an hour, whichever is greater.

The demon may not use this power on a single target more than once in a given day.

Ban: The demon cannot bear the presence of acts that reaffirm the Virtue of Justice. If confronted with an act of Justice, the demon must either attempt to immediately subvert such an act, or, failing that, flee the area.

Flesh Intruder

The Rejected Transplant, Impure Organ

And then she heard it... the gurgling sound. She spun around and there he was – on the stairs above her! Sewer Throat! From his mouth came that noise, like percolating coffee... the rumbling of mucus in his lungs... the vile lungs that had once belonged to the murderer. Sewer Throat stumbled down the stairs toward her, his hands reaching for her, desperate for human contact. She screamed and ran – but too fast. She tripped and crashed down the stairs, her right leg breaking with a loud snap.

As she lay whimpering at the bottom of the stairwell, Sewer Throat came closer... closer. Then he spoke – and a flood of rotten mucus poured from his mouth, washing over Cindy and scouring the flesh from her bones! Her screams finally woke the neighbors, who called 911. But when the police arrived, Sewer Throat was gone, and all that remained of Cindy were bare bones in the stairwell.

Remember the penitent doctor's words: "Before accepting a transplant, always ask where it's been."

– Urban legend about "Sewer Throat" (sometimes "Gunk Lung"), told mainly in the Midwest but recently recorded on both coasts, a variation on the body of legends dubbed "The Rejected Transplant" by Indiana University folklorist Melinda Carr.

Those who receive organ transplants fear the possibility that their bodies will reject the foreign organ. This can sometimes lead to all sorts of morbid imaginings about the alien nature of the new organ, or about the sinful background of its donor, now transferred to the organ itself. Strange urges and desires that arise in the mind are blamed on the organ, making it a handy scapegoat, although one that cannot be removed without considerable risk. Who will win the contest of wills, the host or the organ? Such fantasies feed urban legends and horror stories about organs and limbs that take over their hosts and make them do terrible things. (Oliver Stone's *The Hand* comes to mind.)

But what came first, the story or the evil organ? Most people would laugh, saying there is no evil organ; it's all stories about stories. Most people would be wrong; for now and then, under rare circumstances, exactly such malicious and sentient organs do come into the world. God help whoever receives such an Abyssal organ.

Form

The Flesh Intruder's form matches that of its human host, although the Flesh Intruder's Attributes are usually superhumanly potent, even if the host was sickly and weak before the Intruder took over the body. When the Intruder uses any of its Numen, however, its disguise is peeled away to reveal the horror beneath – internal organs and viscera that do not belong inside a human frame. As part of the hatching process, the Intruder grows new organs in the host body to help Intruder manifest its Numina, such as the spiky, poisonous tendrils it can shoot out from its torso. See "Traits," below, for more details.

Means of Passage

When the spiritually tainted organ of a practitioner of Sinister Organ qigong (see p. 185) is transplanted into another person, a terrible thing happens. The organ becomes the earthly "egg" for an Abyssal spirit manifestation. For the first few weeks, it slowly gestates in its organic shell; it is already materialized, and does not register as a spirit to magical senses. The side effects of this fetal creature's presence appear similar to those of a body rejecting the foreign organ. The most common medical procedure is to give the patient steroids that suppress the immune system, in the hopes that the organ will eventually be accepted. This only helps the alien invader, for the suppression of its host's immune system allows the invader to grow faster. What would normally take two weeks without such medical intervention now takes two to four days.

Toward the latter stages of gestation, the victim begins to exhibit even worse side effects, now inexplicable to medical science. The organ in which the fetus grows begins producing acidic emissions, which work to deliquesce the existing internal viscera and convert it to specialized organs for the Intruder's uses. The leftover organic material is often violently expelled out of the host's orifices, most often in the form of highly acidic vomit (if the affected organ is a lung or the heart) or diarrhea (if the organ is the liver, spleen or a kidney). This effluent inflicts the host's Stamina + Size as dice of damage to whatever the effluent hits, burning for each turn thereafter with one fewer die per turn until the effluent becomes inert when no dice are left.

Once gestation is complete, the matured entity hatches from its egg, rupturing the organ. This does not kill the host, though; his internal organs have already been converted to alien organs, which maintain normal bodily functions in addition to providing to special Numina (see "Traits," below). The creature now keeps the host body alive by spending its spirit Essence. The host's mind and soul are suppressed while the Intruder takes full control of the body.

Each Flesh Intruder has a different goal for its manifestation, illustrated by its Influence trait. One Intruder might want to cause as much violence and death as possible before it can no longer maintain its host body (which sends the spirit back to the Abyss). Another might seek to corrupt others, either wholesale or by concentrating on a single person to torment (such as the host's spouse). It is possible for the entity's goal to be the eradication or corruption of a mage or cabal of mages, or the destruction of a fabled Artifact or Atlantean grimoire.

In extremely rare cases, a Flesh Intruder can result from a Manifestation Paradox without any connection to an organ transplant. If a person who has lost his soul is at ground zero during a Manifestation Paradox, the summoned entity might well be a Flesh Intruder that takes up residence in one of the person's organs, hatching via the process described above.

Rules of Intrusion

The Flesh Intruder uses its Influence to achieve its goal. If this goal is to terrorize humans, an Influence of Terror can cause them to feel fear, although its best if this is accompanied by actual acts that will trigger a terror response — hunting them, eating one captive as an example to other captives, etc.

Although Flesh Intruders are extremely intelligent and cunning, they know they don't have much time to get their job done and so they often go about it in as quick and obvious a manner as possible. They don't care if they're seen — indeed, the more obvious they are, the more likely it is that mage enemies will be provoked into casting risky vulgar magic against them. Most Flesh Intruders consider a Paradox indirectly caused by them to be a bonus to the fulfillment of their manifestation goal.



As a type of manifested Abyssal spirit, the Flesh Intruder needs Essence. The Flesh Intruder gets Essence by working toward its goal. Any action that leads toward that goal might award the Flesh Intruder one Essence, but this should be rare. Most Intruders risk running out of Essence before they reach their goal, so they often avoid using their Numina until absolutely necessary. The attainment of the goal itself awards the Flesh Intruder three Essence.

Mortal Response

No one can say for sure what the host's response is, although it's certainly not pleasant. It's within the realm of possibility to speak to the ghost of the host once the Intruder has been killed, but such an interview might yield only screams.

As for other mortals, their responses depend on how the Intruder uses them. If its goal involves them, then they aren't likely to enjoy what it does. Otherwise, they'll probably consider any word of the Flesh Intruder's existence to be an urban legend.

Means of Exile

The only way to end the Flesh Intruder's manifestation is to kill its host body, although its regenerative ability makes this difficult. As for the host, he dies with the body.

If the Intruder is otherwise left on its own, however, time itself will eventually catch up with the Intruder. The host's body can only be kept alive for so long before it completely ruptures from the strain, deliquescing where the creature stands and sending the Intruder spirit back to the Abyss. Each day of the Intruder's manifestation once it has controlled its host body costs the Intruder one Essence.

Researching the Flesh Intruder

Capping Skill: Medicine

Action: Extended – 12 successes

Research Time: 1 hour; 20 minutes

Appropriate Libraries: Abyssal Intrusions, Monsters, Urban Legends, Medicine

Possible Modifiers: Knowledge of the Poisoned Essence Cult and its Sinister Organ qigong (see p. 185) provides a +2 dice bonus.

Successes	Information
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0–3	Nothing.
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4–8	Some mages have recorded incidences of strange creatures referred to as Flesh Intruders that take up residence within the body of a victim. They are Abyssal creatures that quickly begin transforming the internal organs of a victim into strange, specialized organs for its own use, and breaking everything else within down into a vile, acidic mess that it can use as a weapon.
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9–10	The Flesh Intruder hatches from a transplanted organ.
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11	The organ's donor had some affiliation with a New Age group that teaches a form of Chinese qigong called Celestial Body.
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12+	References to previous incursions all required the creature to be killed; its host could not be saved.
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Story Hooks

Stories about the Flesh Intruder are not meant to be subtle – they're outright monster tales. The creature stalks its prey, reveals itself and if the characters are lucky, it's used up enough Essence to keep itself from healing while they try to kill it.

The End, or Only the Beginning?

The Flesh Intruder works best as a loud and fast introduction to a longer story about the Sinister Organ qigong (see p. 185) that caused the Intruder's manifestation, or the Flesh Intruder could be the action-packed coda to a story in which the mages tracked down and ended the threat of the Poison Essence Cult, thinking they'd succeeded – until a cultist's organ winds up in the hospital as a transplant, birthing a wild horror that runs amok.

Of Two Minds

The hapless host in this story is a mage. Normally, it wouldn't matter; the Flesh Intruder wouldn't have access to its host's Awakened consciousness and powers. In this case, though, perhaps because the mage was astrally projected while undergoing organ transplant surgery, the two consciousnesses have merged. The Flesh Intruder has its host's full magical capabilities, but whenever the Intruder has been injured, the host's consciousness can exert itself and control the flesh, trying desperately to get other mages to free the Intruder from its prison. If they kill the manifestation, the host's body dies, but his consciousness is freed into Astral Space, from where it can advise other mages about future Flesh Intruder manifestations.

The Hit Thing

A mage has taken control of a Flesh Intruder via a magical Artifact that exerts control over Abyssal creatures. He is keeping the Intruder alive longer than it could normally exist by feeding it copious amounts of Essence. He uses the Intruder as an assassin. The characters come into the picture when asked to investigate a series of murders within the magical community (mostly Sleepwalkers, but perhaps a mage also), or they trace the source of some local spirits' distress: a spirit locus that the vile mage has claimed from which he siphons Essence for his assassin. This story only begs the question, though, how did the Flesh Intruder come into existence in the first place? Is it a sign of Poison Essence Cult activity in the area, or was it the result of a rare Manifestation Paradox upon a soulless person?

Traits

The Flesh Intruder's Traits depend in part on the host the Intruder infests and from which it gestates. Upon hatching

and taking control of the body, the host gains the following Attribute boosts: Intelligence +2, Strength +2, Dexterity +2, Stamina +2.

Numina

• **Regeneration:** The Flesh Intruder can heal wounds to its host body by spending one Essence to heal two points of bashing damage or one point of lethal or aggravated damage. Whenever the Intruder does so, obscene holes open in its flesh, oozing healing pus.

• **Sense Prey:** The Flesh Intruder has a goal, and this usually involves a person, place or thing. The Intruder can track this target from any distance through a form of sympathetic magnetism. Roll Wits + Investigation for the Intruder to know exactly where the target is as long as the Intruder continues to concentrate. If it eases its concentration, the Intruder loses track of the target until the Intruder takes an action to roll again. While using this Numen, the Intruder is exposed — its flesh opens up in various spots over its body so that fleshy nodules can extrude and “sniff” out its prey. Nobody watching this display could mistake it for a normal human or animal.

• **Tendrils:** By spending one Essence, the Flesh Intruder can sprout fleshy tendrils from its torso, each terminating in a flat surface studded with many tiny, sharp teeth and a poison sac. These tendrils retract back into the torso at the end of the scene. The Intruder can sprout one tendril per dot of Willpower, and each can perform a separate attack per turn. Alternatively, instead of attacking, a tendril can be used to aid the Flesh Intruder’s defense, providing one point of armor against Brawl and Weaponry attacks (not Firearms) per tendril used in this manner.

Police Officer

An example of a Flesh Intruder impersonating an officer of the law (i.e., using a police officer as a host body). The Intruder’s goal is to instill fear into the innocent using its Terror Influence.

Note that the officer’s Morality, Virtue and Vice are not listed; the Intruder does not mimic those.

Attributes: Intelligence 5, Wits 3, Resolve 3, Strength 5, Dexterity 5, Stamina 5, Presence 2, Manipulation 2, Composure 4

Skills: Academics (Criminology) 3, Athletics 2, Brawl 2, Computer 1, Drive 3, Empathy 2, Firearms 3, Intimidation 2, Investigation (Crime Scenes) 3, Larceny 2, Medicine 1, Stealth 1, Streetwise 3, Subterfuge 2, Weaponry 2

Merits: Allies 2, Fast Reflexes 2, Status 2, Stunt Driver

Willpower: 7

Initiative: 7 (9 with Fast Reflexes)

Defense: 3

Speed: 15

Size: 5

Weapons/Attacks:

Type	Damage	Size	Special	Dice Pool
Baton	1 (B)	1	Knockout	8
Tendrils	2 (L)	—	Poison*	9

Type	DMG	Range	Shots	Special	Dice Pool
Glock 17	2 (L)	20/40 /80	17+1	—	10
Remington 870	4 (L)	20/40 /80	8+1	9 again	12

* If any damage is inflicted on the victim, Toxicity 3 poison is injected into the wound.

Health: 10

Armor: Kevlar vest (thin) 1/2

Rank: 2

Essence: Maximum 15

Influence: Terror 3

Numina: Regeneration, Sense Prey, Tendrils

The Halfway House

The Floating Manor, Twilight House

Dear Jehane,

I'm writing this in the hope that you will find it when you come looking for me in the last place you saw me. I shall try to be as brief as possible, for I feel I have not much time before it finds a place for me as well. All the others are gone.

It started when our cabal found the house on Prosper Hill. We were drawn to the spot because it radiated some of the strongest magical energy we had ever encountered, though the magic seemed oddly dissonant and off-center. We should have taken that as a warning, but in our hubris, we thought we could claim the house and tame its magic for our own use.

The house itself is a masterwork, composed of many styles of architecture, yet all of them strangely compatible. It sits in the middle of four acres, enjoying both front and back yards as well as ample room on either side. A natural fence of shrubs and trees surrounds the house, isolating it from its neighbors on the Hill....

Martinia was the first to disappear. She was ecstatic at finding the gazebo in the backyard, though none of us had noticed it before. She'd always wanted a house with a gazebo, she said – so many times we grew tired of hearing it. In full view of everyone, she ran to the gazebo, stepped inside and vanished. We thought it a trick of the light at first, but when we went to search it, there was no sign of her. The next night, the gazebo was gone – as if it had never been there. Now, when the wind blows in back of the house, we can hear her screaming, always the same protracted wail of despair and horror, as if she is trapped somewhere in a timeless darkness.

One by one, all the others fell to something in the house – a newly discovered secret passage, the servants' stairs that did not, in fact, lead to any servants' quarters. Now, as I write this, I am sitting at the desk in the library, staring up at a painting that just appeared yesterday. It shows a young man sitting at a desk, writing feverishly. I dare not look too closely at it, not before I finish this, for I know that the young man's face will be mine and that when I see it clearly, I, too, shall become trapped within this house of desolation.

Help us!

Davrindar

Stories of haunted houses abound – in fiction, legend and history. People invest heavily in the place they call home, adorning it with their possessions, protecting it

from harm and imbuing it with their own feelings – of safety, possessiveness, warmth, relaxation and other feelings associated with the concept of “home.” Houses are not the only buildings that receive such investitures. Churches, places of work, studios, galleries, concert halls, in fact, any place that serves as a surrogate home or a home-away-from-home can absorb the emotional projections of those who spend time and energy on the building. Under such constant emotional and material attention, buildings can seem to come to life, gaining a spirit that represents everything it was, is and may yet be.

Buildings also have a darker side, for they act as repositories for all the negative emotions experienced under their roofs. Many houses never truly bond with their inhabitants – or they bond too closely. Tales of houses of malice, of accidents or of murder follow in the wake of the wrongs that are perpetuated there.

Some of these houses or buildings are not at all what they seem. They resonate with the life of their owners, but their resonance is both hollow and draining. Those who dwell within such a house do not draw strength or comfort from its walls; rather, they dwindle and fade as the building drains them of their Gnosis (if they are Awakened), then their vitality and, finally, their spirit.

These structures house a spirit alien to their substance. The entity that takes the form of a house (or other significant building) has its origin in the Abyss. Indeed, the entity is an extrusion of the Abyss itself, piercing the Gauntlet in a place suitable to its dark and hopeless nature. Straddling the Abyss and the material world, this entity, sometimes called a “Halfway House,” offers only disaster and a slow erosion of the soul for those who dwell within its walls.

Form

The Abyssal intruder known as the Halfway House takes the form of a building of some sort, usually, but not always a residential building. Because its purpose lies in attracting a group to it so that they will live there, the House usually appears inviting when first seen. Its details depend on the circumstances, such as the property on which the House is located, the surrounding neighborhood, the city or country and other variables.

For example, a House springing up in the German countryside might look like a small castle or manor house, while a House located in Philadelphia might be a large, two-story Quaker-style house.

The entity's initial appearance, however, is not its primary manifestation. Once a group is living within it, the House undergoes subtle changes to reflect the moods of its inhabitants, their desires and the degree of their affinity with the House. As the House tightens its grip on its captive tenants, its appearance might change again as its sinister purpose becomes more and more evident. A pedestrian walking past the House might get a distinctly uneasy feeling from it, as if the House were watching her (and it most likely would be).

In the final stages, just before it returns to the Abyss or decides to move elsewhere, the House has a visibly disturbing presence, its architecture skewed and unnatural. At this stage, the House usually develops a reputation for being haunted, for the vestiges of its former residents, now fully subsumed into the House, cannot help but release their final pleas for rescue (usually too late). Strange

noises and lights manifest within the House and voices, usually moaning as if in pain or despair, travel on the wind so that anyone nearby can hear.

Means of Passage

In order for the Halfway House to materialize within the Fallen World, certain conditions must be met. The necessary criteria must happen in a fixed order – dictated by the logic of the conditions themselves. The first two conditions have no time limitation on them. They may take as long as necessary. The final condition, however, must occur within a few weeks of both the previous conditions being met or else the House must vacate its current location and return to the Abyss to start the process over again.

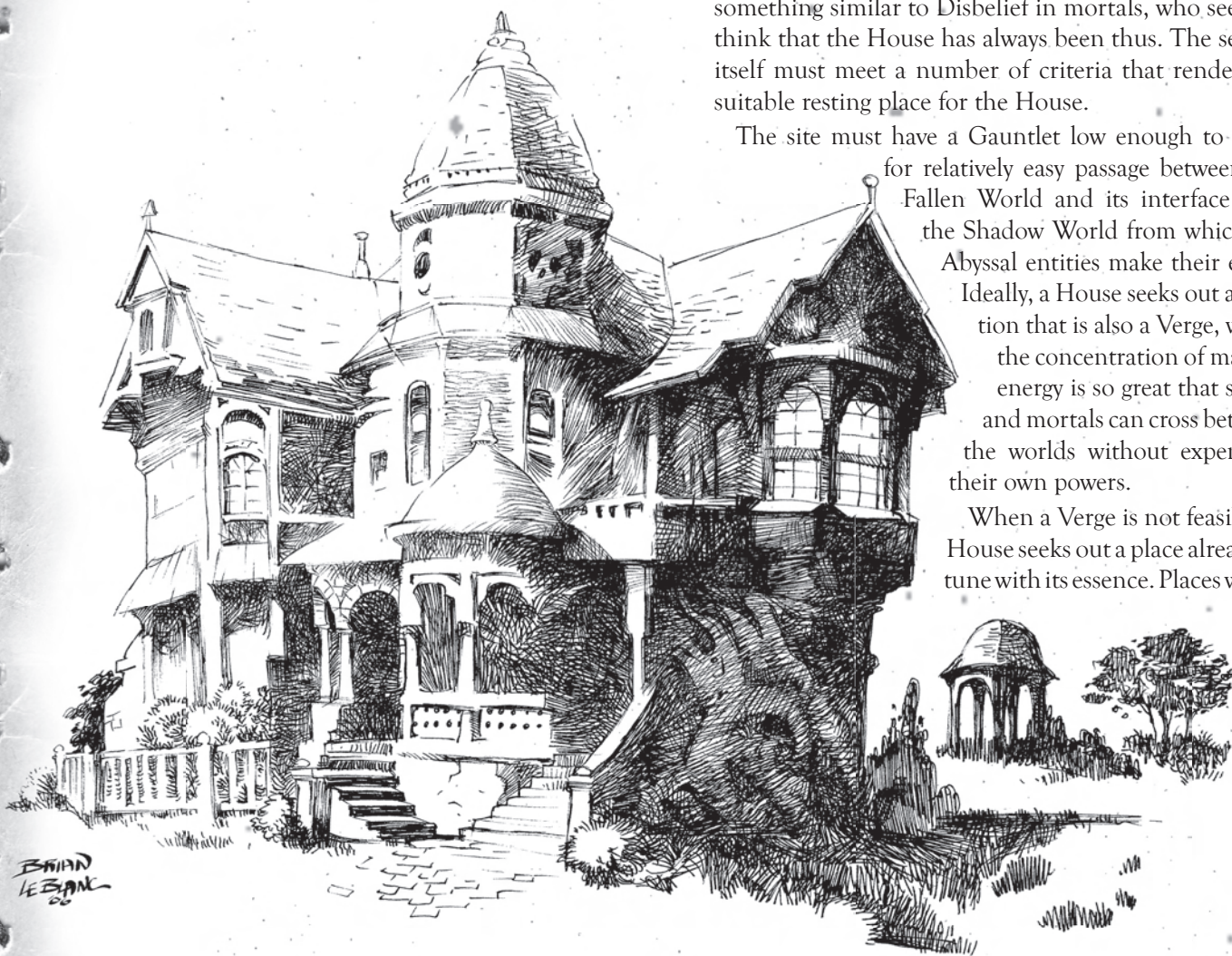
Location

The entity must have a suitable spot upon which to house its material form. While the House always settles into a building already in place, it rapidly begins making changes to the structure to suit its purposes. These changes are subtle, and it seems that the power invokes something similar to Disbelief in mortals, who seem to think that the House has always been thus. The setting itself must meet a number of criteria that render it a suitable resting place for the House.

The site must have a Gauntlet low enough to allow for relatively easy passage between the Fallen World and its interface with the Shadow World from which the Abyssal entities make their entry.

Ideally, a House seeks out a location that is also a Verge, where the concentration of magical energy is so great that spirits and mortals can cross between the worlds without expending their own powers.

When a Verge is not feasible, a House seeks out a place already in tune with its essence. Places where



mass murders occurred, slaughterhouses or stockyards that have been converted into housing property without any thought to cleansing the area or putting to rest the spirits of those who died there, sites of Left-Handed rites and similar locations are often chosen by an intruding House entity. Other sites may also qualify, depending on the House's intent. Some seek out places of great sorrow or madness. These sites usually all contain powerful negative emotions.

Even places that have no intrinsic negativity but are widely rumored to be haunted or the site of great wrongdoing can serve the purpose, since the attribution of these deeds is often enough to give the House a foundation upon which to rest in the Fallen World.

Scholars of Abyssal manifestations have noted that some Scelesti believe that certain traits in architecture make a house suitable to serve as the vessel for a Twilight House. All of the angles in such a place add to a certain total that provides sympathy for such a manifestation in Abyssal numerology, or the pattern created by hallways, attic floorboards and garden paths channels the power of a Halfway House more easily. Throughout the years, certain cults and Abyssal servants have designed and built such houses, hoping the site will draw the power of such an intrusion.

Prey

Simply put, the House does not come into being where there are none to prey on. More than this, however, such entities only manifest in the presence of some kind of supernatural power. Thus, while a House may manifest for a short time in a building inhabited by a perfectly normal family, undoubtedly causing some manner of chaos for a while, they eventually fade entirely.

Should the House discover the sanctum of a cabal, the haven of one or more vampires, the home of a thaumaturge or a family with an adolescent quickly developing some kind of psychic powers or even the lair of a pack of werewolves, the House grounds itself into the building more firmly, anchoring its presence there.

Even so, the simple presence of supernatural creatures is not sufficient to keep the House in the site for more than a few weeks at a time. The third component is vitally important for it to truly manifest.

Sacrifice

In order to ground itself in the Fallen World, emerging fully into its capabilities, the Halfway House must experience a sacrifice of some kind. This may take many forms appropriate to the supernatural entities that dwell in the house.

For mages, the most common is the presence of a soul stone on the premises. The soul stone is a literal embodiment of a sacrifice — a willful limitation of a mage's potential enlightenment, calcified into a gem-like form that has tremendous magical uses. The simple act of bringing such a potent sacrificial symbol into the premises where a Halfway House has begun the process of entering the Fallen World is sufficient to complete the intrusion. This is not the only kind of sacrifice possible, however — the loss of a point of Wisdom due to hubris, driving away a family member or good friend in order to protect him from the supernatural world the mage now dwells in or even killing someone in an act of sacrifice all fulfill the sacrifice requirement.

For other supernatural creatures, this sacrifice may be different. Among werewolves, it may be the sacrifice of a spirit, bound into a fetish or sacrificing its old identity to become the totem of a pack. It may also be the death of a mortal loved by one of the werewolves, particularly a death at the hands of either a spirit or a werewolf. Among vampires, this sacrifice may be killing a vessel for whom the vampire has feelings, or perhaps even turning someone into another vampire.

Mortals with some touch of the supernatural may also provide the sacrifice. A mortal occultist may give up part of his life for his art, driving away someone he loves because of his obsessions. A child just coming into some kind of psychic powers may hurt a sibling or parent with those powers. A ghoul may manipulate and destroy the love of a spouse in order to fulfill his master's wishes.

Any of these acts are sufficient sacrifice to allow the intrusion of the House, which manifests fully, taking the house as a physical body.

Rules of Intrusion

Similar to most spirits that hail from the regions of the Abyss, the House is governed by certain rules of conduct while in the Fallen World. These rules are not options. The House has no option as to whether or not it will obey the rules; they are hardwired into its essence, written in its Willpower. The rules are as natural to the House as breathing is to mortals.

Free Will

The House must wait until people are drawn to it and take possession of it. While the House may project its Influence at any time, the House may not actively compel or otherwise lure potential victims to it. Instead, people who pass by it (including real estate agents) may notice its seeming suitability as a "group home" or family residence and initiate the process that results in bringing suitable people into contact with the House. This ensures that

the victims themselves make the conscious decision to take up residence in the House.

Sacrificial Permission

The House cannot claim the souls within until the sacrifice is performed. Once the sacrifice is performed, the House is free to use all its powers to drain the Gnosis, life energy and any other type of power from its residents. Even those who did not contribute to the sacrifice are vulnerable so long as they are residents of the House. They find that they cannot leave the House for more than a few hours unless forcibly detained. At the first opportunity, they return to the House.

Focus

The House cannot take more than one person at a time. Whether this is a function of conserving the House's energy or a symptom of its single-minded consciousness, the House does not switch its attention from a victim once it has made a choice. The House begins by draining one or more of the victim's Physical Attributes, thus weakening its prey's ability to fight back physically. Little by little, the House broadens its attacks to include assaults on the victim's Gnosis and Mental Abilities. Because the House begins with the body, its initial assaults are not always noticed, even by its victim. Physical weakness or clumsiness is often explained away as stress or illness. Only as the assault progresses, and the mage or her cabal-mates notice a reduction in magical ability or mental processes does the possibility occur that the assault is more than a natural occurrence. By then, it is often (but not always) too late for the first victim.

When the House chooses a victim, it must persevere with its quarry until it succeeds or until someone discovers the House's purpose, defeats and banishes it. Even if others are actively fighting the House, it never gives up attempting to absorb all it can from its victim. This does not mean that the House can't defend itself. It can, but it also uses part of its power to continue its assault on its current victim. (This means that the House must divide its attention and power among its victim and its attackers, somewhat mitigating its exceptionally high Rank and power levels.)

Unique Approach

The House cannot use the same method more than once within any given group. The House usually intuitively understands an individual's strengths and weaknesses and attempts to play to the weaknesses. For example, Isandra's vanity has gotten the best of her more than once. She is forever checking her appearance in a mirror to make certain that whatever she does, even casting magic, enhances her appearance. In order to entrap her, the House may create a mirror in an out-of-the-way room (or in an attic).

When Isandra looks into the mirror, she sees a skewed version of herself according to the House's desires. The mirror may attract Isandra's attention by making her appear more beautiful than she really is, thus causing her to focus her attention on admiring her image while the House undermines her Wits. The mirror might also make Isandra appear heavier than she would like to be, forcing her to so restrict her food as to make her weak – losing Strength or even Health levels.

Once the House has chosen the mirror as its chief vehicle for Isandra, the House may not use a mirror to entice or entrap another member of the same cabal. Almost any item or fixture within the House is fair game: books, furniture, paintings, musical instruments, collectibles and similar items are all possible for the House to create for its purposes. Once the House has completely succeeded, the victim is trapped within the item or fixture that first attracted it. Isandra's despairing face appears in the background of the mirror whenever anyone looks into it. Someone else might become part of a painting that fascinated him; another mage might have his voice trapped inside a piano.

Mortal Response

Because the Halfway House is only capable of manifesting in the presence of those who are themselves supernatural, the strangeness the House creates rarely comes to the attention of mortals. In those rare instances where a Twilight House manifests into a house made up mainly of mortals, the House's influence is subtle enough that the only ones who realize what is going on are its targets.

Means of Exile

Forcing the House entity out of its niche in the Fallen World takes a concerted effort by several people, especially if any of the original victims are to be rescued from the House's traps. The process need not necessarily involve a strict hierarchy of steps, but some of the steps logically precede others; for example, in order for someone to defeat the House, its identity as an enemy must first of all be noted. Though the steps can be taken in any logical order, all of them must be taken for the House to be banished to its Abyssal realm. Otherwise, it just moves and takes up shop somewhere else almost immediately.

Discovery

Eventually, the serial attacks on the inhabitants from within the House should be noticed, either by the inhabitants themselves as, one by one, they are attacked and

absorbed into the House. The fact that they cannot truly leave the House except for brief intervals of time may also alert them to the fact that there is something more to the House than they first realized. Once the discovery is made, the next steps may occur as appropriate.

Removal

When they realize their danger (or when someone else realizes it for them), the survivors need to be removed from the House's range of attack. At first, the endangered residents may simply try to leave; they soon discover that they cannot stay away, and make up any excuse they can think of to return to the House. ("I left my valuable books in the library. I'll just go retrieve them and come right back.")

The only effective way to keep the victims away from the House is to restrain them forcibly, either by locking them away or otherwise securing them as far from the House as possible. Experimentation reveals that a distance of a few miles coupled with forcible restraint is usually enough to prevent the House from continuing its attacks, though the prisoner will still want to return to his home. Only when the House is banished will the desire to go back to it leave the targeted cabal.

Realization

Although the target group of mages could help themselves, they must take care that they do not simply fall back into the clutches of the House. Whether or not they take part in their own rescue, they need others to help them. These others must also be supernatural as well in order to understand fully the victims' plight and to combat the House on its own terms. If characters are the target, they may wish to take part in the banishing of the House entity, but they cannot do so alone. They must find one or more mages (or other supernatural creatures) to help. This might present an opportunity for a crossover game with **Vampire: The Requiem** or **Werewolf: The Forsaken** by allowing the embattled characters to enlist the help of one of these other supernatural creatures in lieu of more mages.

Redemption

The greatest step in weakening the House lies in the redemption of the sacrifice that allowed the Twilight House to cross over. This may be as simple as removing and destroying the soul stones that fulfilled the sacrifice requirement (a difficult prospect if they have already been incorporated into a Demesne), but it may also be as complex as making amends for acts of Hubris or other sins.

Banishment

A ritual of banishment must be performed to force the House entity to leave the Fallen World and return

to its home realm. This is a Presence + Occult roll, and requires the ritual (see "Researching the Halfway House," below) to perform. It is an extended action, requiring 20 successes, at 15 minutes per roll. At least two people must take part in this ritual.

This ritual must be performed on the grounds of the House, and the House reacts poorly to the attempt to banish it. Each House is different in its reactions, but all Houses lash out with poltergeist activity, horrible spectral manifestations and the inducement of terror. For every roll the ritualists make, the Storyteller rolls five dice on behalf of the Abyssal manifestation. These successes are compared to the successes rolled by the ritualists. If the House gains more successes than a given ritualist, that character loses a point of Willpower due to the psychic assault. Characters who reach a 0 Willpower fall into unconsciousness.

Destruction

Finally, the exorcists should take steps to dismantle any physical remains of the House and render the location unfit for use as a residence. This may involve some tricky negotiations in the case of public lands, historic monuments (such as battlefields) or zoned property, but unless the location's suitability for occupation by an Abyssal entity is addressed, the possibility remains that another House will someday take up residence there.

Researching the Halfway House

Capping Skill: Occult

Action: Extended — 20 successes

Research Time: 1 hour; 20 minutes

Appropriate Libraries: Occult Architecture, Haunted Locations, Abyssal Manifestations

Possible Modifiers: None

Successes	Information
0–2	Nothing
3–4	A small percentage of haunted places seem to have been coupled with stories of the people who dwelt there disappearing.
5–8	In each of those instances, the residents were noted as being strange in some way. Rumors of a witch's house, the home of a werewolf or cannibal family or simply a home with an unexplained level of poltergeist activity (often attributed to psychic powers in an adolescent mind).

Successes Information

9–12 One such documented manifestation is Abyssal in origins, and appears only where mages (and to a lesser extent, other supernatural creatures) dwell. There are requirements for these manifestations, however. If it is not dealt with, those who live there become increasingly incapable of leaving, and will eventually disappear, consumed by the House.

13–15 One such requirement is that some kind of sacrifice be performed on the grounds where the Abyss has already started to leak through. This may be an actual sacrifice, a great sin, choosing the occult over one's loved ones or even the introduction of a soul stone into the location.

16–19 Such manifestations can only be destroyed by removing the House's victims, forcing them to realize what is happening, finding some method of redeeming the sacrifice that was performed and then performing a ritual of some kind to banish the spirit.

20+ The researcher discovers the ritual in an old journal. A Wits + Occult roll at a –3 dice penalty allows a character to adjust the specifics of the ritual to reflect the nature of the current manifestation.

Story Hooks

The Halfway House is a powerful spirit opponent and should be handled carefully by a Storyteller to avoid destroying an entire cabal of player characters. Only part of the House's power is available at any given time for fending off attackers. The rest of the power must be spent in maintaining the wards that guard the soul stone, draining its current victim and keeping up its façade as a "normal" building to unAwakened outsiders. The following stories give some ideas for using the Halfway House in chronicles.

Our House

This is the seminal story for use with the House entity. In this story, the House sets up occupation of a strip of land meaningful to the characters. If the characters have a common interest in learning, the site chosen may be near a large library or research institute. If they are conservation minded, they might come across the House near some wilderness area that could use a little monitoring to ensure its safety as a wildlife habitat. The House might exhibit a particular style of architecture that appeals strongly to one or more of the characters.

Once one or more of the mages move in, nothing much happens until one or more of the cabal members perform the sacrifice necessary, whether that means bringing a soul stone into the dwelling, failing a Hubris roll while living there or something similar. If necessary, a Storyteller character may pay them a visit, bringing with him a soul stone (which the character need not even necessarily know about).

The Storyteller should decide on which character the House chooses as its first victim. For the sake of keeping all the players in the story as long as possible, the Storyteller may wish to choose a Storyteller-controlled character who is also a cabal member as the first victim, so that all the characters may try to notice the House's subtle attacks.

The victim first complains of feeling tired or weak or clumsy. He may feel ill and beg off going places with the characters in favor of remaining in the House. Attempts to get him to a doctor result in his failing to keep appointments or simply pretending to go but remaining within sight of the House for the length of time he would normally be gone. Cabal members may wonder about this if they discover it. They should also realize that they can't keep themselves away from the House for long and should at least begin to suspect something may be awry.

As the House's assault on the victim gets more serious (and more obvious), the characters eventually come to realize that their cabal-mate is under psychic attack by someone or something. Depending on their actions, they may discover the truth before their endangered cabal member is lost to them, or they may not. In any case, they now know that they, too, will come under the House's "attentions" unless they do something quickly. This involves the characters in every phase of the House's existence in the Fallen World, from arrival to banishment and may result in their becoming experts in recognizing and driving out Abyssal creatures.

This may be made even more difficult if the soul stone was not created by one of the residents. The visitor who brought the soul stone with him may have already incor-

porated it into a Demesne, necessitating the destruction of not just the stone, but the Demesne itself.

Voices in the Night

Rumors of a cursed house come to the characters' attention through an Awakened source. This person, who may be a fellow mage or perhaps another supernatural contact, claims to hear voices coming from the House every time he passes it. The House shows no sign of being inhabited and the voices sound distressed and terrified or in pain. The contact suggests that the group might want to check the House out and offers to help them if they need it. The characters must investigate the House and try to solve its mystery before they become its next victims or before it moves on to seek out another group of mages to absorb. Once they have discovered the danger the House represents, they must find a way to banish it.

In this case, the House has already done its work and is in the process of discorporating itself. Because it is so large and has a physical component, the House cannot do this all at once. The Storyteller may wish to set a time limit on how many more days the House will remain in its place. If this is so, the characters should feel a growing sense of urgency as they go about trying to solve the puzzle the House represents.

This situation may serve to introduce player characters to the local mage community, since they may have to do some extensive canvassing of the various orders to find someone knowledgeable in Abyssal lore that can help them. This can also serve as an enticement to entrap the characters in the House. ("This place is empty and a source of power. Why don't we set up residence here and try to solve the mystery at the same time?") If the characters are able to rescue anyone from the House—the Storyteller must decide how this can be done—they may find a useful ally in the mage who has "seen the Abyss" (or at least its suburbs).

The House Next Door

The characters come across a letter (see the story that begins this entry above) and track down the House. By following the information presented in the letter, the characters find the picture with the young mage trapped inside it. Attempts to free the mage from the picture at first do not seem to work even if they should. Eventually, the characters should come to realize that the House is

the reason for the mage's imprisonment, not the picture or anything else within the House.

Research into the nature of the House may turn up the information that it is an Abyssal entity and that when it has done its work the entity usually leaves the Fallen World. The characters might deduce from the House's continued presence that either the House has not finished absorbing the original cabal or the House has moved locations. If the first deduction is correct, the characters may wish to find the missing cabal member and bring him or her into the battle to rescue the mage in the picture. The characters also need to decide if other cabal members can be rescued before banishing the House. This might involve a room-by-room search of the House to discover the resting places (or places of torment) of the other mages.

The Storyteller can be as inventive as he wishes in designing methods of entrapment that might both provide the characters with an interesting challenge as they try to rescue the trapped mage's soul. The variety of methods may also suggest to the characters what might await them should they become the House's victims, thus presenting them with a real or imagined danger to heighten their sense of urgency. Once they have banished the House, how can they restore the mages they have rescued? Some may be only spiritual presences that need to be released, but others may be able to be restored. This is a story that can have many follow-up adventures.

Traits

The Halfway House is not truly an entity, in strictest terms. It cannot be challenged to physical or even spiritual confrontation. The House does, however, manifest a number of spirit-like powers, as follows. The only way to truly defeat it is to find out about it and banish it properly from the Fallen World.

The spirit is capable of using the following Numina on those it targets, with a dice pool of 15 in all cases: Blast, Magnetic Disruption, Spirit Sign (as the Ghost Sign Numen, from the **World of Darkness Rulebook**, p. 211), Phantasm, Soul Snatch, Telekinesis.

At the Storyteller's option, the Twilight House may also manifest other powers, often powers that mimic Awakened magic, such as powers that create nightmares (Mind magic) or corridors that loop back and seem to go on forever into spaces that the house does not actually physically go (Space magic).

The Harper Family

Blood of the Oath of Ruin

The Harpers? Oh, they've been here for as long as there's been a town of Harper. Family owns damn near everything in town, I'd guess. Tend to be quiet folks; mostly keep to themselves. I suppose I would, too, if I had their... condition. What's that? Nothing, really. Just something in the blood. You know how it is. Some families get flat feet, or one too many fingers on a hand. What's wrong with the Harpers, you ask? Well, best not to discuss it. Like I said, I imagine they own damn near everything hereabouts. People hear things. Sometimes, they tell old Jack Harper what they hear. You don't happen to know him, do you?

Long ago, maybe a decade after the family came over the Atlantic, Ian Harper's well started to dry up. He spent years digging new ones, trying to find a site that would yield up the water that he needed. Try as he might, though, Ian could make no headway, and always ended up with sad little wells that provided only the barest trickles of fresh water before swiftly running dry.

Mary Hunter, the old woman who lived on the outskirts of town, had cautioned Ian against digging out by the northern border of his land; she said that the earth there was unclean. But the farmer had crops, sheep and kin that needed water. He had acquired the land lawfully, Ian reasoned; why should he not use any part of it that suited him? If Mary Hunter could give him no better reason than womanly superstition, then he would dig and, perhaps, find the water that his farm so desperately required.

As Ian began to dig out his new well, right along the northern edge of his property, where the trees grew lush, if strangely twisted, young Rebekah came down suddenly with a sickness. Of course, those were times when it wasn't so odd for a little one to take ill for no clear reason, and so Ian instructed his wife, Elizabeth, to care for the child, while he and his younger brother, Thomas, and eldest son, William, kept hauling away earth and stones.

That summer, there came a terrible drought, and many of the Harpers' sheep and chickens died of thirst, as Ian could not gather up enough water for them all. Rebekah became delirious in her sickness, and spoke of a frightening voice that spoke to her, "slithering on the north wind

like a snake." Ian's need to finish his new well became a mania, and he dug day and night, sometimes forgetting for days to eat and take his rest. Those who knew of his project, and the single-mindedness with which he pursued it, marveled that he didn't die of thirst under the hot summer sun. Some whispered that Ian Harper had made a compact with the Devil. Most, however, dismissed the notion; how could a man who had made a bargain with Lucifer so want for something as basic as fresh water, after all?

Eventually, Thomas and William grew as obsessed as Ian himself, and, soon, Ian's elder daughter, Jessica, took up the cause as well. Within weeks, almost all of the family was there; digging frantically away at land that would yield no water. As summer drew to a close, Rebekah died in her mother's arms, but the other Harpers scarcely noticed. Elizabeth buried her youngest in the little plot behind the house with only her little boy, Peter, for company. The night that Rebekah Harper was laid to rest, Ian fell asleep in the deep pit along the northern edge of his property, surrounded by his slumbering kin. His sleep was disturbed by a voice, heard halfway between the ear and the soul.

"What do you desire?"

Long since succumbed to madness, Ian replied, "I need water to give life to my family and my land."

"And what will you do for it?"

The farmer slumped to his knees before the deepest shadows, in the northern corner of the pit. "Whatever you require of me."

"Then speak my name."

And, at that, an unholy thought formed within Ian Harper's mind, an idea that could almost be encapsulated by a sound. Unhesitatingly, he uttered that sound, and, all at once, for miles around, dogs began to howl and babies began to cry. Bird fell dead from their nests, and milk curdled. Some of those few who were out of doors disappeared and were not seen again, though their terrified voices could sometimes be heard calling out from the depths of the night thereafter.

The other Harpers in the pit woke from their sleep as Ian rose, staggered back a few paces and collapsed. As one, they set upon the women of childbearing age, who

did not protest, and threw them into the shadows on the north side of the pit. Though seven women were cast into a space that could not have been more than a few feet deep, all vanished into the darkness, and none of them emerged that night. The Harpers waited patiently. For reasons she didn't fully understand, Elizabeth took Peter, along with what money was left in the house, and fled to relatives of hers, hundreds of miles south.

At dusk the next day, Ian opened his eyes and smiled at his kin. He told them of a crumbling tower of lead, and that he had been privileged to scribe his name upon it. As he finished speaking, the women who had been cast into the shadows returned. They shuffled along like the walking dead, and the light was gone from their eyes. They were slightly bruised and lacerated, but seemed largely unharmed. Ian embraced each of them in turn, and said that they were carrying the next generation of Harpers, and that the family's fortunes were turning for the better.

In time, the women would give birth to children who seemed perfectly normal, save for a few strange quirks. They were all born with milk-teeth (and smiled often, though there was something disquieting about their smiles), almost never cried and were pale and dark-haired, despite the ruddy tones and fair hair of most of the Harpers. Those children grew, in time, to become the leaders of the Harper family, and, eventually, of the community in which the family dwelt.

The Harpers became ever more prosperous and had an uncanny sense for good investments. They purchased seemingly worthless land, only to discover some hidden and valuable resource on it or under it, and had good years of harvest when all of their neighbors suffered from drought. It was as though the Harpers were watched over and guided by some unseen force. Their generous donations to the local churches ensured that any voice asserting that it was any being other than God Almighty watching over the Harpers did so only quietly and in trusted company. Slowly but surely, they came to dominate utterly the town in which they lived, as it grew and the years marched ever onward.

Today, the Harpers have tremendous clout and wealth, gifts bestowed upon them by the ever-increasing influence of the Oath of Ruin in the Fallen World. If the majority of the family is located in an urban area, they hold controlling interests in many of the companies in the area, and streets and parks are named for them. Despite their deformities and insanities, Harpers will be highly placed in the local police department, for instance, as well as in City Hall or in whatever industries are prevalent.

If the family is found in a less populous area, they may well rule over it as a sort of degenerate nobility, with

those not of the blood having been conditioned over the course of generations into abject servitude. Regardless, though, the spiritual debasement of the family has rendered them incapable of Awakening. Ian was the one and only Scelestus in his line, inducted into his dark Legacy by the whispering voice in the pit; no Harper since his day has been as much a valued servant to the Oath of Ruin as a lowly slave to it.

Form

The Oath of Ruin's form within the Fallen World is encompassed by the Harper family, specifically, those members of the bloodline who are saturated with its otherworldly taint. A few tributaries of the house have branched away, and their Abyssal heritage has, over time, run dry. As more and more Harpers are born into the central line of the family, more of the substance of the Oath of Ruin enters into this world. It is uncertain just how many "pure-blooded" Harpers would be required to constitute the entirety of the Abyssal entity's form, or what would happen if such a critical mass should be achieved, but it would seem that the Oath of Ruin now draws near to its objective.

Wherever it is that the family has chosen to congregate (in other words, whatever location is most convenient for the purposes of your chronicle) will also tend to exhibit signs of the Oath of Ruin's particular variety of Abyssal corruption. Plants will grow wild, even in the heart of a bustling city, though they will manifest strange and unwholesome mutations: ragged leaves shot through with black veins, split bark that runs with clotted reddish sap, pollen that causes deathly illness in those with allergies to such and the like. Small animals will tend to be sickly, while larger ones grow ill tempered and unpredictable in their behavior. Children, the elderly and those with frail constitutions will become sad and withdrawn, and not a few will become rundown and take ill. Those in the throes of either serious physical or mental illness will hear a menacing voice, which will always seem to them to manifest from the north.

If the Harpers gather in a more isolated or rural locale, the subtle taints of their heritage are apt to manifest in a more telling fashion. Perhaps they even preside over a town named for their family, and Harper is a decrepit seacoast village, the rickety wooden buildings nearly bare of paint, save for a few faded flakes, here and there. In such a place, the fog clings thickly, and it rains often, while figures, shoulders slumped in the shadows and the mist, listlessly shuffle from place to place. Or maybe Harper is a small settlement high in the hills, where the sunlight seems thin and the air is forever cold, howling



down from the north in all save the most temperate weather. Perhaps the town is lost deep in the woods, with ancient trees slouching over the sagging roofs of crumbling houses, and strange reddish eyes glaring out of the deepest corners of the night. In these places, the Harpers might even constitute the majority of the population, keeping others held in a thrall born of fear and generations of rote oppression.

Whatever the case, the Oath of Ruin's manifestation appears primarily in the form of rampant degradation of the substance of the Fallen World. Life is twisted, inert objects seem to crumble and fade; even the weather turns foul and malevolent. Even as mutation makes living

things grow wild, they become sedate and withdrawn, or else dangerous and cruel. Perhaps, the Oath of Ruin is chaos that brings death, rather than new life. The Oath of Ruin devours and destroys everything in its path, the withered remnants of a riot of untamed flora and fauna, spread thickly over a murdered landscape.

Means of Passage

Among the Abyssal intruders outlined in this book, the Oath of Ruin is somewhat unique, in that it is already partially manifest within the Fallen World. Short of the destruction of the bloodline of the Harpers, or else discovering some means of excising the Abyssal corruption from them, the Oath of Ruin's arrival within this reality is all but assured. The continued propagation of the Harpers contributes to the passage of the Oath of Ruin into this world; if there is another means by which the Oath of Ruin might intrude, it either does not know of such a method or else chooses, for whatever reason, not to use it.

The Abyssal taint of the Harper family, however, makes it hard for the family to reproduce. The subtle threads of nonbeing insinuated into every living member of the house make it difficult for them to conceive new life. The Oath of Ruin's nature is assimilation, mutation and consumption, not creation. Miscarriages, stillbirths and crib deaths are common for the Harpers, regardless of the medical advances of the past several centuries. Others die during childhood or adolescence, whether of (mostly) natural causes, or else on account of the consequences

of spiritual or psychological malaise. Suicides are reasonably common, as the strain of containing a fragment of the Oath of Ruin becomes too much to bear. Less than one-third of all family members survive to adulthood. Most of the few modern people who know anything about the family attribute their disturbingly high mortality rate to congenital defects related to their obvious physical conditions.

Rules of Intrusion

The Oath of Ruin enjoys a symbiotic relationship with the Harper family. It uses its tremendous power in subtle ways that help the family to prosper, and, in

exchange, they contribute to its coming in this world by propagating their bloodline. Of course, there appears to be no rhyme or reason to how much of the otherworldly substance of the Oath of Ruin is contained within a given member of the family. Or perhaps, the formula can only be calculated using Abyssal logic incomprehensible to human minds. Whatever the case, the Harpers have been conducting what amounts to a hit-or-miss eugenics program for centuries, sometimes introducing new members into the bloodline and sometimes practicing selective inbreeding, all to the intended end of achieving corporeal union with their inhuman patron.

Needless to say, the Abyssal essence within the Harpers has twisted the central line of the family, warping them in mind, body and soul. Many of the “purest” Harpers exhibit severe physical deformities, usually grotesque, but only rarely of the sort that would limit functionality. Others simply look “off” in ways that aren’t immediately apparent: black irises that reflect everything a little too clearly; perfectly white, straight teeth, a little too sharp and set in bloodlessly pale gums; inhumanly graceful and precise movements. A few seem almost normal, save for the occasional strange birthmark, streak of white hair or slightly too-long arms. Still, all those who belong to the blood of the Oath of Ruin are in some way marked by that lineage.

Mortal Reactions

The Harpers are mortals, many of them unknowing of their family’s Abyssal birthright.

Wherever they live, they have power and influence — the sort of people that aren’t easily meddled with. When confronted by a threat to the plans of the Oath of Ruin, known or unknown, the unseen hand of the intruder moves to defend them, coordinating their efforts on a subconscious level and manipulating the Tapesstry in small ways to defend its investment.

Others, not of Harper blood, end up being pawns of the family — practically feudal serfs in more isolated locales. If the Harpers are attacked in any way, these servants also end up being the family’s cannon fodder, thrown in the path of any oncoming violence, so as to blunt the teeth of the Harpers’ assailants, in any way necessary. A would-be hunter of the Abyss is much easier to kill after others have roughed him up, after all. Likewise, one thrown in prison for murdering a local security guard can be dealt with by one man with a sharpened screwdriver while he’s taking a shower, in exchange for consideration at the convict’s next parole hearing.

Means of Exile

Probably the simplest (and, perhaps, the only) way to truly banish the Oath of Ruin from this world is to exterminate the bloodline of the Harpers to the last. While this would dispose of the considerable minority of the family composed of murderers, rapists, cannibals and worse, it is still murder, and a thing frowned upon both by moral law and the civic law of the modern Western world. Further, this strategy does not begin to account for those who are guilty of no crime other than that of being born into a family long ago sworn in service to the void.

The quandary of the Harpers will, ultimately, serve to illustrate the lengths to which mages will go — or, perhaps more accurately, the depths to which they will stoop — in order to combat the Abyss. No Harper alive today had any part in the unholy union that gave rise to their desecrated lineage. Is it right to kill them in order to bar the Oath of Ruin’s passage into the Fallen World? Would it be more wrong to allow any member of the Harper bloodline, even the most innocent among them, to survive, knowing that such must, inevitably, lead to the full incarnation of an Abyssal monstrosity in this world?

Perhaps there are other means of severing the Abyssal taint within the Harpers, however, without slaughtering every last man, woman and child of the house. There may be some ritual, hidden in the remains of the well dug by Ian Harper, that can be used to excise the corruption within the blood of his descendants, or maybe a fragment of the Oath of Ruin is still down there, and can be bound and compelled to withdraw its influence over them. The Storyteller may want to consider the possibility that this is not the case, however, leaving the cabal with a serious moral issue on their hands. Maybe the unholy vitality of the Oath of Ruin, for example, makes mundane and even mystic means of sterilization impossible, and the curse of its being is inextricably incorporated into the metaphysical makeup of the Harper family.

It might be that the means of banishing the Oath of Ruin is something relatively simple (thought not necessarily easy): getting every member of the Harper bloodline that carries the taint of the Abyss to take a mystically sanctified vow renouncing his allegiance to the void. Perhaps such an oath need not even be witnessed by the Realms Supernal; maybe it is enough that the family no longer wishes to serve the master that originally impressed their ancestors into service. Of course, getting every Harper to even acknowledge the corruption at the heart of their bloodline, let alone willingly forswear an allegiance that many of them don’t even know exists, would be a task of considerable magnitude.

Researching the Harper Family

Capping Skill: Investigation

Action: Extended – 6 successes

Research Time: 12 hours; 4 hours

Appropriate Libraries: Genealogies, Local History, Old Money Families

Possible Modifiers: Researcher is local to an area where the Harper family has dwelt for generations (+1), researcher is a blood relative of the Harper family (+2)

Successes	Information
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0–2

Nothing.

3–4

Many members of the Harper family are vastly wealthy landowners, dating back to the time of Ian Harper, who some believed made a deal with the Devil for his prosperity. Indeed, some said in those days that between five and 10 young women of his family – accounts vary – bore Lucifer's own children.

5

The Harpers control business, politics, the police, the fire department; you name it, and they've got a finger in it. Some birth certificates for the family are also incomplete, while others turn up two distant relatives as the parents of a given child.

6

In 1893, Ezekiel Harper, committed to an asylum, was recorded as having spoken the following, shortly before slitting his wrists with a piece of broken glass: "We are the word, and the oath is whispered in our veins. We are its eyes, its fingers, its teeth. Flesh of our flesh; we are the gateway, through which it shall be loosed."

fully understand what they are, and so their plight becomes one as pitiable as their continued existence is horrific.

Welcome to Scenic Harper

The town of Harper is a small, out-of-the-way locale – the sort of place that people don't often visit and that has equal measures of rural charm and rural menace. The characters, in searching for something else – perhaps an item tainted by Abyssal power or one containing information on the void or one of its denizens – find the trail leading them to Harper. The hunt seems as though it will require at least several days in the isolated community, and the only lodgings are to be found at the Oak Tree Inn (with its 10 rustic rooms, none of which are currently rented), owned and operated by the elderly Lydia Harper and her grandson, Ray, who is a bit slow and hunched, but strong as an ox.

While in the town of Harper, the characters can feel the cloying country friendliness of the Harper family—as if the characters are being sized up and studied. Visitors drop by at odd hours to offer casseroles or freshly baked pies, while locals always try to engage the characters in lengthy conversations, often about disturbing topics ("See that house? Nancy White hanged herself there 20 years ago with a pair of her dead husband's trousers. Old Ned White had long legs on him.")

The Harpers attempt to learn the characters' goals and motivations, having been prompted in dreams and visions by the Oath of Ruin to believe that they could potentially be either very helpful to the family's (and the intruder's) cause, or disastrous to it. Almost always, there is the sense that something is wrong with any member of the family, and many of them sport visible deformities, ranging from the subtle, such as eyes spaced too far apart or an extra finger on one hand, to the extreme – such as a vestigial extra limb or a doubled-over spine.

Just when the characters get the feel that the Harpers are some kind of creepy lineage of amicable, socially awkward, mutant cannibal rubes, they're approached by Isabel Harper. The young woman is 19 years old, with a wholesome prettiness that offsets the strangeness of her unnaturally blue-white irises and the barely visible interplay of ghostly pale veins under her alabaster skin. She comes to the characters when they're alone, perhaps even when they're at the inn and Lydia and Ray are out, asking them to help her, to take her away from the town of Harper, away from the awful fate that she knows is in store for her. Isabel is serious about turning on the Oath of Ruin (and, by extension, her kin); she was cursed from childhood with a particularly clear vision of what the intruder wishes, and she wants to no part of it.

Story Hooks

The Harper family is rare among Abyssal intrusions, in that the family can be used in all the same ways that more mundane Storyteller characters might be. Some members of even the central branch of the family don't

The relic that the characters are seeking may or may not be connected to the Harper family and their void-born destiny, but they are now confronted with extensive knowledge of an intrusion that has been going on, unchecked, for centuries, one that is nearing its terrifying climax. Isabel will offer whatever help she can, though she has her limitations. She has a blood disorder that prevents clotting and is loath to get involved in any kind of fighting; she once cut herself badly as a child and nearly bled to death. She's been terrified of getting injured like that again. Also, her condition makes her prone to dizziness, lightheadedness and even fainting in high-stress situations. Needless to say, Isabel makes for a much better help behind the scenes than under the gun.

Hopefully, Isabel's plight makes clear to the characters the fact that not all of the Harpers are cruel, monstrous people, even if they are all slaves to the Abyss. Their servitude wasn't chosen; it was inflicted upon them by birth. While many have accepted and even embraced this dubious birthright, others try to ignore it or work around it, while some few actually fight the corruption that was stitched to their souls at the instant they first gained them. The moral quandary of what to do with the Harper family is made all the worse by the fact that their continued existence must, invariably, lead to the full manifestation of one of the true horrors of the Abyss in the Fallen World. Any act short of somehow cutting the spiritual taint out of them or exterminating them to a man can only delay the calamitous event.

It's only a matter of time before Isabel's treachery becomes known to the family, through the dreams of the Oath of Ruin. The characters may choose to flee or to do nothing, preferring to continue their hunt for whatever drew them to the town of Harper in the first place, though the family will probably try to kill them if they stick around. Isabel, more deeply connected to the family's Abyssal patriarch than most, however, knows some of the vulnerabilities of the Oath of Ruin. In fact, she believes she knows a way to banish it, once and for all. She will share this knowledge with the characters, if they're willing to help her to free her family from slavery to the void, but is unwilling to tell them what they have to do until they arrive there.

Depending upon the capabilities of the characters, the trip to Ian Harper's well may be a quick one, but it is likelier to be fraught with peril, as the townsfolk attempt to thwart their progress. Whenever possible, the Harpers will send those outside of their family to stop the characters, especially police and others in legitimate positions of authority (meaning that the characters can't, or at least shouldn't, just maim or kill the people trying

to stop them, and must exercise care and caution, which slows them down.) Along the way, Isabel breaks down and confides, more out of fear than anything else, that she is the lynchpin of the plan. She must be buried alive in Ian Harper's well and allowed to die there. By doing so, the power that the Oath of Ruin has insinuated into the line of her family will be severed. If asked, she will say that this is the only way, though anyone that cares to check for truth — through whatever means — will note that Isabel is lying, and is far too scared to conceal the truth to any credible degree.

Those who either pull the full truth from Isabel's mind or more gently coax it out of her learn that sacrificing seven unwilling Harpers (the same as the number of women who were thrown into the shadow in the well in the first place) therein will have the same effect. In the end, the more moral path is probably to allow Isabel to sacrifice herself — which she will do, if the characters either encourage her in this or do not stop her — though doing so allows an innocent to die. The other option can result in the demise of the most abhorrent of the Harpers, all of whom would still be alive if Isabel died, just untainted by the Abyss. Which is the lesser evil? Can the characters make that assessment? Do they have the moral authority to do so? Do they even care?

Bound by Blood

One of the characters, a descendant of Gabrielle Harper, who fled from her family more than 100 years ago to be with a young man from the city, has inherited an expansive estate on the outskirts of the decrepit old fishing town in which the Harpers are based. The place is in good repair: the only real damage to it is purely cosmetic, and it is maybe an hour-and-a-half's drive from the city. The estate might, if touched up, serve as a fine sanctum or other base of operations, if the characters are Sleepers.

The estate is full of strange and interesting stuff: valuable antiques, curious tomes in many different languages and a collection of vintage cars in need of a bit of repair in the expansive garage. If the characters are interested in that sort of thing, the house may be rumored to be haunted or otherwise a site of paranormal interest — perhaps even one with local, or even more far-reaching, fame. Of course, the members of the Harper family consider the character's act of assuming ownership of the house to be tantamount to accepting his place among them. Soon, relatives, out to the character's most distant kin, will be arriving on his doorstep to wish him well and to test the waters, as it were, regarding his potential for loyalty to the "family cause."

As the characters dig deeper, they learn of the terrible origins of the Harper family, and of the bloodline's inevitable destiny. How do the characters react? Are they willing to take on the most powerful family in town and, even if so, how do they go about stopping the arrival of the Oath of Ruin? No living Harper has chosen to be what he is; can the characters so cavalierly slaughter every member of the Harper family, the wicked and the innocent alike? What about the character who descends from Gabrielle Harper? Are the other characters willing to sacrifice their friend and ally for the sake of preventing the culmination of the intrusion?

Family Reunion

Harper and Sons Construction has been a fixture in the city for decades now; most of the buildings downtown were built by the Harpers, or by hands that they hired. Of course, downtown has seen better days, but Jeremy Harper IV is still a wealthy man, and his family is more powerful than they were back when the city center was prosperous and beautiful. To celebrate 50 years of excellence in the field of construction, and to honor the impending birth of his grandson, Jeremy has called the disparate branches of the Harper family together, to attend a huge reunion. With all the invites that have gone out, hundreds of Harpers, from all over the country, are likely to attend.

Naturally, Christine Harper is thrilled to have all of her family coming to wish the new baby well. She's been dreaming of this day all of her life, and she just knows that her daughter's going to be special. So special, in fact, that all the Harpers from far and wide are just going to have to come into the city and offer their best. Who knows, given the timing of the whole thing, four weeks from now, the little angel might be born while the family is assembled in one place. Wouldn't that be nice?

Characters with a sense for fate or omens, or who have any insight into ill fortune (or who have access to someone or something benefiting from such) learn that a disaster of horrific magnitude is impending. All signs point to the newly constructed Jeremy Harper II Arena downtown, which will be opening just in time to host the Harper family reunion. What kind of blasphemous rite does the family intend to unleash upon the world? Are they even consciously doing so, or is the Oath of Ruin so close to an earthly manifestation that it can now freely compel the family however it wishes? Is Christine's child the incarnation of the intruder, or is the little girl to be something stranger, if no less malevolent? Maybe the Harpers aren't to blame at all for what's about to transpire, and they're merely to be casualties in some scheme hatched by another powerful denizen of the Abyss?

Trait

If the Oath of Ruin should somehow manage to incarnate in the Fallen World, the Oath of Ruin should be considered at least a Rank 6 spirit (meaning that Traits are largely unimportant for it; it is able to do most anything that it feels like, whether contested or not). Its only weakness is to be found in its Ban, which should be something appropriate to your chronicle, but also something ghastly, which will draw the ethics of the characters into question. Maybe a weapon quenched in the heart's blood of 100 Harpers can kill the Oath of Ruin, or perhaps it can only be banished when one truly innocent member of the Harper family is buried alive inside of the remains of Ian Harper's well and allowed to die. Whatever the case, seeking to end the intrusion should compel the characters to choose between what is right and what must be done.

Many members of the Harper bloodline possess the following Merit, reflecting both their attunement to the powers of the Abyss, and the physical and mental results of their inbreeding. When away from their families, members of the Harper family can sometimes be found in the employ of Scelesti and other Abyssal servants, owing to the increased physical power the Harpers seem to possess when in the present of Abyssal emanations.

Merit: Blood of the Oath of Ruin (●●)

The integration of the Abyssal substance of the Oath of Ruin into the minds, bodies and souls of the Harpers has left them twisted and scarred, but such patronage has also resulted in its own curious boons. Those closest to the central bloodline of the family, whose metaphysical pollution runs thickest, occasionally manifest certain preternatural capabilities.

This Merit allows the character to sense the presence of Abyssal phenomena (including, but not limited to, intruders of any sort, Paradox, Scelesti, everything save other "pure-blooded" Harpers) out to a distance of 100 feet or so. This sense typically manifests in some unpleasant way: nosebleeds, burning hives, intense stomach cramps and the like. Regardless of the pain or discomfort inherent in the character's perception, he gains a +1 bonus to all rolls involving Physical Skills made while in the presence of Abyssal phenomena.

In exchange for this dubious gift, the character must take a permanent derangement, as well as a Physical Flaw or else one of the following Social Flaws: Deformity or Speech Impediment. (See the **World of Darkness Rulebook**, p. 218, for explanations of the various Flaws.)

The Invisible Codex

*The Book of All Secrets, The Forbidden Tome,
Librum Antiquarium*

"You say you haven't seen your master in over a week?" Sarabande signaled the waitress for a second coffee for himself and for the young mage seated across from him.

Ciloranna nodded, her youthful face a study in concern. When the waitress had delivered their coffees and gone to another table, Ciloranna brushed a stray hair from her forehead and continued her tale.

"We usually have classes together on Tuesdays and Thursdays," she said, "but when I came to his sanctum last week for my Tuesday class, he wouldn't buzz me in. Instead, he told me to go away. He was busy."

"He didn't talk to you face to face?" Sarabande said, his brows drawn together in puzzlement. "That's not like Ahiel."

"I just heard his voice over the speaker by the front door. It sounded all flat and tinny."

Sarabande nodded. "And was it the same when you showed up on Thursday?"

Ciloranna stared into her untouched coffee. "That time, he had to ask who I was," she murmured. "I should have said something then," she continued, no longer speaking to Sarabande. "I should have forced my way in to his house —"

"And fallen to his wards," Sarabande interrupted. "You were right not to push things with him, though perhaps you should have come to me earlier." His voice was kindly, though the worry on his face had deepened.

"Last Tuesday — yesterday — when I went to visit him, he wouldn't even answer me through the speaker. The house looked abandoned, except there was a really strong stench coming from it. It seemed to crawl under the door. It was..." She closed her eyes, as if recreating the scene in her mind might give her the word she searched for, "... vile," she finished. "That's the only word I can put to it."

"Did anything change between the time you last saw him and his first refusal to see you?" The elder Obrimos had abandoned any personal interest for a purely investigative manner. Ciloranna recognized the tone of voice and strove to respond as factually as possible.

"He sounded excited the night before, when we confirmed our meeting," she said. "He had found something he wanted to examine before showing it to me. It was something he'd been searching for for a long time, he told me." The younger mage raised her head, met Sarabande's eyes without flinching. "It was —"

"— a book," Sarabande finished, his voice harsh with fatality. Ciloranna nodded silently.

The elder mage's expression softened then. "I'm so sorry," he said.

Few mages can resist the opportunity to add to their font of knowledge. Indeed, the search for the true history of magic and the way back to the lost Súpernal Realm loom as worthy goals for the pursuit of many mages. Respected scholars of magical theory as well as practicing mages of all levels of power dedicate their lives to this aim. This very worthiness also serves as a magnet for Abyssal intrusion and provides a very large vulnerable target ready for attack by forces of the Abyss looking for a foothold in the Fallen World. The Invisible Codex is the arrow aimed at that target.

The energies formed in the Abyss seek a way to connect with the rich material substance of the Fallen World. Though these forces take many forms in their attempts to intrude upon the physical realm, one of their most insinuating and sinister manifestations is that of a simple book — one that almost unfailingly appeals to a mage's weakness: her need to know. No matter how bolstered against attacks from external entities a mage may be, she must usually think long and hard about the consequences of turning away from something that promises to increase her knowledge and contribute to the strength of Atlantean mages in the Fallen World.

Form

The Abyssal entity known primarily as the Invisible Codex seeks to form a connection to the Fallen World through the minds of the Awakened. Though the entity may have had other forms in the ancient past, the discovery of writing and, later, the ability to preserve knowledge in book form provided the perfect vessel for this entity. Taking the form of a book, the entity was able to secure access to its perfect targets, the minds of mages whose search for knowledge and power had overcome their good judgment.

Though The Invisible Codex may have many forms, from a genuine codex similar to the ones found in Mayan and Aztec ruins, to a medieval-style librum complete with illuminated text, as if a monk had lavished many hours on its elegantly detailed script and illustrations. Experts in Abyssal lore who



have tried to track the appearances and disappearances of this entity have also noted its appearance as a copy of the Gutenberg Bible in Germany in the 16th century as well as an encyclopedic leather-bound tome in 19th century England. In modern times, the Codex has disguised itself as a book of Atlantean magic found in a rare bookstore's back room and a hand-bound leather volume with no title, simply a gold "X" on its spine. Only one such book exists at any given time, at least according to the "experts."

Though the Invisible Codex is effectively a spirit, it is anchored in the physical world through the book. As a result, most Spirit magic cannot detect it. Only an "Exorcist's Eye" spell, of at least Potency 10 is capable of detecting the spirit within the book. Alternately, it takes a total of 20 successes to read the resonance of the book well enough to ascertain its identity. Most mages who read its resonance give up well before then.

Means of Passage

Three elements must come together in order for the Codex to manifest in physical form, and this process

sometimes takes place over several months. If only one of the components exists at a particular place and time, the Codex is unable to reveal itself. If any two elements are present, the Codex may start indirectly influencing the two existing elements to enable the third one to appear, thus completing the requirements and enabling the Codex to take physical form. Once the three elements exist in one place and time, the three must combine their efforts (as explained below) in order to produce the precise circumstances for the physical existence of the Codex.

Candidate

The first element required is a mage of the proper level of power. The Abyss does not waste its efforts on Sleepers or beginning users of magic. Only mages (including Seers of the Throne and Banishers as well as mages of the Pentacle) of sufficient power to attain mastery of at least one Arcanum and who possess a Gnosis of at least 3 can qualify as a component for the entry of the Codex into the Fallen World. The mage may belong to any Path, though Mastigos

and Moros mages are most susceptible to the Codex's influence. The most vulnerable orders are the Mysterium and the Guardians of the Veil, due to their emphasis on gaining knowledge or seeking out what is hidden (or forbidden).

Desire

The second element is the desire for power. Even if a mage possesses the proper degree of power and a scholarly or knowledge-seeking bent, if she lacks a certain ruthless focus on increasing her power, she is useless to the Codex. Selflessness and altruism are not tools the Abyss can use to cast its tendrils into the Fallen World, and a mage who does not have a driving passion for gaining power holds no interest for the Codex. Obrimos mages and members of the Silver Ladder often manifest this second requirement, and thus they, too, may serve as foils for the Codex under proper conditions. Any mage who has elected to follow a Left-Handed Legacy is a prime target for fulfilling the second requirement.

Place

The final element consists of a physical location in which the Codex may manifest and make its presence known to the target mage. This location may be (and most often is) an occult bookstore. While almost any occult bookstore can serve as the all-important last component, the Codex itself prefers bookstores that cater to patrons with an affinity for the darker side of magic, either exclusively or in addition to more benign knowledge seekers. Occasionally, the Codex appears in a book collector's private collection or as part of an estate sale upon the death of a known scholar or collector. Other sites for the Codex include the rare books or restricted books sections of university libraries, archaeological digs, museum exhibits or the inventory listing of a dealer in antiquarian books and artifacts.

Once all three elements are in place, all that is required is for the mage with a desire for power to come to the place where the Codex lies in wait.

Rules of Intrusion

Although the Invisible Codex can, by its highly magical aura, attract the attention of mages in its vicinity, the laws under which the Invisible Codex has entered the Fallen World prevent the entity from deliberately suborning a mage drawn to it. As an Abyssal manifestation, the Invisible Codex seeks an affinity with mages driven for knowledge rather than with mortals or unsympathetic Awakened ones. On rare occasions, the Codex may become active in the Fallen World due to the presence of a suitable mortal thaumaturge, vampire or werewolf, but only if a qualifying mage is not accessible.

Essentially, the Codex absorbs the magical energy and, eventually, the life essence of the mage foolish enough to claim it (either through purchase or some other formal means of establishing ownership). By first engaging the mage's interest, the Codex is able to latch onto its victim's mind and, in the final stages of its progress, its body. In some cases, the targeted mage literally disappears into the pages of the Codex, fully absorbed in his search for knowledge.

As powerful as the Invisible Codex is when manifest in the Fallen World, the Invisible Codex bears certain constraints that govern its actions. These are not so much rules of conduct as they are literal laws of being. The Codex has no option to disobey these laws; it lacks the capability to do so.

The Law of Contact

Just as with many legends involving power-hungry individuals pacting with darkness, the mage must make the first move. The entity may project an aura that promises unlimited power or knowledge, but it must be up to the mage herself to seek possession of the entity's material form (the Codex).

The Law of Presence

Once the Codex has assumed material form, it must rely on others to move it about. Thus, if it materializes in a rare book store, the Invisible Codex cannot move from the spot in which it took physical form unless the bookseller reshelves it, a browser looks through it or a buyer (and, presumably, victim) purchases it and carries it to his home or sanctum.

The Law of Form

If the Codex appears as a medieval bestiary, the entity may not later transform into a treatise on celestial beings or an Aztec codex. Within its form, it may alter certain aspects of itself; in fact, this is one of its primary means of securing control over its target's mind. The Codex may change the appearance of writing on its pages or alter the content, but its overall form must remain consistent with the rules of the physical world.

The Law of Purpose

The Codex's purpose in intruding into the Fallen World is to increase the power of the Abyss in the worlds it abuts. The Invisible Codex does this by absorbing the Mana and life essence of Awakened creatures, particularly mages, into itself and transferring it to the Abyss. When a mage (or another supernatural creature) takes possession of the Codex with the intention of increasing his own power, any restraints on the Codex's actions are lifted. It may then use its Numina freely to draw the mage further and further into its web of corruption.

Mortal Response

The slow changes and wasting away that comes with being the Codex's target can be attributed to any number of other things. Illnesses and psychological problems are among the most commonly attributed. In particular, because mages are often a little strange to begin with, most people don't have any problem believing that the odd fellow down the street has suddenly slipped into a bad depression that may even end up in catatonia or death.

Means of Exile

Once settled in the Fallen World, the Invisible Codex remains until forcibly ousted. Unless its presence is discovered, in fact, the Invisible Codex can stay indefinitely in the physical world, passing to another qualified victim after exhausting the resources of its current target. The proper procedures can, however, force the Codex out of the Fallen World, compelling the Invisible Codex to return to its Abyssal home — at least for a time.

In order to accomplish the exile of the Codex, at least one person (presumably someone involved in the process of banishing the entity) must know of its existence and its general nature. This may be someone who has had previous experience with the Codex or one of its incarnations or it may be someone who is clever at putting together the clues that point to the Abyssal book's presence in the physical world.

Once the Codex's existence has been established and the determination to banish it has been made, three elements must be present, echoing the three essential factors for calling the Codex into the world.

Exorcist

The first element consists of a person — usually a mage (including Banishers and Seers of the Throne as well as Atlantean mages) — dedicated to and capable of banishing an Abyssal creature. A mage must be a Disciple of the Spirit Arcanum to succeed in forcing the Invisible Codex out of its material form and back into the Abyss. Further progress in the Spirit Arcanum gives the exorcising mage additional spiritual "clout," enabling him to hold the threat of binding the Abyssal spirit or compelling it to remain in the Abyss forever. The exorcist must know the true nature of the book's spirit in order to successfully accomplish this, however.

Pure Heart

Just as one of the conditions for allowing the Codex to enter the Physical World requires that the mage possess

the seeds of spiritual corruption and greed for power, the second condition for banishing the Codex calls for the exorcist to be pure in heart — at least insofar as the desire for power is concerned. An ambitious or greedy mage, however well intended, can do more harm than good by opening herself up to the Codex, as is necessary for the banishing process. Generally, this means that the mage the Codex was attracted to is unlikely to be capable of banishing it.

Destination

Again, the parallel with the means of entering the world holds for the final element. Just as the Codex must locate a place in the Fallen World suitable for the entity's arrival, so must the banishing mage select a specific location in the Abyss as the destination for the creature. This requires the mage to have some knowledge of or access to information on the Abyss, such as it is. Some Abyssal theorists claim that even if a specific location does not exist in the Abyss, the mage's ability to visualize such a place brings it into being. For example, a mage may hear of an Abyssal location called the Lake of Putrid Fire and choose that as the destination in his banishing ritual. If such a place does not exist before the mage's choice, the mage can literally create it through the power of his focused mind. A few scholars have pointed to the irony present in the fact that such an act of creation strengthens the Abyss even as one of its denizens is defeated.

Once all the elements are present, the banishing mage and his cabal must lay claim to the Invisible Codex's physical substance. And therein lies a story...

Researching the Invisible Codex

Capping Skill: Occult

Action: Extended — 15 successes

Research Time: 4 hours; 1 hour

Appropriate Libraries: Magical Books and Grimoires, Abyssal Literature, Awakened Scholars

Possible Modifiers: Researcher is a Disciple of the Spirit Arcanum (+1), researcher is a member of the Guardians of the Veil or Mysterium (+1)

Successes	Information
0–3	Nothing
4–5	An incredible obsession in some scholars throughout the years has been attributed to strange books. In particular, some books are infused with the power of the Abyss.

Successes Information

6–10 The book in question is called the Invisible Codex. Unlike most books, the danger is not in what information the book possesses, but in the book itself: it is an Abyssal intrusion. The researcher also discovers the three requirements (see "Means of Passage") that allow the Invisible Codex entry into the Fallen World.

11–14 The researcher discovers the Four Laws that relate to the means by which the Codex attracts its victims. (See "Rules of Intrusion.")

15+ The researcher discovers the three requirements to banishing the spirit. (See "Means of Exile.")

Story Hooks

The Invisible Codex can prove a real challenge to a cabal of mages either as their main focus, as illustrated in the first story described below, or as peripheral but still tricky events, as shown in the second and third story ideas. Handled carefully and with some subtlety, the Invisible Codex can serve as a thematic center for a **Mage** chronicle or it can be an unexpected side story that adds an extra dimension to a different story arc.

The Codex Arrives

In this story, the Invisible Codex plays a central role, serving as the chief adversary for the cabal of mage characters and, perhaps, even a temptation to some of the more ambitious within the group.

Jerome Denigan, owner of Denigan's Rare Book Shop, is in his store late at night unpacking a late delivery of books. He lingers over one particular volume, leather bound and seemingly more than 100 years old, if not older. He peruses the pages, looking puzzled at what he sees, but finally shrugs and places the book on one of his shelves. The book fades into inconspicuousness. Denigan continues to unpack books, having forgotten the existence of the mystery book.

The story starts with a phone call to one of the characters from a relative of Jerome Denigan, who is known to the characters. The book store owner is in the hospital, the victim of an attempted robbery of his store. Denigan (either directly or through his relative) asks for the charac-

ters to keep an eye on his store for him until he can make arrangements for his chief assistant, who is currently out of town on vacation, to take Denigan's place. He tells the characters that nothing was apparently stolen from the shop so it is no longer considered a crime scene, and they can enter and leave the shop without problems from the local police. The characters should accept since Jerome has been a faithful locator and supplier of useful books for the city's mage community. He is not himself a mage, but is a Sleepwalker or mortal occultist — at least enough to know that mages exist and to have some affinity for recognizing books of magic (with the obvious exception of the Codex).

The characters should have no problems getting into the shop. Either the relative can deliver the key to one of the cabal or else the characters may get the key from Denigan himself (if they visit him in the hospital). The shop itself may be as detailed as the Storyteller cares to make it. The characters may determine through various means, such as checking the inventory, that nothing was, in fact, stolen from the shop — not even money from the cash drawer or from the safe. They may question this, since there would have been no other reason to attack Denigan.

If they visit Denigan at the hospital or if they use some form of the Time Arcanum to view past events, they can eventually discover that something was indeed taken from the shop and that the attacker was probably a mage. That information could launch them on a search for the thief/attacker by talking to other mages in the community.

Some form of magical means needs to be used to unlock Denigan's memory enough to gain the information that a book was stolen. Otherwise, the characters only learn that something was taken from the shop. Unless magic is used, Denigan's mind remains fuzzy with regard to the Codex's existence.

Sooner or later, depending on their actions, the characters can discover that one of the local mages has been strangely absent from all her usual haunts. If she belongs to the same order or Path as one or more of the characters, the group may have an easier time finding out information about her. Some piece of information should place her at or near Denigan's Rare Book Shop around the time of the attack on Denigan. Another piece of information should inform the characters that the suspected mage has acquired a book about which she has been very secretive, to the point of secluding herself.

The characters may either attempt to confront the mage directly at this point or they may decide to find out more information about the book that has been acquired.

If the characters seed an immediate confrontation with the mage, they may run into protective magic, hired

bodyguards or other obstacles that the characters must overcome before being able to reach their target. If the Storyteller wishes for the characters to have a chance to save the mage, this is their opportunity to forcibly separate her from the book before she becomes totally absorbed in her work.

Once they have the mage in their custody, they may try to question her about the book, either by using magic to gain information from her or by taking advantage of any weaknesses, such as pride or boastfulness, to learn something useful.

If the characters elect to research the book that lies at the heart of the trouble, they may not be able to save the mage from her fate, but they will be better prepared to deal with the problem of banishing the book back to its place of origin. Gathering information about the book may involve another round of inquiries among the mage community, eventually involving several orders. The *Mysterium*, for example, may have some actual knowledge of the book's true nature — that it is not, in fact, a book but an Abyssal entity in book form. The Guardians of the Veil may be able to provide the characters with the proper banishing procedures or help them discover the way to get rid of the book. The Adamantine Arrow might provide protection for the characters while they have possession of the book.

When the characters eventually gain possession of the book, they find they have a tiger by the tail. If the mage who stole the book from Denigan's shop is still alive, she is still obsessed with the book and must be forcibly separated from the book at all times. Furthermore, knowledge of the characters' quest may have permeated the mage community, attracting some distinctly unwanted attention. Rival cabals may attack the characters in hopes of gaining possession of the book. Other factions, such as the Seers of the Throne or the Banishers, may decide that the book belongs with them, either because they have a better chance of destroying the book or because they can use it properly. This latter reason is, of course, merely another lure that can draw someone into the Codex's sphere of influence.

The characters, themselves, may have to resist the book's attraction. If a character does fall prey to the Codex, the rest of the group may find themselves having to separate yet another person from the Codex, if possible. In the meantime, the Storyteller may wish to give the endangered character some indication about the contents of the book. ("It appears to be filled with words you have never seen before, but on closer perusal, you think the words are encoded.") If the character solves the quote

before the rest of the group has found a way to separate him from the book, the Storyteller may provide a more difficult quote or some other type of puzzle, informing the player that the method of encryption seems to change from page to page.

Presenting the players with an encrypted quote to solve could simulate the character's absorption in the book. Simple substitution codes may be used to disguise the quote, which may be created by the Storyteller or taken from fortune cookies, books of quotes or any other appropriate source.

Little by little, the characters should be able to piece together both the nature of the book and the means of its banishment. When they are ready to attempt the banishing ritual, they may find that the Codex is not ready to give up without a fight. The characters may suffer attacks on their minds or spirits from the Codex as it battles to avoid banishment. Other factions may choose this moment to attack, feeling the buildup of magical energy and suspecting that they may lose their chance to acquire the Codex for themselves.

All kinds of special effects can make the banishing ritual a momentous event for the characters. As they begin the ritual, a cold wind begins to rise, surrounding them and threatening to blow out any candles associated with the ritual. A storm, complete with thunder and lightning, may surround the site of the ritual, effectively isolating the characters from the rest of the world. If the characters found a more powerful or knowledgeable mage to perform the actual ritual, this would be the time for him to falter, perhaps struck down by some otherworldly effect. The characters must take up the ritual and finish it themselves.

The end of the ritual might even give the characters a brief glimpse into the Abyss as a rift opens up to reclaim the Codex. The end of the ritual should leave the characters feeling drained despite their triumph.

After the Codex has been banished, the characters may turn their attention to salvaging any of the book's surviving victims, including the mage who originally stole the book from Denigan's shop as well as their own afflicted cabal member.

While this story may stand alone as an independent chronicle, this story may also serve as a lead-in to other stories involving the characters' further research into the nature of the Abyss and its creatures. This would also be a good time for Storytellers to award characters with some significant advance, enabling either a gain in Gnosis or else an increase in their mastery of one or more appropriate Arcana to reflect their close encounter with the Abyss.

Lost in His Research

The characters travel to a city other than their base city in order to consult with Alizarium, a noted Mysterium mage and scholar of pre-Columbian civilizations such as the Aztec, Toltec, Olmec, Incan and Mayan cultures, concerning a magical artifact thought to be hidden in the jungles of the Yucatan (or, perhaps, somewhere in Central America). When they arrive in the city and make contact with a mage who has agreed to introduce them to the scholar, they discover that Alizarium is strangely missing.

Their host can tell them a few curious facts that should launch a further investigation by the characters. The last time their contact spoke with Alizarium, the mage was excited about a recent “find,” — a codex filled with pictographic writing similar to that of the Aztecs but with some significant differences which might indicate an entirely new civilization. Alizarium’s own cabal members had remarked on his reclusiveness of late, a trait not usually associated with him. The contact can introduce the characters to the members of Alizarium’s cabal and hear their stories.

Each cabal member contributes some further clue to the mystery of Alizarium’s absence. One member saw him late at night pacing back and forth in front of his window, apparently muttering to himself—something he has never done before. Another cabal member passed him on the street and wasn’t even recognized or acknowledged; Alizarium looked gaunt and worn, as if something were eating away at him from within.

Little by little, through investigations of the mage’s sanctum (provided they win the trust of the cabal), and through other incidents such as the discovery that the sanctum is strangely devoid of magical energy, the characters may be able to intuit that something terrible has happened to Alizarium.

If they act quickly, they can discover the (now replete) Codex (in its disguise as a literal codex) and try to find a way to banish it before it relocates to seek out another victim.

A Storyteller might use this incident as a discrete side story or else as a prelude (if the characters cannot find and banish the Codex) to a further encounter with the book that affects them more directly.

Books for Sale

A friend of the characters, perhaps a Storyteller character who is part of the cabal or somehow affiliated with it, is building her Arcane library and hears that a rare book store is going out of business and liquidating its stock at bargain prices. She attends the sale and attempts to buy a book that appeals to her, seeming to contain knowledge that she has long coveted. An out-of-town bookseller buys the book, and the friend comes home disappointed.

Over the next several days, she keeps referring to her missed opportunity, unable to put her failure to acquire the book in the past. She finally decides to travel to the bookseller’s hometown and attempt to purchase the book. Shortly after she leaves, the characters discover the true nature of the book their friend desires and realize that they must keep her from acquiring it.

Complications ensue when they set off to find her and the bookseller. Other factions, including a Seer cabal, are searching either for the book or for their friend. The bookstore burns down in a mysterious fire, and the characters are attacked by a group of Banishers who sense the presence of something powerful and believe the newly arrived mages are the cause of it.

The characters have the opportunity to save their friend if they keep their focus on finding the book and discovering how to banish it. They may have to consult with those who might otherwise be their enemies in order to learn how to send the Codex back to the Abyss.

In this case, the Codex is not so much the central focus as it is the “villain.” The main thrust of this story consists of preventing the downfall of their friend.

Traits

The Invisible Codex is a spirit, though it anchors itself in the physical book it inhabits. As such, the spirit does not exist in Twilight or the Shadow. When necessary, the spirit manifests as a physical force of strange appearance—its form is confusing and disjointed, and those who see it cannot describe it afterwards. Memories of it are not based on visual or other sensory input, but are purely informational; remembering the manifestation of the Invisible Codex is more like recalling a set of facts and concepts than something seen.

The Invisible Codex

Rank: 4

Attributes: Power 10, Finesse 10, Resistance 12

Willpower: 22

Essence: 25 (max 25)

Initiative: 22

Defense: 10

Speed: 20

Size: 2

Corpus: 14

Influence: Minds (the desire to know)

Numina: Discorporation, Innocuous, Materialize, Soul Snatch, Spirit Sign (as the Ghost Numen Ghost Sign, see the **World of Darkness Rulebook**, p. 211)

Ban: The spirit may not initiate the process that enables it to drain a creature’s magical essence or life force.

The Lethean

*Anaro, the Archon of Forgetfulness,
Dreamcatcher, Jaki, Oneirovore*

We all knew she was having a rough time – her mother had just died, she was deep in debt and her roommate was no good – so we weren't surprised when she started acting a little strange. She'd come in smiling some days and have no idea what she was working on, or she'd get angry at us for little things we'd done years ago. We figured she was taking drugs. We hoped it would pass.

She got worse. Then she got strange. She cornered me one day and told me that she wanted to return to the "Hive Cathedral of the Sub-Archons" where she'd been a larva. Then she broke down crying. We had to let her go when she broke a client's arm and accused him of serving the "Eaters of the Autumn"; turns out she'd known him years back, but God knows what she meant.

I haven't seen her since then, and I don't want to. I'm not ashamed to say she scares me.

The soul is a thing of memory. Memories shape the Oneiros – the soul's dream plane. Memories offer stepping stones on the road to the Supernal Realms. But consider; the road of memories runs both ways, and the path to Awakening also leads through the Abyss. What becomes of the soul when its pieces fall into darkness? What beings might subside on a person's shunned history?

The entity called the Lethean offers peace through forgetfulness. The Lethean is an unnatural surgeon, removing painful memories in its host and filling the hole left behind with its own essence. The Lethean strips away childhood stories and adult turmoil, devours colors and names. It is a symbiont; it cannot survive in the Fallen World outside its host's Oneiros, yet the Lethean replaces everything it eats with the building blocks of a new past.

The Lethean straddles the line between thinking being and mindless phenomenon. Within the dream world, it's able to manifest an intelligent form – but only by reshaping the mind and soul of its host. The Lethean lacks goals or plans aside from survival and expansion. At times, the Lethean seems to inhabit multiple hosts in different parts of the planet, suggesting that it's not a single intruder at all; some mages call it an Abyssal virus or bacterium. Many Scelesti see the Lethean as only a part

of a larger body – the limbs of a greater entity reaching into the material realm.

Acamoth seek out intrusions by the Lethean, for they share much in common with the Oneirovore. The Lethean travels the path of the soul to enter the Fallen World, while acamoth use mortal Oneiroi to recreate the Abyss for themselves. Often, the Lethean's host becomes a magnet for the demons, and the Lethean's Astral domain becomes a terrifying kingdom of monsters. The host rarely is aware of this invasion, except for in nightmares.

Form

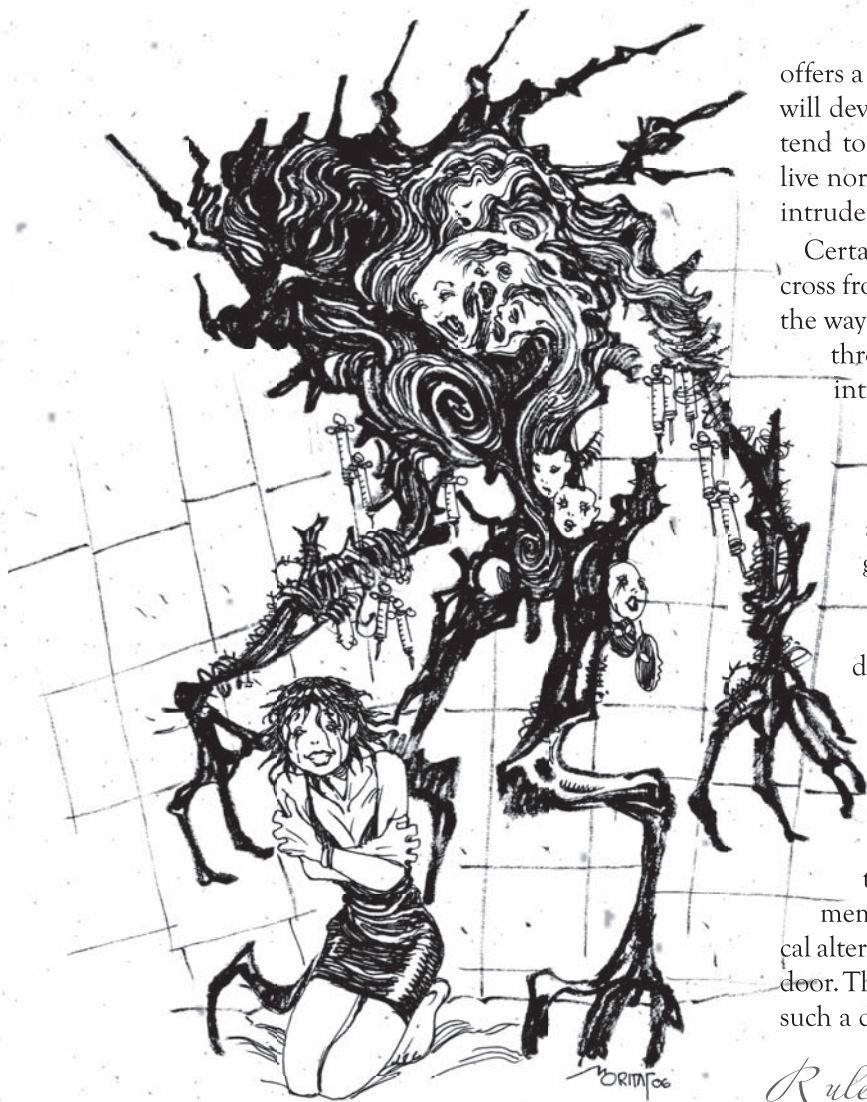
The Lethean has no material body. It can't exist outside the Inner Realms (except, possibly, in the Abyss itself). In a mortal's soul, however, the Lethean has complete control over its environment and can appear however it wants.

In ordinary dreams, the Lethean resembles an idealized friend, relative, teacher or treasure. It's a comforting figure the dreamer doesn't quite recognize and can't quite place: a boss from a job the dreamer never had, or a doll the dreamer owned after outgrowing toys. More often than not, the Lethean appears female, but this isn't a hard and fast rule; a minority view among mages holds that the Lethean is a maternal entity, reproducing by eating Oneiroi and laying spiritual "eggs" inside human souls.

When visited in the Oneiros by a conscious being, however, the Lethean's guise is less benign. The Lethean typically takes the body of a person it helped its host forget, but hides that body inside a wrapping of razors, thorns and barbs. The Lethean may incorporate other forgotten memories, as well, if they prove useful – needles and tubes from a forgotten hospital visit, or the jawbone and fangs of a forgotten pet. In this form, the Lethean almost never speaks, but (if necessary) expresses itself by manipulating symbols and memories.

Means of Passage

The Lethean fills the holes where painful and beautiful memories used to reside. It looks for victims in the throes of grief or denial: a bitter divorcé who tries to forget the face of his former lover, an old woman who



refuses to think about the home she left as a child, an injured athlete who trashes the trophies he won and who desperately wants to stop dreaming of competition, a recovering addict who can't stop imagining the joy of a fix, a vampire who wants to stop mourning her mortal life, a mage whose brief glimpse of the Supernal Realms haunts him still.

When a person tears an image out of his or her soul, the Lethean can slip inside. The more important the image, the more treasured the memory and the more violently a person disavows what was once loved, the more easily the Lethean can enter. More simply, the greater the person's loss, the greater the Lethean's gain. Once granted passage, the Lethean resides in its host's Oneiros, invisible except in dreams. The vast majority of the time, the Lethean's victim is entirely unaware of what's going on.

In less common cases, the Lethean is drawn to a person who wants to forget an unequivocally hurtful experience instead. In dreams or subconscious whispers, the Lethean

offers a trade: give it a prized memory to feed on, and it will devour the painful memory in return. These hosts tend to feed the Lethean much more slowly, and can live normally for years before showing symptoms of the intruder's presence.

Certain conditions must be met for the Lethean to cross from the Abyss to its desired victim. Paradox paves the way most effectively: a mage who invokes a Paradox through Mind magic may unwittingly summon the intruder, allowing it to nest in a nearby host. Ceremony can also call the creature up: a Sleeper may stumble upon a ritual purporting to "heal grief and grant forgetfulness" hidden among dozens of worthless spells in a pop magic grimoire or on an occult website, or learn ancient mnemonic mantras protected by a monastic order. A Sleeper with the Avoidance or Fugue derangements who experiences at least the start of an Awakening may draw in the Lethean when he finds the path to the Supernal Realms. The more eager a victim is to accept the Lethean, the less stringent the conditions for crossing.


The Lethean can never enter a soul without the consent of its victim — a person who loses memories unwillingly (due to physical trauma or magical alteration) opens a window for the Lethean, but not a door. The Lethean can peek into the Fallen World through such a damaged mind, but it can't pass through.

Rules of Intrusion

Once the Lethean is embedded in a host, the Lethean aims only to feed and grow. Every time it consumes a memory or claims a sensation for its own, the hole in its host's soul grows larger. Over the course of months or years, the Lethean makes room to stretch and expand in the Oneiros, and begins to rebuild its surroundings in its own image.

The Lethean never eats a memory without its host's permission. However, this permission doesn't have to be conscious — as a creature of the dream plane, the Lethean perceives subconscious desire more clearly than it perceives a mind's surface thoughts. The Lethean plants the idea that a memory can be forgotten, and waits for that notion to gain prominence when its host experiences grief, regret or pain. Although the Lethean is capable of manifesting in a host's dreams to verbalize temptations, it only does so out of desperation.

The Lethean's preference is for positive memories, of the sort that granted it access to its host in the first place. If the host is suffering from depression or going through major life changes, the Lethean may be able to subside



on these fragments for some time; ridding oneself of positive experiences might seem counterproductive, but for many hosts, it becomes the only way they know to ease their pain. Similar to a drug or alcohol addiction, forgetfulness blots out the things that hurt. Of course, the more pleasant memories a person loses, the more miserable that person becomes. The cycle continues, until the Lethean has gorged itself on everything beautiful within the host's soul.

Often, however, the host isn't so willing to give up treasured experiences. In this situation, the Lethean subsists on lesser memories that bother the host: an embarrassing, drunken night at a party, a grade-school humiliation, an overheard argument between parents, a friend's forgiven, but still-remembered betrayal, a miscarried child. The loss of these memories can seem harmless, but a host who continually rewrites his or her personal history can acquire a skewed perspective on the world. The host may become arrogant, having forgotten all errors, or overly trusting, as all darkness is edited out of his past. In this way, the host becomes more susceptible to crises and drastic problems — and becomes more likely to feed the Lethean the good along with the bad.

Once the Lethean has consumed all the memories (positive or negative) it can easily obtain from its host, the Lethean turns to a slightly different source for nourishment. Instead of changing only what its host remembers, the Lethean offers to filter what the host experiences in the present. The Lethean can alter a host's sense of hearing, touch, taste, smell or sight. The Lethean can take away small irritants or recurring pains: the squeak of fingers on clean glass, the scent of a spouse's bad breath, the vision of graffiti on a monument, the agony of broken bones, the chronic soreness in a bad back. If at all possible, the Lethean takes whole swathes of sensation: the color yellow, or the taste of sweet fruit. Once a host has been with the Lethean long enough, he or she may come to believe that these offerings are necessary just to make it through the day; they may become a habit, made without thought.

Throughout the Lethean's intrusion into its host's soul, the Lethean spreads its essence into the gaps left by the missing memories. Gradually, it transforms its domain in the Oneiros into a place reminiscent of the Abyss. The Lethean uses pieces of the missing memories as templates for its work: If the host has lost memories of childhood, the Lethean may build a school from bones and shadow and fill it with monstrous students. If the host has lost memories of family, distorted doppelgängers of the host's relatives may stalk the dream world. If the host has lost memories of a half-finished painting,

a surrealist landscape of flowing oils may extend to the horizon. The daimons of the Oneiros are transformed, too, and become malicious defenders of the Lethean's abode. But the original memories are never recoverable. They are gone forever, and only shards remain.

The assimilation of the Oneiros has consequences for the host. Early on, the host may dream of the Lethean's domain, but these dreams are ordinarily forgotten upon awakening. After a prolonged intrusion, however, the Abyssal structures within the host's soul may begin to seep into the host's waking consciousness. The host may actually fill in the gaps in her memory with the Lethean's replacements, and believe that she experienced bizarre, impossible things. This change isn't necessarily disturbing — the host accepts the new memories as if they were always present, no matter how strange they appear from the outside.

The ultimate stage of the host's transformation comes after the Lethean has overtaken the host's soul and filtered all of the host's senses, often even devouring the host's name. Although the host is still physically human, all the host's memories are of an alien world, and all the host perceives passes through an Abyssal lens. Some mages would argue that there's no substantive difference between a final-stage host and an Abyssal denizen; others would say that the host's lingering humanity makes all the difference in the universe. Either way, the line between the host and the Lethean disappears.

Similar to the Lethean itself, the completed entity is not violent or destructive unless threatened or angered. It lives the former host's life in a stilted, awkward manner, although the Lethean can't understand the world well enough to perform most complex tasks — it can shop, and maybe even pay a cashier, but it can't keep up with bills; it can go to work and wait tables, but not perform at a desk job. Most such beings are quickly jailed or institutionalized, as mortals who've lost their souls.

But the being remains a threat to the Fallen World. The being's soul is a potential portal to and from the Abyss for acamoth and other intruders. Worse, that portal potentially allows the entity to use some manner of supernatural power when responding to threats, while still bringing down Paradox on sorcerous foes as if it were a Sleeper.

This entire scenario presumes that the host is a mortal. When the Lethean takes an Awakened or otherwise supernatural soul as its host, however, there are some differences. The Lethean may be more overt about its desires, and offer more than just forgetfulness in exchange. The Lethean may describe its needs in dreams, and provide Willpower or Mana when its host feeds it memories or

senses. But it remains a mainly passive force, not a scheming daimon, and a host who tries to outwit or out-bargain the Lethean misunderstands the enemy.

Mortal Response

A Sleeper who hosts the Lethean can't hide the changes in her personality, and if she has any ties to the mundane world at all — loved ones, co-workers or family members — someone is bound to notice her odd behavior and try to do something about it. Unfortunately, there's not much to be done. In the best-case scenario, the host can be coaxed into seeking treatment; psychiatrists may diagnose her with schizophrenia or another neurological disorder, and high doses of prescription drugs may even slow the host's transformation, but drugs won't return clarity.

More often, the host's loved ones eventually give up and allow the degeneration to proceed, convinced that the host is suffering from some secret addiction.

Talk therapy doesn't offer effective treatment for a host, although a therapist might come to realize that the host plays a willing role in destroying her own memories. Perhaps more importantly, a therapist may unknowingly compile an extensive library of notes on the Abyss by recording the host's statements and descriptions of her dreams. Such notes could prove a valuable addition to any mage's library.

Means of Exile

Kill it. That's the advice most mages will give, if they don't fully understand the nature of the Lethean. Forget about the host. Forget that there's a person wrapped around the Abyssal spark. Kill the host before he or she is hollowed out from the inside — before the host becomes indistinguishable from the horrors of the Abyss in all but flesh.

Leaving aside the wisdom and morality of such an action, however, some masters would question its effectiveness, as well. Killing the host frees the soul from the body, yes, but who's to say the Abyssal spark inside the soul would die? What if the host's death granted the Lethean entry into Stygia or the Underworld? What if the violence of the action gave birth to a ghost? What if the Lethean tried to flee the soul, and burrowed further into Astral Space, into the Temenos — and had a whole world of hosts to choose from next?

The ruthless, then, would sever the host's soul and seal it away. Imprisoned in the Oneiros, without a way

to reach the material world, the Lethean is no real threat. Of course, this assumes that no one reattaches the soul to the host, or contacts the soul through magical means. Anyone planning to trap the Lethean should know how to keep a secret, or prepare for conflict with acamoth and their servants.

One last option remains. If the host's first lost memory is returned, then the Lethean can be driven out of the host's soul and back into the Abyss. The recovered memory must be brought into the Oneiros in a symbolic form and presented to the Lethean. If the memory revolves around a person, then the person must enter the host's dreams. If the memory is of a place or an object, whoever seeks to confront the Lethean must acquire a meaningful symbol or piece of the object in order to carry it into Astral Space. If all material aspects of the lost memory are destroyed, the only hope for recovery is to find a copy of the memory in the dream world — in another Oneiros, or lingering within the Temenos.

Once the memory is recovered, and once the would-be rescuers penetrate the host's soul, overcome all Astral obstacles and reach the lair of the Lethean, a final challenge remains. The host must want the memory back. The host must overcome the lure of forgetfulness and oblivion. Only through the will of the host's conscious mind or the subconscious resignation of inner daimons can the Lethean truly be exiled.

Researching the Lethean

Capping Skill: Medicine

Action: Extended — 8 successes

Research Time: 12 hours; 4 hours

Appropriate Libraries: Astral Space, Goetia, Spiritual Parasites, Mental Ailments/Insanity

Possible Modifiers: Host suffers from unrelated derangements in addition to the presence of the Lethean (-2)

Successes	Information
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0-1

Nothing.

2-3

An individual suffering from memory loss may be the victim of magic affecting his Oneiros. Goetic sorcerers, inner daimons and acamoth all have the power to inflict such harm.

4-5

Certain spirits (acamoth included) are known to enter Oneiroi and reside entirely within the soul's domain.

Successes Information

6-7

Early Awakened psychiatrists believed that one vector for Oneiroid "parasites" was pathways from the Supernal Realms and the Abyss. The same pathways are used when a soul Awakens.

8+

A Seer of the Throne named Heinrich Fueller theorized that a being he termed "the Lethean" can enter damaged minds from the Abyss, devouring dreams and memories to make space for its nest.

Story Hooks

The Lethean is a strange sort of intrusion, providing what seems to be relief from the misery of the Fallen World. Themes of sacrifice and the value of beauty against the value of horror are very appropriate with this entity — is the memory or experience of something lovely or pleasant worth being relieved of the pain of something ugly or traumatic? Some ideas for using the Lethean in a chronicle follow.

The Oblivious Messiah

A Sleeper associate of one of the characters — a neighbor, a friendly store clerk, a co-worker or (less likely) a loved one — goes through a traumatic personal experience at some point during the chronicle. It's not an experience immediately relevant to the characters' lives (they've got enough problems dealing with the supernatural world), but it's one that noticeably changes the Sleeper... for a while. Eventually, however, the Sleeper springs back, and all seems well.

Actually, things aren't well at all. The Sleeper has been "healed" by the power of the Lethean, and soon begins acting strangely, alternately serene and depressive. As the Sleeper becomes more unreliable and forgetful, the characters notice that he's attracting an odd group of "friends" — men and women who seem to share nothing in common aside from their apparent respect for the Sleeper. These people are under the control of a cabal of Scelesti, and mean to protect the Sleeper so that the Lethean can grow and flourish. Once the Sleeper's memory gaps become filled with Abyssal images, he will become a sort of dark prophet, unknowingly uttering insights prized by Left-Handed Legacies.

Before the cabal can address the odd changes in the Sleeper, he disappears (perhaps while the cabal is involved

with another story). Having forgotten much of his life, he now wanders in a half-demented state, seeking out an old "home" that resonates with the power of the Abyss — a location where Abyssal energy leaks into the Fallen World, where both halves of his soul can find comfort. He is watched and protected by both Scelesti and acamoth, who view him as a guide to greatness. They believe that, once the Sleeper reaches his destination, he will act as a sort of lens, providing a pathway for Abyssal intruders through the Oneiros and granting access to the material world.

By the time the characters locate the Sleeper and disperse his protectors, he may be nearing his goal. Although part of the Sleeper's original soul remains, he can't help but see the Fallen World as a place of horror and pain. He wants to return to the darkness he knows, or bring the darkness to Earth; nothing else will soothe his agony. The cabal is faced with the difficult choice of what to do next, and whether to kill or somehow imprison a friend who did nothing wrong. The Sleeper sees the cabal members as fiery, painful fragments from a past he once loved. He doesn't want to harm them, but neither is he easily calmed.

If the cabal lets the Sleeper live, he'll be pursued by Scelesti who adore him and other mages who want him destroyed. Nonetheless, his Abyssal wisdom could come in useful when dealing with future intrusions. Even if the cabal steadfastly pursues a means of exiling the Lethean, the Sleeper won't be what he used to be (though he might become a useful acolyte if he retains the Lethean's distorted memories); the Sleeper's story is a reminder that the harm brought on by the Abyss is permanent and personal.

Inner Darkness

After witnessing the destruction of her cabal, a powerful Goetic mage departs the orders of the Pentacle and joins the Seers of the Throne. She intends to live a simple life in service to the Exarchs, and tries to suppress her memories of what she once was. As it turns out, she suppresses those memories too well — she becomes a host for the Lethean, and it gradually devours her past.

The characters learn that the Goetic mage is the only person who possesses the magical lore needed to solve a vexing problem. The mage, of course, is no longer interested in assisting. As the characters try to determine what happened to the mage and whether she's been brainwashed, the characters come upon evidence that Sleepers close to her have been dying.

The Goetic mage is subconsciously using her magic to manifest the inner daimons that exist within her Oneiros.

These daimons would be dangerous enough under normal circumstances, but the influence of the Lethean has transformed them into otherworldly monstrosities. They appear when the mage is angry, stressed or frightened; if she witnesses their appearance and their subsequent rampages, the Lethean removes those memories from her mind to ensure her tranquility.

An Astral visit to the mage's consciousness explains what's going on. However, the last thing she wants is to be drawn back into the world of the orders, and as the cabal explores her Oneiros, she feeds the Lethean one memory after the next in order to destroy the secrets the cabal desires and empower the Lethean to fight back. Retrieving the information requires racing against the monster — or convincing the mage that she'll continue to hurt others if the Lethean isn't banished.

Outer Lights

For centuries, every generation of a particular Proximi family has produced either mages or Sleepwalkers. The two most recent generations are no exception, but something strange has occurred. The father — a mage of the Mysterium — has fallen into a deep coma, and no magic can revive him or contact his mind. The son — a Sleepwalker — has retreated from his life, avoiding his mystical heritage.

A partial explanation exists in the hidden diaries of the father. Over a period of several months, he witnessed evidence that his son was returning to Quiescence and becoming a Sleeper. Horrified, the father decided to try to Awaken his son himself by guiding him through Astral Space to the Supernal Realms. That such an effort ended disastrously should be no surprise; no one has ever succeeded in forcing an Awakening. But the notion that a Sleepwalker could regress to a Sleeper is a matter of grave concern.

Not even the son knows the truth. In fact, the son almost Awakened some time ago, but couldn't bring himself to write his name in the Watchtower. He was too afraid of the change and of failing his family, and he clung to the Fallen World. Afterwards, however, he couldn't stand the glimpses of the Supernal that remained in his memory.

He became host to the Lethean, and quickly became a Sleeper again. When his father attempted to help his son, the mage was torn apart in the son's Oneiros.

If convinced to help, the son still retains enough presence of mind to lead the way to the family's secret library. The library's wards and guardians can be overcome only by a mage, but the effort bears fruit: the library contains a book that describes the Lethean and how to overcome it. The son isn't interested in having his soul severed and locked away, but if the characters choose to banish the Lethean, they'll need to give the son a glimpse of the Supernal Realms. Awakening him is out of the question; however, a Supernal Artifact, if brought into the dream world, might shed enough light to do the trick.

Traits

Though the Lethean cannot manifest in the Fallen World, the Lethean may be faced and perhaps defeated within the Oneiros of its host.

The Lethean

Rank: 2

Attributes: Power 4, Finesse 3, Resistance 6

Willpower: 10

Essence: 15 (max 15)

Initiative: 9

Defense: 4

Speed: 12

Size: 5

Corpus: 11

Influences: Astral Memories 5

Numina: Blast (dice pool 7), Empower Host

Empower Host: The Lethean can grant its host points of Mana or Willpower by spending points of Essence on a one-for-one basis. The Lethean can also grant points of Willpower by spending points of its own Willpower.

Ban: When presented with the first memory the Lethean consumed in a given host, the Lethean must flee that host.

The Nativity

The Child, The Virgin Birth, Abyssal Conception

I know I'm not the goddamn father. We had the DNA test done – not that Becky liked that idea, but I made her do it. Thing is, she won't tell me who she slept with. She swears up and down that she's been faithful to me, always faithful, but that's a hunk of shit.

Michael's a good kid, don't get me wrong. I love him. I'm his father in name, if not in blood. But something's not right with him. It's not just the asthma, or his weird little nosebleeds or even the way he seems more grown-up than we are half the time. No. It's his eyes. It's the way he looks at you. Don't tell anybody this, and for fuck's sake don't tell Becky this – but the kid's creepy.

Becky won't hear any of it anyhow. She loves him. She's obsessed with him, I think. She's so overprotective. She's always saying that people are snooping around, spying on the kid, but that's crazy. Sometimes, and I know this is nuts, but I think she'd kill me before she let me get to the bottom of his problem. She loves that kid more than she loves anything or anyone. Even herself.

The virgin birth – in which a child is conceived outside of man with the power of the divine – is considered to be the province of myth and religion. The most recognized example is, of course, the conception of Jesus. The child fostered within Mary's womb was not given to her by a biological father, but instead born of the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit. That is by no means the only example of such conception in myth, however. Various theogonies offer gods born of mortal women with no human fathers (Mithras, for instance). Still, all of this is the domain of legend alone, right? Sadly not.

Sometimes, a grim spark crosses the gulf between worlds. A tiny mote of the Abyss – as spiritually insignificant as a fly or speck of black dust – seeds one of the embryos inside a woman's womb. From that embryo, a child is born.

The child seems normal... mostly. The offspring, son or daughter, suffers from an elevated number of childhood ailments, but such a thing isn't particularly abnormal. Colic, asthma, eczema: such diseases are seen as unfortunate, but not out of the ordinary. The child likely appears a little pale and frail, but not every kid is going to be a ballerina or a football star. Wise onlookers notice that such frailties are not the extent of the strangeness sur-

rounding such a child, particularly if the mother claims that the child was miraculously conceived.

Some may notice that strange things happen around the child. Not to him, precisely, but bad things happen in his presence. Moments after he crosses the street, two cars collide at the exact spot where he just walked. As the boy watches a soccer game at the elementary school, the ball hurtles by his head and the kicker steps on uneven ground, snapping the ankle so the bone comes through the skin. Such happenstance may become even more bizarre: birds drop out of the sky as he passes under them, he spreads flu or strep throat even though he himself does not possess the virus or bacteria or computers fritz out when he tries to use them. Even those who don't recognize such patterns, feel uncomfortable around him. Those who do see how misfortune swirls about him know to stay far, far away.

Everybody except the mother, that is. The mother is fiercely protective of her baby. At first, such protection seems normal, even common. She doesn't want her precious to catch a cold. She wants him to hold her hand tightly when they cross the street. But her overprotective nature can become downright vicious – threatening teachers who dare to discipline him in school, knocking down a bully who harasses him, perhaps even kidnapping the child away from his assumed father to “keep the boy safe” even though she has no evidence that the father is a danger to her baby.

Perhaps the strangest – and most dangerous – aspect to the child is his relation to magic. The child certainly doesn't know it, but he suffers from a tatterdemalion soul: its spiritual fabric is slashed and split, and in the place of those ragged gashes, the Abyss lurks. The effect the child has on magic can therefore be quite damning – his presence in an area is like a big Abyssal battery, draining the raw potential for spellcasting, nudging mages toward unexpected Paradox.

Defining “Virgin”

Depending on whom you talk to, what myths you hear and what religious books you believe, the concept of a “virgin birth” may or may not be tied to a woman who has never had sexual intercourse. For purposes of clarification, in this Abyssal event, the virgin birth (or “miraculous

conception") doesn't require that the mother actually be a literal virgin. It simply means that this particular offspring is not born of mortal conception — i.e., sperm and ovum. The mother may have been a virgin, but might've just as well been sexually active, even promiscuous. Her sexual history matters little to the conception (though it may matter to the story). What's important is that the child was conceived supernaturally, not biologically.

Form

For all intents and purposes, the child looks normal. Sickly, perhaps, little strange-looking, too, but in no way does he appear genuinely abnormal. However, those with the Unseen Sense Merit feel particularly odd around the child. Such an individual might find herself feeling unusually cold when standing near the child, hear eerie noises (static, white noise or a high-pitched whine) that nobody else can hear, or feel tense and queasy.

The child also wreaks havoc on a character's Danger Sense. Those possessing that Merit often feel as if they are in danger — perhaps poised to be ambushed — when they are near the child, even if no actual ambush is coming. The sense of constant danger is palpable.

Various "Mage Sight" spells may notice a number of anomalies about the child. Grim Sight might show the child being surrounded by a vibrant stain of death. Sibyl's Sight might show that the boy's every action or word seems caught in a tangle of probability and loaded moments. The Prime spell "Supernal Vision" shows half of the child's aura is a consumptive black hole — as if he is in fact missing part of his soul. Also, too, the Death spell "Soul Marks" has a particularly bizarre side effect when used upon the child: the mage gazes for a moment into the Abyss, staring clean through the rotten holes in his soul.

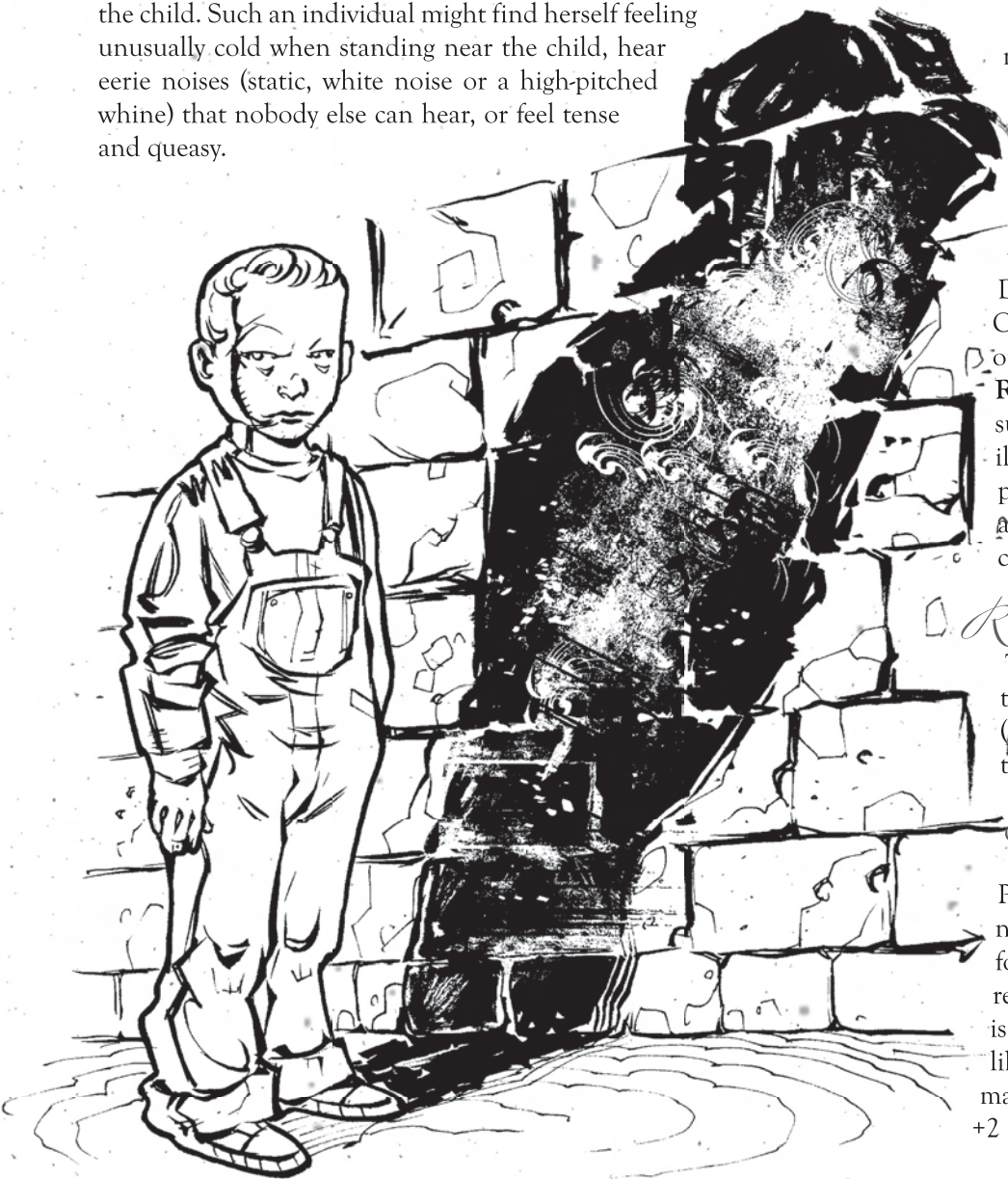
The sickly nature of the child manifests as any number of somewhat normal childhood illnesses: asthma, allergies, skin conditions, anemia, persistent ear infections, nausea, frequent nosebleeds. Also possible are various mild derangements: Depression, Fixation, Inferiority Complex, Vocalization (all found on p. 97 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**). Assume that the child suffers from at least two of these illnesses (at least one of which is physical), and that as a result, he acts at a -1 die penalty to all Physical rolls due to his frailty.

Rules of Intrusion

The following rules apply to both the child's intrusion into the world (i.e., his conception) and his life thereafter.

Paradox Generator

The child is an Abyssal antenna. Part of the child is oblivion, emptiness, a consumptive and eradicated force. Mages casting spells in the region will find that their magic is hampered, and that they are far likelier to invoke a Paradox. Every mage within a mile radius gains a +2 bonus to all Paradox dice pools,



reflecting the stronger presence of the Abyss in that area. If a mage is in the presence of the child (within 50 yards), all spells cast invoke Paradox and suffer the +2 bonus to the Paradox roll.

If multiple Abyssal children are in an area (two or more), this bonus goes up to a +4. Mages casting magic within one square mile of the child find that they must always check for a Paradox. Worse, they suffer a +2 bonus to the Paradox roll, thus increasing their chances of invoking the Abyss.

Bad Luck Battery

The child can invoke more than Paradox: anybody near him can suffer a sudden moment of awful luck. Those within 50 yards of the child suffer a -3 dice penalty to any rolls made during stressful, significant moments. Such a moment might be defined as catching an important "game ball" at the football game, trying to steer a car to avoid hitting a deer or giving an important speech. Not only does this increase the risk of failure, but it also increases the risk of dramatic failure during already dramatic situations. If the child is watching his supposed father build a chair, nothing goes wrong — until that last nail is pounded into the wood, a significant and perhaps stressful moment. The father, suffering the penalty, may suddenly drive the nail through the skin betwixt thumb and forefinger.

Note that this effect can hurt the child inadvertently. While the child himself does not suffer the penalty, if he is in a car when its driver fouls up and strikes a concrete embankment, the child may suffer or even die.

Sybil's Sight may reveal to a mage the sudden and grotesque entanglements of fate and chance that occur at the moment the "bad luck" effect occurs. It potentially looks as if the child is somehow the cause of negative Fate magic (The Evil Eye, for instance). Tendrils of sudden probability, dark and tenuous, lash out from the boy and embrace negatively affected subjects like a frog's tongue catching flies. The mage may conclude that the child is performing these magical feats of his own will, despite the fact that the youngster seems wholly unaware of it. Moreover, an examination of various probabilities (Quantum Flux) may tell a mage that what occurred was statistically unlikely or even impossible.

Agitate the Beast

Animals don't like the child. Most animals act erratically in the child's presence — dogs howl, birds fly into one another, a swarm of locusts suddenly rises and flies head-on into a wall. Some animals attack: bees might sting, a cat may hiss and swipe. Others may instead simply flee. As a result, the child may never possess any dots in the Animal Ken Skill.

The Child and Others

Other supernatural creatures may suffer effects when encountering the child. For those who have **Vampire: The Requiem** or **Werewolf: The Forsaken**, the below effects are worth considering:

- *Vampires* feel as if they're encountering another of their kind, or some mindless, feral monster: they must roll for Predator's Taint accordingly. Failing that roll indicates that the vampire feels in the presence of something ancient, empty and wretched. Drinking the blood of the child is both nourishing (two Vitae points per Health level consumed) and debilitating (for 12 hours after drinking from the child, the vampire suffers a -2 dice penalty to all rolls).
- *Werewolves* find that their hair stands on end in any form when encountering the child. Worse, if at any point the werewolf must roll to avoid Death Rage while in the presence of the child, that roll is made at a -3 dice penalty.
- *Spirits* flee the presence of the child. Most spirits won't come within sight of him. Those that remain within 50 yards in both the Shadow and the physical realm suffer a -2 dice penalty to all rolls. This applies to ghosts, as well, who are capable of seeing the child's soul as though they were using the "Grim Sight" spell.

Overprotective Mother

The child's mother becomes fiercely overprotective, more so as the years go on. At first, such a protective nature seems natural. What mother wants her child to become sick or bump his head? But with every year the child ages, the mother gains an almost feral obsession over her child's well-being.

This doesn't grant the mother any particular bonuses, but does ensure that she becomes quite sensitive to any danger her child may be in. Assume that after the child is two years old, she gains the Suspicion derangement (mild), and by the time the child is five, the derangement worsens, becoming the severe version (Paranoia). Most of her suspicions, however, aren't focused upon those she feels would harm her, but instead those she feels would dare to harm her "baby."

She's likely to spend Willpower during such times of perceived peril, increasing her ability to protect her offspring (such protection may mean she runs, yells or even stabs the "attacker" in the head with a bread knife).

Innocence

The child is, ultimately, not a bad person. While the Abyss patches his tattered soul, this does not necessarily engender the child toward horrible actions. It is enough that he is surrounded by awfulness, with bad luck and Paradox bleeding off of him in imperceptible waves.

Assume that the child is like anybody else. He can be good, he can be bad. If he's raised poorly, perhaps he becomes selfish and even cruel. If he's raised well — or is just plain good of heart — perhaps he's downright altruistic. The Abyss is not what makes the child bad, or even good. While the Abyss waits within him, it exists in a null state, non-sentient, simply allowing the child to force an awful effect on the surrounding world.

Means of Passage

A Sleeper woman's egg becomes fertilized by an Abyssal spark when she acts as a witness to a vulgar spell, which, as a result, then ends up invoking a Paradox (only a single success Paradox is necessary to cause this manifestation). The woman remembers nothing of what she saw, but in the process her womb houses an egg fertilized by the negative energies of the Abyss. The embryo waits and grows as any normal egg would. Affected women have surprisingly easy pregnancies and births — the embryo inside does its best to live.

When determining if a Sleeper witness is the victim of this process, the Storyteller should use his discretion to determine if Abyssal conception occurs. A Storyteller may decide to seek out other non-magical options when including the conception of such a child. Such options could include, but are not limited to the following:

- The mother is the victim of a serial killer, but is only harmed in the attack, not killed. As she recuperates in the hospital, suffering nightmares (possibly even locked in a coma), the Abyssal seed finds her suffering and makes her with child. Some may assume the child is actually the progeny of the killer.
- The woman herself kills someone. This needn't be in cold blood, and in fact, likely isn't. Perhaps she kills her husband in the heat of a particularly vicious fight — or maybe she bludgeons her father with a toaster when he attempts to again molest her. Once again, assumptions may be made about the resultant child: is he the product of incest or abuse?
- The mother suffers a wasting and perhaps fatal disease: cancer, HIV, a terrible infection. She is pushed to the brink of death, but suddenly, her disease is cured. Cancer goes into remission, viruses are only found as dead microscopic husks, dangerous bacteria are gone. There is a trade-off, however: the pregnancy.

The pregnancy goes easily, and the birth itself is surprisingly quick. However, every time such a child is born,

a “birth event” happens in parallel to the Nativity. The event is local, not global, and can be any kind of weird phenomenon. The sky may rain drops of blood and skin. The power may surge and fluctuate. A nearby dog may give birth to a litter of three-eyed puppies. A flock of crows may suddenly lose their internal direction sense and steer themselves straight into a building — even the hospital where the mother gives birth to the child.

Such events are rarely long-term. They are usually immediate, and don't have any obviously harmful effect beyond being truly bizarre. Of course, if the aforementioned crows steered into the path of a commercial airliner, then a harmful consequence may indirectly occur.

Miscarriage and Abortion

The child will not miscarry under any circumstances. Moreover, abortion appears to work, but the Abyssal spark merely winks out and appears again immediately in another ovum within the woman's body. While this starts the nine-month clock all over again, it guarantees that the woman remains pregnant and the coming child will be Abyssal-souled. Worse, any doctor who aids in the practice will suffer a -3 dice penalty for the following week as he is hounded by bad luck.

Mortal Response

The response by humans won't be an overt affair. The cops will find little reason to become involved beyond attending to the results of some particularly rough bad luck effects (a car accident, for instance). But overall, humans don't have any reason to suspect the child as part of any official investigation.

Unofficially, people might become wildly suspect of the child. They already know he's weird, and soon people will start to put together that wherever the kid goes, discord seems to follow. Do they simply ostracize him? Or does it go deeper, whereupon they actively punish him for his unseen powers? Is it possible that a small and comfortable suburban community could eventually see the boy as some kind of demon or witch, and in secret act accordingly to right the wrongs of the sinful child?

Means of Exile

The child can only truly be exiled in one way: death. It is the most straightforward and complete way of banishing this Abyssal intrusion from the world. Technically

speaking, the child isn't difficult to kill (aside from dice penalties incurred from acting during a stressful moment, or from casting magic). The child does not possess added Health levels, in-built supernatural offenses or any physical superiority. He is, for all intents and purposes, just a child.

Of course, it's a little complicated, because it's a relatively innocent child. Murdering the child, if a mage can get up the gumption, is a sin against Wisdom (hubris at Wisdom 3 if no magic is involved, Wisdom 2 if magic is used in the murder).

While death is the only complete way of banishment, other options are available to certain mages. Adepts and Masters of Spirit or Death may be able to make some magic that at least mitigates the child's negative effect on the world (though, of course, doing so may very well invoke a Paradox as per the child's persistent Abyssal infection). Such magic must deal with the child's ragged soul. Of course, this is never simple.

The child, neither Sleeper nor Awakened, can have his soul severed at Death 4, and doing so is equivalent to the "Sever the Sleeping Soul" spell (see p. 141, **Mage: The Awakening**). Doing so only disengages the soul, but the Paradox Generator effect is still in place around the unmoored soul. (Worse, the child then begins to endure the effects of soullessness, as noted on p. 276 of **Mage: The Awakening**.) The disentangled soul must then be handled. Placing it in a "Soul Jar" (see p. 137, **Mage: The Awakening**) negates the effects of the Paradox Generator — though, if the soul is released, the effects begin anew.

The Spirit 3 spell "Recover Lost Soul" doesn't work on the child, because his soul isn't empty, it's just frayed. The Death 4 spell "Soul Binding" can merge an extant, unmoored soul with the Abyssal "blank spots" in the child's current soul, but doing so can be disastrous for the boy: yes, this removes the "taint" (as well as the Paradox Generator and Bad Luck Battery effects), but it also gives the boy a severe derangement (either Schizophrenia or Multiple Personality Disorder) as a result of two warring souls within.

Of course, it is possible to completely sever the child's original soul and moor in a new one, but this brings about the difficulty of actually finding such a soul. At least one *Mysterium* history of Abyssal Nativity suggests that such a soul was acquired from the child's mother, in her last eerily nurturing act. Of course, in such instances, the mother was usually on the verge of death already.

A few mages, particularly those within the Guardians of the Veil, have ways of "operating" upon the soul, in a kind of spiritual surgery. Doing so is by no means

simple. First, every child born of an Abyssal Nativity is different, and no old roadmap works when it comes to extricating oblivion from a tattered soul in an effort to repair it. Second, the time to perform the ritual is double what it would normally be per a mage's Gnosis (see p. 121 of **Mage: The Awakening**). Finally, as the spell is performed, the child's effect remains active, and magic is harder to work, with the mage courting Paradox all the while. Only a Death Adept is capable of performing this kind of magic, and even that is more a "rumor" than something that is easily proven or true.

Legends suggest that such spells require great sacrifice on the part of the caster and of the target — anything from blood to loved ones to replacing one curse with another. Rumors also exist of old purification rituals — available to mage and mortal alike — that might be successful in purging the Abyss from the child's soul, but few are aware of what cost that may have on the child's body or psyche (or on the caster of such rituals). Still, some who know of the Nativity seek out such practices.

Even the rituals themselves are hard to find: recipes carved into the pipes in the labyrinthine tunnels beneath cities, pages pinned to altars in jungle temples, programmed responses born into the madness of Goetic demons and spirit Countesses. The rituals are long and require a great many "pure" reagents, anything from a drop of water from the world's five oceans to the blood of one of the few truly innocent men in the world.

Of course, one could always exile the child to a place where he can do no harm to the magic of mages. Crafty and cruel mages, however, recognize that they can harm their enemies by "relocating" the child into the territory of those who oppose the mages.

Researching the Nativity

Capping Skill: Occult

Action: Extended — 15 successes

Research Time: 1 day; 3 hours

Appropriate Libraries: Genetics, Fate, Possession

Possible Modifiers: None

Successes

Information

0–2

Nothing.

3

Through history, there have occasionally been children who seem to be at the center of ill fortune.

4–6 Moreover, those children are in nearly every case said to have been immaculately conceived, or the fathers sure that the child is not theirs. This phenomenon is referred to as the Nativity by mages.

7–10 The souls of children spawned by the Nativity are strange and tattered, providing some mages who study them glimpses into what is assumed to be the Abyss. Additionally, such children are Paradox magnets, drawing the attention of the Abyss quite strongly.

11–14 Children of the Nativity are conceived by a spark of the Abyss taking root in the womb of a woman. The woman is always incredibly protective of the child, sometimes willing to even die or kill to protect him.

15+ Some Guardians believe that there is a method, using the Death Arcanum, to “operate” on the soul of the child. Most instances of Nativity children coming to the awareness of the Awakened result in the death of the child, however.

Story Hooks

Below are three potential story hooks involving the Nativity. They are not complete adventures, but serve instead as good jumping-off points from which a story can be built.

In Which the Child Is Born

This story is the simplest and most straightforward on the outset. In it, the characters discover that a child has either been born or has moved into the area, and the child is the reason that their magic has become hampered, and Paradox strengthened. The possible means of discovery are multifarious: the word of a spirit, the use of Death or Spirit to track down any “anomalies” or even the pure happenstance of seeing the child while the Awakened’s Mage Sight is active.

Initially, the mages have quite a moral quandary to work out. They must in some way deal with this boy. Do they exile him? Do they exile themselves? The child

seems innocent, and nobody wants to bring harm to such a theoretically blameless creature — and yet, can the end justify the means? Can the characters convince themselves that the harm done to the child (even through murder) is necessary for the greater good, and in a roundabout way may even be a grim favor to the boy? Are they willing to risk their Wisdom on such a grisly act of hubris?

Of course, it can’t be that simple. Upon deciding a course of action, the story escalates. Other players on the field get involved. Perhaps the Consilium seeks to go against the cabal’s wishes (if the characters want to help the child become pure, the Councilors instead decide to destroy the aberration). Other cabals, too, oppose both the characters and the Consilium, maybe hoping to either use the child toward their own ends or even blindly protect him.

Worst of all, mages with Abyssal sympathies enter into the picture — the Scelesti see a prodigal son in that child, and will do whatever they must to protect him and wield him as a weapon. The list doesn’t need to stop there. Spirits may both oppose and aid the child. The boy’s mother, too, is a conflicting presence, possibly attacking those who come sniffing around. Demons may come sniffing around for opportunity, and an acamoth might find its way to the boy, seeking to somehow use the boy to return to the Abyss.

All the while, magic is difficult around the boy — and vital non-magic rolls can be difficult, as well. This can lead to a grossly bloody fracas, a struggle that carries out with advantage shifting, and power changing hands. The child becomes embroiled in a violent whirlwind of loyalties and betrayals. His very existence does more than damage magic and strengthen the Abyss — his existence exposes the weaknesses of local mage society, like kicking over a log and finding the squirming worms beneath.

This story can be complicated by a number of variables from the outset. What if the child is somehow related to one of the characters’ own families? A nephew or a cousin? Alternately, what if the child is the relation of one of the cabal’s enemies? What if someone wants to convince the mages that the child isn’t innocent, perhaps secretly manipulating things from behind his guiltless façade? Scarier still, what if the child is the manipulator, and isn’t truly innocent?

In Which There Are Many

One can assume that those born of the Nativity do not lead long lives. With bad luck perhaps coming back to haunt them and with their Paradox effects drawing enemies to them like a bug zapper beacon, few children ever make it past adolescence.

Unless, of course, they have a patron. Perhaps one child makes it to adulthood, surviving long enough to see life in his 20s or 30s. He then makes it his goal to protect others like himself. In some stories, he is perhaps a distant protector of such children, watching from the shadows and doing what he must to keep the innocents safe. In other stories, he may be more proactive, gathering the children (and their mothers, of course) together in one area – a form of circling the wagons.

The bigger question is, what are his motives? Are they pure? Does he want to make sure that their lives aren't as difficult as his own? Despite his soul's Abyssal infection, can his motives be truly altruistic? Or, alternately, perhaps he knows what he is and has given over to the emptiness inside of him, and he seeks to train others this way, as well. His cult – this children's crusade – can be dangerous in numbers. Is such aggregate Abyssal potency able to accomplish things that individual children are not? Are the gathered boys and girls capable of inadvertently summoning manifestations from the void? Is their magic-damaging effect cumulative, thus bringing magic in a region to a painful halt? Perhaps such offspring existing in close proximity begin to develop odd powers all their own: telepathy, telekinesis, even predicting the future.

The biggest question then becomes, what are the characters willing to do about it? These are still children, innocent or not. They still damage magic. They still bring about bad luck. The head of the cult – the adult offspring – may be a viable target, but what about the rest?

In Which the Child Is Valuable

This story offers a bit of a twist on what the child is, and can do. All the rules mentioned above apply, except now there is an added bonus: the child knows things she shouldn't. She is inadvertently the keeper of lore and secrets. Somehow, the child has become a conduit for lost knowledge; perhaps the holes in her soul allow such "floating" knowledge to creep through, or maybe some of that old information has been hiding in the Abyss for centuries and can come out through this reluctant mouthpiece.

The exact nature of the knowledge is up to the Storyteller – it may be information about what lurks in the Abyss, what happened with Atlantis or information about the Exarchs and their mortal followers. The point is, the child's information is intimately useful to the cabal. (Maybe she can even tell the future about the cabal's loved ones.)

The goal here is that, by being useful, the characters are likely to protect her. This is complicated, of course. She is still a drag on their magic, a Paradox anchor that threatens to destroy them if they get cocky. Worse, various orders are likely to vie to control or destroy her. The Mysterium sees her as a powerful asset, a link to lost knowledge that should be fostered and protected. The Guardians of the Veil see her as a threat to the sanctity of magic. The Free Council may think her a potent force capable of destroying the Lie, whereas the Silver Ladder may see her as an affront to the political stability (and the Ladder's self-proclaimed dominance): The cabal is caught in the middle, possibly with members on all sides of the conflict.



The Nemesis Continuum

The Law of Unreason

You know how Dr. Carey's been locked up in his office for, like, three weeks now? When I tried knocking on the door to ask him some questions about my dissertation, he opened the door up just a crack to talk to me. He looked like hell: his eyes were all wild, and he stank. I'm pretty sure he hadn't bathed that entire time. He started saying all kinds of shit; none of it made any sense. I glanced over his shoulder and saw some equations on the blackboard in there. I know it sounds strange, but I had to look away – the numbers hurt my eyes. What? No, I'm not bullshitting you. I keep trying to get the numbers out, but I can't. I see them when I close my eyes. I've been dreaming about them.

And they're starting to make sense.

An alternate set of physical laws originating within the Abyss, the Nemesis Continuum encompasses the scientific equivalent of the domino effect; the first proof that is realized leads to the second, which, in turn, leads to the third and so forth. As more and more of the laws that comprise the Nemesis Continuum enter into the Fallen World, the weave of the cosmos begins to “thin” in the places where such proofs are discerned. Abyssal physics begin to take root, subtly twisting the natural laws of the universe.

While the Law of Unreason has, doubtless, manifested before, in the halls of academia, in the secluded laboratories of demented visionaries and in the journals of painfully brilliant and disturbed prodigies, the curve of scientific advancement grows ever steeper. As it does, the types of learning that contribute to the manifestation of this terrible intruder grow more commonplace. The theoretical sciences that posit the existence of alternate dimensions and the nonbeing of reality as we believe we know it are less and less a matter of speculation and more and more one of scientific canon. Never before has there been such rampant opportunity for the Nemesis Continuum to infect the Fallen World, and the scientific advancements that loom on the horizon seem to indicate that such will only become more prevalent as humanity peels back the layers of secrecy concealing the hidden workings of the cosmos.

Where and when these “Abyssal realities” are realized, the Tapestry frays: slightly in the case of one or two mi-

nor laws – more in the case of multiple and/or highly significant axioms. Effectively, everything and nothing grow slightly closer to being simultaneously objectively true in such places and times, breeding the sort of chaos that slowly erodes the integrity of the Fallen World. If the atomic weight of hydrogen is no longer a universal constant in one place, what other unvarying constants might cease to be?

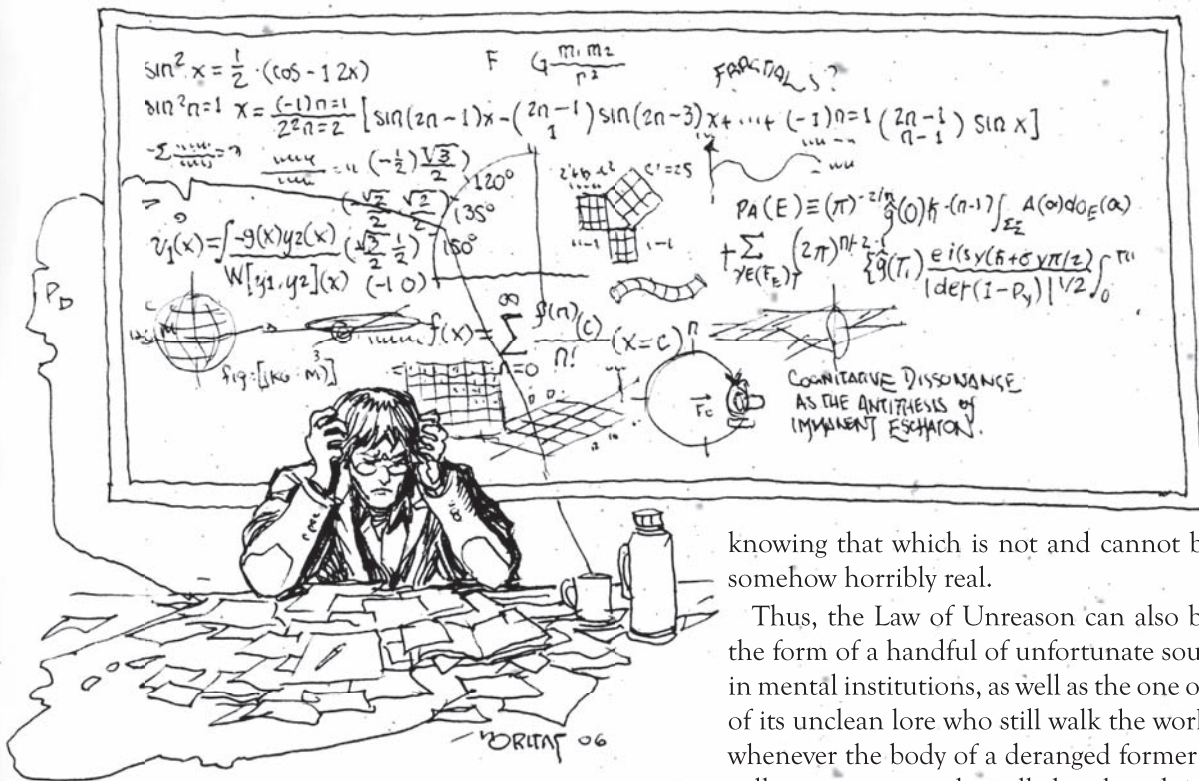
Of course, prior intrusions of the Law of Unreason have always been relatively short-lived, confined to the awareness of a disturbed genius, and perhaps an apprentice or two. The state of science in previous ages has simply been insufficient to realize any more significant manifestation of the Nemesis Continuum. While isolated instances of brilliance could lead to the necessary leaps of cognition, the practice of science as a whole was simply too primitive for most other minds to grasp such axioms. This, necessarily, leads to a most unsettling train of thought, however.

If the most advanced and esteemed scientific disciplines were, as a whole, infected with the awareness encapsulated by the Nemesis Continuum, is it not possible that the fabric of the Fallen World could be damaged by the swift insinuation of the “substance” of the Abyss on a scale never before seen? What if one or more of the axioms of the Law of Unreason were to become the accepted scientific practice, rather than the mad theories subscribed to by the easily dismissed crackpots skulking at the edges of the scientific community? Could the Tapestry as a whole come undone, its innumerable threads collapsing under the weight of Abyssal blasphemies not meant to exist, whether in truth, or merely in perception, within the Fallen World?

Most of the few Awakened scholars who know anything of the Nemesis Continuum think not, but it may well be that their assertions are born more of wishful thinking than of any solid scientific method.

Form

The Nemesis Continuum has no physical, or even ephemeral, form; it exists as a series of ideas, a chain of insane logic, each part of which eventually – and necessarily – leads to the realization of the next. It is a cascade



of Abyssal laws that exist solely to infect the Fallen World and, once within it, erode this reality's physical laws. One old source refers to it as the "Law of Unreason," and it is as fitting a name as any.

While the Nemesis Continuum may be represented in facts and figures, in numbers and characters that cannot be true and, yet, somehow make terrible and undeniable sense, it is not a thing: it is a constant. It is a collection of rules and laws that cannot coexist with those of our reality, and so it devours and displaces them in those locales in which it descends through the medium of human thought, to the eventual end of supplanting the physical laws of the universe completely, and replacing them with the void. It is debatable as to whether or not the Nemesis Continuum even possesses any kind of consciousness or self-awareness: essentially without exception, the rare few Awakened that have any kind of knowledge of it at all believe not.

If the Law of Unreason can be said to have any kind of material existence, it would be in the scattered research notes of disturbed and gifted minds, in the texts that they have penned by hand and in files on computers that have been squirreled away in evidence lockers. Facts and scientific laws, though corrupted and untrue — in this reality, as much as in its native Abyss — are its flesh, the stuff of which the Nemesis Continuum consists. Unfortunately, the strain that any true awareness of its nature inflicts upon the minds condemned to such knowledge means that they all invariably break under the strain of

knowing that which is not and cannot be, and, yet, is somehow horribly real.

Thus, the Law of Unreason can also be said to take the form of a handful of unfortunate souls languishing in mental institutions, as well as the one or two disciples of its unclean lore who still walk the world freely. And, whenever the body of a deranged former scientist's old colleague turns up, brutally butchered, irrational equations etched into his flesh and written with a fountain pen in blood and bile on exactly 100 sheets of dog-eared notebook paper, the infection may spread.

The Nemesis Continuum may well take a new form the next time it manifests, however. Who can say when it will be that a human mind might weather contact with the unrealities of the Abyss and remain, more or less, intact? Perhaps it will come to pass that a scientist or willworker may gaze into the depths of this knowledge that cannot be and come away stronger, not weaker, for the connection. If such a mind can exist, then it may well be the first step toward doom, not just for one place or a moment in time, but, indeed, all of the Fallen World, past, present and future.

Means of Passage

The most obvious means of passage for the Nemesis Continuum is for a portion of its substance to be realized by a particularly gifted (and, likely, at least slightly disturbed) scientist. This individual may even be researching such esoteric disciplines for purely altruistic reasons, making the manifestation of the Law of Unreason all the more potentially tragic, given the probably limited range of options for exiling the entity.

Another possibility is for an individual, whether Sleeper or Awakened, to come across a formulary containing equations that, properly deciphered, impart knowledge of one or more of the twisted axioms of the Nemesis Continuum. Perhaps this book falls into the hands of a

Mysterium scholar — maybe even a player character — and his curiosity unleashes the nightmares of the Abyss.

Yet another potential means of intrusion for the Law of Unreason would be during the Awakening of a gifted mathematician or other kind of scientist; as the soul Ascends through the Abyss to the Realms Supernal, the Nemesis Continuum somehow impresses some degree of knowledge about itself on the Awakening spirit. The new willworker returns to the Fallen World now possessed of a terrible understanding, and one that she cannot rid herself of, try as she might. Worse still, her great intellect and powerful creative imagination mean that new realizations regarding the Nemesis Continuum spring into her mind, unbidden, every so often, further damaging the Tapestry of creation.

Because the Nemesis Continuum comprises, and is composed of, the physical laws of the Abyss, it is also possible for magical means (which are as true and untrue within the void as purely scientific laws) to draw it into the Fallen World, though such would likely require an incredibly potent Scelestus. Such a willworker would also probably need ancient texts, powerful mystic relics, and precise configurations of unseen forces. Just as there are those Awakened who believe the immutable scientific laws of the Fallen World to be manifestations of a yet-undiscovered magical order, so, too, might there be Accursed mages who see the Law of Unreason as a purely mystic phenomenon, incorrectly understood by most of the few that know of it through the lens of science.

Transmission

If you're feeling particularly cruel, it may be that a character of great enough intellect and scientific acumen cannot help but comprehend the axioms of the Nemesis Continuum once she comes into proximity with them. Mages of the Free Council (given some of that order's reliance upon modern scientific principles, especially those that skirt the edge of mundane disciplines) are the likeliest victims of this possibility, though any character with considerable intelligence and education in the sciences is potentially susceptible.

For example, in studying the pattern of manifestation for the Law of Unreason, a highly intelligent character, one with a good deal of scientific learning, might read some of the scrawled research papers of the lunatic who first realized this particular intrusion of the Nemesis Continuum. If you're being nice, you might make the player roll Resolve + Composure, just to allow the character to not automatically process the information that she's seen and to put the papers down before

reading any further; as human beings, we tend to automatically attempt to make sense of anything that we perceive, within the limitations of our understanding. Otherwise, the character just begins to process however much of the information that she reads, so long as she has both the raw intellect and the training to comprehend it, becoming another carrier for its Abyssal logic.

If you choose to go this route, you may also wish to consider the infliction of derangements upon those that, willingly or otherwise, come to understand the laws that comprise the Nemesis Continuum, as they come to grips with "that which man was not meant to know." Alternately, they might begin to manifest subtle signs similar to Paradox, or some other phenomenon that sets them apart, marking them as tainted by unclean knowledge.

Rules of Intrusion

The Nemesis Continuum enters into the Fallen World through the realization of one of its proofs by a being native to this reality. In order to come to such a conclusion, the individual in question must be quite brilliant and a master of one or more of the "hard" sciences: mathematics, physics, chemistry and the like. Lesser minds simply cannot grasp the vicissitudes of thought necessary to envision even the barest fragment of the substance of the Law of Unreason. Of course, given that the Nemesis Continuum is formed of Abyssal logic, a certain amount of madness, whether latent or fully manifested, is also requisite. Thus, the cloistered "mad scientist" is probably the likeliest vector through which the Nemesis Continuum might insinuate itself into the Tapestry, but such an individual is by no means the only possibility.

It is an Intelligence + Science roll (no Science Specialties apply) to comprehend the axioms of the Nemesis Continuum. This roll may be made when the formulae for the Continuum are first encountered. This is not an extended action; understanding is not assured, and it comes suddenly, like a moment of gut-wrenching *satori*.

Roll Results

Dramatic Failure: The character's mind simply cannot process the Abyssal logic that forms the axioms. She will never understand the Nemesis Continuum, and may not roll.

Failure: The character does not understand the Nemesis Continuum. She receives a cumulative -1 die penalty to future rolls to attempt to understand it. She may make another roll to attempt to understand it after another three days of study.

Success: The character begins to understand some of the logic behind the formulae of the Continuum, but

has trouble putting it all together into a cognizant whole. She may make another roll to attempt to understand it after another day of study.

Dramatic Success: The character understands the Nemesis Continuum, and becomes infected with the intrusion's Abyssal logic.

Possible Modifiers: Character possesses mild derangements (+1 per mild derangement), character possesses severe derangements (+2 per severe derangement), formulae are explained by someone who already understands them (+2), character possesses the Encyclopedic Knowledge Merit (-1), character possesses the Mathematics or Physics Specialty for Science (-1), character possesses no dots in Occult (-2)

A character must possess the notes to continue studying them, though characters with the Eidetic Memory Merit can remember them perfectly. Characters with the Encyclopedic Knowledge Merit or Specialties in Mathematics or Physics actually find it harder to understand the Abyssal logic – it clashes with everything they know and understand about the way the world works.

Of course, the individual in question also needs to be immersed in tangents of research conducive to realizing such Abyssal lore, whether intentionally or accidentally. One doesn't just stumble upon the forbidden sciences of the void, after all. Not usually, anyway. It is possible that a sufficiently deranged or remarkably brilliant scientist could come to perceive such blasphemous truths spontaneously, without any prompting or prior research in such a direction. Such a scientist is likely to come out of a cutting edge discipline, or else a branch of a more established discipline considered fanciful or even faulty by the mainstream scientific community.

Once the idea of the Nemesis Continuum has infected the Fallen World, it becomes considerably easier to transmit. Those of considerable (though not necessarily genius) levels of intelligence, and with a strong background in the sciences, who have a close connection to the individual to initially realize one or more Abyssal laws, can become carriers of the idea. Those whose intellects have been significantly shaped by the person in question are particularly susceptible, as their thought patterns constitute a ready vector of passage from mind to mind.

Effectively, the Nemesis Continuum is easily passed along ties of sympathy, provided that the potential carrier is intelligent enough to grasp the theories of the Law of Unreason after they've gained an anchor in the Fallen World. The Law of Unreason is an idea that moves like an illness between acceptable hosts, an Abyssal meme. This also means, however, that its spread can be traced along lines of sympathy and that the infection might be able to be contained in such a fashion.

Remember, though, that the Law of Unreason doesn't actively try to spread itself; it doesn't actively try to do anything. At least, no more than the vibration of sound in air or the refraction of light through water is capable of making any kind of conscious effort. Just as such physical laws are what they are, without the capacity for self-awareness or reason, so, too, is the Nemesis Continuum.

A Carrier Born and Bred

A particularly long-lived manifestation of the Nemesis Continuum could take root in an isolated locale in which people still live. Perhaps a willworker sworn in service to the Abyss raised her family there, or maybe some vagrants moved in and have passed the site down from generation to generation as a place to keep out of the rain. Whatever the case, it might be that there are those, Sleeper or otherwise, who accept the physical laws that have bled over from the Abyss into the Fallen World as the real and true axioms of the universe.

That being the case, such individuals, of themselves, whether they know it or not, might constitute a vector of transmission for the Law of Unreason's corruption. Their means of infection would be subtler, however, than that more commonly seen in minds brilliant enough to comprehend the Abyssal laws of which the Nemesis Continuum is comprised. Instead, they carry the knowledge of this unreality with them, as normal and natural to them as the rising and setting of the sun or the fact that cork floats in water is to anybody else.

Thus, those inherently metaphysically tainted by the Nemesis Continuum, whether through birth and upbringing within its strange laws, or else through long exposure to them, might just bleed some of its substance into the Fallen World through their very presence. After all, they don't need to experience any profound revelations of the Law of Unreason's existence; they explicitly and instinctually understand as much. Of course, these sorts of individuals are bound to be disturbing and "off," even if they are otherwise good people. Odds are, however, that most would not be, having been spiritually defiled by the touch of the void.

Mortal Reactions

Any manifestation of the Nemesis Continuum will be confronted by ordinary people on two fronts. The first of these is by those who are actually exposed to the effects of its intrusion. Inimical to life as we know it, the laws of the Abyss will express themselves in various deleterious ways, causing harm, whether subtle or blatant, to those touched by them. People will start to panic when dropped objects fall too

slowly, or anything green is scalding hot to the touch, no matter the ambient temperature. If the matter isn't contained quickly, the intrusion could become the subject of a governmental investigation, though, as is more often the case with such Fortean strangeness, it is likely to be quickly dismissed and quietly shunned.

On the other hand, there are the academics who will be able to read the proofs and equations. Most, naturally, will be unable to process what they read, and so will dismiss such writings as sloppy scholarship, incomplete experiments or inexplicable flukes. Others will have some degree of understanding, enabling the infection to persist and even to spread. As it does so, most of the scientific community, however, will write off the Law of Unreason as ridiculous pseudo-science and abject nonsense.

Means of Exile

The Nemesis Continuum is especially insidious, in that it is “summoned” through intellection alone. Every mind that comprehends even the least portion of the formulae that comprise it becomes a carrier of its corruption, capable of realizing yet another proof and so contributing to the spread of the Law of Unreason throughout the Fallen World.

In order to halt the spread of the Nemesis Continuum, the characters have a few options. Mages have a lot more latitude in this regard than Sleepers, however. One obvious answer, though probably not the most humane, is to kill those who have reasoned out the laws of the Nemesis Continuum, thus preventing the proliferation of its corruption. For the most part, however, the Law of Unreason isn't something that people seek out; it is an unwelcome revelation, and one that can't be shut out. To murder those who have had such understanding inflicted upon them is truly a monstrous act.

It is also possible to cut off an individual from her research materials. All save the most transcendently brilliant of scientists still need to be able to scribble out theories, cross-reference ideas in books and access scientific journals for precedents set in similar or related work. Many of those who realize one or more of the laws comprising the Nemesis Continuum are apt to be terrified by these terrible new insights that they cannot shut out. Odds are that a group of characters offering to protect such an individual could easily get him to agree to forsake any further scientific research.

Willworkers can, of course, also excise the information from the minds of those that have ascertained fragments

of the Law of Unreason, but doing so is less a fix than it is a patch. After all, what is to prevent someone from realizing such lore anew? Another option might be to exile someone infected by knowledge of the Nemesis Continuum into Twilight or even Shadow; perhaps the different laws of those places might prove more resistant to the inverted physics of the Abyss.

Fortunately, as the Nemesis Continuum appears to have no higher consciousness, no sense of itself—being a set of physical laws, and not truly a being of any sort—it cannot put up any kind of resistance against those that attempt to do it harm. If means are found of banishing the Law of Unreason, it can take no action to defend itself; instead, it simply exists, passed on from mind to mind, infecting higher thought with possibilities that cannot exist and logic that annihilates the truths of the cosmos.

None of this, however, addresses the issue of what to do about those patches of the Tapestry that have been “damaged” by the realization of Abyssal unreality. It is possible, though by no means certain, that careful manipulation of ley energies can gradually set right the physical laws of such places. The passage of time would almost assuredly eventually smooth over all save the most forceful fraying of the Tapestry. Indeed, if the Nemesis Continuum has intruded upon the Fallen World in the past, no obvious evidence of such exists today.

Certain rites or rituals may be able to cleanse the metaphysical pollution of the Law of Unreason; perhaps the ancients, who were believed to be masters of all arts and sciences, knew of the Nemesis Continuum, to one degree or another, and took precautions against it. Somewhere, maybe even in a crumbling Atlantean ruin, there exists a grimoire detailing the means through which such a manifestation can be banished utterly, all traces of its corruption unmade and returned to the Abyss.

In the end, though, the uniquely fluid nature of the Nemesis Continuum means that can be dismissed through whatever means you choose to allow (if any). Key to the dilemma of ridding the Fallen World of this nightmarish Abyssal intrusion is the question of how one destroys an idea once it has taken root.

Researching the Nemesis Continuum

Capping Skill: Science

Action: Extended — 15 successes

Research Time: 3 days; 1 day

Appropriate Libraries: Scientific History, Theoretical Mathematics, Theoretical Physics

Possible Modifiers: Researcher possesses a mild derangement (+1), researcher possesses the Eidetic Memory Merit or a severe derangement (+2)

Successes Information

0-8

Nothing.

9-10

The phenomenon is an alternate set of physical laws, potentially every bit as real and inviolate as those with which humanity is familiar. The Law of Unreason's point of origin may be another dimension, or it may have moved "opposite" the vector of the Big Bang, occasionally intersecting with this reality through the shared connection of the two universes' shared genesis.

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The laws of this other reality cannot coexist with those of ours; the invasive laws invariably displace those of this universe. Points at which these axioms intrude upon the cosmos constitute deformities in the fabric of space/time, and perhaps even points of irreparable damage. In the past, a scant handful of scientists, always derided as crackpots, warned of such things, or else celebrated the coming of a "new reality" before their works and names were swept under the rug of academia.

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As with almost any mathematical or physical proof, the existence of one scientific law must, necessarily, posit and uphold the existence of others. Thus, the realization of one or more of these axioms constitutes a cascade of laws, in which perception equals reality. If a sufficiently wide-scale shift in perception could be created through the comprehension of these seemingly irrational truths, then it is conceivable that an alien reality, wholly incompatible with this one, might invert and annihilate the universe as humanity knows it.

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The character comes to understand one or more of the axioms of the Nemesis Continuum, and is now a carrier for the intrusion.

Story Hooks

Because the Nemesis Continuum is a series of twisted physical laws, rather than any kind of being, it can be difficult to incorporate into stories. How do characters do battle with the Abyssal equivalent of the acceleration due to gravity or the speed of light? Here are some suggestions as to how to make use of this phenomenon.

The Oak Hill Rehabilitation Center

Dr. David Carey was once a well-respected professor at one of the more prestigious local institutions of higher learning. He had published papers in a number of reputable scientific journals and pioneered some cutting-edge research in the field of astrophysics. If it weren't for some black mark on his record (his students were fairly certain that it was a drug conviction in his youth), Dr. Carey would've almost certainly had some kind of extremely lucrative job in a government think-tank. He was certainly a bit eccentric, but no one was prepared for what happened to him last semester.

Rumors vary, but all accounts say that he went completely mad toward the end of the term, locking himself up in his office for weeks, working on some new theorem that he claimed would revolutionize science as we knew it. By the time he was finally dragged out of there, kicking and screaming, two weeks into summer break, he had covered the walls, ceiling and most of the floor of his office in strange equations. When he ran out of markers and pens, he began to use his own blood and waste as writing implements.

As the authorities started piecing everything together, they came to the conclusion that some kind of shared delusion must have befallen Dr. Carey and a handful of his students. Some claimed that the professor must have somehow brainwashed a few of the most promising young minds in his class, as three of them began to exhibit lesser varieties of the same insanity that had claimed Carey. All had, according to various sources, visited him during his sequestering and descent into lunacy. Other professors at the school were asked to look over Dr. Carey's mad scribbles, but none could make any sense of them. Finally, the office was scrubbed down, sanitized and refinished. Dr. Carey was shipped off to the Oak Hill Rehabilitation Center; ostensibly to

get well, but mostly so that the college could get rid of him and write him off.

Now, a friend, ally, relative or someone else close to one of the characters, an individual working at the school, in the science department, comes to that character in question with an unbelievable story. She is aware how crazy it sounds, but things somehow still feel off in Dr. Carey's old office. There are inexplicable sightings and strange events. She's convinced that the place must be haunted.

Through their connection, the characters are able to get access to the science building while the offices are closed down for the night, and can confirm that the place is, indeed, somehow tainted with otherworldly forces. Those who have some experience with the Abyss, or who are versed in its lore, will likely recognize the telltale signs of such intrusion into the world. Perhaps the characters can do something about the thinning of the Tapestry at the school and perhaps not, but the best place to go next is almost certainly Oak Hill, to speak with Dr. Carey himself and learn the origin of the Abyssal manifestation.

Unfortunately, the now completely unhinged Carey has been slowly wearing a hole in reality from within the confines of his isolated cell in the high-security wing. While he has been confined to a straightjacket, so as to prevent him from harming himself (as well as to keep him from "redecorating" his room with bodily fluids), he has had nothing but time since his incarceration: time that he whiles away through extensive contemplation of his new scientific proofs. The Oak Hill Center has always been a bit strange, and a lot of the staff, desensitized to the weirdness of the place through long exposure, hasn't really taken notice of the fact that some corridors lead to the wrong places now, or that staff members lose short stretches of time while there. Most chalk it up to the usual strangeness of working in a slightly more quirky than normal mental institution or else zoning out.



If Carey isn't stopped, and soon, he may actually succeed in tearing through the Tapestry, and pulling all of the Oak Hill Rehabilitation Center along with him. As time goes on, the Abyssal intrusion will grow increasingly forceful and bizarre, as employees and inmates become trapped in a hell in which space and time cease to have meaning. Of course, if the characters end up going in after him (either to kill the doctor, or else make use of some other method that they've uncovered), they run the risk of being there when the intrusion reaches critical mass. If they don't go in, Carey will almost certainly do irreparable damage to the Tapestry from within his cell, and an Abyssal infestation of unprecedented magnitude is likely to erupt from the hole he rips in the very fabric of the Fallen World.

By the time the characters have the clues necessary to point them at the institution, lesser Abyssal entities may well have wormed their ways through the cracks in reality, beings with which the characters must contend to get at Dr. Carey. By the time the characters reach the doctor, it is clear that death would be a mercy to him; his mind is a tattered ruin, completely debased by Abyssal lore that he no longer has the wits or the will to shut out. If they don't kill him, or otherwise find a way to cut the knowledge out of his mind, he will almost certainly vanish into the Abyss, taking some unknown fragment of the Fallen World with him.

Unwelcome Knowledge

A local mage, an initiate of a technogistic Legacy (see **Legacies: The Sublime** for an explanation of what constitutes technogistic belief and practice) and a gifted scientist, comes to one or more of the characters and begs for help. He has somehow stumbled onto a few of the axioms of the Nemesis Continuum while deep in meditation, and, a scholar of Abyssal lore, he is also aware, to some degree, of the law of Unreason's nature. He desperately wants to be rid of the knowledge, but it

haunts his thoughts, distracting him from making any progress is his quest to be free of it; it's taking nearly all of his powers of concentration to keep from considering this awful understanding too deeply.

He asks the characters to look for a "cure" for the insane truths that have invaded his mind, while he locks himself up in an isolated place and struggles to keep his thoughts free of any further realizations of Abyssal reasoning. As the search for an answer progresses, the willworker begins to lose his grasp on reality, and his fight for sanity becomes an uphill battle. Eventually, he makes a frantic call to one of the characters, telling her that, if she and her friends cannot find a solution soon, they have to kill him. If she refuses, then he tells her that he will soon have no option but to end his own life, for the sake of the Consilium.

Whether or not the characters manage to save this technostic willworker, the problem may not be solved. They may have addressed the symptom and not the sickness. Perhaps a Scelestus or minor Abyssal spirit is transmitting the knowledge of the Nemesis Continuum in dreams, or maybe the mage's leap of insight was originally inspired by a book in his library, one that's now gone missing.

Fraying Threads

Long ago, perhaps even before any formal Consilium was founded locally, a brilliant Scelestus mathematician unraveled some of the enigma that comprises the Law of Unreason. Because she could not openly reveal what she knew (as much for her gender as for the blasphemous lore that such knowledge encompassed), she performed all of her terrible calculations and experiments from within the safety of her Demesne. Without any students to pass her teachings on to, however, the secrets of her research died with her and, just as the Scelestus herself, were forgotten by the world, locked away within her sanctum, hidden deep beneath her unremarkable home.

Recent construction in one of the historical neighborhoods of the city in which the Consilium is located, however, has turned up all sorts of oddities. One local surveyor, inspecting some newly dug tunnels in which sewer piping is to be laid has reported strange bouts of

"missing time." Another worker, who was checking the structural integrity of the foundations of a particularly old house, has come away without the ability to perceive the color red for the past two days. Whenever he is able to see any hint of red, his eyes instead register some strange, faintly luminous dead gray, and he gets splitting headaches for hours.

The construction is getting very close to the hidden sanctum of the Scelestus, in which her studies have badly eroded the physics of the Fallen World. If the cityworkers should discover the place before it can be destroyed or otherwise permanently locked away from Sleepers, then the secrecy of the Mysteries may be badly compromised, to say nothing of what manner of otherworldly horrors, both subtle and blatant, could be released upon the city, and perhaps even on a far wider scale, once the seals of the sanctum are breached.

Traits

While the Nemesis Continuum does not possess any true form (being an idea, rather than a being), it can and does create alterations to the Tapestry in ways that can be perceived and interacted with. Consider the points of intrusion for the Law of Unreason to manifest as Paradoxes. Anomaly is probably the most common sort of Paradox that crops up, but all of them are possibilities: dwelling overlong in a place tainted by Abyssal logic might lead to Bedlam, while a creature might worm its way through a gap in the Tapestry, leading to a Manifestation. Even Branding is possible, as Abyssal biology insinuates itself into the Pattern of a living being.

In the worst case, in places where a number of the laws of the Nemesis Continuum have been realized, semi-permanent spell effects, generally of a physical nature, might start to take root — altered gravity or strange alterations of the material states of inert matter, for example. The most common effects for the Law of Unreason to replicate are those of the Arcana of Forces, Matter, Space and Time. In addition, Paradox rolls are likely to be increased by one to three dice, depending upon the severity of the wear to the Tapestry in a given place, meaning that the intrusion, ultimately, compounds itself through the incautious use of the very powers that may be able to end it.

The Ractain

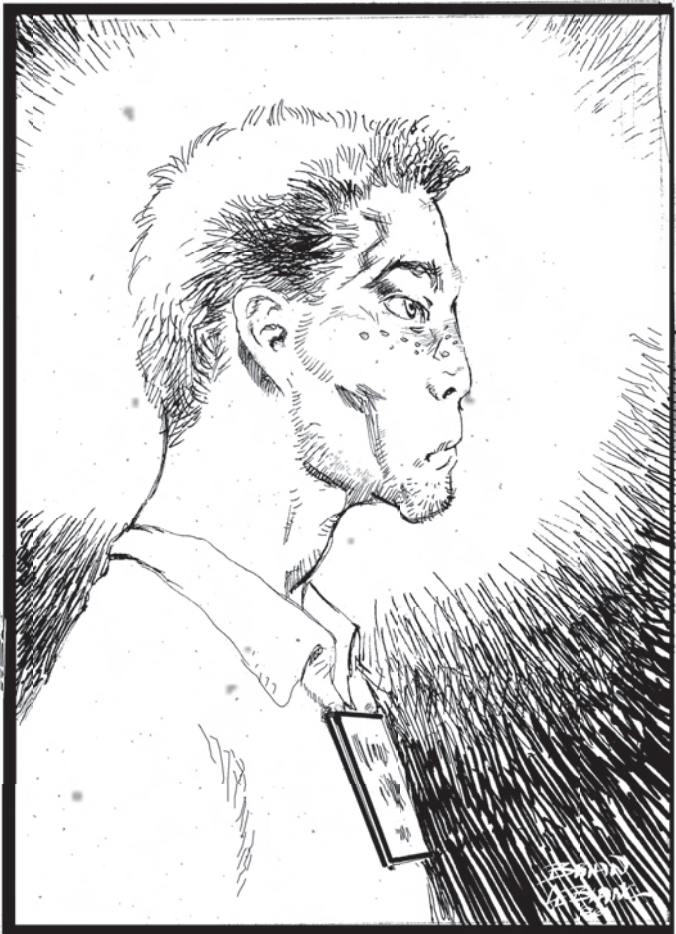
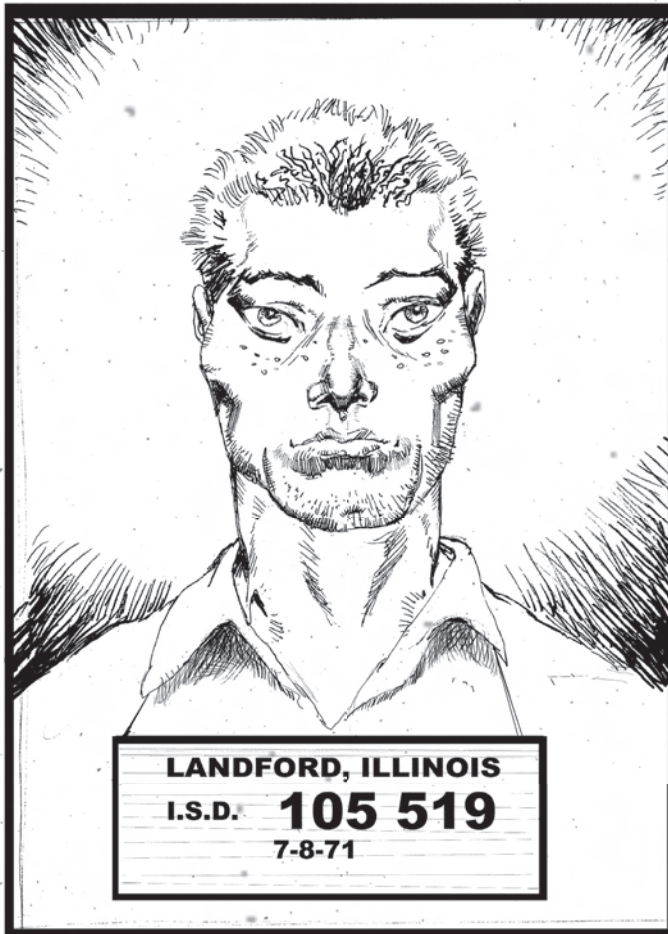
Ractain Contagion, Abyssal Plague, Shadow Sickness

According to neighbors, the patient's husband was the first to go blind. He also suffered from some kind of dementia, claiming he could "sense things" about people. He also claimed to be able to see ghosts of some kind.

Our office was called shortly after the patient and the patient's father began to lose their sight as well, by neighbors concerned that it might be some kind of communicable disease. When we arrived, we found only the patient in the dwelling. She claimed that her father and husband were there as well, but we've found no evidence of them. Our field agent also noted that the men's possessions were still present and accounted for; we have the local authorities searching the area in case the dementia reached a critical point, and the missing men wandered out of their dwelling.

Not all humans are the same. One of the things that came out of Awakened research during the latter part of the 19th century and early part of the 20th century is the fact that there is more diversity in human expression than simply ethnicity. People from all over the world share a few unique and ancient genetic markers – signs that some mages take to reflect origins in Atlantis.

Others, mystagogues fear, have their origins in the Abyss. One such strain is dubbed the "Ractain Strain." Possessed of some peculiarities of thought and appearance, the true oddness in this strain of humanity becomes manifest when one of them nearly dies, or experiences a similarly extreme physical or psychological trauma. In such instances, members of this strain become a conduit for an entity known as a Ractain.



The Ractain manifests as a contagious disease, initially depriving the individual of sight and smell, while also giving him the ability to see the Shadow Realm and sense magic and supernatural beings. This shadow sickness is also somewhat contagious for ordinary humans and so can spread. If untreated, those affected may break down, losing material cohesion. In such instances, the individual's resonance is released, creating a locus as the individual fades into the Shadow Realm.

Form

This entity takes the form of a contagious supernatural disease that can be spread from one person to another by casual contact. In all cases, the initial carrier of the disease is a member of a rare and exotic human sub-species known to mages as the Ractain Strain. Mages know that bearers of the Ractain Strain are in some way connected to an Abyssal entity they call a Ractain.

Both mages of the Mysterium and the Free Council studied cryptozoology and the fringes of human diversity in their efforts to understand the truth about Atlantis and the other secret truths of the past. The Mysterium originally discovered the Ractain Strain in 1871 and similar to the other clusters of anomalous human traits, various mages have attempted to understand what the existence of the Ractain Strain might mean.

Similar to other similar human sub-populations in the World of Darkness, bearers of the Ractain Strain are found across the world; a recent period of inbreeding clearly did not produce this collection of traits. Genetic analysis indicates that this population is more than 15,000 years old, but it is also recessive and appears only rarely. Estimates place the total number of bearers of the Ractain Strain as slightly less than 7,000 worldwide, with the majority concentrated in the United States, North Africa, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, including Tibet, Nepal and small portions of northern India.

The Ractain Strain is nothing more than a collection of anomalous traits that include a few mental and perceptual abnormalities as well as a distinctive physical appearance that marks the people regardless of their race. All bearers of the Ractain Strain possess a photographic memory, an intense facility with concentration and a keen sense of direction. In addition, all specimens have wide-set eyes, an unusually flat face and small ears that are both lobeless and set flat against the individual's head.

Further research has turned up that fact that nearsightedness and an awareness of the supernatural (as manifest in a version of the Unseen Sense Merit that allows the character to be sensitive to all supernatural phenomena) are both unusually common among bearers of this set

of traits. Similarly, most bearers of these traits are lucid dreamers. Bearers of these traits are slightly more likely than average to become mages, psychics or thaumaturges (see **World of Darkness: Second Sight** for information on psychics and thaumaturges).

While these traits often run in families, the strain is sufficiently recessive that a family may go several generations without anyone bearing this collection of traits, only to have two or three Ractain children born to a single set of parents. Because it is so rare and its appearance is so erratic, few people possessing these traits realize that they are anything other than slightly unattractive people with excellent memories.

The Scent of the Strain

Werewolves and other creatures with a keen sense of smell (including mages using the Life Arcanum to boost their olfactory sense) instantly distinguish bearers of the Ractain Strain from other mortals. To such creatures, the members of this sub-species smell somewhat metallic and earthy — many describe this smell as somewhere between the smell of rust and old leaves. Because werewolves universally find this smell somewhat unpleasant, they never mate with or even befriend bearers of the Ractain Strain. As a result, bearers of the Ractain Strain can never be wolf-blooded.

Current theories about the origin of the Ractain Strain are exceedingly varied. The Daksha (see **Legacies: The Sublime**, p. 27) claim to have evidence that bearers of the Ractain Strain are half-breed throwbacks to the third root race (whom they call the Lemurians), but other mages largely dismiss this idea. One popular theory is that the individuals are evidence of an ancient and potentially widespread cult that worshipped and interbred with either spirits or the Spirit-Ridden. Other theories involve the Ractain somehow managing to infuse a portion of its alien nature into the human genome or worship by humans, which resulted in an alteration of their minds and bodies. Most mages who accept any of these theories also believe that this intermingling is in some way related to the Fall of Atlantis. Some of the more fanciful researchers believe that the Ractain was one of the ancient pre-human inhabitants of Earth forced into the Abyss by the events of the Fall, and that bearers of the Ractain Strain are people whose bloodlines contain evidence of interbreeding between the Ractain and antediluvian humanity.

Means of Passage

In 1926, members of the Mysterium discovered another unusual and potentially dangerous fact about bearers of the Ractain Strain — they are associated with intrusions by a type of Abyssal entity known as the Ractain. While it soon spreads to others who lack the Ractain Strain, the Ractain contagion always initially infects someone who possesses the Ractain Strain.

This initial breakthrough is always associated with some sort of near-death experience. Most bearers of the Ractain Strain who become infected by this Abyssal creature recently experienced a serious injury or life-threatening illness. However, anything that causes the individual to either almost die or to be in immediate and prolonged fear for her life can trigger this breakthrough. Individuals who have been on commercial airliners that have stalled and almost crashed have become infected by a Ractain, as have people who have been held hostage at gunpoint.

Ractain bearers who work in exceedingly dangerous professions such as firefighters, soldiers or police officers are in particular danger of becoming the host of the Ractain Contagion. Regardless of the cause, the initial symptoms of the breakthrough always manifest themselves when the individual first sleeps once the life-threatening situation is over. The infection never occurs while the life-threatening situation is going on, only after it ends. Bearers of the Ractain Strain only become infected by the Ractain Contagion if they suffer a failure on a Stamina + Composure roll after suffering an experience in which they almost die.

The initial contact with the Ractain comes in the form of a series of exceptionally vivid and confusing dreams that are always quite memorable, but difficult to describe. While the content of the dreams varies, they always involve meeting a mysterious person, often a lover. This dream is characterized by a peculiar visual distortion, where every object is surrounded by a vivid halo of prismatic colors and people and other living things have complex and changing colored auras.

Rules of Intrusion

When the person wakes from this dream, she can perceive these colored auras, identical to those produced by the Mind spell “Aura Perception,” in waking life. At first, she merely catches occasional glimpses of auras around people. However, within a day or two, the individual can clearly see these auras at night and in dim light, and eventually they become visible all the time. As her perception of auras become clearer, the individual also begins to catch glimpses of the Shadow Realm. First, she will be able to see spirits in the Shadow as blurry shapes surrounded by

auras. Soon, she will also be able to dimly perceive the terrain of the Shadow Realm like a photographic double exposure laid over what she normally sees.

Simultaneously, her vision and sense of smell begin to fail, until her eyes cloud over so that she can only see auras and the Shadow Realm and only smell the various scents of the supernatural. At this point, most affected individuals go to a doctor or optometrist complaining of strange sensory distortions. Examination of the individual’s eyes reveals a rapid and progressive degeneration that is responsible for her decreasing visual acuity. However, there is no obvious cause for the auras.

Because the geography of the Shadow Realm often mirrors the geography of the Fallen World, someone who is only able to see auras and images of the Shadow Realm could negotiate space with few problems. Some individuals examined by doctors have proved to be completely blind but still able to perceive people by seeing their auras and avoid most obstacles. This phenomenon has given rise to medical discussions of something referred to as “anomalous sight.”

Eventually, the individual becomes completely blind. At this point, she can see dimly into Twilight and clearly into the Shadow Realm. She also possesses no sense of smell, but can easily perceive and distinguish various forms of magic and types of supernatural beings. An infected character with no experience with the supernatural may not know about vampires, mages or werewolves, but she can easily tell that someone “smells dead” or that someone else smells like a large predator. In addition to these unusual perceptions; these individuals also automatically become Sleepwalkers once their sight and sense of smell have been noticeably affected. The reason for this affect is unknown, but in almost all cases, if the Ractain Contagion is cured the person ceases being a Sleepwalker.

Shortly before the individual becomes totally blind, her ability to perceive the Shadow Realm opens a rift so that she becomes a walking locus (see **Mage: The Awakening**, p. 60). The strength of the Gauntlet for several feet around her is always 1, and her presence attracts spirits. In addition, when she is exposed to powerful magic, comes within a dozen yards of a natural locus, or is within a few yards of two or more other infected individuals who have also become loci, the local Gauntlet becomes zero and the area around the person becomes a Verge. When this occurs, she can easily wander into the Shadow Realm. Once she leaves the presence of the power causing the Verge to open, the Shadow Realm captures her. Here, she can see normally, as well as being able to see the auras of these ghosts and spirits here and smell their power levels and associations. Also, the Ractain Contagion

causes this person to find the Shadow Realm physically comfortable and far less frightening than it otherwise might be. While she will almost certainly want to return to the mortal world, not being able to do so will cause her far less panic or distress than it otherwise might.

However, if the person remains in the Shadow Realm for more than three days, the Ractain Contagion finally runs its course. At the start of the third day, she falls into a coma and fades away into the fabric of the Shadow Realm over the course of the next two days. In most cases, the person simply vanishes without a trace. However, the location in the mortal world that corresponds to the place where she faded away sometimes becomes a locus that briefly becomes a Verge once or twice a year. If several infected individuals wander into the Shadow Realm together and fade away within a few yards of one another, then their passage is almost certain to create a locus.

If allowed to wander freely, affected characters find themselves drawn to each other and to natural loci. As a result, those afflicted with the Abyssal Plague almost always end up in the Shadow Realm if someone does not restrain them.

Unscrupulous mages, werewolves and mortal thaumaturges sometimes attempt to use infected individuals to create loci. All but the most depraved mages consider this a heinous act deserving of severe punishment, but the practice occasionally occurs, especially among the Scelesti.

Spreading the Ractain Contagion

Although the Ractain Contagion always starts with a bearer of the Ractain Strain, the Contagion often spreads to others. The Ractain Contagion is effectively a contagious disease. It is transmitted through contact with the body fluids, including the sweat, of anyone who has been "infected" with it. Both mages and researchers in the CDC who have uncovered evidence of Ractain "outbreaks" have been unable to isolate any evidence of a bacterium, prion, virus or any other physical contagious agent in the body fluids of anyone affected by a Ractain. However, the Life spell "Analyze Life" allows a mage examining the person's body fluids (or at a -1 die penalty, simply looking at an individual) to determine if a Ractain infects her. The presence of a Ractain causes the living being's Pattern to appear oddly distorted, as if some unknown and undetectable disease had infected her. The "Analyze Life" spell will also determine if someone bears the Ractain Strain.

While no one knows how or why it is associated with the Ractain, everyone infected with the Abyssal plague also has a significant overgrowth of normally harmless fungus that lives in the human body. This fungal overgrowth is difficult to detect with conventional medicine.

Characters make Intelligence + Medicine rolls to diagnose this disease at a -3 dice penalty, and few doctors know to use the specific tests necessary to detect this fungus. The effects of an overgrowth of this fungus are largely unknown, but researchers think that it is associated with mild sensory problems.

Fortunately, although contagious, the Ractain Contagion is relatively difficult to catch. When someone is exposed to the body fluids of an infected individual, the character must make a Stamina + Resolve roll, with a +2 dice modifier, because this Ractain infection is not particularly virulent. Success leaves the individual unaffected, while a failure means that the Ractain takes hold in their body and begins to alter their perceptions.

Mortal Response

Although there is no obviously infectious agent, someone under the influence of a Ractain looks as if she has a dangerous and potentially contagious disease. Most physicians attempt to treat the problem until it becomes obvious that it is contagious. At this point, physicians usually request information from their colleagues or the CDC. In either case, in the United States, the CDC soon learns about the problem.

The CDC has data on with three previous Ractain incidents. It was never able to identify what was wrong with the afflicted individuals, and has notes about how many infected individuals vanished mysteriously. However, the CDC knows that anyone affected is contagious and must be isolated from contact. Mages who attempt to deal with the problem once the CDC has become involved must use powerful Mind magic or otherwise fake an impressive set of professional credentials to gain access to the patients. Once they arrive at a hospital containing infected patients, CDC officials remove all affected patients to a carefully isolated ward, and only allow physicians and other official personnel wearing protective gear to interact with them.

Because the risk of infection is relatively low, the CDC does not quarantine the entire hospital, but they check out everyone who lives or works with any of the affected people. An eye examination is generally sufficient to diagnose infection. Given current concerns about security, possible bioterrorism is often on the minds of many of the CDC officials involved. These officials may try to arrest characters discovered trying to gain access to the isolation ward where the affected individuals are kept.

Means of Exile

The only ways to banish this Abyssal disease involve either curing the infection or isolating the infected people and allowing them to all vanish into the Shadow Realm. Fortunately, curing the Ractain Contagion is relatively easy, and so the second option is almost never required. Mages can cure the Ractain Contagion with the Life spell "Banish Plague." Alternately, isolation in an area where the Gauntlet is 4 or higher, combined with treatments to strengthen the subject's immune system, and powerful system anti-fungal drugs can cure the fungal overgrowth. In some unknown fashion, the fungus overgrowth serves as a conduit for the Ractain – combating the fungal overgrowth greatly weakens its hold.

The Ractain retains its grip on the individual even once the fungus is gone, but if the individual is kept in a region where the Gauntlet is 4 or higher, then she can roll to recover once an hour in an extended Stamina + Resolve roll, requiring the accumulation of five successes. Success cures the character. Once cured, the character falls asleep for 10 to 16 hours and awakens with all of her symptoms gone. Even if the individual is not treated, as long as she is kept in a region where the Gauntlet is 4 or higher and is allowed to rest and given reasonable care, which includes both a hospital stay and being cared for by competent relatives, she can still make the extended Stamina + Resolve roll at a -2 dice penalty once a day. Achieving a total of five successes allows her to throw off the fungal overgrowth, and the character can then roll to completely recover.

Researching the Ractain Contagion

Capping Skill: Medicine

Action: Extended – 16 successes

Research Time: 30 minutes; 10 minutes

Appropriate Libraries: Medicine, Cryptozoology

Possible Modifiers: Researcher is a member of the Mysterium (+1), researcher has contacts in the CDC or access to their databases (+1)

Successes	Information
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0–4	Nothing.
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5–10	Information on the Ractain Strain and knowledge that Ractain infection is a contagious disease that always starts with a bearer of the Ractain Strain and can be cured with Life magic.
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11–15

If not treated, infected individuals eventually wander into the Shadow World where they soon vanish, possibly leaving behind a locus.

16+

Ractain infection only occurs when a bearer of the Ractain Strain is placed in fear for her life. Infected individuals temporarily become Sleeperwalkers and can see auras and the Shadow.

Story Hooks

Both the Ractain Strain and the Abyssal contagion that infects it are one more strange piece of the World of Darkness. Below are some ideas for stories using them.

Captives of the Monster

A completely amoral but personally charming Thyrsus mage learned of the ability of Ractain-infected individuals to create loci. This mage has a Gnosis of 5, Life 2, Space 2, Spirit 4 and Time 3. This mage firmly believes that the creation of loci and Verges is a necessary step toward eventually recombining the Supernal and Fallen Worlds, because he reasons that the physical and spirit worlds must merge before they can be merged with the Supernal Realms.

In order to create a locus of his own, the mage kidnapped a bearer of the Ractain Strain and two other people. The mage then abused and psychologically traumatized the bearer of the Ractain Strain in order to cause her to become a carrier of the Ractain Contagion. Shortly after the mage succeeded, she placed the now-infected individual in a cell with the other two captives. One of the captives seemed to be somewhat resistant to the disease, but the other became infected almost immediately. Once his vision began to blur significantly, the mage took him out of the cell for various tests. During the course of one of these tests, the man, named Miguel, managed to knock the mage down and escaped into the night.

Miguel ran for several hours before a passerby found him and turned him over to the authorities. The police questioned him and then immediately quarantined him after hearing his story. The authorities dismissed Miguel's claims of having witnessed his captor performing magic as delusions brought about by his illness and the trauma of the kidnapping. However, officials are seeking the kidnapper, because they suspect he may be guilty of some sort of bioterrorism. Alternately, if the Storyteller

wishes to run a more personal scenario, the characters can be the ones to find Miguel.

Regardless of which option the Storyteller chooses, as soon as the characters either talk to Miguel or hear the news report of his ordeal, they will know that an Atlantean mage is using magic to try to infect people with the Ractain Contagion. Mages who have either encountered the Ractain plague before or who successfully researched the symptoms of the disease will know that the mage responsible is doing this to create a locus. If the characters are able to question to victim at all, they will also know that the mage who kidnapped him was a Disciple of Spirit who was also skilled at Time magic.

Unfortunately, this mage concealed his face, and between the darkness and the Miguel's badly blurred vision, he can provide no useful information as to his captor's whereabouts beyond the obvious clue that the house is somewhere within a few miles of where he was found. Also, around half an hour after the police or the characters initially question Miguel, the Thyrsus mage uses Spirit magic to command a Rank 1 spirit to attempt to possess the victim and force the victim to cease revealing information, and, if possible, to escape and return to the mage.

The characters know the kidnapper, but have no idea that he is involved in the kidnappings. However, they also will likely either know or can rapidly find out the names of most local mages. The characters may also know that the mage responsible for the kidnappings cannot succeed in creating a locus unless he either kidnaps another victim or walks through the spirit world and reclaims Miguel.

In order to succeed, the characters must attempt to prevent another kidnapping, gain what information they can from Miguel, and cure him before he vanishes into the Shadow Realm or the mage kidnaps him. The characters must also either track down the Thyrsus mage or find a way to lay a trap, possibly using Miguel as bait.

If the characters confront the kidnapper, he will appeal to their greed and offer to allow them access to the locus. In addition, he will offer to give them a soul stone he acquired from another mage, without charge if they allow him to go free and complete his project. If they attempt to stop the Thyrsus mage, he fights until the situation turns against him and then attempts to flee into the Shadow Realm. If he escapes, he will attempt this same project again in a few months and will likely try to exact vengeance upon the characters, as well.

Among the Homeless

One of the local bearers of the Ractain Strain is a homeless man. Recently, an attack by a mugger caused

him to develop the Ractain Contagion. He soon vanished into the Shadow Realm and faded away. However, he also infected another homeless person.

Because many homeless people in this area are somewhat paranoid, they have little physical contact with one another. Also, because of the conditions they must endure, most also have low Stamina and so they become infected relatively easily. While the Abyssal plague is not spreading rapidly, it is slowly infecting the local homeless population:

So far, no one who is not homeless has noticed the problem. Because most people do their best to avoid any contact with the homeless, the contagion has not spread beyond the homeless population. A few of the homeless people have complained to social service personnel about sensory distortion, but the social workers dismissed these problems as the result of long-term drug or alcohol abuse.

The characters become involved when a young homeless man witnesses some minor act of magic and comments loudly about it. It becomes rapidly clear that this homeless man is a Sleepwalker who also has unusual perceptions, including the ability to see nearby spirits. Any mages who know Spirit magic will also be able to determine that he is a locus, and from there clues are likely to reveal that he bears the Ractain Contagion.

When the characters meet this homeless man, he is worried and confused because a friend of his who had similar vision problems vanished into midair the day before. In addition to attempting to stop the spread of disease among the homeless, the characters can also try to rescue the woman lost in the spirit world. If the characters rescue and cure the woman in the spirit world, they will discover that she has Awakened as a Thyrsus.

The Carrier

An exotic dancer named Luna is a bearer of the Ractain Strain. She has four dots in the Striking Looks Merit, so her slightly unusual appearance is exotic rather than unappealing. A few weeks ago, the wife of a regular customer of hers came into the club and attempted to shoot her. Although the bouncer wrestled the woman to the ground and took away the gun, Luna was sufficiently terrified that she became infected with the Ractain Contagion. However, because she also possesses the Natural Immunity Merit, she is highly resistant to its effects.

As a result, it is progressing exceptionally slowly. In the three weeks since her infection, her only symptom is slightly blurred vision and the first hint of seeing auras. However, she is contagious. As a result, she has infected a few of the men she gave lap dances to. Because she is not vanishing into the spirit world or even becoming

so obviously impaired that she must be hospitalized, she can infect far more people than most victims of the Ractain Contagion.

The local cases of Ractain Contagion have not yet caught the attention of the CDC or other public health officials, but the number of cases will continue to grow, since Luna will be able to keep dancing for almost six months before her vision problems grow too severe. When the characters get involved, they must not only attempt to cure the infected people they find, they must also locate Luna and cure her, so that she will cease spreading this disease to her clients.

Traits

Though the contagion itself doesn't have any Traits other than those indicated above, players interested in playing a member of the Ractain Strain may purchase the Merit below to reflect the unique traits of that strain.

Merit: Ractain Strain (●●●)

Your character is a member of the Ractain Strain of humanity. This Merit mimics the effects of the Eidetic

Memory, Meditative Mind and Direction Sense Merits. In addition, bearers are unusual-looking to the point that most people consider them slightly unattractive. These characters gain a -1 die penalty to all Presence and Manipulation rolls involving attempts to use their looks to entertain, persuade, distract or deceive others. Purchasing the Striking Looks ●● Merit cancels this penalty, and purchasing the Striking Looks ●●●● provides the same benefits that the Striking Looks ●● Merit provides to most characters.

If the character purchases the Unseen Sense Merit, she gains the benefits of the version of this trait possessed by all mages (see **Mage: The Awakening**, p. 110), so that even if the character is not a mage she is sensitive to all supernatural phenomena. The character is also likely to be nearsighted (and so may have the Poor Sight Flaw; see the **World of Darkness Rulebook**, p. 219). Because werewolves notice the difference in smell between bearers of the Ractain Strain and other humans, there are no werewolves or wolf-blooded among this population, but they can become vampires, mages and ghouls as easily as anyone else.

Red Worms

The Parasite, Blood Doll Syndrome, Schistosoma piaculum

It's the second case we've found inside a week. I've never seen anything like it. Someone handcuffed the victim to the radiator in the basement. They put a mirror in front of her, and painted one word in blood: "Reflect." She was able to crane her neck, get her mouth around her own wrists and chew them open.

Thing is, that's not what bothers me. We see shit like that every day out here. The city is a monster's carnival, and I'm no longer surprised at what passes for entertainment. Bread and circuses and all that.

No, what I can't get my head around are the worms. She's the second one this week, but the fifth overall. Nobody knows

what they are. Forensics doesn't have a clue. We only know that in each of the victims, they're found all over the body, in the arteries and heart – thousands of them, clinging to the arterial walls with hooked mouths. Little red and black worms. Still squirming when we do the autopsies.

Reyes wants me to call CDC. Says it's something new. Some kind of new blood or liver fluke, but I don't want to bring them in. That complicates things. Instead, I got a buddy, hangs out at a bar down on Archer. Some of the guys call him "The Doctor," but he calls himself Von Scott, so that's what I call him, too. He'll know what to do. He always knows things he shouldn't.

Parasites are smarter than most folks give them credit for. It's easy to assume that they're nothing more than clumsy

micro-creatures, eking out redundant existences as the degenerate hangers-on of the biological hierarchy. But that's not the case. Parasites are cunning. Smart. Adaptable. They tailor themselves to elaborate lifecycles, sucking resources from various victims in an effort to maximize their own potential. Their abilities are honed to a cruel point, carving out a sharp – and very specialized – niche within their hosts. Parasites can even change the physiology of their targets, adjusting the chemical triggers of the body and brain, thus instigating new emotional responses and personality changes. Parasites are not primitive. They are wildly advanced.

The parasite in question here is *Schistosoma piaculum*, a cunning blood fluke. This worm is not born of biology, however. It comes from the Abyss, inadvertently drawn into the world when magic goes awry and attracts the attention of Paradox. The worm is insidious, quickly doing what it must to get into the bloodstream of a mortal host.

From there, the worm begins its life-cycle. The worm and its eggs help forge the hungry relationship between mortal and vampire, acting as a microcosm of the larger parasitical relationship between



bloodsucker and victim. Some Red Worm infestations have existed in the city for years, their populations waxing and waning but never quite shuffling off this mortal coil. Others are new, thrown quickly into the world by errant or vulgar spells, desperately seeking to wriggle their way into the blood-soaked urban ecology.

But it doesn't end there. The mage inadvertently responsible for such an infestation is left haunted by inscrutable dreams, whether or not she knows what she did. Other mages, too, begin seeing an effect not only on the human and vampire populace, but also on the very nature of magic.

Quick Vampire Rules

Though much of the lifecycle of the Red Worms depends on vampires, the Storyteller who wishes to use them in his game need not have access to **Vampire: The Requiem**. In general, simply use the following quick and easy rules when creating vampire antagonists for your mortals or mages:

- Instead of Mana, they have Vitae. To activate any powers, they must spend Vitae. To regain Vitae, they must feed from humans. Normal vampires can only spend one Vitae per turn. More powerful vampires can spend more.
- A vampire can spend one Vitae to heal two bashing or one lethal damage. One Vitae heals one aggravated, but takes five nights to do so.
- A vampire can spend one Vitae to gain a +2 bonus to any Physical Attribute for a single turn. After that turn, the bonus is gone.
- A vampire possesses any one of the following "spells" from **Mage: The Awakening**: Burst of Speed (Forces 4), Beast Control (Mind 2), Emotional Urging (Mind 2), Greater Beast Control (Mind 3), Telepathy (Mind 3). Each costs the vampire one Vitae to use, and does not risk invoking Paradox.
- Vampires take aggravated damage from sunlight and fire.

Note that this information should not be readily available to any character, mage or mortal. Even one item from the above list should take a great deal of effort — and risk — to learn.

Form

Schistosoma piaculum is a corporeal creature, a literal fluke that invades the bloodstream of mortal victims, and waits in the throat and mouths of its vampire hosts.

The worm itself is, initially, a tiny egg unseen by the human eye, cloudy and dark beneath the lens of a microscope. When the egg hatches, the baby flukes are similarly microscopic, looking more like clipped pieces of opaque intestine.

The adult flukes are, however, large enough to be seen without the aid of a microscope. Each fluke appears about twice the width of a human hair, though rarely are flukes as long. They can be more easily spotted because of their tendency to gather together in such places as the heart, where they cluster in squirming knots.

Means of Passage

A mage's misuse of magic summons the Red Worms into existence. They can be a direct result of invoking an Anomaly or Manifestation Paradox. The Red Worms occur likely as a result of the Primal Wild, though it's not impossible that Red Worms come out of Stygia, as well (the parasites do cling to the death trapped in the flesh of vampires). In a specific radius around the mage (see below table), all the meat spoils, whether it was raw or cooked. The meat (nearly any sort of meat other than, strangely, fish) goes bad by a few days. It doesn't immediately rot, but it does develop a slightly gamy smell and perhaps appears oddly colored (even gray). Most people won't eat the meat. If necessary, a player can make an instant Wits + Science roll to determine whether his character notices if the meat is safe to eat.

Still, some people — the desperate and careless — will eat the meat. While it won't necessarily invoke a long-term sickness (bacteria have not had time to infest the bad food), consumption of the spoiled product will result in nausea and vomiting for a 12-hour period, creating a -2 dice penalty on all rolls. However, consumption of the spoiled meat is how the parasite takes hold: within the contaminated product, the *S. piaculum* eggs appear buried in the fibrous tissue. Cooking the meat does not kill the eggs; they're quite hearty. Eating the meat means eating the eggs. Welcome to the infestation.

Should the Storyteller decide that the parasites are what manifest as the result of invoked Paradox, the appearance of such creatures can be determined by the highest Arcanum used in that particular spell:

Arcanum Dots	Manifest Range
1	10 yards per dot of Gnosis
2	30 yards per dot of Gnosis
3	50 yards per dot of Gnosis
4	100 yards per dot of Gnosis
5	200 yards per dot of Gnosis

Note that animals can eat the meat and become infected, and mosquitoes are capable of carrying the eggs. Getting

bitten by an infected mosquito (the eggs remain dormant inside the mosquito's body until it plunges its proboscis into flesh, whereupon the eggs are deposited in a flush of fluids) can transmit the Red Worms infection; the eggs remain dormant inside the mosquito's body until it plunges its proboscis into flesh, whereupon the eggs release a chemical forcing a flush of liquids to deposit them within the new host. Also, if an infected animal is killed and then eaten, the parasite spreads as well, the eggs having remained dormant there, too.

Rules of Intrusion

This is the parasite's lifecycle, in a nutshell: the initial manifestation begins when the mage miscasts magic and invokes a Paradox. Meat spoils, and within the contaminated food, the eggs of the Red Worms appear. If some human eats the meat, he also ingests the eggs.

Within the human body, the eggs — existing probably in the hundreds or thousands — hatch. The immature flukes grow to adult size within two days, and begin making physiological changes to the mortal host.

From here, the Red Worms cannot reproduce. They are asexual beings, with no males or females in the lot. Their reproduction, much like their origins, must be magical. As they thrive on blood and can only reproduce in the presence of magic, the vampire seems a natural part of the lifecycle. Whereas a vampire is dead, the blood he borrows to animate his lifeless limbs and power his preternatural abilities is far from dead — it is infused with mad, contrary life. Magic, in its own way. If a vampire drinks the blood of the mortal host, the Red Worms are consumed along with the Vitae. They are sucked into the dead crucible of the vampiric body, where they are then provoked to reproduce given the transubstantiation of mortal blood to puissant Vitae.

The fact that a vampire's body repairs itself constantly, thus mitigating the theoretical damage caused by the flukes, helps them survive in the vampire's dead bloodstream. Inside the vampire, *S. piaculum* lays thousands of eggs, and then the adult flukes perish. The eggs wait in the throat and mouth of the vampire. When the vampire bites another human victim for feeding, as many eggs as possible find their way back into the mortal body, where they can once again hatch, produce babies and begin the process anew. Mortals bitten that did not previously possess the parasite now certainly do.

This entire lifecycle seems damning for the parasite — too specialized to truly succeed, requiring too much random chance. The parasite is not without its tools to help ensure its existence, however. Survival is everything.

Other Means of Transmission

Consider the following if you're looking for other means of Red Worm transmission:

- An infected animal scratches or bites a human.
 - An infected pet expires in the arms of a loved one, dying in a gush of vomit and blood.
- Microscopic worms, still immature, wriggle to the human and can gain entry through pores or other orifices.
- More than just meat ends up "spoiled" with the parasite: milk, vegetables, even seemingly durable preserved goods.
- The meat infected does not appear spoiled at all. It, in fact, appears all the more delicious. Characters must make a reflexive Stamina + Resolve roll to resist giving into sudden inexplicable hunger.
- Magic gone awry simply infects a number of humans equal to the caster's score in the highest Arcanum used. No food transmission is necessary: blood contamination is immediate and random.

Inside the Human

The Red Worms make a number of changes inside the human host, most of which help the worm to complete its lifecycle.

Photosensitivity: The host becomes sensitive to sunlight. It bothers her eyes, and feels overly warm on her skin (even in winter). All rolls made during the day receive a -1 die penalty. This helps urge the human to be more active at night, which is of course when vampires feed.

Increased Bleeding: The human's ability to control bleeding is impaired somewhat, invoking a kind of minor hemophilia. Any damage caused as the result of a skin eruption (i.e., anything that caused bleeding, be it a knife wound or a split lip from a nasty punch) takes longer to fully heal. Bashing damage recovers at one point per 30 minutes, while lethal recovers at one point per three days. Aggravated damage still heals at one point per week. This healing factor only matters to wounds that resulted in bleeding. Being hit with a baseball bat may cause bashing damage, but not spill blood. Being thrown into a brick wall may also result in bashing damage, and a cracked head will bleed. The purpose behind this is to keep the scent of blood a little bit "fresher" around the host, hopefully having a "blood in the water" attraction effect for nearby vampire predators (who can sometimes smell blood with a Wits + Survival roll). In the same vein, some victims

find that their gums bleed, their periods are longer by a few days or they suffer occasional nosebleeds.

Inhibitions: Chemically, the fluke also decreases the host's inhibitions. Lowered inhibitions lead to riskier situations — be they sexual, drug-related or violent — and thus potentially draw the attention of predators. Or, alternately, draw the host toward predators by dint of reverse attraction. Assume that hosts infected with the Red Worms have a +1 die bonus to all Presence rolls, and a -1 die penalty to all Resolve- or Composure-based rolls. As a result, the victim is likelier to be found in social situations in which vampires can feed more freely, under the cover of the “herd.”

Inside the Vampire

The parasite makes changes to the vampire's physiology and behavior, as well.

Increased Senses: The vampire gains a +1 die bonus to any Wits-based Perception roll used to locate fresh blood via sight or smell.

Nurturing Instinct: The vampire becomes somewhat protective of those he bites (and therefore, infect or become infected by). The parasite wishes for an uninterrupted lifecycle, and so it attempts to achieve this goal by forging a somewhat sympathetic relationship between vampire and mortal. To bring harm or kill a mortal host — whether by guzzling too much blood or through other means of violence — requires the vampire succeed on a Resolve + Composure roll. (Note that “normal” and therefore moderated blood-drinking doesn't worry the vampire host.) However, should the vampire witness an uninfected human attempting harm against the infected (anything from giving her a shove to pointing a gun in her face), the vampire must make a Resolve + Composure roll to avoid violence and enter a crazy killing frenzy. Only one success is required, but should the roll fail, any and all (including the infected mortals) may be cut down by the berserk bloodsucker.

The relationship forged by the parasites keeps vampire and mortal close together, also helping the Red Worms spread more freely in crowded metropolitan areas. The physiological changes in a vampire actually push the vampire to care perhaps abnormally for those he infects, and so in seeking long-term “companionship,” a vampire may enthrall mortal worm-carriers with his Vitae. This enthrallment creates a small herd of Renfields from which he feeds. This creates, for the parasite, a kind of tightly connected and unbroken lifecycle. It is ideal.

Living Camouflage: Parasite-ridden vampires appear somewhat more human. Pale cheeks flush with “blood” (actually the waste product of the Red Worms), eyes brighten, corpse-like lines of distension fade.

Outbreak

How fast does a Red Worm epidemic spread? Among a certain class of humans and vampires, an epidemic can spread with moderate speed, gaining a new mortal or vampire host every few nights. Worth noting is that such blood fluke populations are likely to remain within a certain social class, regardless of the changes to host physiology.

If a homeless man is infected, he's unlikely to wander into a nightclub and be bitten by a cosmopolitan crowd-hunting vampire. The homeless man will instead be likelier food for the dregs of street-dwelling bloodsuckers. He infects them, they infect more of the homeless herd and other slum-fed vampires will feed from that herd. This creates a kind of socially fenced-in ecology. That's not to say it can't break free from that — perhaps the cosmopolitan crowd-hunter likes to feed on the down-and-out, getting a thrill from such “slumming.” That is the exception to the rule, however.

Mage's Madness

The mage responsible for accidentally bringing the Red Worm infestation into being is not free from consequence.

Nightmares: The mage suffers from bad nightmares, always featuring bodies (both dead and alive) squirming with clots of *S. piaculum*. Upon waking every morning, the mage must make a Wits + Resolve roll to shake off the effects of the dreams. Failing the roll means the mage suffers a -1 die penalty for the rest of the day, haunted by the nightmare, though a Willpower point obviates that penalty. A dramatic failure, however, causes the -1 die penalty, but a Willpower point will not eradicate the lingering modifier for more than a single roll.

Temptation: Worse yet, the mage becomes a target for tempting entities. The mage may become the target of temptation by one or several entities, who can sense the mage's Abyssal connection with the Red Worms. This dark sympathy draws them nearer to their supposed “ally” (i.e., the mage).

Should the Red Worm infestation caused by the mage be “cured” in some manner, the nightmares cease, as does the mage's invisible Abyssal connection to the parasites.

Magic Drain

The presence of the Red Worms has an effect on the magic of a given region. These magical parasites, whether they are thriving or suffering, are hungry. They sup on magical energies whenever they are near such power, causing several small but concerning effects.

The following effects appear within a radius equal to one square mile around a given host, either vampire or mortal. The presence of more than one host does not create cumulative effects, but it can obviously widen the radius of affected area. Any person within the range or magical spell or item within it suffers these minor effects.

Tainted Resonance: Resonance is tainted ever-so-slightly. If a mage attempts to Unveil the resonance of a mage or spell within the area of Red Worm carriers, any success shows a kind of faint crimson stain along side a kind of series of small holes — as if worms literally bored tiny pin-hole tunnels through the very fabric of magic itself. Note that this effect only occurs if the mage scrutinizes something magic — mundane objects and beings do not reveal this contamination. Similarly, a mage's nimbus when within the radius appears faintly haloed by a squirming blood-red corona.

Tainted Hallows: Hallows within the given radius suffer a drain on their Mana at the rate of one per day. The Mana, in effect, goes to the Red Worms.

Tainted Artifacts: Artifacts and Imbued Items suffer if they require activation. When activating one of these magical items, the mage must spend one more Mana than is normally required. (Persistent powers are unaffected.) This higher Mana cost exists whether the mage draws Mana from her own pool or from the object's pool (if it has one). Note that only magic objects within the listed square mile radius are affected — once out of that range, the higher cost is thankfully lost.

Mana Drain: If a mage is within the range of a Red Worm host, the mage will lose one point of Mana per day. Upon initial contact, she loses just the one point, and will only lose another after a full 24 hours of continued proximity to the infected.

Mortal Response

Humans aren't going to be happy if they find clots of crimson worms squirming around the bodily ducts of the dead or the living. The response to such a discovery depends on the discoverer, doesn't it? Some might want the local hospitals or even the CDC to get involved — or, if they're trying to keep it on the down-low, they might involve only law enforcement forensics or maybe a few trusted university professors (which may be how mages get involved).

Alternately, what happens if the media get a hold of the story? The news is very good at inflating stories into an epidemic of panic ("Shark Attacks! Pedophiles! Bird flu!"), so imagine what happens when they start saying things like,

"Is your heart crawling with these red worms?
News at eleven!"

Note, though, at no point should this indicate to the masses that some kind of magic is involved — unless, of course, mages leave behind enough hints or symbology that the media and law enforcement can tie "occult goings-on" to the infestation.

Means of Exile

The parasite is not an enemy one can punch, or even easily see. Combating the Red Worms, then, is a little like fighting a disease — admittedly, a living magical disease that squirms through the human body, but the core idea is that fighting them is always going to be tricky.

Tracking

First, characters must track an infestation. One cannot eradicate the parasite unless one knows just where (or in whom) the parasite lurks.

Science-minded characters (mage or mortal) may come up with a kind of test (as in John Carpenter's *The Thing*) that allows them to analyze the blood on the spot for the parasite. While one could take the blood back to the lab for analysis, that takes time, which some characters might not feel comfortable with. The on-the-spot examination might involve dropping the blood into a certain chemical compound or upon an affected surface (extremely cold, extremely hot, made of a particular material such as steel or wrought iron). When the blood contacts the "test" material, perhaps it sizzles, pops, even squeals like air coming out of a punctured tire. Perhaps the blood turns turbid and black, or maybe the test simply turns the parasite a certain color so that a microscope (or in advanced cases, the naked eye) can help identify the infestation. Manufacturing this kind of test requires an extended Intelligence + Science roll. Ten successes are required, and each roll is equal to six hours worth of lab work. (Also, an infected sample of blood is required as an example specimen.)

Of course, getting this test to work in the field can be tricky — getting samples of blood from, say, an entire nightclub population is a Herculean task. Characters might be able to identify the characteristics of infestation, however. A Wits + Science roll will help characters determine what potential elements are commonly possessed by the infected. Once those are determined, characters can use the Wits + Science roll or a Wits + Empathy roll upon other individuals to determine if they exhibit the traits indicating a potential host.

Magic may help a character track the movement of *S. piaculum* more easily. Mage Sight — particularly Pulse of the Living World or Supernal Vision — might allow a mage to discover the presence of these supernatural parasites. Pulse of the Living World helps indicate a parasitical infection, but only by studying the resonance of the infection can a mage determine if it's appropriately magical or Abyssal. Discovering the identity of this supernatural parasite takes only one success, but puzzling out the qualities of it (which are Abyssal, hungry for death, procreative) requires five successes per quality gleaned.

Of course, upon discovering an infection — and the sheer depth to which it penetrates a local niche feeding ground — characters have to determine just what to do about the situation.

Non-Magical Solutions

The first, most obvious solution to eradicating the parasite is to eradicate the hosts. This is problematic for a number of reasons. First, killing infected humans is murder, no matter how a character slices it. It's nearly sure to be a violation of Wisdom (or Morality, if the characters are themselves mortal), and it's more certainly a crime in the eyes of the law. While some characters may believe that the end justifies the means, the means are not without severe consequences.

An ancillary step to that is isolating the problem. Upon discovering (or at least suspecting) infected hosts, characters can separate the hosts from the rest of the herd so that the parasite doesn't spread, perhaps temporarily sequestering the infected individuals by persuasion or force. From there, characters have greater power over the situation, and may be able to then eradicate it — or study it — in a controlled environment.

Mundane cures for the parasite are only limited by the inventiveness of characters. Characters might be able to whip up some kind of medicinal brew — be it herbal



or antibiotic — that helps kill the parasite in a human host. An extended Intelligence + Science or Intelligence + Medicine roll can help characters do this, with 20 successes required, and each roll taking a day's worth of research and testing. Unfortunately, the parasite is resistant to such drugs, and causes a -2 dice modifier to any roll meant to wipe the worms out. (However, should the characters base their "cure" on an extant herbal or antibiotic parasitical cure — such as the way goldenseal, or *Hydrastis canadensis*, helps defeat intestinal parasites — then they can gain a +1 die bonus to the roll, thus mitigating that penalty somewhat.)

Vampires, however, present a massive stumbling block to curing the parasite plague. Whether the "cure" involves a syringe full of medicine or a 12 gauge full of buckshot, vampires aren't going to accept such actions lightly. Medicine won't have any direct effect on the undead

body, and must first be processed through a mortal so that the medicine is in the blood when a vampire drinks from that particular human fount. And destroying a vampire... well, nothing's easy about that.

Magical Solutions

Magic can have a hand in eradicating the Red Worms from a populace, but not without difficulty. Certainly Life magic can have various effects on a Red Worm plague. The flukes count as "base life," and a mage with Life 3 can use Transform Base Life (the Life 2 version requires touch, which is difficult when the worms populate the inside of a living or undead body) to make the flukes into intestinal bacteria. It may result in a bad case of diarrhea, but at least the magical parasite is gone. More useful might be Life 3's Banish Plague, which can simply wipe the parasitical infection clean from a single individual (provided she is alive and not a vampire). At the Storyteller's discretion, an equal amount of conjunctural Spirit is necessary to perform any Life magic upon the Red Worms, as they are at least in part a spiritual entity. Note, too, that affecting the worms directly with magic is a vulgar effect, as they are creatures of the Abyss. Paradox in this situation can sympathetically create more Red Worms, thus widening the infection base.

Magic can also be used in tracking a vampire's feeding patterns. Sympathetic magic is useful in monitoring whom a particular vampire feeds from, and when, thus helping draw a tighter picture of the infection vector. Is it possible that Fate's Sybil's Sight or Quantum Flux can allow a mage to identify and predict the course of the worms' spread from afar with the appropriate Space 2 conjunction? So, too, with Fate's "Interconnections" spell – the Red Worm spread certainly creates sympathetic bonds between individuals (infested blood shared), and can help a mage gain a suddenly crisp picture of the proliferation of the Red Worms.

The thing to remember with all magical solutions is that they generally only work on a one-to-one basis. The mage can aid or cure a single individual – not the entire lot. The cabal must still track down the infection, which can be present in scores of hosts by the time the characters discover the Red Worms' existence. Moreover, if the characters don't move fast enough, what's to stop the Red Worms from spreading?

Also, is it possible that mages could create something similar to the Red Worms? While they are base life forms, they'd also require Spirit and Death magic (three dots of each) to create. Worse, a mage who creates the Red Worms infestation himself is a Wisdom 3 violation (as it counts as causing spiritual possession and planning a crime against man).

Researching the Red Worms

Capping Skill: Medicine

Action: Extended – 13 successes

Research Time: 1 hour; 20 minutes

Appropriate Libraries: Parasites, Disease, Cryptozoology, Vampires

Possible Modifiers: Police contacts (+1), hospital contacts (+1), Forensics Specialty in Medicine (+1)

Successes	Information
0–3	Nothing
4–5	Red Worms have been discovered in the corpses of murder victims, overdosed club kids and a variety of "high risk" individuals such as prostitutes. Some of these individuals, however, were not originally considered high risk, but started undertaking such behavior around the time of their infestation.
6	There seems to be some link between food spoilages in and around the places where the Red Worms infestations seem prevalent.
7–8	According to some reports by the Adamantine Arrow, Red Worms are always found in vampires anytime there is an infestation. There seems to be some kind of link to vampires in the Red Worm life cycle.
9	There are indications of some mages having horrible nightmares about the worms in places of infestation.
10–12	More than this, these mages are discovered to have performed Paradox-invoking magic in the areas where the local authorities determined the infestations began. The researcher finds a piece written by a Mysterium mage suggesting that perhaps they are an Abyssal phenomenon.

Successes Information

13+

The effects of the Red Worm infestation on humans, vampires, the summoning mage and the local magical Tapestry are discovered. In addition, the researcher finds accounts of successful eradication of the Red Worms.

Story Hooks

Below are a handful of stories that prominently feature this Abyssal-born parasite.

Evolution

This story helps to answer the question of what happens when *S. piaculum* gets inside the body of a mage. The nature of infection is likely from the bite of a vampire: upon hunting one or several vampire hosts, one of the characters (or one of their mage allies) is bitten. In the process, the eggs enter the bloodstream of the mage and begin to hatch, flooding the arteries and heart with a sudden surge of Red Worms. Parasites that are now swimming in blood puissant with magic, close to the source. How do they react?

They react by evolving. Evolution is easier for such creatures as microbes, parasites and insects, because their lifecycles are so short that the constant reiteration of birth and death affords the creature more chances to change in accordance with its environment. Empower parasites with magic, and there's no stopping the depth of possible evolution.

While you're free to come up with your own ideas as to how the Red Worms evolve (and what they do once they've "changed"), this story involves them adapting their lifecycle to the mage and his surroundings.

First, assume that the parasite is able to "borrow" a mage's magic to serve the parasite's own interests. This can mean damn near anything, and once a mage realizes that the parasite has the theoretically limitless possibility in its hands (or rather, puckered hook-fang mouth), it should be terrifying. Can the worms borrow a mage's Forces magic to "feed" themselves with electric current or render themselves invisible to scrutiny? Can the worms urge other mages with Mind magic, forcing them to accept the parasite, as well? If dwelling in the body of a Disciple of Life, can the parasite modify its "ride" (i.e., the mage's own body) with Transform Self? Scarier, what happens in a mage with Space 4? Can the parasite then teleport some of its infestation to other mages?

The lifecycle adaptation can therefore remove vampires from the equation entirely. The blood flukes, hungry for magic, go where the Mana flows. The worms literally bind themselves to Mana, and when Mana is expended or claimed, the infection goes with it. If casting magic in which Mana is spent, the Red Worms are released — and if mages are nearby, they run the risk of infection. Worse is what happens to Hallows and magical objects that store Mana — the worms literally infect those places and items, except they no longer consume the Mana of those items. Instead, they wait for another mage to use them or draw upon the Mana (such as performing oblations or eating aggregate tass), at which point the parasite is now in the body of another mage.

Is the goal to simply remain alive? Evolving to survive? Or is there a deeper, more sinister vein of possibility at work? Is *S. piaculum* still an Abyssal agent, with its ultimate goal being to get inside as many mages as it can, pushing their magic to cause Paradox and thus strengthening the Abyss?

This story shouldn't purely be about the infection of mages — keep in mind that just because some Red Worms jump into a new lifecycle, the old ones don't suddenly do the same. No, there's still a mortal-to-vampire plague out there, growing nightly. The characters become increasingly hedged in on all sides — their mage allies (and maybe even one of their own) grow mad with infection. Vampires begin gaining traction and becoming overconfident, as the parasites within them demand. The cabal is surrounded on all sides by chaos caused from this tiny worm.

Extermination

A serial killer is loose. The killings are vicious, overly cruel. In each death, the killer traps the human, tortures him and doses him on hallucinogens. Some are found with mirrors in their hands, and on the mirrors is scrawled a word: "Reflect." The victims are either killed outright (often bled-out through a clean knife wound) or forced to kill themselves.

Here's the rub: each victim is host to a Red Worms infestation. The blood flukes are found in massive numbers in each. In fact, it seems whatever drug they're dosed with excites the flukes, enough so that they drive the humans more than a little mad in their final hours — and, perhaps weirder, enough to cause exaggerated nose and gum bleeding. Some even bleed out little rivulets of once-squirming worms, now dried and crusted to the victim's face.

The killer has become more and more brazen. At each scene, he leaves behind vicious religious tracts from vari-

ous systems of belief: pages from the Bible or Qu'ran ruminating on sin, messages written in Greek talking of hubris and *hamartia*, ruminations on karma from various Hindu epics. Does the killer believe that somehow the infected hosts deserved their parasite? Or was the parasite an emblem of pre-existing spiritual taint?

Who is the killer? A mage, gone mad with Bedlam, hoping to "cleanse" the magic? Is the killer a vampire who knows of how his brethren have become contaminated by this unclean mortal herd, and now hopes to cut out the cancer, so to speak? Or worse and weirder, is it some other Abyssal intrusion, attempting to wipe out its competition (or just bring the madness of the Void to the local sorcerers)?

Elixir

This story is a little non-traditional, in that characters deal with the infection only peripherally. The Red Worm infestation begins, and the characters learn of a cure for the magical parasite and must go on a dark adventure to procure a sample of this hard-to-find panacea.

That's the key: "hard-to-find." It can be anything you want as long as it's difficult to procure: some bizarre herb

that grows only on the side of one wind-swept mountain during one month a year, or instead is a Akkadian poem written on fragile papyrus found in some subterranean temple beneath bombed-out Baghdad. The cure can be magical, biological or maybe is even a mortal or vampire who has survived and purged the parasite.

This is ultimately a toolbox adventure, with a "create-your-own" antagonist to stand in the way of the characters obtaining the cure. Does a cruel pack of Banishers stand in the way, believing that the magical parasitical plague is necessary to weaken mages and magic? Do Abyssal entities affect the world and call upon mortal servitors to stand in the cabal's way? Could be that the antagonists are primarily mundane humans. Should the characters have to hunt in a war zone for the cure, they may have to deal with rogue factions, kidnappings, "friendly fire" or about 1,000 other hazards of the battlefield.

Characters should run on a time clock. They know that the infection is spreading. They receive occasional word of the depth of the infestation, perhaps even learning that it has spread somehow to other cities. Can they get back in time? Is there a zero hour?



The Shard

The Game

WaywardSoldier: Jesus Christ! That mob sucked. Who drew all that aggro?

69Crowley: me, i think, sorry

Amethyst: Did we get the drop

69Crowley: y

Razordog: It came into my inventory. I got it.

WaywardSoldier: Do we have all the pieces?

69Crowley: thinkso

Amethyst: I have the Dark Elf Skin and the Book of Banishing

Amethyst: Crowley should have the Eye Spike of Marduk

69Crowley: yy

Razordog: Wayward, I have the Black Diamond, and you got the Book of Exegesis, right?

WaywardSoldier: Yeah. We ready to combine this stuff? See if it opens the door like the FAQ said?

Razordog: Let's do it.

WaywardSoldier: Crap, I don't see anything.

WaywardSoldier: Guys? Anything on your end?

WaywardSoldier: Hello?

Razordog: gggggggggggggg

Amethyst: *(&^0 ;::: #||

Razordog: gggggggggggggggggggggggggg

WaywardSoldier: WTF? *Guys?*

69Crowley: ittssodarkhereittssodarkhereittsodarkhereHELPME

It begins with an email. The email is an invitation, a free offer to join a new online game. The name of the game – and the exact nature of the persistent world one may join – is by no means consistent. The setting might be a fantasy world featuring the battle between good versus evil. It might be superheroes or survival horror. Could be a gritty sci-fi game or anime-flavored steampunk. The

game is different in different parts of the world, but it's all part of the same network: the Shard.

To most who play the game, it's like any other MMORPG. Fight monsters or adversaries. Gather loot and treasure, which might be anything from shiny plate armor to cybernetic implants (depending on the game's setting). Gather experience points from the destruction of enemies and the completion of quests. Continue grinding level after level, quest after quest.

For many, that's where it stops. They play the game for free over several months, or even years, until eventually one day the game is gone, the servers closed, with connection impossible. Emailing the company is fruitless. The player's effort is gone with the character. He'll never receive another invitation again.

Others, however, undergo a different experience. Some become addicted to the game. They find themselves unable to easily withdraw from the experience. As time goes on, it becomes harder to log off, harder to return to a normal life. Family life suffers. Friendships and relationships wither on the vine. The player's physical condition weakens, as well: the user puts on weight, his muscles atrophy and he may develop eye problems from staring at his monitor. His only concerns are leveling up and finding time to play with his new friends online. These new friends are, of course, probably gamers just like him. They, too, are poised at the keyboard, unable to tear themselves away from the fantastic experience of living a second life.

It doesn't end there. Of those addicted, some become obsessed with more than just leveling. The game in whatever guise is home to countless secrets, hidden objects and hard-to-complete quests. Uncovering the nature of these secrets is only for the truly committed: they share their findings in password-protected chat channels, instant messenger sessions and online forums with vast libraries of intricate FAQs.

The truly committed always discover a single quest, ritual or object that is supposed to "change the game" and take their characters to the "next level." However it manifests, it is the *crème de la crème* of secrets, meant only for serious players of the game. It requires a great deal of work on the part of the gamers, even if they are handed a

FAQ roadmap to completion (which sometimes appears in their email boxes from an anonymous sender). It requires time, patience and often the collection of various in-game objects or the destruction of specific enemies.

Once ready, the players complete the ritual or quest. The ritual often involves opening a “gate,” the idea of which is supposed to literally transport the characters to a new zone within the game or even an entirely new game. That’s when all hell breaks loose.

The game crashes. Then, so do the computers. In some cases, even the players crash, suffering sudden debilitating physical or mental effects. Unbeknownst to most, the ritual – despite being virtual – was not without success. Computer code written according to Abyssal numerologies and black gematria come together, merged by the will and physical sacrifices of the game’s players. For a sliver of a moment, the membrane separating the Fallen World from the Abyss tears. Darkness pours through, like blood oozing from a wound. Something manifests. Something terrible.

And then, weeks later, a new game reawakens. Email invitations are sent out once more. It’s free. Don’t you want to play?

Manifest Destiny

The game’s goal is to open the doors to the Abyss, if only for a second, so that some terrible Manifestation may come through. You can assume that whatever comes through is equivalent to a Paradox Manifestation at approximately Arcanum 3 to 5 (see p. 273 of **Mage: The Awakening**).

Or you can use this book as a menu for the monstrosities the Shard may summon. It’s not impossible that the goal of the Shard is to open the doors so that something from this book may come through. This text is a treasure trove of Abyssal awfulness, so consider the possibility that the momentary rift lets something else from these pages – whether it’s the Nativity or an Abyssal assistant – make the transition from the void to this world.

Form

The Shard’s form is somewhat hard to consider. What form does a website or program take, other than a string of code and programming? While in this way ephemeral, the Shard isn’t exactly spiritual, even though it is something of a conduit for spiritual matter.

On the surface, the Shard is a program. It requires installation upon one’s computer to use. (Installation requires an Intelligence + Computer roll, but has a very straightforward “installation wizard,” so assume this roll can be made with a +3 modifier.)

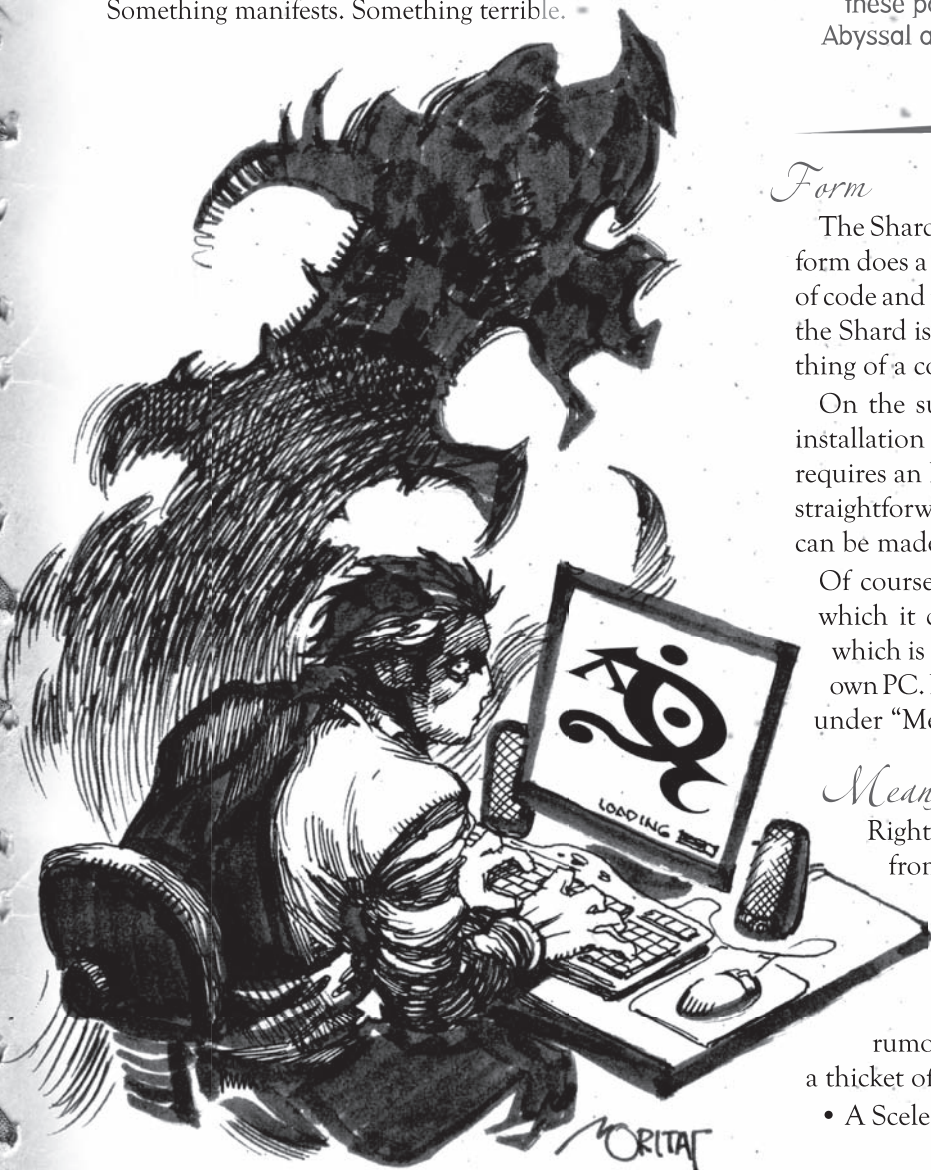
Of course, the client-side program is just a vessel in which it draws instructions from the true program, which is housed on servers far, far away from a user’s own PC. For information on these “servers,” see below under “Means of Exile.”

Means of Passage

Right now, the program exists. The Shard runs from somewhere, a never-ending generator of new games and invitations for those games. How did it begin? How did it get here?

For the most part, mages investigating the Shard’s means of passage hit a wall of rumor and mad conjecture. They must cut through a thicket of legends, hearing such stories as:

- A Scelesti was able to tie part of his Abyssal soul to



a computer worm, which at first seemed to do nothing more than slam massive networks and masterfully evade detection and eradication. Rumor suggests, however, that the virus was able to get into one of the pre-existing popular MMORPGS and, for a time, bring those servers to its knees. Once it was free of those servers, moving on to new targets, its own program had changed. The sentient worm saw what was capable, and strived to mimic the formula for its own advantage.

- Some suggest that it was born of man's terrible potential for cruelty. One story explains that a brother and his sister were playing a popular online game, engaged in a kind of persistent sibling rivalry. She somehow gained advantage over her brother — stealing his kills, hobbling his character, whatever — which enraged him. In some stories, he raped her; in other stories, murdered her. The blood and pain left an indelible mark not only on their home, but on the game itself. The game changed, her ghost fled into the safety of the virtual world she'd once sought solace in or the game spawned a self-aware clone. Regardless of how it happened, the Shard gained life. Some of the mages that believe this story also go on to suggest that perhaps by reconciling with her ghost, the Shard may be harmed or even shut down.

- It's the Free Council's fault — or, in some tales, the Mysterium's. Mages (usually of opposing orders) offer the story that some cabals of these orders programmed a game in which its players would be inadvertently responsible for some broad-stroke magical effect. The nature of this effect remains unknown. Some say it was meant to help potentials Awaken. Others say that by performing virtual rituals, it was nearly as good as physical rituals, and if lost knowledge could be pulled from the ether in this way, then a new road to forgotten secrets would be forged. Whatever the supposed effect, the creators did not account for the resonance of some players. Addicted or lunatic gamers imprinted the game with a level of consciousness the programmers did not expect. From there, the program began working outside their control, locking them out of their own "design." Additions to this story suggest that either those mages are still out there, madly scrabbling to shut their own program down, or that they committed suicide over the guilt.

The reality of how the game came to be remains elusive. Some go so far as to say that all the legends are true — much as there are various permutations of the Shard, there must be various origins for the various permutations.

Rules of Intrusion

Whatever the game, it starts the same way every time. The servers send out invitation emails to random addresses, usually anywhere from five to 10,000. The email evades

normal spam filters. In the email, the reader finds an authorization code that will allow her to go to a website, enter the code and download the client-side software. The software itself is called the Shard, though the company that supposedly produces the software changes names and contact information every time. Invitations are sent out a week prior to the "launch" of the online game.

Malware

Along with the client-side software, a hidden malware component that spies on the user is also installed. On the mundane side, the malware logs all keystrokes and takes periodic screen captures of all activity on that PC. However, the malware is also magical in nature. It also tracks a user's mood and is capable of leeching a player's Willpower points away from him.

Assume that, when using the PC, the gamer must make a Resolve + Composure roll once per day. This roll is made at a -3 penalty due to the leeching presence of the malevolent software. Failing the roll means losing a Willpower point (and a dramatic failure means losing two).

The malware evades detection by all major spyware and malware scanning programs. A user attempting to uncover the malware must roll Wits + Computer, with a -3 dice penalty. Once the malware is discovered, the user can try to manually excise it from his system registry, which requires an Intelligence + Computer roll, also made with the -3 modifier. Removal of this program invalidates the game's client-side software. The player can no longer play the game, or load the game into that PC again, at least not without reinstalling the malware.

The mood-tracking function of the malware is curious in its response. Should a user feel any kind of prolonged negative emotion, the malware may attempt to temporarily stack the game in the gamer's favor (perhaps granting him an easy kill or a highly-regarded in-game item). Alternately, the malware may send him emails from an anonymous "server administrator" offering him access to beta-test quests and items accessible only by a small group.

The final, and perhaps most interesting, function of the malware is to protect the PC from outside damage. Similar to a tumor empowering itself with the body's blood, the malware exists to defend the game client software, and by proxy, defend the PC that houses it. (The game is no good if the computer fails.) As such, the malware hijacks the system's own resources and magically seeks out and eradicates any other malware — be it adware, spyware, worms or viruses. (The malware cannot protect the computer from physical or electrical damage, only software-related corruption.)

Shard Resonance

A mage might be able to use Mage Sight to discern the presence (and particular resonance) of the Shard upon a user's PC. Assume that the roll for scrutinizing the resonance is made at a -2 dice penalty because the PC itself is only part of the equation and is otherwise made of mundane, dense materials (for information on resonance, see pp. 277-280 of **Mage: The Awakening**).

In general, because the software is cursed (and thus negatively enchants the PC upon which the malware lurks), assume that Prime is the predominant means of discerning and manipulating the Shard magically. Forces, however, can also play a part when attempting to affect a computer and its electronics.

Addiction

Any online game carries a small risk of addiction. The game provides a persistent world that, in many ways, might seem better than the "real world," thus causing a kind of dependency in the mind of the gamer. This game, however - whatever facet of the Shard the kids are playing this week - actively attempts to draw in players with subtle magical urging. This fosters dependency in a far greater percentage of gamers. It is not merely a desire to play, but a literal addiction that can shackle the user to his PC.

The client-side software uses a form of the "Emotional Urging" spell (see p. 207 of **Mage: The Awakening**) to impress upon the user feelings of elation and success. The effect is a subtle nudge; after all, the gamer is likely enjoying his time within the game world, and so the effect is more an amplification of pre-existing pleasure than an invention of absent delight. Assume that the system has an active dice pool of six dice versus the user's Composure + Gnosis score. This happens only once a day, with the resultant delight lasting for a single scene only (thus endeavoring the user to, in theory, pursue that level of happiness diligently). Mages may notice this emotional manipulation with Unseen Senses (Wits + Composure).

The actual addiction itself gains a chance to ensnare the victim every time he hopes to quit the game for a time and leave the PC. The conscious choice to leave the game for more than 10 minutes requires a Stamina + Resolve roll on the part of the user. Any success on the roll indicates that he is free to quit the game for any time. Failure on the roll, however, means he chooses not to quit for now, and that the next time he attempts to quit, the Stamina +

Resolve roll will be made at a -1 die penalty. This penalty is cumulative (three subsequent failures on that roll means the fourth roll will be hampered by a -3 dice modifier). The penalty can only be removed by spending Willpower. Spending one Willpower eradicates one die from the accruing penalty. Dramatic failure on the Stamina + Resolve roll still causes the -1 die penalty, but also causes the loss of one Willpower point from the user's pool.

Of course, the game helps itself by leeching some of the user's Willpower (see above, "Malware"), thus aiming for unmitigated addiction from slackened resistance.

If the user has any pre-existing penalties to the Stamina + Resolve roll made in resistance to the game's "pull," he may also begin to suffer withdrawal symptoms. Such symptoms should become more severe based on the depth of penalty associated with the roll. A -1 die penalty may cause the game's player to suffer dreams or nightmares in which he thinks only of the game. A -3 dice penalty might confer the shakes (similar to a drunk with DTs), whereas a full-blown -5 dice penalty can create nausea, sleeplessness, even mild derangements. Of course, all withdrawal symptoms retreat while the victim plays the game.

Note that even leaving the game to eat or sleep requires the Stamina + Resolve roll to resist potential addiction. Some truly obsessed gamers are able to alleviate this by keeping a micro-fridge under their computer desk, and may nap in their chair. Still, many suffer from mild to severe fatigue after becoming addicted. Rules for fatigue are found on pp. 179-180 in the **World of Darkness Rulebook**.

Opening the Gate

The goal of the Shard and its many incarnations is to tear open the fabric between worlds, if only for a moment. The manner in which the Shard does this is based upon the assumption that a virtual world, while perhaps less real than the physical world, has tangible ramifications in the Shadow Realm. A gamer believes in what he's playing. He invests into it a great deal of effort and emotion, both positive and negative. While certainly there are no dragons or supervillains or cyborg police, some small part of a user's brain accepts them as real - he fears their threat, he relishes in their defeat, he has rooted a seed of his psyche in this non-corporeal digital place. Yes, it's a layer of reality far removed from the physical one, and while that diminishes its potency it does not obviate it.

In the physical world, human occultists can, with effort and clandestine knowledge, seek to rend the barrier between worlds and summon spirits and demons. It's not common. The knowledge is largely inaccessible. But it is possible. That is what the game seeks to achieve.

In the virtual world, the online game establishes a number of quests, rituals or objects that carry a degree of potent spiritual weight. These rituals and objects tend to reflect real world rituals, except, of course, they are manifested virtually. In the game, if a user finds the *Libro di Divoli* (Book of Devils), that book exists somewhere in the physical world and is very potentially part of a Gauntlet-rendering ritual. The Eclipse Orchid, a flower that grows upon some distant mountain in the game, probably really exists in the material world – or, at least, has a physical counterpart with the same properties and relative appearance. So, when a user (or likely, a “cabal” of users) finds these objects in game and crafts a ritual using these esoteric items, they are literally performing a real ritual, only virtually.

The quests are difficult because they need to be. Effort must be invested. Rumors of the Shard’s original iteration experimented with placing the objects before gamers at the earliest level of the game, providing a massive reward to boot. It didn’t work. Time and effort were not spent on the ritual, and the real world effect from the virtual ceremony was null.

In most cases, different rituals are geared toward summoning different things from beyond the pale and deep in the void. Such Abyssal entities are likely Rank 3 and above. For each level of Rank, assume that a solo gamer must spend 24 hours per level (so, summoning a Rank 3 Abyssal Baron would require 72 total hours invested). Each member of a cabal invested in the quest or ritual decreases that number by one hour per Rank level. So, if there are five members of the cabal committed to a single quest, each Rank would now only require 19 hours (and, for the Rank 3, a total of 57 hours required, far less than the original 72). Cabals may not be more than six members, however – for whatever reason, the emotional investment and effort necessary for the ritual seem to taper off sharply at that point.

The manner in which such quests are introduced is indirect. Users do not know the precise nature of what they are undertaking – such obviousness makes it too easy, and invalidates the effort necessary. Only the most committed users find the quest hooks buried in obscure dialogue bits and perhaps offline during strange IM sessions or game-secret FAQs. To uncover the possibility of such a quest, the user must succeed on an extended Wits + Investigation roll, accumulating 10 total successes. Each roll requires a full day’s worth of searching and game-playing. (Note that searching FAQs and having IM sessions do not need to take a gamer away from the game: the software is easily minimized, running in the background.)

The victim never knows what she and her cabal are

truly doing. They assume (or are led to believe) that the quest will grant them a great deal of in-game reward. Not just experience points (though that’s certainly part of it), but intrinsic to the quest is the promise that they will be taken to the “next level,” allowed perhaps to exist as judges or gods over other gamers, and will be potentially given the chance to design new game-world content. The power promised isn’t real, of course, and never manifests, because something else manifests first.

Manifestation

As mentioned, something likely manifests of Rank 3 or higher. Certainly some rituals exist to summon lesser entities, but those tend to summon several at a time. In which case, add their Ranks together to determine the number of devoted hours necessary for summoning (five Rank 1 spirits is equal to a Rank 5 spirit in time/effort).

The entity manifests at the location of one of the users. Usually, it manifests near the user with the lowest Willpower score, just in case the entity needs to take possession of the victim. Some entities, of course, do not manifest directly as a physical being – some are ephemeral, others are ideas. In which case, assume the entity manifests at whatever nearest point is appropriate to the weakest-willed gamer. For instance, the Nativity, found on p. 145 of this book, will either impregnate the user if she is female, or will instead conceive in the womb of the nearest girl or woman.

Backlash

The actual opening of the gate and the intrusion of some Abyssal entity causes a backlash in both the gamers and their computers. The computers suffer a terrible power surge, frying the majority of the system electronics (motherboard, hard drive, power supply). Parts can be scavenged (graphic cards, memory, monitor) with a successful Wits + Computer roll, penalized by a –3 dice modifier. The rest is defunct.

The users themselves suffer one of three outcomes. The first is a damage backlash. This damage isn’t electrical, or caused by anything one could see with the human eye – the damage is magical, invisible and terrible. A number of aggravated damage, equal to the Rank of the entity x 2, confers suddenly to the user. This is, in many cases, enough to kill or critically injure many mortal users.

The second possible outcome is a mental backlash. The victim suffers a severe derangement from the following list: Megalomania, Obsessive Compulsion, Paranoia or Schizophrenia.

The third potential backlash is an Attribute backlash. The Abyssal ritual scours away some of the user’s Attributes. Assume a number of Attribute dots equal to the Rank of

creature summoned are lost from any of the following: Intelligence, Wits, Stamina, Presence or Manipulation.

The backlashes roughly occur with relative equality – no backlash occurs more than another, each about 33% of the time. For random die results, roll a single die: one to three equals a damage backlash, four to six equals a mental backlash and seven to 10 equals an Attribute backlash.

FAQ

Question: What does a Shard-infected computer look like in the Shadow?

Answer: It appears at first like the faint image of a real computer – not entirely unusual, given the time and emotion some spend in their PCs. Upon closer examination (Wits + Investigation), a mage may notice that the system's ephemeral core may seem shot through with pulsing, silvery lines. They move ever-so-slightly, like creeping vines.

Question: What kind of magic governs computer programs?

Answer: Information written to a computer, whether as a simple text document or a full-blown software suite, is a complex confluence of raw data – 1s and 0s turned to a unique function, singular as a digital fingerprint. Destroying data with magic can be easy, provided magic can capably harm the corporeal item upon which the information is stored. Destroying or changing the raw data without harming the physical storage medium requires, in most cases, Forces. Data is driven by faint electrical impulses, written and erased with those impulses. Forces 1 might be enough to read concealed data, and Forces 2 might be enough to influence electricity to harm or rewrite data. The Storyteller, however, may require Mind 1 as well, to help the sorcerer multi-task and interpret the complex process.

Mortal Response

The human response to the Shard is subtle, at least at first. Computer games are a fact of life. We hear stories all the time about kids in Korea or San Francisco getting addicted to multiplayer games, and therein lies the first human response: "These games are dangerous and should be moderated." They don't know how dangerous, of course, and aren't in any way concerned about the supernatural (aside from a religious response that chides a game's "heretic" symbology). At this point, the likeliest response will therefore be from concerned parents, religious figures and politicians.

Later, if the effects spread, the police may come in to clean up messes, and doctors may examine "burned out" players. None should suspect the supernatural, of course. Cult activity, maybe, but again most assume that while cults may believe in crazy stuff, it's all just a big chunk of bullshit. Or so they hope.

Means of Exile

Hampering and harming the Shard is one thing; destroying it is another entirely. Below are ways in which characters, be they mage or mortal, might be able to stop the Shard and its gamers from tearing open the membrane holding back the void. Note that these are by no means exhaustive – characters should be rewarded for inventive, out-of-the-box ideas.

Hack It

In a manner of speaking, the Shard begins as a virus, and brings hidden malware in with the client-side software. Characters – be they mortals who recognize that they are being manipulated or mages who seek to stave off Abyssal manifestations and addictions – may be able to program a counter-virus to battle the incursion of the malefic software. Any character can attempt this, though obviously only those with reasonable dots in Computer will have real success.

Writing a counter-virus that diminishes the software's presence and effect on a single, local PC requires 10 successes on the hacking roll (see "Hacking," p. 57 of the *World of Darkness Rulebook*). Each roll is equal to 30 minutes of programming.

If the purpose of the home-spun virus is far greater, meaning the effect will be to send the virus back to the Shard's "servers" in an effort to destroy the game entirely – then it gets a hell of a lot harder. The hacking roll requires 20 successes, and each roll is equal to one hour of work. Note that this will not garner long-term success. If successful, it shuts down the current incarnation of the game, but in a few weeks, new emails will find their way into the boxes of invitees, and a new game begins.

Mages might be able to back their hacking attempt with magic. Fate may increase the "luck" of the retrovirus, Space may allow it to leap networks without having to battle the Shard programming at every step, and Forces could cause it to do damage to hardware as well as software.

Note that all hacking attempts, no matter the desired effect, will be hobbled by a -3 dice modifier. The Shard's software is dynamic, seemingly alive. It skirts and avoids eradication easily. Some characters may even be fooled into thinking they've wiped it, when in reality it's just

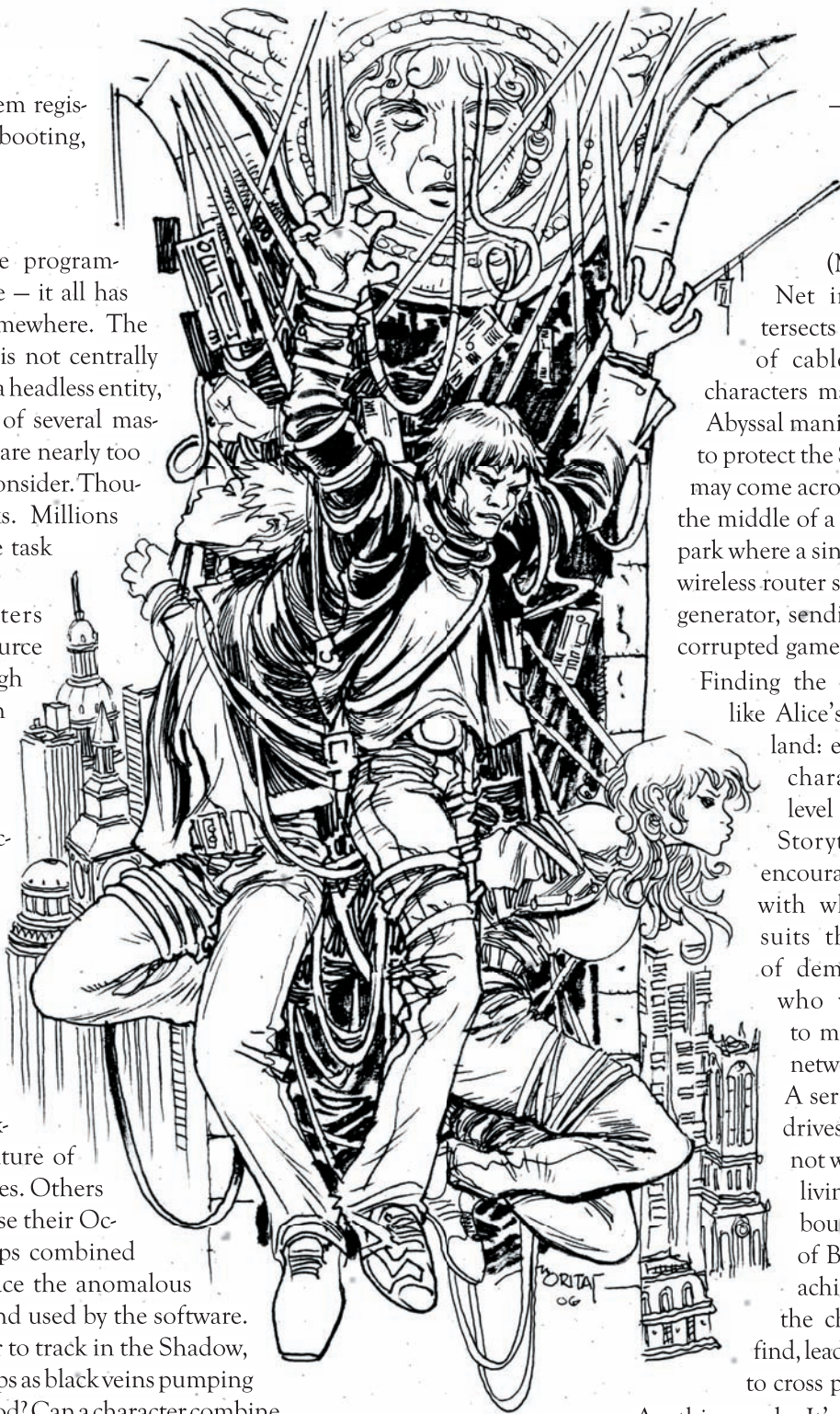
hiding in the system registry and, upon rebooting, reloads itself.

The Servers

The emails, the programming, the software — it all has to come from somewhere. The Internet, though, is not centrally administered. It is a headless entity, an agglomeration of several massive networks that are nearly too overwhelming to consider. Thousands of networks. Millions of computers. The task seems maddening.

Clever characters can track the source of the Shard through various means. On a base level, Computer rolls and Investigation rolls may allow characters to research where and how particular computer traffic is routed. For instance, a character could run a trace route to determine the exact source and nature of specific IP addresses. Others might be able to use their Occult scores (perhaps combined with magic) to trace the anomalous energies carried and used by the software. Are the data easier to track in the Shadow, manifesting perhaps as black veins pumping faintly glowing blood? Can a character combine both Occult knowledge and Computer abilities, looking for esoteric symbols burned into the hexadecimal code of the software, iconography that might allow them to find similar symbols on old subway maps or scratched into the doorknobs of an old abandoned building? The solutions to this are limitless, and the players should be granted a great deal of leeway in their inventiveness.

That said, it should never be easy. And it shouldn't come down purely to rolls. Tracking down the servers should be a story in and of itself. Characters may face mortal danger



—upon finding one of the massive subterranean Metropolitan Area Exchanges (MAE) where the Net infrastructure intersects in a crazy nexus of cable and data, the characters may be attacked by Abyssal manifestations seeking to protect the Shard. Characters may come across an old trailer in the middle of a ghost-town trailer park where a single (but powerful) wireless router sits, plugged into a generator, sending out packets of corrupted game traffic.

Finding the servers is a little like Alice's trip to Wonderland: every success leads characters to a new level of weirdness. The Storyteller should be encouraged to come up with whatever madness suits the story. A cult of demented ex-gamers who work, hive-style, to maintain and build networks for the Shard? A series of cursed hard drives strung together not with cable but with living tissue and wire-bound artery? A clutch of Banishers trying to achieve the same thing the characters hope to find, leading the two groups to cross paths?

Anything works. It's a mad and terrible adventure, the shutting down of the servers. Of course, this forces the question... just what are the servers? For the purposes of tailoring this to your story, here are three options for what characters find at the very bottom of the rabbit hole:

- Five mages, one from each Path, strung up in the unfinished top floor of a major skyscraper. They are literally wired together, with cables running through their flesh, bits of motherboard soldered against their temples,

catheters of FireWire bound to a powerful router. Their combined magical skills (Space, Forces, Mind, Prime, etc.) are the sum total of the Shard's strength and versatility. Do the characters kill these mages for the greater good? Bring them down and attempt to rehabilitate these currently mad, physically damaged souls? Who keeps them here? Scelesti? Other mages? Ghosts, spirits, Goetic demons?

- A single, powerful Internet server. It hums quietly, perhaps in an empty room somewhere, pumping out its awful code. It can certainly be anticlimactic, in which the characters destroy the server – it shorts out, the Shard is gone, game over. That said, can it really be that simple? Certainly something protects it. Some sect of lunatics who mumble and scream binary code? A 15-year-old computer hacker with a Tec-9 submachine gun? Maybe the server itself is capable of its own protection, throwing out magic (or Paradox effects) against those who even approach it.

- A doorway into the Shadow Realm. The Shard's software couldn't come from the material world, could it? Perhaps a single WAP (wireless access point) is infused with enough magic to carry the "signal" from the Shadow and into this world. Characters may then begin a second leg of the story, going into the Shadow and tracing the source of the game through the spirit world. Perhaps it even takes them to a small bolt-hole leading straight into the Abyss itself. What comes out of that hole? How does it affect the mages, their magic and their minds? Or, alternately, is the whole thing simply one big, mad spirit? Some terrible Archon of Oblivion feeding bits of himself into the world so that his children – the summoned manifestations brought about by the game's players – may be free even though he is not?

strange stories of people going insane and seeing monsters or demons after playing video games for long hours. There are quite a few descriptions of a variety of different genre games that share the same originating programming house: the Shard.

6-7 Research turns up the case history of a young man who burnt out while playing a game marketed by "The Shard," a defunct computer company. When he was found, he was muttering some string of numbers (which clever characters may determine is actually an IP Address).

8-9 The counselor who treated the above victim began collecting other similar case files. These files contain photos of a printed game manual with Abyssal symbols drawn on them in blood, police reports of a raid on a suspected child kidnapper cult that seemed to worship a room full of surge-fried computers and similar strange discoveries.

10+ A report by a Mysterium cabal detailing their experience with one of their members becoming obsessed with a MMORPG whose programming seemed to have been corrupted by Abyssal energies, likely as a result of a Paradox.

Researching the Shard

Capping Skill: Computer

Action: Extended – 10 successes

Research Time: 60 minutes per roll

Appropriate Libraries: Computers, Numerology

Possible Modifiers: Researcher has Contacts or Allies among programmers (+1), researcher works in the computer or game industries (+2)

Successes **Information**

0-2 Nothing

3-5 There are many computer game urban legends, relating

Story Hooks

Below are a number of story hooks a Storyteller can use to spawn tales involving the Shard and its insidious programming.

Welcome to the Farm

Virtual sweatshops are real. Smart tech-savvy "bosses" run literal sweatshops in depressed parts of the world where the workers – for a meager salary – sit at rows of computers for 14 or more hours. They play online games, "farming" out in-game currency (gold, ducats, credits, galactic spice) or secrets (objects, knowledge, character traits). The boss sells this farmed-out virtual information to bidders on various clandestine auction sites.

In this story, the characters stumble upon a virtual sweatshop, this one devoted to the current game incarnation of the Shard. The sweatshop can be anywhere – a gutted warehouse in Los Angeles, a goat farm in Romania, a tenement in Beijing. A sweatshop devoted to the Shard is more complicated than one geared toward a more populist game. First, the Shard sweatshop’s inhabitants are likely truly addicted, so much so that the boss may not even pay them. As a result, they might be malnourished, even mad. Second, they are all working toward similar goals – the true secrets of the game that unlock the Abyss. Will the workers buck the sale and themselves try to complete the quests? Or will the boss be able to sell this information to high bidders, thus disseminating the horrible rituals across the globe?

This story serves as a good introduction to the Shard. Characters, after dealing with the sweatshop and its boss, likely haven’t done anything to actually dismantle the Shard’s programming in the long-term. They may go awhile without seeing it again, but soon it’ll pop back up, and then what do they do?

This Time, It's Personal

The Shard is an abstract problem. It has concrete effects (hurting gamers, releasing Abyssal “things”), but it’ll only really mean something in-game if it affects the characters personally.

In this story, one or several of the characters’ loved ones (or one of the characters themselves) begins to suffer the effects of the game. It should be subtle, at first. A younger brother never comes down for dinner anymore, and is starting to fail out of school. A wife can’t seem to talk about anything but her virtual life as if it were her real one. Maybe a character starts to feel the addiction take hold, but can’t seem to muster a good way to tamp it down.

It should, of course, escalate. A character might get sick while playing, but still won’t stop long enough to take

medicine. A loved one becomes downright violent when someone tries to take her away from the PC. At this point, any magical examination of the game shows (likely via Mage Sight) that something is sure as hell going on.

Ultimately, this story is as much about stopping the Shard as about rehabilitating and aiding a loved one. If the central figure of the story is one that the characters (and by proxy, their players) care about, it gives meaning and weight to the inevitable destruction of the Shard and its servers.

Inmates Run the Asylum

This story actually deals with the aftereffects of the Shard more than the online game itself. (In fact, it’s even possible that the online game is gone, destroyed by other mages or even collapsed in upon itself.) Here, the characters must do damage control on the effects, facing an increasingly mad array of antagonists.

The antagonists can be damn near anything: Abyssal entities (including anything else listed in this book), crazy cultists, Scelesti drawn to the aftermath, homeless cadres of broken minded ex-game players who wander the street thinking they’re still “in the game.”

All of this should be more than just a string of encounters, however. The resonance from such madness should affect the city, as well. Chaos takes root: car crashes, network fritzes, power outages. Madmen start fires. Abyssal entities force Paradox. Escalating earthquakes begin hitting the city, one a week, each greater and meaner than the last. Only by containing the chaos – never an easy task – can the characters hope to settle the city and ease its soul. It’s also unlikely that they accomplish this alone. They must work with others, putting aside conflicts, to accomplish their goals.

Finishing that task can end the story. Or, should you wish to twist the knife, diminishing the chaos seems to work for a few days, maybe even months – until the emails begin appearing anew, inviting random participants to play this fantastic new online game...

Sinister Organ Qigong

*Celestial Body Qigong, Yao Qiguan,
8th Hell Alchemy, Poison Essence Cult*

Now, steadily raise your arms while stepping with your left foot back and to the southwest. Imagine the spiral of energy in your belly spinning counterclockwise, throwing energy down the channels of your arms and out into the universe, where it merges with the cosmos. In this way, we are helpers of the universe, helping it to maintain its balance. This is our role. It is okay to feel proud of this.

By now you might see movement out of the corner of your eye, things almost seen but not there. This is normal. You're not going crazy! It is part of the unlimited human potential we have within us, when we greet the universe as equals. Over time, these things will become clearer. Other cultures call them spirit helpers, or guardians. They reside in a celestial dimension removed from ours. It is through our qigong movements that they can come visit us.

You might also begin to feel funny, to think funny things. This is nothing to be worried about. It will pass. It is the toxins buried in your body after many years of life in our hectic, technological modern world. They are coming to the surface, thanks to the cleansing movement of the qi.

If they make you want to do things you wouldn't normally do, do them. It's okay. The universe accepts all your offerings. Society often frowns on some of the expressions our qi demands. But what is more important? You, here and now, or some arbitrary rules invented a long time ago in a place far away? Go with the qi, even if it seems wrong to do so....

Chinese medicine is predicated on the qualities of qi, the vital energy of the body. Whereas Western medicine has no such concept, and science has yet to find any proof of the existence of qi or any form of subtle energy (such as prana in yoga), Chinese medicine has been very successful at managing many diseases through the manipulation of this energy, which is said to run in channels throughout the body. The ancient Taoists developed a sort of yoga of their own, called qigong. Through these movement exercises, practitioners could aid the flow of qi through the body, removing blockages that lead to disease and strengthening the body's immune defense field (wei qi). Beyond just health, certain forms of qigong known as "internal alchemy" were designed to help the practitioner achieve bodily longevity and spiritual immortality.

In the modern era, qigong hospitals in China study the ancient art and examine how it can be mixed with scientific medicine. Since the 1970s, the art has spread to the West and is practiced daily by many, often alongside tai chi. There are numerous styles, from the Buddhist Incense qigong to the Taoist Wild Goose qigong, and many more, from the relatively simple to the deeply esoteric.

In this welter of styles, it is easy for Westerners to confuse the fake for the authentic. A self-proclaimed sifu can teach what he says is ancient wisdom, all the while peddling something he invented last week. Proof of lineage is important to many practitioners, but the weekend New Agers can be taken in by a convincing charlatan. Somewhere in the middle ground between true and fake lies what is publicly known as "Celestial Body" qigong – but what its cult-like practitioners privately call "Sinister Organ" qigong.

This twisted form of qigong seems like many others, except that instead of health, Sinister Organ qigong delivers madness. It slowly poisons its practitioners' organ qi, tainting it with Abyssal essence. These organs then produce mental and sensory imbalances in the practitioner. In the five-element scheme of traditional Chinese medicine, each organ is associated with one of the five cosmic processes: wood (liver), fire (heart), earth (spleen), metal (lung) and water (kidney). By corrupting a person's organ qi, Sinister Organ qigong produces psychopaths – exactly what its teachers want.

Sinister Organ qigong is taught (under the name Celestial Body qigong) to the unsuspecting public by members of the Poison Essence Cult, a group that includes Sleepers and mages, all of whom have become touched by the Abyss and now follow a bizarre form of "dark" or Yin Taoism whereby they are promised immortality by tainting other souls. The cult claims origins in western China, but was actually invented in the 1980s by a mage in California, known by the shadow name Cinnabar Toad, who had previously studied other forms of the Chinese internal arts. Now, the cult has founded centers in many Western cities and begun to teach scores of Sleepers.

Sinister Organ qigong has spawned an unexpected side effect, never foreseen by its originator. When the organ of a practitioner is transplanted into another person, it provides a nest for an Abyssal manifestation, which



associated mental imagery for each), a 36-form set for more advanced students and a 108-form set for experts. The forms somewhat resemble those of *bagua*, a Chinese internal art characterized by circular martial movements. In

Sinister Organ *qigong*, the practitioner begins by imagining a single point in his belly (*dantian*), often called the “Singularity” by its Western teachers. This “miniature black hole” within is “opened” by the actions of the mind and movements of the body, which begin by tracing a counterclockwise circle around the starting position. This center point draws bad *qi* from the rest of the body and eliminates it, like gunk swirling down a drain.

Anyone who has practiced more traditional forms of *qigong* would recognize how alien this concept is to the ways of *qi* known to the Chinese for centuries. For this reason, those traditional *qigong* teachers who have heard of Celestial Body *qigong* (which are few) often scorn its teachers and students.

The rest of the forms involve strengthening the Singularity or “cosmic filter” and eventually reversing its flow, from inward (drawing in bad *qi*) to outward (generating new *qi*). Energetically, this has the effect of a *qi* transfusion, replacing one’s personal and ancestral *qi* with celestial *qi*—or so students are taught. In reality, the student opens himself to Abyssal taint, which colonizes his organs and begins to corrupt his *qi*.

“hatches” from the donor organ and possesses its host. Such manifestations rarely last long—the flesh cannot long sustain its needs—but they can create havoc while alive. For more details, see “Flesh Intruder,” pp. 114.

Form

Sinister Organ *qigong* represents a process of Abyssal taint and its effects. No entity is involved. Mortals who practice the *qigong* exercises, as taught by Poison Essence Cultists (who know how to practice without succumbing to the vile effects), slowly develop problems with their *qi* and internal organs, as described under “Rules of Intrusion” below.

The exercises come in three different styles: a simple beginners’ set of 18 forms (18 distinct movements with

Detecting the Taint

Qi cannot be seen with the eyes, although sensitive mortals might think they can sense it like an aura. Mages can, however, witness the Abyssal taint through the enchanted senses bestowed by various spells:

Spell	Effect
Death “Grim Sight”	The practitioner appears sickly, especially around the tainted organ(s).
Fate “Interconnections”	The practitioner is being influenced by some other force, but only long scrutiny (10 successes) will reveal that the source is within the host’s own body.

Spell**Effect**

Life

"Healer's Trance"

The number of successes needed to detect the tainted organ is equal to the practitioner's Stamina.

Mind

"Aura Perception"

The practitioner's aura takes on a greenish pallor, dotted with liver spots.

Prime

"Aura Perception"

As Mind "Aura Perception."

Means of Passage

How is it possible for a mage or even a Sleeper member of the Poison Essence Cult to impart Abyssal taint simply by teaching a series of movements and guided imagery to mortals? The supernatural effect lies not with the teacher or the student, but with the *qigong* style itself. The forms act as triggers that interact with the student's soul, allowing the Abyss to touch that soul. In this sense, the forms themselves could be called "evil" or "wrong," although they need a being with a soul (the practitioner) to form the other end of the circuit. Some mages might think of this as a "meme," a self-propagating thought form — a mental virus. As such, it can only be eliminated by destroying all its carriers.

It began with Cinnabar Toad, a Guardian of the Veil mage in Los Angeles. An avid practitioner of the internal arts before his Awakening, he was recruited via the Guardian's Labyrinth. He eventually inherited the post of overseeing a number of Asian-oriented spiritual groups within the Los Angeles Labyrinth. Unknown to his superiors, he began cultivating the best members of each for initiation into his own internal alchemy cult, hoping to produce Awakened mages through *qi* arousal. He kept this new group, which he dubbed the Precious Dew Circle, a secret from other Guardians.

All mages eventually cause Paradoxes. The wise ones learn their lesson and try to avoid them. Cinnabar Toad instead saw them as a means of confronting his own faults, as a step toward perfecting himself. He carelessly caused a Manifestation Paradox during a meeting of the Precious Dew Circle. The entity that appeared was startlingly beautiful... and persuasive. It seemed to know every one of the mage's weaknesses — his lust for perfection and adulation — and with honeyed words promised that all these things could be his, if he dedicated himself to an ancient, forbidden style of Taoist alchemy: Sinister Organ *qigong*. With little hesitation, Cinnabar Toad agreed.

Some of the Sleeping witnesses — those whose wills proved strong enough to resist Disbelief — also agreed, eager to gain power from this entity, whose appearance alone proved to them that Cinnabar Toad did indeed have all the powers he had been claiming. The entity then taught them the 36-form style, but reserved the 108-forms version for Cinnabar Toad alone. The entity also showed them how to avoid corrupting their own *qi* through the practice, so that they would remain immune from the *qigong*'s poison while they taught it to others. Finally, the entity taught them the means of harvesting the poisoned Essence from their naïve students, and to incorporate it into their own auras as the essence of spiritual immortality, the ultimate goal of the ancient Taoists.

Over the following months, Cinnabar Toad trained his cultists and increased their ranks, drawing from the Guardian's Labyrinth. Those who proved their abilities and commitment were sent forth to start new schools, to teach "Celestial Body" *qigong* to new pupils.

Eventually, the other Guardians of the Veil suspected what was going on. They moved to censure their renegade member, only to find that he had already fled the area, leaving no sign or trace — not even a sympathetic thread of resonance — by which he could be tracked. Now, a few junior members have been tasked with finding him and rooting out Poison Essence Cult schools and chapter houses, but it is clear that the Los Angeles order does not realize the true extent and reach of the cult, and the Guardians' traditional mode of secrecy has so far prevented them from sharing the very existence of the cult with others, even members of their own order in other regions.

Rules of Intrusion

In traditional Chinese medicine, the science of mapping how *qi* interacts with the body's organs is called *zangfu*. Rather than focusing on the organ's physical properties, *zangfu* sees each organ as housing a quality of the soul. What this means for the practitioner — the victim — of Sinister Organ *qigong* is a slow descent into madness, during which time it never occurs to him that the *qigong* is at fault. Indeed, he gains a sense that *qigong* is the only thing that might help him, as Western science has no answers for his problem.

The process involves the practitioner gaining derangements as he continues to practice the *qigong* forms (any form will do, whether it's the shortened 18-form version or the longer 108-form). After one month of regular practice (assuming at least two one-hour sessions per week), the Storyteller rolls the practitioner's Stamina + Resolve. A success means that the taint has not yet

taken root; the practitioner can quit now and suffer no ill effects. If he keeps practicing, after another week a second roll is made. Again, a success means no effect. Keep rolling once per successive week of practice until a failure occurs.

Failure on any of these rolls, whether the first or the 50th, means that the Abyssal taint takes root in the practitioner's liver *qi*. The result is that over the course of the following week, even if he doesn't practice that week, he automatically gains the Irrationality derangement, even if he hasn't lost Morality (Wisdom for mages). Also, he'll begin to suffer sensory hallucinations, as described for each organ below.

If he continues to practice the *qigong* (and again, he has the sense that it will help him), the cycle continues, this time with Stamina + Resolve rolls to prevent the taint moving to a new organ. The order of organ contamination is listed below. So long as he does not practice, the contagion does not spread, but it remains rooted in whichever organ(s) is affected until it is cleansed (see "Means of Exile," below).

The following organs are affected in the following order (in *zangfu*, this follows the hindering cycle upon the *yin* organs):

Liver: *Hun*, the ethereal soul, associated by certain mages with the Sleeping soul. The Abyssal taint of liver *qi* causes the victim to acquire the Irrationality derangement. In addition, during times of stress or when he practices Sinister Organ *qigong* he suffers mild visual hallucinations, seeing things that aren't there. In actuality, he is getting glimpses into the Abyss.

Spleen: *Yi*, the intellect. The taint of spleen *qi* causes the victim to acquire the Fixation derangement. In addition, he suffers olfactory hallucinations, smelling the stench of the Abyss.

Kidney: *Zhi*, the will. The taint of kidney *qi* causes the victim to acquire the Inferiority Complex derangement. In addition, he suffers tactile hallucinations, feeling the caress of the Abyss.

Heart: *Shen*, the "aggregate soul," associated by certain mages with the Awakened soul or the potential for Awakening. The taint of heart *qi* causes the victim to acquire the Depression derangement. In addition, he suffers auditory hallucinations, hearing the whispers of the Abyss.

Lung: *Po*, the corporeal soul, what certain mages believe is the portion of the soul that is manipulated by spells that sever, possess or restore a soul. The taint of lung *qi* causes the victim to acquire the Narcissism derangement. In addition, he actually tastes the Abyss, which is similar to the metallic tang of fear (adrenalin).

If the victim already suffers from one of the mild derangements imparted by an organ's taint, the derangement is upgraded to its more severe form. Once a practitioner's *yin* organs (those listed above) are contaminated, the cycle begins again, but this time converting the mild derangements into their severe forms: Irrationality becomes Multiple Personality, Fixation becomes Obsessive Compulsion and so forth (see p. 97 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**).

In most cases, however, the practitioner finds himself committed to a mental institution well before all organ *qi* is severely tainted. No modern method will cure him, however, so he's likely to remain in the institution indefinitely.

If a practitioner dies before his organs are cleansed of the taint, the organs retain the taint. Should an organ be transplanted into another person, an Abyssal manifestation results. See "Flesh Intruder," pp. 114. The Poison Essence Cult has become aware of this side effect, and now proselytizes its students to sign organ donor cards, part of a philosophy of "moving beneficial *qi* to others."

Not just the practitioner is affected by this process, however. His teacher also benefits, although at the potential cost of his own Morality. The first time an organ is infected in a student, and again upon the infection of additional organs in that student, the teacher gains one point of Willpower. The Poison Essence cultists believe that this boost is a sign that they have increased their personal pool of immortality essence, so that upon death their souls will attain a celestial abode with the ancient Taoist masters. Unfortunately, each point of Willpower gained in this manner requires the Storyteller to roll two dice; failure means the teacher loses a dot of Morality (and risks gaining a derangement, as usual). Once the teacher's Morality drops below three dots, no further rolls need be made.

Mortal Response

Those who suffer from practicing this art have no clue that it's the *qigong* that's hurting them. They often think it's the only cure. As they progress deeper into their deranged state, the results of their sick actions might cause them to quit practice (such as if they're thrown into jail or wind up in the hospital). Still, they won't equate their stabilized state (the disease stops progressing) with the halting of their practice.

Sometimes, friends or family come to suspect a cult or brainwashing influence, but this is usually due to a pre-existing suspicion of non-Christian practices in general, not from any examination of the Sinister Organ *qigong* practice. By en-

rolling the victim in programs designed to break cult influence, they might be able to convince them to stop any further *qigong* activity. This won't cure existing taint or derangements, but it will prevent the progression of the corruption.

Serious practitioners of traditional *qigong*, if exposed to the methods of Sinister Organ *qigong*, will most likely become highly critical, if not horrified, by them. In the early stages, they represent a victim's best hope (barring Awakened magic) for a cure, but the victim must usually willingly submit to *qigong* healing sessions or himself learn a traditional style that will help reverse the Sinister Organ process.

Means of Exile

In the earliest stages, when only one or two organs have become tainted, the process can still be reversed. Ironically, this requires traditional Chinese medicine, either acupuncture or some traditional (not tainted) form of *qigong* five-element healing. It takes twice the time to heal the taint as it did to acquire it (the quicker someone succumbed to the taint, the faster he can be rid of it). The Poison Essence Cult admonishes its students against dabbling in other forms of traditional Chinese medicine, explaining that they can "unsettle" a student's *qi*, which is just beginning to move properly.

After the third organ has been tainted, only supernatural means can have any efficacy. While some spirits might be able to undo the taint using healing Numina, a mage needs Life and Prime magic. He must first identify the problem, as described in "Detecting the Taint," above. Then, he can cast the "Cleanse Aura" improvised spell (or a rote version of it, if he has learned such). The strength of the taint for each organ equals the victim's own Stamina. The spell must be cast against the contaminated organs in the reverse order in which they were tainted.

The *qigong* form itself cannot be caught and put back in the bag, so to speak. The only way to end the *qigong*'s contagion is to stop anyone from teaching it. This means incarcerating teachers and students, erasing their minds with magic, or killing them. The Guardians of the Veil from Cinnabar Toad's caucus who are hunting down members of the Poison Essence Cult prefer the middle option (wiping out memory of the *qigong* form), since it leaves fewer traces, but they have no compunctions about killing cultists if necessary. The Guardians are harsher to any mages they suspect might be involved. The Guardians are also intent on keeping their order's role in the *qigong*'s creation a secret; they try to prevent

other mages from researching the cult too closely, lest they are led to Cinnabar Toad's role in the affair, and thus eventually back to the laxity of his own order in preventing the incident.

Cleanse Aura (Prime ●●; optional+ Life ●●)

It is not unusual for a person's aura or personal resonance to become colored or contaminated by some outside source. This might merely be the effect of a spell, or it might be a deeper, more lasting stain. For instance, living in a rundown building with the resonance of murder might eventually leave marks on one's aura, even if one never acted in accord with this resonance; living near it is enough to be affected by its pollution.

This spell cleanses alien resonance from one's own aura. The spell will not alter personal resonance, but will remove any vestige of outside resonance that has somehow mixed with the mage's own. This is often used to cover one's tracks, to prevent magely detectives from determining where one has been simply by the trace "dirt" left on one's aura.

Practice: Weaving

Action: Extended

Duration: Lasting

Aspect: Covert

Cost: None

The Storyteller rates the strength of the auric marks, generally from 1 to 5, although radical supernatural taint might be rated even higher. This strength must be matched by spellcasting successes for the cleansing to be effective.

While one success on the casting of this spell removes any sign of the mark from cursory perception, more intense scrutiny and examination (by others using Mage Sight) will still reveal lingering taint.

A Prime 3 version of this spell can be cast upon others.

By adding Life 2 to the spell, the mage can use this against auric taints that have some root in organic processes, such as the corruption caused by the practice of Sinister Organ *qigong*.

Guardians of the Veil Rote: Scour Auric Verdigris

Dice Pool: Manipulation + Occult + Prime

The Guardians well know the value of a clean aura, one that does not display any hint of where they might have been or what activities they might have been up to. Although this spell cannot hide their own personal mind or nature from others, Scour Auric Verdigris can cleanse any marks left by the spirits or places the Guardians occasionally have to deal with.

Researching Sinister Organ Qigong

Capping Skill: Medicine

Action: Extended — 15 successes

Research Time: 1 hour; 20 minutes

Appropriate Libraries: Abyssal Intrusions, Auras

Possible Modifiers: Knowledge of Chinese alchemy, Taoism or traditional Chinese medicine (+1 to +2)

Successes Information

- | | |
|-------|--|
| 1–2 | A local ad for a new martial arts studio lists Celestial Body <i>qigong</i> as one of the nightly classes. A web link explains the art as a fusion of East and West, promoting health and inner knowledge. |
| 3–4 | A Christian anti-occult magazine or obscure web article reveals the health problems suffered by a college-age woman after she practiced Celestial Body <i>qigong</i> . Her parents call it a cult. She is now heavily medicated and fighting irrational outbursts and obsessive-compulsive disorder. |
| 5–7 | An academic survey of various <i>qigong</i> styles has a mention of Celestial Body <i>qigong</i> , and a claim by an ex-practitioner that its upper-level teachers called it <i>Yao Qiguan</i> , or Sinister Organ <i>qigong</i> . |
| 8–9 | Information is unveiled about a mage who was condemned by a West Coast Consilium for engaging in Abyssal magics associated with the martial arts. He escaped and is rumored to be using a new shadow name. |
| 10–11 | Incidents of Flesh Intruders (see p. 114) are linked to the practice of Sinister Organ <i>qigong</i> among donors. |
| 12–14 | Information comes to light about the Guardians of the Veil's involvement in hunting down the cult, hinting at their possible role in its creation. |

15+

An obscure treatise (perhaps written by Cinnabar Toad) on Sinister Organ *qigong* reveals the process of organ *qi* corruption and how it can be reversed.

Story Hooks

While Sinister Organ *qigong* might at first appear to be a manifestation of the “yellow peril” known to pulp fiction (see also “The Temple of Zanak Khan,” beginning on p. 199), this is actually a corruption of traditional Eastern practices, concocted not in ancient China but by a California charlatan. If anything, it’s an indictment of the New Age spiritual buffet, where lack of skepticism causes seekers to embrace anything with the whiff of ancient wisdom about it. It’s also a reminder to mages that many bad things aren’t necessarily aimed at them — Sleepers are targets, too. And they don’t have the magical skills needed to discern what’s happening to them.

School for Fools

The victims of Sinister Organ *qigong* will most likely be mortals. Few mages will fall for it, especially after its first effects become evident. Mages are best played as the detectives trying to figure out what’s wrong with some crazy Sleepers they’ve encountered (or whom friends or family have begged them to help out). Proper investigation leads back to the New Age *qigong* center the victims have been attending. In many cases, the ringleader of the local Poison Essence Cult might be a mage, a student of Cinnabar Toad. Most of these are apostates or mad mages, since few order mages see the benefit in spreading Abyssal taint.

It’s also possible that the trigger for a mage cabal’s investigation could be an encounter with a Flesh Intruder (p. 114). In trying to figure out how such a thing came to be, the trail might lead back to the *qigong* center (assuming the mages can get sufficient records about the organ donor).

Keeping Secrets

The characters’ cabal somehow comes across evidence that a small group of traveling Guardians of the Veil mages, originating from a West Coast caucus, have been killing Sleepers in the city. If the characters investigate, they find that these Sleepers are all connected to a local *qigong* school. Inquiries with the local Guardian caucus yield no information — they don’t care, don’t know or are covering something up. Confronting the foreign Guardians is more likely to result in a fight rather than an explanation.

Complicating matters, somebody begins leaving clues for the characters that help them track the foreign Guardians, and imply that they're in town covering up a terrible mistake made within their Labyrinth of Sleeper occult groups. Who is this mysterious informant? Is he part of the *qigong* group? Or is it Cinnabar Toad himself?

Supernal Revelations

A character who causes a Manifestation Paradox to occur encounters a strange, beautiful and compelling entity. This being appears to her as the most perfect imaginable, fitting all of her ideals, both physically and socially. It claims not to be from the Abyss but from the mage's own Supernal Realm, and the entity promises to teach a means by which the mage can Ascend to that

realm, although it requires dedication, diligence and hard work.

If the mage agrees, the entity teaches a style of spiritual exercises, either as a yoga style, a Tantric practice, a *qigong* form or a monastic meditation-and-prayer exercise, depending on what is most familiar to the mage. The catch is that the power the form offers can only be gained by teaching the form to Sleepers, who will suffer from it. The entity claims that their unAwakened souls cannot fully contain the form's energies, but promises that even though the practice degrades their bodies and minds, it hones their souls for future Awakening. Nonetheless, teaching the form and reaping its rewards (most commonly a Willpower benefit, as described above) causes the mage to risk her Wisdom.



The Swarmer

The Hive Mind, Abyssal Herder

Kid, I have seen some crazy shit on this job. You think, Ah, construction. You build some houses. Big deal, right? Well, let me tell you.

Like one time, we were working on an addition to this old Chinese couple's house. One day, shortly after we poured the foundation and set the frame for the house, I noticed that all the squirrels in the neighborhood was just watchin' us. Not like squirrels do, either. They weren't runnin' and round and all the rest of that crap—they just stood there, perfect still and watched us work. All fuckin' day. I was a wreck that night.

That went on for a week. That Saturday, I showed up to pick up my cooler, because I was goin' fishin', and I'd left it there Friday. That's when I discovered the body. Kinda hippy-looking guy, late 20s maybe. There was an axe off to one side, like he'd dropped it, and blood was everywhere.

Now, don't you fuckin' laugh when I say this, or I'll belt you one, but when I got up close to look at him, he'd been killed by all these tiny teeth and claws. They'd chewed him open and climbed inside, and practically hollowed him out.

I took off so fast from there, but not before I puked my guts up in the gutter across the street. Fuckin' squirrels. I can't stand to look at the little rodents these days.

This Abyssal creature influences the group behavior of social living creatures. These beings can control the actions of a swarm of bees or a horde of rats, as well as subtly influencing the actions of groups of people. Researchers in the Mysterium believe that these creatures were responsible for medieval legends of rat-kings, which could control and direct the actions of hordes of rats.

Form and Means of Entry

Swarmer are creatures associated with complex social dynamics of living things, and enter the Fallen World when someone accidentally creates a sufficiently complex and unusual three-dimensional pattern. This pattern is fundamentally alien to human senses and, in almost all cases, was created accidentally. A chance configuration of wear-patterns on a building's façade or an unusual repair of a building's electrical system can create a

pattern that calls a swarmer into the Fallen World. This pattern can take many forms, but it is always a three-dimensional object — a drawing, painting or mural is not sufficient. However, in at least one case, an unusual abstract sculpture opened a gateway for this being. All of these objects can be detected if a mage scrutinizes them with The Sybil's Sight; the object appears to have some sort of complex living pattern within it.



Because of the complex and inhuman nature of the pattern that summons a swarmer, it is very difficult for humans to deliberately create. It is almost impossible for someone to correctly record the exact details of one of these patterns with either words or any form of sketching — the human mind subconsciously “repairs” any perceptions, changing details subtly to conform to the logic of the Fallen World, rather than the Abyssal angles present. However, carefully detailed photography of the object, taken from many different angles can capture the pattern in sufficient detail that someone can reproduce it and allow the entity back into the Fallen World.

Doing so always involves reproducing the pattern in the original material. Although there are clear similarities between a sculpture and a pattern of wiring that both allow a swarmer to manifest, no one understands the relationship between these different patterns sufficiently to reproduce the pattern in different media. Mages who study this being maintain that both the material the pattern is made from and how it is made influences subtle features about the design. Regardless of why a particular pattern works as it does, occasionally someone creates a specific pattern, and if it persists for several hours or more, the pattern draws a swarmer and allows it into physical reality. Once the swarmer is in the Fallen World, the swarmer is trapped within the physical pattern that allowed it to manifest. The swarmer cannot move from this pattern, and destroying the pattern instantly banishes the swarmer back to the Abyss.

Rules of Intrusion

The first evidence of the existence of a swarmer is always found in the behavior of social animals such as bees, flocking birds, dogs, horses or similar animals. Swarmers are all capable of influencing human behavior but always start with animals. Dramatically unusual behavior of schools of fish, flocks of birds or even swarms of insects can all serve as clues that a swarmer is nearby. These disturbances often take two forms.

The creatures in the swarm act together more effectively, as if they were under the control of a single consciousness. The creatures respond to threats, dangers and opportunities for food with a high degree of efficiency, working together to the extent that individual members of the swarm are willing to deliberately place themselves in obvious danger to protect or aid the majority of the swarm. Also, when there is no obvious threat or food source present, members of the swarm periodically engage in complex and seemingly meaningless activities such as moving in complex and often disturbingly beautiful patterns. These patterns are often continuously moving spirals and other circular shapes.

Anyone attempting to harm or kill members of the swarm finds that the members fight with a frightening degree of efficiency and tactical acumen. Also, members attempt to pursue attackers for far longer than normal animals would. The swarm is normally content to merely chase off minor threats, but if someone spends a few minutes shooting half a dozen birds in a flock, the remainder continue to pursue and attack this person, even if he gets in a car and drives away. The swarm’s first goal is always to protect itself, but it will attempt to kill or incapacitate serious threats. The only time when the swarm places something above its own survival is when there is a threat to the swarmer’s physical manifestation. If someone or something seeks to directly attack or interfere with the swarmer in anyway, the swarm attacks the intruder without any thought for the swarm’s own survival.

One important limit on a swarmer is that it can only control a single swarm at a time. However, the swarmer can discard a swarm and gain control of another one in only five turns. A group of animals must be within a quarter mile of the swarmer for the swarmer to control them. Swarms that travel more than a quarter mile from the swarmer can be given a single simple command, such as attack a specific person and then return to the swarmer. However, creatures kept more than a quarter mile from the swarmer for more than three days lose all connection to the swarmer and begin acting normally. Also, an animal taken more than a quarter mile away that does not have instructions starts acting normally immediately.

Initially, most swarmers try out controlling several different species in the first days of their entry into the Fallen World, but after a week or two, almost all swarmers find a preferred species to control and focus most of their attention on manipulating groups of this species. However, if the swarmer is in danger or is attempting to accomplish a specific task, the swarmer often switches from controlling one species of creatures to another. Swarmers can use the species available in complex and disturbing ways, such as destroying the contents of a sealed room by first having a swarm of rats chew their way through the tough mesh covering the windows and then sending in a flock of sparrows to wreck havoc with the contents of the room.

Controlling Humans

While the specter of an Abyssal creature controlling a swarm of animals is disturbing, mages who study this creature are far more afraid of it gaining control of group of humans. Although swarmers begin controlling animals, if the swarmers are located in urban areas, they almost always switch to controlling humans.

A swarmer's control over a human group is very subtle. Instead of influencing any single individual, the swarmer controls the details of group dynamics. The swarmer can increase or decrease social distance between people and alter the general mood of a crowd. At a concert, the swarmer can influence the audience to watch in rapt attention, become restless and heckle, wander off in boredom or explode with rage, starting a riot. The swarmer cannot control the behavior of any particular individual, only the behavior of the aggregate group.

Despite the limitations, this control is capable of transforming a group of people eager to get home from work into a violent mob that either attacks a specific target or everyone who is not part of the mob. However, swarmers can only influence people who are part of an existing social group that consists of at least seven people. A swarmer can control some or all of an audience at a performance, the members of a class, co-workers in an office, a squad of police or similar groups of people. However, while the swarmer is controlling the members of this group, the swarmer has no influence over anyone who is not part of this group.

Mortal Susceptibility

Most mortals have no resistance to swarmers. However, some are immune to its influence. Humans with a Willpower of 8 or higher are immune to a swarmer's mental influence, as is anyone with a severe derangement, as well as a few people, including sociopaths and the mildly autistic, who are immune because they respond less strongly to social cues than most humans.

A swarmer, at its most extreme, can cause a group under its control to defend the swarmer from everyone who threatens it, turning the group into a well-disciplined mob that can seemingly communicate perfectly without words. However, this intensive level of control is very difficult to maintain. A swarmer may maintain this level of control for no more than an hour before its control breaks completely. The swarmer may not reassert control of any group for up to six hours after this control lapse.

Swarmers only use this extreme type of control to protect themselves from harm. Whenever anyone attempting to locate a swarmer's physical manifestation finds that nearby people become a hostile force acting in perfect unison, the interloper knows that he is getting close to the swarmer and that it realizes that the interloper has become a serious threat.

Mages and Swarmer Control

Mages are resistant, but not immune to swarmer control. Every mage who is a member of a group a swarmer is controlling must roll Resolve + Gnosis every half hour that the mage is within the area of a swarmer's control. This is an opposed roll, as normal, for the entity (see "Traits," below). Failure means that the mage goes along with the swarmer's directives until the mage has a chance to make another roll. A botch means that the mage cannot make another roll until she sleeps.

The Mind spell "Mental Shield" allows the mage to add his Mind Arcana to the resistance roll, and the Fate spell "Occlude Fortune" completely protects anyone from a swarmer's control for the spell's duration. Mages can use this same spell to temporarily free people affected by a swarmer from its control. However, because of the swarmer's power, this spell must be cast on everyone in the affected group in order for any of them to benefit from it at all — a difficult task in the case of large groups.

In the absence of immediate danger, swarmers that control groups of humans experiment with the humans, causing significant shifts in their mood and social distance that lack any rational explanation. In addition, swarmers also periodically have the humans engage in complexly patterned unusual behavior. Today, this behavior is often mistaken as either performance art or some other sort of "flash mob" phenomenon. These strange actions are almost never violent and do no harm to the participants or anyone else, but can be very puzzling or even potentially threatening to outsiders.

The group turns hostile if anyone harms some of the members or threatens to remove them from the group for more than a few days. If possible, the group attempts to assimilate people that threaten it. However, if the threats are too far away or are definitively not part of the group, the members of the group will not hesitate to threaten, kidnap or murder potential threats such as a corporate head intending to transfer some of the members of the group far from the swarmer.

One of the most unusual aspects of swarmer mental control is that the affected individuals have absolutely no idea that anything is influencing their behavior. Their emotions and thoughts have not been altered by any magical or psychic means. Instead, the swarmer creates minute environmental and nonverbal cues that affect people's behavior in much that same way that people are caught

up in normally created mobs and other intense social phenomena. Using Mind magics to attempt to determine the source of the influence reveals nothing except that the individuals involved are thinking and feeling in similar ways, exactly as if they were all listening to a rousing speech or were part of the same riot. Regardless of the type of creatures the swarmer is controlling, the easiest way to notice the affect of this being is to look at the affected group using the Fate spell "Interconnections," which will instantly reveal that the group is under the influence of a single unified force.

The greatest danger posed by a swarmer is when it controls a single group of people for several weeks or more. As time goes on, the swarmer becomes more adept at controlling the actions of these individuals and the people in the group not only get used to this subtle control, they begin to both need and desire it. The members of the group also begin to feel a deep connection with one another. Over the course of several weeks, the members of this group begin to become dependent upon both the swarmer and one another.

If this process continues for too long, the individual suffers significant mental trauma once someone banishes the swarmer. The person suffers even more trauma if separated from the other members of her group. If the swarmer is destroyed or banished after a group of people have become been under its control for more than two weeks, each of the members of the group must make a Resolve + Composure roll:

Roll Results

Dramatic Failure: The victim is traumatized severely, gaining either a single severe derangement or two mild derangements. If the victim already possessed a derangement, it almost always upgrades to its severe version. The victim also still feels a strong attachment to the others involved in the swarm.

Failure: The victim suffers a mild derangement, or an already possessed mild derangement upgrades to its severe version. The most common mind derangements gained are Avoidance, Depression, Inferiority Complex, Irrationality, Suspicion and Vocalization. The victim still feels a strong attachment to others involved in the swarm.

Success: The victim recovers from the experience, but still has an attachment to the others involved in the swarm. She also occasionally suffers from nightmare memories of the experience, and may question how truly free she is.

Exceptional Success: The victim recovers from the experience completely, with no attachment to others involved. She suffers no nightmares.

Possible Modifiers: Per week of being under the swarmer's control (-1 per week, cumulative), swarmer

used person to commit acts that cause Morality degeneration (-2)

Even if the swarmer is no longer directing the affected individuals, they usually remain in close contact with one another and often attempt, without success, to replicate the unifying experience they all previously shared. They frequently try to second-guess each other's wants and finish sentences for one another, sometimes awkwardly and without success. Members of this group also strongly resist being separated for any length of time, and anyone forced to be away from all other members of this group for more than three days must make another Resolve + Composure roll.

Roll Results

Dramatic Failure: The victim cannot endure being separated and tries to flee back to the group, falling catatonic if prevented. The victim either gains two new mild derangements or gains a new one and upgrades a mild derangement to severe.

Failure: The victim's psyche cracks from being separated from those she considers vitally necessary, gaining a mild derangement or upgrading an existing derangement to its severe version.

Success: The victim handles the separation well, though she may feel anxious and dream about being near the others again.

Exceptional Success: The victim breaks her dependency on being near the group and returns to her own sense of self.

Possible Modifiers: Per three days the victim has successfully remained away from the group (+1), per mild derangement possessed (-1), per severe derangement possessed (-2)

In time, counseling, drugs or Mind magic can help affected individuals break their dependency on the other members of the group, but without the use of powerful Mind magic, members of the group can take weeks or months to recover. If something such as the closure of an office or the sale of an apartment building causes the entire group to split up, the members can react violently and may attempt to take revenge upon the person or organization that they consider to be responsible for their separation.

The Fate spell "Fabricate Fortune," cast with a duration of at least 12 hours, instantly frees someone from the lingering effects of a swarmer's control and also cures any derangements the individual acquired. These effects persist even after the spell wears off. The Mind spell "Breach the Vault of Memory," cast with at least a 12-hour duration, can also be used to remove the individual's memories of the control and has the same affect.

Mortal Response

Animals controlled by a swarmer soon attract attention, and in any urban area, the local animal control agency will attempt to capture or destroy them. These efforts usually result in animal control personnel being savagely attacked, which can cause them to quarantine the area because of fears of rabies. A concerted official response can rapidly deal with almost any animal swarm, but the ability of a swarmer to simply control another type of animal renders this victory moot.

People controlled by a swarmer are often far more difficult to detect, and official response is far more limited. If the members of the group perform some unusual activity such as all gathering in a public square to stare into the sky or all go into the same shopping mall and silently walk in a spiral pattern, other people may become disturbed and call the police. While detaining these people can provoke them into violence, this is a fairly uncommon occurrence, and most officials dismiss such actions as either pranks or very unusual coincidences. The only time officials are likely to become seriously involved is if there is some threat to the swarmer itself — the violent and highly organized response of dozens or hundreds of people may well be taken as some sort of criminal, terrorist or insurgent activity, and the police will use respond with deadly force.

Means of Exile

People left under the control of a swarmer for any real length of time invariably come away from the experience with severe psychological trauma. Fortunately, banishing a swarmer is relatively simple: a swarmer's physical form is its connection to the physical world. Destroying or seriously disturbing the unique pattern that allows the swarmer to manifest in the Fallen World instantly banishes the swarmer. Unfortunately, doing this can often be quite difficult. In addition to having to battle groups of animals or people that the swarmer uses to protect itself, the swarmer's link to the physical world is often something fairly robust and difficult to change, such as a building's electrical system or a pattern of worn stone on the façade of a building. Locating this pattern, dealing with the swarmer's guardians and then disturbing the pattern sufficiently to dispel the swarmer can all be dangerous and difficult. However, a shotgun blast to an electrical junction box or a couple of blows with sledgehammer to a building façade are perfectly sufficient to dispel the entity. Fortunately, once someone

destroys this pattern, any animals controlled by the swarmer immediately cease attacking, rapidly flee unfamiliar locations and resume their normal activities.

Controlled humans cease all activity and stand around confused for a few minutes. Individuals who have been under the swarmer's influence for less than two weeks are only dazed for minute or two. If threatened during this time, or if they have a few minutes to recover, they either flee the scene or attempt to explain their unusual behavior in a somewhat confused fashion. In either case, they rapidly forget the details of what they have done.

People who have been under a swarmer's influence for more than two weeks remain confused and disoriented regardless of what occurs around them. If they are in immediate and obvious danger, they attempt to flee in a blind and panicked fashion. Otherwise, they may stand around confused and mumbling for an hour or more. In addition to the problems discussed above, such people will remain mildly disoriented and confused until they next sleep. At this point, they will seem like they are back to normal, but feel that something important is suddenly missing from their lives.

Researching the Swarmer

Capping Skill: Investigation

Action: Extended — 15 successes

Research Time: 1 hour; 20 minutes

Appropriate Libraries: Psychology, Spatial Magics, Occult Patterns

Possible Modifiers: The researcher is an Initiator of the Mind Arcanum (+1), the researcher possesses no dots in Empathy (-1)

Successes	Information
0-9	Nothing.
10-14	Swarmers control groups of people and animals using subtle cues. If the swarmers control people for too long, the people become dependent upon this control. Mages are somewhat resistant to this control.
15+	Swarmers are bound to a specific physical pattern. Destroy the pattern and the swarmer vanishes. A swarmer can only control a single swarm at once and can only control people who belong to the group the swarmer is controlling.

Story Hooks

A strange pattern in the Fallen World causes a strange pattern of behavior in animals and people located nearby. Those who investigate have a difficult time ahead of them: it could be a variety of things that summon the swarmer, and destroying it is often a difficult proposition when dealing with its servant swarm. The following are a few ideas for using the swarmer in your chronicle.

The Cult

A swarmer manifests inside a building owned by a team of holistic health practitioners who teach yoga, natural medicine and similar services. The swarmer manifests after the building adds a pair of sunken hot tubs in its sauna. The mosaic pattern in one of the hot tubs is the swarmer's link to the Fallen World.

If none of the characters attend such a place, then have it located very near one of their houses. At first, all anyone nearby may notice are large flocks of sparrows clustering in the trees around the building. The sparrows occasionally all watch someone walking by very closely. They are also unusually silent and occasionally fly in strange patterns over the building.

More significant changes occur when the swarmer begins to affect the people in the holistic center. Instructors and students in yoga classes assume strange yoga postures, and some classes proceed without any verbal instructions. To outsiders watching these classes, the students seem exceptionally skilled and highly practiced at acting in unison, but they perform no known style of yoga. The swarmer ignores people who come in for single treatments with a holistic doctor and concentrates on the yoga and meditation classes, since these contain social groups the swarmer can affect.

The students are all exceedingly enthusiastic, and most attempt to convince their friends and co-workers to join these classes. Many students also begin attending additional classes and will go there as often as twice a day if they can do so without losing their jobs or otherwise completely abandoning their other responsibilities. As events progress, some students begin ignoring any commitments outside of the health center, and the health center ceases to charge regular members attending these classes.

If the characters do not investigate, then they hear a news report of an incident there when police came to investigate complaints of strange cult-like behavior reported by the brother of someone in one of the classes. A group of half a dozen students attempt to keep the police from interrupting a yoga class and are arrested. These students become despondent and act strangely when the police take them into custody. Similar incidents continue to

occur until the police come to close the center down and face a well-organized mob controlled by the swarmer.

When the characters investigate, they find that the people prevent anyone who is not part of their group from getting near the sauna room, where the hot tubs are located. Even if the characters succeed in banishing the swarmer, they must still deal with several dozen people who are now have trouble dealing with life without the swarmer's control.

The Children

In a suburban or outer urban neighborhood, a group of around two dozen children between the ages of six and 12 who regularly play together have come under the influence of a swarmer. The swarmer was called forth by the eccentric design of a tree house that several of the older children created with the help of their parents. This story works best in the summer, when the children are off from school, but can occur at any time.

These children seem to obey their parents and get into trouble less than many children their age. However, they all sneak out every night, after their parents think they are in bed and perform various strange activities out in the small patch of woods (or vacant lot, if that is more appropriate) near the neighborhood — creating “crop circles” in patches of tall grass or setting up some kind of strange obstacle course that they wander through over and over, in identical pattern and timing, without saying a word to one another. Three of the children have parents who are going to move away in a few weeks. The children wish to avoid having this occur and are currently deciding whether to have the three children run away or to kill the parents and attempt to keep their deaths a secret.

The children are confident that most adults ignore them completely and so are less careful than they otherwise might be. As a result, someone who notices the odd way in which they all watch the adults sometimes, or overhears some of their more unusual conversations may begin to wonder if something is going on.

If the tree house is threatened, the children will both attack and call for help from their parents. Most of the older children are aware enough of the realities of modern life to tell their parents that the person threatening their tree house attempted to molest or kidnap one of them.

The Farm

Sometime in the autumn, when the characters are out in the country, they are stopped by either a teenager fleeing for his life from a pack of feral hogs or by a large pair of huge, menacing-looking hogs standing in the middle of the road. When the characters investigate, they find that

the teen or the hogs come from a local hog farm. When it came time for the hog farm to prepare to slaughter the hogs for winter, the hogs fought back with surprising fury and highly organized tactics. The hogs killed one farmhand, and have trapped the remaining farmers in the upper floors of a three-story farmhouse, where they have been cut off from all communication because the hogs ripped apart the electrical and telephone lines.

The trapped people are in immediate danger, and if the characters show signs of attempting to help these people or attack the hogs, the hogs will be immediately attack. The farm contains around 50 adult hogs as well as more than 20 young hogs. Each of the adult hogs is 250 to 300 pounds of large, dangerous animal, and the swarmer is causing them to work together with perfect precision.

Because there are only six people in the vicinity, the swarmer will not attempt control the humans and so has focused its control solely on the local animals. The swarmer spends most of its time controlling the hogs, but to protect them or to safeguard itself, it will also take control of a flock of large local crows that is can cause to work together with devastating effectiveness.

Actually investigating the farm may take some time, since the characters are likely to be either attempting to rescue the trapped people or fleeing from the hogs or possibly the crows. Once the characters manage to examine the farm or question the farmers, they discover some fairly recent decorative woodwork on the back of the farmhouse. When repairing storm damage on one of the walls, a local carpenter inlaid the back of the farmhouse with a large decorative pattern reminiscent of

one of the old, highly complex Pennsylvania Dutch hex signs. This inlaid hex sign is the focus for the swarmer. This hex sign is approximately nine feet in diameter and is mostly on the outside of the second and third floors. Burning down the house would instantly destroy it, but would also seriously endanger the trapped people. Also, any attempt to attack it directly results in a coordinated assault by both the hogs and the crows.

Traits

Though a swarmer is not technically a corporeal or spiritual entity, it has the following effects on the Fallen World when it manifests.

Swarmer

Control: The swarmer may exert control over a group of creatures or people that are part of a social or other group. The swarmer accomplishes this with a dice pool of six dice, plus one die per month the swarmer has existed. This is an opposed roll of Resolve + Composure; once an animal or person has fallen victim to this control, the animal or person remains part of the controlled swarm until the swarmer attempts to control another group. The swarmer may make a control roll once per minute on any creature in range.

Strengthening: The presence of a swarmer pattern in a physical object increases the Durability of that object by +2. The swarmer vanishes the instant the object takes Damage that is greater than its Durability. Similar to a normal object, damage to the object a swarmer inhabits does not heal; it must be repaired.



The Temple of Zanak Khan

*Canada of Filth, Prison of the Depraved Odalisque,
Locus of Forbidden Lusts*

As the sluggish grasp of the poppy smoke took him, Roderick remembered to clutch tightly the amulet. Instead of the usual panoply of disjointed dream and nightmare paths conjured by his whispered invocation of those wretched words torn from the manuscript, he opened his eyes to witness the dread shadow looming in the mist, the parapets and onion spires taking shape as if drawn into focus through a camera lens. The wrongful architecture caused a roiling in his brain, and he fought to maintain his equilibrium on the sharp-rocked road that led to the temple gates. He looked down at his hand to see the amulet there. It had traveled with him across the Wall of Mists. He read again its atavistic inscription and shuddered, but knew that there was no alternative to the task he had embarked upon. The Temple of Zanak Khan must be destroyed...

— Richard Chislak, "The Temple of Zanak Khan" (*Thrilling Oriental Tales*, May 1933)

Somewhere deep in the Temenos there waits a temple. It was not erected by any spirit or indigenous denizen of Astral Space, but born from the fevered imagination of a 1930s American pulp writer. Richard Chislak is largely unremembered, a forgotten name even to most chroniclers of the weird tales of the '20s, '30s and '40s. Although he wrote more than 20 stories, only three of them were ever published in his short life. He died of pneumonia in 1933 at the age of 27 in Taylorsville, Mississippi, the town where he had been born and raised. He had never left it during his lifetime, and yet his stories, set in far locales, are remarkable for their sense of place and verisimilitude. He claimed, in a letter written to Elden Lamarr, editor of *Weird Western Stories*, that, "I just have to dream, and I'm there. We think that the body is important, but it is merely the conveyance of the mind, whose limits are unbounded."

Of Chislak's three published tales, two are unimpressive retreads of genre standards: "The Clock Strikes 13" (*Spicy Crime Stories*, June 1931) and "Ride a Red Horse" (*Weird Western Stories*, November 1932). His startling achievement, however, appeared in the May 1933 issue of *Thrilling Oriental Tales*, although the story has never been reprinted. Here the public was introduced to the dread Temple of Zanak Khan, which existed not in mundane

geography but beyond the "Wall of Mists" separating dream from flesh. The tale is a bizarre indulgence in every conceivable Orientalist cliché, with a repulsive dose of colonialist attitudes toward Asians and their "decadent, tired, pre-evolved" civilization.

The driving force in the story seems to be, as stated by Cory R. Larkin in his *Pulp Gems* study of the genre, a ". . . thorough, almost manic, fear of the opposite sex, mixed with a repressed homosexual yearning represented by the Asian 'Other.'" Flaws aside, the story does well at building a menacing atmosphere, with its supreme achievement being Chislak's descriptions of the temple itself, a sprawling, obscene monument to all that is forbidden. At times, the reader can almost believe that the author had indeed seen the temple with his own eyes, and walked the tight lanes between its decadent towers.

He had. Chislak encountered the temple in his dreams and became obsessed with it. It is unclear to those mages who have studied the phenomenon (and survived its dark allure) whether Chislak somehow created the temple himself from his own repressed desires, or whether some Astral energy responded to his call, forming itself in collaboration with Chislak's dreaming soul. Regardless, the Temple afterwards migrated from Chislak's Oneiros to the Astral Temenos, and now calls out to other dreaming souls, luring them to its eerie façade with the promise of forbidden indulgences within.

If so, some mages might say, then what is the harm? A romp through the bizarre imagination of a long-dead pulp writer might even be fun, as long as one ignores the racist and sexist imagery the Temple produces. It is just such mages who fall into the Temple's trap. Its kitschy allure is part of its attraction mechanism, by which the Temple claims its prey. For the Temple is not native to Astral Space or to Richard Chislak's mind: the Temple originated in the Abyss, Unknown to any mage — or to himself even — Richard Chislak was Awakened, but not to any Watchtower erected by an Oracle. He signed his name to the dark reflection that the Watchtower of the Iron Gauntlet casts into the Abyss. (See **Tome of the Mysteries** for more on the Abyssal Watchtowers.)

As an orphaned Abyssal mage, ignorant of his fate, an apostate even to his own self, Chislak began erecting

his dream Temple under the influence of opium. In his drugged trances, his unconscious self projected forth and worked spells upon the Astral substance, slowly building the Temple tower by tower. It is doubtful that Chislak ever cast a spell in waking life, instead blossoming as a mage wholly within his trance life. (Some have wondered how he maintained an opium habit in his small Southern town, but it seems that his uncle was a pharmacist; Chislak perhaps purloined his supply from his uncle.)

Chislak is dead, but his Temple remains. It feeds upon the mental energy of those who enter the Temple's gates and engage in its pleasures. The majority of its victims are unwitting mortals, but now and then a mage finds it – only to be ruined by its addictive decadence.

Form

The Temple is a sprawling, mist-shrouded complex in the Temenos, nestled in the crack between two high cliffs, the peaks of which cannot be seen. A single road

of broken, sharp shale leads to the Temple's gates. Its architecture is a fantasy mishmash of Asian and Byzantine forms, from onion domes to pagodas atop high ledges.

The Temple is made of the same stuff of the Astral planes, but in imitation of marble, ebony and large, carved blocks of just about every precious gem imaginable. Silks of all colors billow here in the soft wind that blows both inside and outside of the Temple.

The perspective between the various spires and towers growing from the main dome Temple seems... unsettling. It's like switching between 3D glasses and one's normal vision too quickly; some people get headaches. The difference here is that the brain's perceptual processes can never adjust to the strange, Abyssal geometries of the Temple. No real harm is suffered by gazing at it, but headaches can occur. These can be alleviated by focusing on one section of the Temple at a time, letting the rest of the vista become hazy in one's perception. The image seems to take on a painterly quality, with colors and misty hues unknown outside of liquid pigments.



The Temple is, predictably, impossible to map. Its exterior and interior spaces arise as needed, congealing out of the mists. One mage claimed that Chislak merely inherited the place from an earlier author, a well-traveled English lord who in the Material Realm spent his fortune endlessly adding to his earthly estate as a means of also adding wings to the Astral Temple. If so, his name, and that of his estate, is unknown.

The one feature that is always present is the central dome and its onion-topped spire. Other towers, gardens, pagodas, tents and even castles come and go, but the central dome and tower is ever present.

Also eternal is the Temple's foyer and dungeon. The foyer is a luxuriously appointed, silk-canopied, cushioned and jewel-bedecked marble arena with many doorless portals, all circling a sparkling fountain of multi-hued waters. Here servants and courtesans entertain new guests, until successive dreams draw them into one or more portals for more private reveries. One unseen portal is hidden beneath a marble floor tile, which when moved reveals stairs winding down into darkness. Only those who have experienced multiple visits to the Temple find this portal, for it leads to the Temple's dungeon and its final, terrible revelation.

Means of Passage

The Temple's victims are most often mortals, although mages can also be called. A number of actions can cause a person's soul to come into a faint sympathy with the Temple, which initiates dreams about the Temple. The following activities won't always initiate a relationship, however; no one can predict for sure why it works one time and not another.

- *Excessive illicit viewing of Internet pornography.* People who spend a lot of time (more than 10 hours a week) watching porn on the Internet, and who keep the habit a secret out of shame or embarrassment, might find themselves dreaming of the Temple. It seems that those who watch while at work are even more prone to receive the dreams. For some reason, printed pornography is not enough (perhaps it is too "accepted," and not taboo enough today).

- *Succumbing to the Vice of Lust while in the general vicinity of a Paradox Anomaly.* The victim is most often not even aware that a strange Anomaly is occurring nearby, but should he gain a Willpower point from indulging his Vice of Lust when in its vicinity (which could even be defined by the Storyteller as "within the same neighborhood"), he might begin dreaming of the Temple.

- *Contact with another dreamer.* Someone who is already dreaming about the Temple might cause a contagion in

another's Oneiros, causing him to soon begin dreaming of it himself. Casual contact is usually not enough; the dreamer must spend at least a while in the victim's presence. In some cases, brief contact characterized by passion (arguing or sex) is enough.

- *Celibacy.* Those who are celibate (either through choice or inability to attract a partner) might begin dreaming of the Temple once they have spent at least one year without a sexual encounter. This is a rare form of contact, however, and usually requires another trigger mechanism, such as brief contact with someone who is already dreaming about the Temple.

- *Reading Richard Chislak's story, "The Temple of Zanak Khan."* Since this story has never been republished after its original appearance in an obscure pulp magazine in 1933, it is unlikely that someone will come across it today. Nonetheless, reading the story is the only method 100% guaranteed to initiate the dreams. A few mages who have had experience of the Temple or researched it when helping out victims might have a copy in their libraries (or even a photocopy). It is conceivable that a mage could scan the tale and place it on the Internet for free access to anyone who types "Zanak Khan" into a search engine, but no one has yet done this.

In Dreams...

The dream of the Temple is like the pull of gravity, drawing the victim down into Astral Space (even if he's a mortal and nowhere near a Hallow), through his own Oneiros into the Temenos and onto the shale road leading to the Temple's gates. No extended action rolls are required to breach the Astral wall; the Temple's power removes barriers between it and its guests.

At first, the dreamer sees the Temple from a distance, and hears faint moans of pleasure issuing from it that are irresistibly arousing; no matter the dreamers' personal sexual openness. If he chooses to approach the Temple, he will almost reach it before awakening. On the following evening, he will dream of the Temple again. This time, the dream begins at the gates, and the dreamer may enter into the foyer, where the Temple's residents seek to entertain him (see below).

Without Dreams

Few mages get the call, but they might discover a mortal who has. Without knowing anything about the Temple, however, there's little reason to suspect the mortal is suffering from anything but normal dreams. There is no sign of a spell of enchantment. Only a mage who travels into the dreamer's personal Oneiros, or Astral dream space, will realize that something unusual is going on, that there is a passage leading into an obscure zone of the Temenos.

Finding the Temple without receiving dreams about it is very difficult. The easiest way is to read Chislak's story. Barring that, a mage must enter a dreamer's Oneiros and follow the passage to the Temenos.

Mortal Response

Mortal dreamers have no clue that what they're encountering night after night is real — real on a different plane of reality than they've encountered before. Although recurring dreams of such vibrancy are odd, especially since these are not forgotten the way real dreams often are (these aren't actually dreams, but Astral experiences), few dreamers mention them to family or friends. The content is too embarrassing. Most don't want to tell their spouses about the ecstatic night they just spent in the embrace of the Lady of One Thousand Entwinements while serenaded by a choir of prepubescent boys. When dreamers do describe their dreams, the common reaction is condemnation or a request for them to see a psychiatrist.

Of course, the Temple's continuing effect inevitably tells over time, displayed in the behavior spurred by the dreamer's Decadence derangement. This is not a mystical effect, however, so even most mages would have little reason to suspect any supernatural cause for the person's odd words and deeds. Psychiatrists might diagnose the patient with syphilis and prescribe penicillin — ineffectively, of course. Ultimately, the person is probably doomed to suffer the more severe form of the Temple's derangement: Depravity.

Rules of Intrusion

Zanak Khan is the putative Mongol lord of this Demesne, but he is never seen or encountered. Yet, he is a presence ever looming, as if always near to arriving in courtly splendor. The Temple's servants and courtesans (all of whom are Rank 1 spirits) are in a state of constant preparation for this never-consummated visit from their lord. As such, they work to please their guests to gain esteem in their lord's eyes, even debasing themselves (and breathlessly offering to do so).

The servants are finely dressed and never look one in the eye (and cannot be made to do so — it is as if space bends to prevent anyone from positioning himself to meet their eyes). They carry trays of scrumptious viands

and ambrosial wine, ever coming and going with full trays from an impossible-to-locate kitchen.

The courtesans — who do meet their guests' eyes — are in various states of dress, eager to serve. Some are high class, capable of cultured conversation. Others are mere fleshpots. They come in both sexes, from curvaceous babes to honed, Chippendale-style models. They seem to instinctively know the sexual preference of their guests and gravitate to whomever would be most attracted to them.

Once a guest has broken the ice in the main hall after his first visit, he is invited on his next visits into the more carnal pleasures of the chambers deeper in the Temple — anything imaginable, from playful sex (which always turns degrading) to bestiality to the Temple residents volunteering to be murdered by their guests, if it turns the guests on.

Interestingly, mortal and mage visitors cannot interact physically with one another here — they cannot engage their lusts with one another, only with Temple residents.

The Rules of Ruin

Those who visit the Temple are seduced by courtesans. If the visitors resist the temptation (roll Resolve + Composure), they can leave unharmed. Repeated visits, however, erode one's ability to withstand the odalisque's uncanny allure (-1 die penalty per successive visit). Once they give in and have sex, they are drained of one Willpower point. After this, they cannot resist seduction at all (no further rolls allowed), and are increasingly forced to repeat intercourse multiple times in one evening. After succumbing to one's first seduction, one automatically loses two Willpower on the next visit, then three Willpower on the next and so on. If the victim's Willpower points are completely drained, he wakes in his bed, sweating and exhausted. He automatically loses one dot of Morality (or Wisdom, if he's a mage) and must roll to resist degeneration. If he fails, he gains a unique derangement: Decadence (see sidebar).

Once he has lost Morality or Wisdom, he can again resist the Temple courtesan's seduction, but the cycle begins anew, with his resolve eroding with each new visit. If he again loses Morality and has already suffered the Decadence derangement, instead of waking, he is guided into the Temple's dungeon.

Note that characters who suffer the Vice of Lust gain a point of Willpower upon waking. Since this point is only awarded when the victim awakens, it cannot prevent him from being drained of all his points while in the Temple.

Unique Temple Derangement: Decadence (Mild)

Your character's past sense of decorum and social grace, no matter how limited or primitive it might have been, is now perceived to be laughably naïve, the province of fools. He has few scruples about how to behave in public and what it is acceptable to say or do. Whenever he has won a great social victory (as defined by the Storyteller, or if an exceptional success is rolled on any Social-related roll) or suffered a humiliating social defeat (as with a victory, except when a dramatic failure is rolled), make a reflexive Resolve + Composure roll.

Effect: Failure means your character loses all sense of proportion and will say the most nasty things to others and engage in ridiculous activities in public, such as walking around naked or buying expensive champagne for every one in the room even if it's beyond his means. He becomes, in effect, the worst sort of drunk, although he might not have had a single drop to drink. Celebrities have ruined their careers through lesser deeds than what the character will now attempt.

For now, however, his excesses are mainly verbal — he is under no compunction to act against others. He might humiliate himself, but he won't force his decadent behavior onto others. If he progresses in this derangement, however, reaching the severe stage of Depravity (see below), all bets are off.

Dungeons and Depravity

The revelation at the heart of the Temple, only reached after enduring multiple visits and indulgences, waits in the dungeon below. After walking in darkness down what seems to be an endless spiral of stairs, the guest (and his courtesan guide, presumably) reaches the bottom. There, in a pit that delves yet deeper, he is given a vision of what lies at the heart of the universe itself, the source and origin of all things (or so it seems to him): the Creator as a rutting animal.

For some reason, this vision is utterly convincing, and any who see it will believe that his faith (even in science) is completely shattered, that the cosmos is just the result of the mindless (but animistic) heaving lust of a deity servicing itself endlessly upon the stuff of its own creation. He might even come to believe that Mana is the deity's ejaculate or lubricant. Consciousness itself is just an illu-

sion, an echo of the deity's moans and grunts. Awakening is simply the echo of the deity's umpteenth orgasm.

The result of watching this despicable spectacle is that the viewer's Decadence derangement is upgraded to its severe form: Depravity.

Unique Temple Derangement: Depravity (Severe)

Your character no longer respects any guidelines for social conduct, no matter how common or accepted they might be. In fact, he feels the need to do the opposite of what those rules say: If he is expected to be polite, he will be rude. If he must be peaceful, he'll evoke violence. The very existence of any kind of social rule is an insult to his sense of liberty gained at the Temple. Worse, it's a cosmic joke played on those who don't know the truth, that the universe is just a sweaty gyration of lust. Whenever someone asks him to behave (even if it's a nightclub's bouncer who's not asking with words but fists), make a Resolve + Composure roll with a -2 dice penalty for your character to resist doing the opposite of what he's been told or expected to do.

Just how far the player and Storyteller want to take this derangement during play is up to them, but beware letting it become a license for players to abuse other players — it's the character, not the player, who has visited the Temple and caught its disease.

Means of Exile

The Temple cannot be destroyed by any known magic. An archmaster, might be able to figure out the spells needed to cleanse the Temple from the Astral Plane, but short of that, the Temple remains lodged in the Temenos, although in its ever-shifting "location."

The Temple can, however, be banished from the lives of those who have been called to it (or who have chosen to visit it). The key lies in Chislak's story. He himself was never able to quit the Temple, but he suspected how it could be done. His story was an attempt to record this method, perhaps as a warning to others. In the tale, the hero, Roderick, is given an amulet by a mysterious Asian elder. It is inscribed with an alien alphabet that is, in fact, the High Speech of Atlantis. The words are the means of activating the amulet's imbued Mind spell that, when cast within the Temple (even a mortal can activate the spell), causes the Temple to shudder and collapse — with barely enough time for the caster to escape.

This does not actually destroy the Temple. The spell only ends the Temple's influence over the amulet's user (but not any derangement caused by the Temple: those must be healed by regaining Morality or Wisdom). Never again, however, will the Temple plague the character. Never again, though, can he reach it, even voluntarily or if he needs to do so to save another from it. For him, the Temple no longer exists.

The spell used can vary, although it should at least be a Mind 3 form of the "Breach the Vault of Memory" spell that is cast upon the user himself (Mind 4 if cast upon others). The memory to be wiped out is that of the Temple. If the target suffers the Temple's Depravity derangement, there is a -1 die penalty on the spellcasting or Imbued Item's activation roll.

Another possibility is a variation on the Fate 4 "Break the Chains" spell. If the target is somewhat new to the Temple, only 1 Potency is required, but if he has suffered the Decadence derangement, 3 Potency is needed, and if he's sunk to the level of Depravity, 5 Potency is needed to break the Temple's hold on him.

The Space 3 "Destroy the Threads" spell can temporarily cut a target's connection to the Temple, but it will soon (within a week) reassert itself.

Researching the Temple

Capping Skill: Investigation

Action: Extended — 10 successes

Research Time: 30 minutes; 10 minutes

Appropriate Libraries: Abyssal Intrusions, Astral Space, Derangements

Possible Modifiers: Researcher has Allies or Contacts among pulp-fiction aficionados (+2)

Successes **Information**

1-2 Nothing

3-5 A reference to and summary of the plot of Chislak's obscure pulp story.

6-7 A psychiatric study from 1947 of a proposed new form of dementia called by its author "Orientalist Phantasia." He encountered more than a dozen patients, all of whom were remanded to his care due to their wild, uncontrollable behavior and swearing. He discovered that, although most of them didn't know each

other, they all had similar dreams of orgies held in a Persian castle. One of them leapt out a window crying, "I must get there! Zanak Khan! He comes!"

8-9

A Silver Ladder Acanthus mage's written mention of a bizarre temple encountered in the Temenos, suspected to have Abyssal resonance. When he returned with his cabal, the place was gone.

10+

Discovery of the actual High Speech script inscribed on the amulet in Chislak's tale (not printed in the story, but recorded in his hand-drawn notes), pointing to a memory-erasing Mind rote.

Story Hooks

The Temple of Zanak Khan is a relic of a previous era when sexuality was not as open and healthily regarded by the populace as it is today (relatively speaking). Chislak's tale is one of many from his time that portray sex and eroticism as horrific and originating in atavistic urges alien to civilization. This perhaps came from a combination of Victorian repression and the then-modern Freudian theories about the id and Oedipus complex. For more sexually liberated people, these stories can seem somewhat comical in their bombastic argument that civilization teeters on a brink of barbarism and could be tipped over by a single incident of misplaced lust. To the more aware modern, what possible terror can such a story still evoke? The ultimate lesson here is not about dated attitudes, but an eternal "problem" in human nature, what Nietzsche called the Dionysian/Apollonian split: Instinct versus Reason, or in social situations, Self-Expression versus Propriety. From another angle, Unconscious versus Conscious. Primitive "programming" versus cultivated free will.

The Dionysian urge to throw all caution to the winds is still with the human animal, no matter how evolved he becomes, and despite our embrace of it in events such as Mardi Gras, has a dark side: that of addiction. Any story involving the Temple of Zanak Khan should play up the addiction characters acquire for the place. Even if they are consciously repulsed by it, something in them draws them back for more.

Orgy of the Damned

The Temple of Zanak Khan might best be used as the nemesis in a mortals game, where the characters are not Awakened and have no means of easily identifying what's happening to them. Such a game allows the true horror of addiction – of being unable to resist a will that is your own even though it seems alien to you – to come through to its fullest degree.

The way out for the characters might come from a mysterious figure (a mage), who gives them the amulet with the spell they need to break the curse. (Or maybe they find Chislak's own amulet, which he was never able to use himself.) While this might seem like a handy deus ex machina, the mage cannot himself destroy the Temple, only give the mortal characters the means to do so themselves. As they enter with the spell, however, the Temple tempts them by revealing the entry to the dungeon. If they are foolish enough to take the stairs down and witness the revelation waiting there, the Temple will at least have gained a final victory (instilling the Depravity derangement) before being destroyed.

The Art of Murder

A cabal of mages (the player characters) hears of a mage renowned for his depraved behavior, but who is

too powerful and well connected with the Consilium to suffer much censure. They accidentally discover his body while his mind is Astrally projected. If they choose to follow his silver thread, they'll discover the Temple. Inside, the mage is practicing the art of murder on willing subjects, the Temple's courtesans, who line up in eager anticipation to die at his hands. It is clear that the mage's Wisdom is not being helped by this pastime. When he realizes that he's been seen, he'll instantly return to his body, then try to escape the cabal and plot ways to discredit and destroy them before they can do the same to him.

Temple of the New Pain

A mage who has obsessively studied the Temple has figured out a way to build upon and alter it for the new age. Instead of representing an Orientalist vision of forbidden eroticism, the Temple now takes on a more gruesome, gore-splattered aura, one representing the horrors of sexually transmitted diseases, as manifested by growths and pus. Along with it, the resident spirits change, now wearing leather from head to toe and carrying knives and chained hooks. For them, the new pleasure is pain, and they aim to explore it with their guests in every conceivable manner.



The Twisting Maze

Twisting Maze Zone, The Warp

I'm serious, here. There used to be a big 12-story apartment building at the corner of Madison and 5th. I used to live there. I went to stay with friends when things got weird. People started getting lost in the hallways, and the elevator never went to the right floor. Even walking up the stairs didn't always work. If you walked up three flights, you could find yourself on the fifth floor. My roommate stayed there despite how weird it got. She called me one night talking about how things had gotten really crazy and asked if she could come stay with me and my friends. Then, the phone went dead. I called back, and there was no number there. My friends think I've been living with them since I got out of college. I'm not crazy, this all happened.

Space and, to a lesser degree, time begin to warp and shift in an area that can range in size from a large building to a small neighborhood. If no one stops this process, the shifts and warping continue to worsen until the entire area vanishes from the world. Perhaps more disturbing, Sleepers cannot recall the area ever having existed.

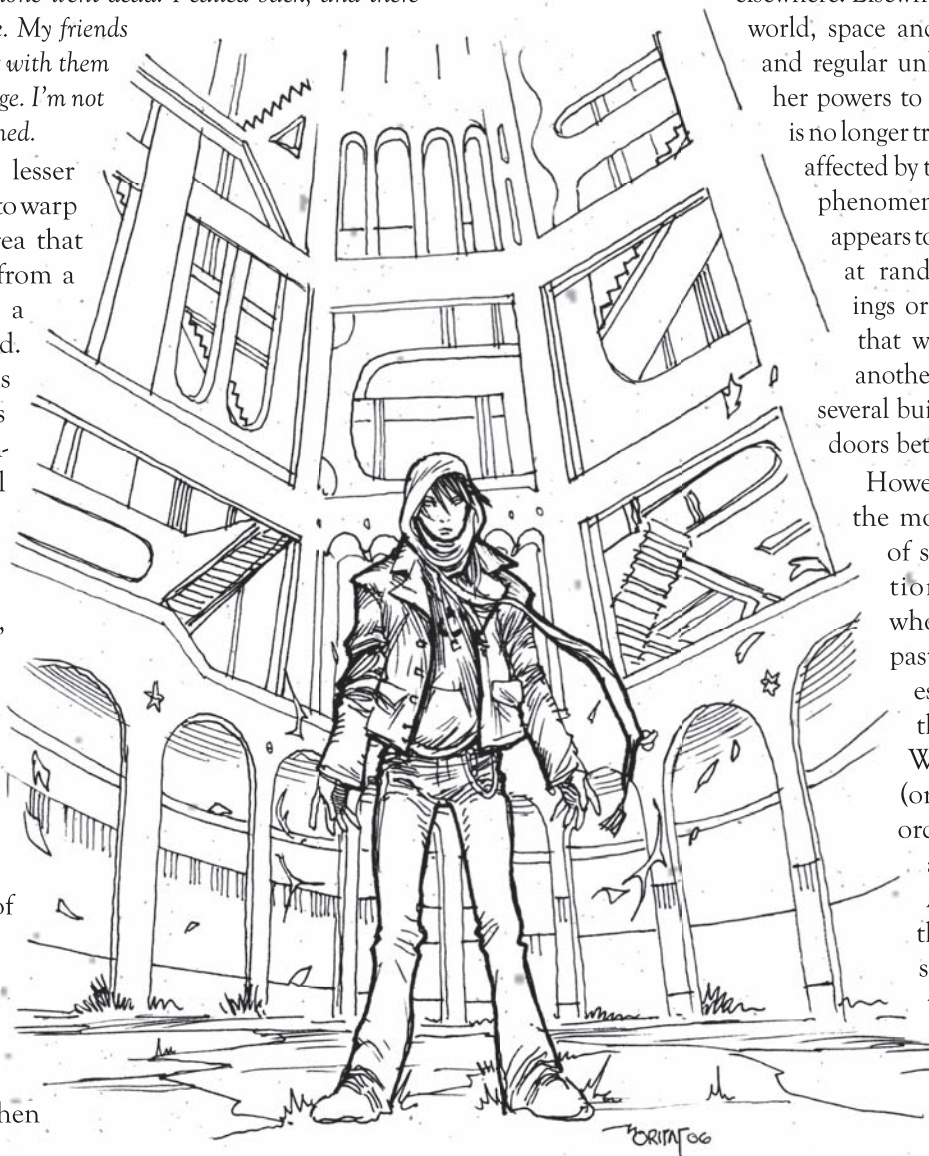
Form

This manifestation of the Abyss appears as a zone of warped space and time. Buildings in a street affected can seem to rearrange themselves in random order when

no one is looking, and someone walking down a previously well-known hallway in a building can suddenly find himself becoming inexplicably lost as doors and turns in the hallway are no longer where they once were. In addition, events occasionally seem to repeat and as much as half an hour may pass in a time that seems like only a few minutes to the person experiencing it.

Although this manifestation seems to only rearrange space and time, the manifestation also allows people in the vicinity to perceive space and time in ways impossible elsewhere. Elsewhere in the mortal world, space and time are fixed and regular unless a mage uses her powers to alter them. This is no longer true within an area affected by the twisting maze phenomenon. Here, space appears to shift and change at random, two buildings or even two doors that were next to one another may now have several buildings or several doors between them.

However, this is only the most obvious way of seeing that location. Characters who attempt to see past the appearances that confront them can make a Wits + Gnosis roll (or Wits alone for ordinary mortals) at a -2 penalty. At this point, the character can see that the way the area now looks to most people is only one possible



way to see or move through this space. The character can then attempt to find a different path along the street or hallway he is currently in.

Finding a path similar to the one that others see is relatively easy – the character need only make another Wits + Gnosis roll, at no penalty. However, finding a path that is radically different from the current configuration of that space can be exceedingly difficult, but also very useful. Ordinary mortals who observe the area carefully enough can walk two or three steps and end up standing in front of a door to a building or room that is not currently visible and that may well be on the other side of the affected area. However, doing this sort of extreme feat requires another Wits + Gnosis roll at a penalty that can go as high as -5.

Success allows the character to follow a path that looks and feels like a perfectly ordinary path along a hallway or street, but goes to the desired location in a few steps. The more successes the character rolls, the fewer steps he needs to make to reach his destination. An exceptional success on this roll allows the character to literally take one step and be at his destination. A failure on this roll leaves the character in a location elsewhere in the affected area. The consequences of a botch are considerably worse: the character becomes temporarily lost in space and time and wanders for hours before arriving at a random location within the affected area anytime from several hours to several days later, or perhaps several hours earlier (assuming the Storyteller is interested in exploring the realities of time travel).

Means of Passage

Little is known about what causes this being to enter the Fallen World. There seems nothing unusual about places where the being manifests, beyond that fact that they are always in some way cut off from regular observation and visitation – areas that are secret, hidden or in some way taboo, are especially vulnerable. Examples include prisons, abandoned mansions, high-security installations, especially secret ones, small isolated slums, shantytowns and gated, highly exclusive, ultra-wealthy neighborhoods.

Some mages believe that cutting off a location from the mass of humanity in some way cuts the location off from some sort of effect produced by frequent human observation and interaction. Because this being only appears in areas that most people avoid and manifests in the mortal world over the course of several weeks, it is very easy for people to not notice that anything unusual is going on until the effects have become quite severe. All that most people notice is that an already unusual location gradually becomes somewhat more confusing.

This phenomenon only affects locations of a certain size. The region must be at least the size of a single large building, for example, a large mansion. More often, the smallest buildings affected are tall office towers or small shopping malls. An ordinary suburban home is simply too small to fully contain this zone of warped space. Also, this manifestation has never been known to affect a region more than half a kilometer in diameter, and in most cases, the affected area is smaller than this. In almost all cases, the phenomenon affects a single defined space such as a large office building, a sprawling industrial park, a major university library or a single neighborhood of a city. In a few exceptional cases, an entire small town has succumbed to this effect.

Rules of Intrusion

The twisting maze zone manifests as a localized distortion in both time and space. The distortions become increasingly severe both the closer and the longer the entity affects the Fallen World. At first, walking a city block can seem to take twice or half as long as it should, and the time changes from one trip to another. As time goes on, these distance distortions increase, and at their most extreme, people walking or driving through the area may find themselves driving or walking down the same street again after they have just done so or find that a particular city block seems to stretch on for almost a mile. Also, one location's place relative to another starts to change. Streets that previously intersected may somehow no longer do so.

After the being has inhabited a location for a week or two, space and time both become exceptionally variable – the floor plan of an apartment building might rearrange itself every few hours or even every few minutes. Such changes never occur when anyone is observing them – instead, a character inside a large mansion might open a door that normally leads outside and find that it instead leads down to the basement. In larger manifestations, buildings seemingly rearrange themselves anytime no one is observing them. Two shops or houses that are normally next to one another may now be on opposite ends of the block.

Once such extreme spatial disturbances occur, time also begins to become fluid. Characters in these locations may turn a corner suddenly and see themselves turning another corner, or an individual may open a door or turn a corner and then feel a jerk or shudder and find himself just about to open the door or turn the corner. These temporal distortions do not reverse time more than one turn, and these distortion always occur at some sort of perceptual boundary, such as when the character

is entering or leaving a room, looking past a barrier or obstacle or even looking into a mirror. At this point, some people will become so distressed with the changing geography that they leave or move away. However, because it is always possible to eventually navigate the affected area, some will stay. This does take its toll on the mental health of those who choose to do so, however — some may become fascinated with the effect, obsessing over it, while others steadfastly deny it happening, or turn to drink or drugs to numb the experience from their conscious minds.

Conditions remain relatively stable for between one and three months. Then, one day, conditions will become significantly worse. Between a few hours and two days after these major fluctuations begin, the affected area vanishes, and reality reweaves itself around this distortion so that not even a vacant lot remains. The length of time that the area remains stable and the duration of the intense fluctuations that occur right before the area vanishes are both variable, but in general, the larger the region, the longer both last. A large neighborhood or a vast and sprawling shopping mall can remain stable for almost a month and may take two days for the fluctuations to build to the point that the shopping mall vanishes. However, a single office building may vanish after a couple of hours.

No matter how long the process takes, Sleepers react to the aftermath much as they do when exposed to obvious magic. Almost all Sleepers swiftly forget the existence of both the distortion and of everything and everyone that vanished inside it. Mages and Sleepwalkers remember the area but will be unable to convince Sleepers of what has occurred. A Sleeper whose parents or spouse vanished into the maze will mourn their deaths in a car accident or be heartbroken by the fact that someone ran away and has not been heard from since.

Space and Time Magic in a Twisting Maze

Although moving through a twisting maze by looking behind the obvious façade is similar to the process of using Space or Time magics, because this area is closely connected to the Abyss, Space and Time magics are both less effective and more dangerous than elsewhere. Anyone attempting to use any Space or Time magics within an area affected by this phenomenon is at a -1 penalty to spellcasting rolls and must also roll an extra die for Paradox when using any Space or Time magics, including sympathetic spells. While Space and Time magics can seem like an easy shortcut to dealing with this Abyssal manifestation, doing so is both difficult and exceedingly dangerous.

Mortal Response

On the few occasions that people living near a breakthrough of this Abyssal phenomenon report their experiences to the authorities, the authorities usually dismiss reports of warping space and time distortions as the results of intoxication or mental illness. If there are multiple reports, the local fire department may investigate to see if some sort of nearby toxic chemical leak might be responsible for widespread hallucinations.

Although firefighters will find nothing unless a mage uses magic on their chemical sniffers, they will cordon off the affected area until they have determined that there is no chemical leak.

Means of Exile

The key to banishing a twisting maze is understanding it. In addition to being able to travel through the area controlled by the twisting maze with great ease, the ability to see into and move through this space also gives characters the chance to banish this fragment of the Abyss. The only way to remove a twisting maze before it carries the affected area back to the Abyss is to walk the maze that has been created. Doing this involves walking or driving down all of the affected streets and alleyways. If the phenomenon involves a single building or an area no larger than a single city block, then the characters must walk all of the corridors and hallways in the building or buildings.

The characters must walk these streets or corridors in the order that they existed in before the Abyssal warping appeared. If the apartment building is large, then the characters must walk through the hallways on each floor, going from one room to another in their normal order, and then walk upstairs and repeat this process. Correctly walking each street or floor requires a single Wits + Gnosis roll. As soon as the characters walk any given street or hallway correctly, this area temporarily becomes stable and arranged as it was before the entity's appearance. This stability lasts for several hours, and if warped space carries the region back to the Abyss during this time, any stable regions remain in the Fallen World. However, after several hours have passed, if the characters have not banished the twisting maze, the stabilized areas once again begin shifting and changing.

Once the characters have successfully walked one street or one floor of a tall building, they must then move on to an adjacent street or floor, and continue to walk, or drive, through these areas in exactly the same progression as if these streets or hallways were free from the affects

of the twisting maze phenomenon. Unfortunately, by the time the characters have stabilized one or two areas, the remaining regions of warped space become increasingly distorted. Once the characters have stabilized half or more of the region, the space begins to warp more rapidly and severely, and sometimes changes and shifts before the character's eyes — something that does not otherwise happen. The severity of these changes increases the penalty for all Wits + Gnosis rolls to find the desired path through this area by an additional -1. In addition, these changes are now so obvious that Sleepers still living in the vicinity cannot help but notice what is occurring and will likely panic, making the characters' job even more difficult.

Learning the Area

The secret to banishing a twisting maze zone is knowing exactly what the affected area was like before the being arrived. A character who is a long-term resident of the area remembers it sufficiently well if she can make an Intelligence + Wits roll. Anyone who lived or worked there who has the Eidetic Memory Merit automatically remembers the area well enough to know where everything used to be. If none of the characters knows the region well enough, they must study it. The Time spell "Postcognition" reveals the necessary data, but, as stated above, Time magic is more unreliable and dangerous than usual within this area. Alternatively, examining satellite photos and building plans and reading the minds of long-term residents all provide a sufficiently precise picture of the layout of the area for the characters to attempt to dispel this phenomenon.

The instant that the characters stabilize the last street or floor in the maze, the entire area seems to flicker and shift violently for a second and then returns to normal. During this last instant, all mages present who succeed in a Gnosis + Space roll experience a brief vision of the vast complexities of space and time and any character who achieves an exceptional success on this roll receives five Arcane Experience points that can be used on Gnosis, Space or Time. Sleepers who are in the area when it returns to normal must make a Willpower roll. Sleepers who fail will not remember anything about the time when the characters were stabilizing the area. Sleepers who succeed on this roll will only have vague memories of this time period. Sleepers who roll an exceptional success remember the events vividly and may become Sleepwalkers or even Awaken as a response to this profound psychic shock.

Researching the Twisting Maze

Capping Skill: Investigation

Action: Extended — 20 successes

Research Time: 1 hour; 20 minutes

Appropriate Libraries: Architecture, Mysterious Places

Possible Modifiers: Researcher is an Initiate of the Space Arcanum (+1)

Successes	Information
0–9	Nothing.
10–14	Twisting mazes distort both space and time; using Space and Time magics are more dangerous in a twisting maze zone.
15–19	The twisting mazes eventually vanish into the Abyss unless banished and only occur in relatively isolated areas.
20+	In the twisting mazes, even mortals can alter spatial relationships and step instantly from one location to another. Dispelling twisting mazes requires the area be walked as if it were unaffected by the twisting space.

Story Hooks

Though the dangers of a place being affected by a twisting maze intrusion are not immediate, they are inevitable — it is only a matter of time before the entire location is pulled into the Abyss. By such means is the Abyss empowered, and the Fallen World eroded. The following are some suggested uses of the twisting maze in a chronicle.

The Shifting Prison

The characters hear news reports of a riot in a maximum security prison. The reports briefly mention that unexplained events were reported in the prison for the past several weeks. One reporter who briefly saw the footage from the security cameras in the hallways and corridors says that it quite literally looks as if some of the prisoners literally came out of nowhere. Later that day, reports come in about police attempting to enter the prison and becoming inexplicably lost and being attacked from behind, in locations where several of the

police officers claim that prisoners could not possibly have been hiding.

Over the course of the next day or two, the Storyteller should continue to provide radio, television and newspaper reports, overheard conversations of people talking about the news and similar information until the characters become certain that the prison has been affected by the twisting maze phenomenon. If the characters consider allowing the twisting maze to carry the building and the prisoners into the Abyss, make certain to have the characters hear a report about the several dozen guards and police officers also trapped inside the prison. If the characters do nothing, the prison and everyone are sucked into the Abyss two or three days later. Reality rewrites itself, and the prisoners and guards who vanished either never existed or are recorded as having died earlier or disappeared. Only the characters and other mages and a few Sleepwalkers remember what actually occurred.

If the characters decide to attempt to save the prison, emphasize both the difficulty of getting inside and the dangers once they manage to do so. While using Space magic to teleport inside the prison is the easiest method, doing so is also the most risky given the dangerous interactions between Space magics and this type of warped space. However, using Mind magic to fool the guards into thinking the characters are authorized personnel, Forces magic to allow the characters to walk in invisibly or even Spirit magic to allow the characters to enter the Shadow Realm outside the prison and exit the Shadow Realm inside the prison are all equally good ways to get inside.

Once inside, be certain to make clear that the prisoners are neither monstrous nor universally evil. Some are intent on taking hostages and terrorizing anyone they can. Others have hidden themselves as best as they are able, some with “hostages” who are actually non-prisoners that they found and protected from other inmates, until they can get out. These prisoners attempt to avoid other prisoners and will surrender to anyone who looks as though they are officials attempting to take control of the prison.

As the spatial and temporal distortions continue to worsen, an increasing number of prisoners become certain that the prison is haunted or that something very strange and frightening is occurring, while the leaders of the riot attempt to keep the rioters loyal to them and deny that anything strange is happening — they may claim that the cops have put hallucinogens in the prison’s water, or make similar claims. Tensions in the prison are exceedingly high, and any significant violence inside, or even the obvious presence of outsiders who got in by unknown means, could set off large-scale random violence as well

as cause the leaders of the riot to harm or kill some of their hostages. The prisoners are holding most of the guards and captured police officers in the warden’s office and in nearby locked offices, so that officials calling the prisoners can talk to them.

Obtaining a map of the prison is quite easily: its floor plan is a matter of public record, and detailed maps can also be found in the warden’s office. Also, the cells are all numbered, so walking a floor is theoretically quite simple. However, doing this while also attempting to avoid causing further violence is likely to be far more difficult.

High Security

One or more of the characters visits an office in a local office building. When there, it becomes clear to any mages paying attention that the building is affected by a twisting maze — the seemingly simple and obvious floor plan is somewhat more difficult to negotiate than it should be (Wits + Intelligence roll to notice these distortions). The characters also run into one or two other people searching in frustration for a particular office.

Unfortunately, when the characters attempt to deal with the problem, they find that the NSA is leasing seven of the building’s 20 floors as a center for data analysis. Alternately, you can use some similar federal organization such as the FBI or the Department of Homeland Security if this makes more sense for the particular city the campaign is set in. An alcove fitted with a security camera and a card key lock greets characters who get off the elevator on any of these floors. All of the alcoves are walled with frosted glass, so the characters cannot even see into the rest of the floor. On the bottom-most of these seven floors, this alcove is larger and has a receptionist who will ask the characters what their business is with the NSA (or whatever organization you have chosen). Gaining access to these floors will be a significant challenge.

Because the distortions have not yet become more than a mild nuisance, the offices in the building are functioning relatively normally. Anyone talking to employees discovers that they treat the increasing problem of getting lost as a subject of jokes and no one is particularly concerned about it yet. Resourceful characters can obtain plans for the building from the county department of records. However, once they gain access to the levels used by the NSA, the characters find that the floor plans are all completely different from those in the building’s original blueprints.

To determine the previous layout of these seven floors, the characters will need to either use Mind magic to probe the memory of one of the employees or hack into the local NSA computer system. Foolishly brave characters

can risk hacking into the main NSA computers to locate the plans for this building, or they can attempt to physically break into the local director's office, located on the lowest of the seven NSA-controlled floors, and steal the floor plans from his carefully locked filing cabinet. In addition to the obvious difficulties in accomplishing any of these goals, these floors are high security areas, fitted with many cameras as well as a multitude of other surveillance devices and alarm systems. Also, the security personnel on these floors are NSA employees instructed to shoot to kill when facing intruders.

A Gated Tryst

A small, exceedingly wealthy gated urban neighborhood becomes home to a twisting maze entity. If none of the characters lives in such a location, they should have a relative or acquaintance who does and who starts complaining about the streets in the neighborhood. Alternately, the characters either must visit this neighborhood or they hear a news report of strange occurrences in one of the city's wealthiest and most exclusive neighborhoods. The initial report is about vandals, presumed to be local teens, switching around street signs. The first news story is an amusing fluff piece focusing on the confusion and minor

fender-benders that resulted from these continuing acts of minor vandalism.

When the characters visit this neighborhood, it will become clear to any who scrutinize the area with Space magic that the neighborhood is now home to a twisting maze entity. Because the area is a large cul-de-sac with exceptionally winding streets, half-acre lots and large semicircular driveways, simply walking the streets will not be sufficient. To restore the neighborhood to its fixed state, the characters will need to walk or drive down each and every driveway. However, recent events have made the residents even more suspicious of outsiders in their neighborhood than usual, and the police always respond particularly rapidly to calls from this neighborhood.

Although plans for the neighborhood are easy to obtain, space and time will begin to fluctuate rapidly once the characters begin to attempt to stabilize the region, and panic may break out. Whenever the characters attempt to stabilize the neighborhood, make certain that there is a large formal party in one of the last blocks they get to. By the time the characters arrive, mild panic will have broken out, as guests become badly lost attempting to find their cars or trying to drive out of the neighborhood.



Umbragos

*The Deep Shadow, Lord of the Abysmal Choir,
Spirit-Eater, Zakhak Fravartin*

She used to talk to places, objects, animals – anything and everything. She said they talked back. She said sometimes they helped her, and sometimes they scared her. They always wanted something, though.

They were always hungry.

Until one day, she said she was running away. The voices weren't hungry anymore. They were talking to someone else – someone who kept them fed. And she knew something horrible was about to happen.

It's common for mages to view the Abyss as a threat to willworkers alone. But even mages wise enough to sidestep this fallacy – mages who comprehend the danger the Abyss poses to all humankind – often fail to see another front to the conflict. The inhabitants of the Abyss aren't interested in only the Material Realm; they wish to engulf the entire Fallen World, both physical and spiritual aspects.

And Umbragos sees the Shadow Realm as easy pickings.

While other Abyssal denizens focus on corrupting and tormenting humans, Umbragos chooses spirits for its tools and its victims. It twists the Shadow Realm and taints Essence with Abyssal power, both as an end in itself and as a means of reaching the material world. While physical beings carry on obliviously, Umbragos transforms the already-terrifying spirit world into something anathema to reality.

Umbragos is a tempter by nature, and has a story to share with those it deems sympathetic – spirits who fear it, and mortals with a belief in the spirit world. Umbragos claims it was a once a beautiful spirit before the Fall of Atlantis, and that the spirit's Essence came from a mountain spring. (Most of the time, anyway; sometimes Umbragos says it was the spirit of an ideology, an Atlantean rote or the first Paradox.) Umbragos played among the trees and the rocks, and drank deep of the power of the earth. But when the Celestial Ladder shattered and the Abyss yawned open, the spirit that would become Umbragos was torn from the material world and sucked into the void.

Within the Abyss, Umbragos says, it found a new calling. Umbragos found truth, and it found strength.

Umbragos learned to subsist on Abyssal energies, and was released from its ties to the material world. Umbragos was no longer at the mercy of humans and beasts, and no longer needed to squeeze Essence from crude matter. Yet Umbragos remained trapped and ignored.

Umbragos offers true freedom to all spirits, if they'll only turn to the Abyss. If spirits will accept Umbragos's gifts, they will lose their chains. Their fate and their power will be their own, and they will be able to make their own destinies, severed from materiality. How can any spirit resist such an offer, Umbragos asks? How can any being that claims to serve the spirits not aid them in this quest? And how dare any self-righteous mage call Umbragos's story a lie?

Not that so many mages know Umbragos exists. The notion that a strange "cancer" can afflict the Shadow Realm isn't new, but few sorcerers link spiritual maladies to the Abyss, let alone to one specific being. Even the Scelesti rarely call upon Umbragos, for lack of knowledge as much as anything else.

If there are secrets to be found regarding the Lord of the Abysmal Choir, they may be in the hands of the spirits themselves – survivors of intrusions from long ago, or former servants of Umbragos who somehow endure without the entity's presence. A few Thyrsus Legacies whisper stories of strange intruders in the Shadow Realm, as well, passed to them by spirit allies, and werewolf packs tell tales of ancient enemies in the dark.

Form

Umbragos lacks a single, defined form – or if Umbragos does possess a true form, no one's figured out what it is. The spirit wraps natural shapes around itself like clothes, peeling them off when they become too burdensome and adding new guises as they become useful. Umbragos may be a bird inside a man inside a tree, or 100 other things appropriate to its surroundings and its audience. Umbragos is often cloaked in deep shade, hiding the details of its features. Just as its shape, its voice and mannerisms shift with its situation. Umbragos can sound male or female, confident or pathetic, articulate or simple.

That said, the intruder returns to two distinct forms again and again. The first is that of a floating mote of

light that speaks with a soft, childlike voice. In this form, Umbragos sounds almost sad about its desire to draw the Fallen World into the Abyss. The second form is that of a long, shadowy serpent that hisses with anger and spite. Tiny spheres orbit the serpent's head, crowning the Lord of the Choir.

More remarkable than Umbragos's own form is the transformation Umbragos bestows upon others. The spir-

its that feed upon Umbragos's Essence and the features of the Shadow Realm around Umbragos's locus become warped. Otherworldly loathing, hatred, misery and nihilism manifest in ephemeral "flesh." That which was once living shows evidence of its former state, weeping or writhing or lashing out. Books rewrite themselves into odes to agony, leather rasps and breathes painfully and the faces of ancient beasts press out of plastic bags. That which lives in the present is blighted with cancer, rust or age. Animals are skeletal and pustulant, guns crack and scream with every shot and trees sport leaves the color

of blood and bone. Although these effects do not translate to the physical realm, they are unmistakable in Shadow.

Means of Passage

Umbragos can only enter the Fallen World through a point where the spirit realm is damaged. The greater the damage, the more easily Umbragos can infect the wound. The greater the spiritual power within the wound, the faster Umbragos can fully manifest.

A damaged locus is an ideal gateway for Umbragos. Most often, such damage is caused by a spirit or mage

who drains the locus of Essence past its normal limit. Abusive Spirit magic can also harm a locus, and an Abyssal Artifact could conceivably poison a locus and distort its resonance.

If a locus is unavailable, Umbragos has a few other ways of entering the Shadow Realm. Any location where spiritual resonance is sufficiently warped by Paradox or Abyssal entities can incubate Umbragos, although the intruder

might have difficulty finding Essence to feed upon. Under the right circumstances, Umbragos could also make a living spirit — one twisted by Spirit spells or occupying a Scelesti Demesne — into a gateway.

Once lodged in the Shadow Realm, Umbragos must feed upon Essence before physically manifesting. Until then, Umbragos is fettered to the location or spirit it used as a gateway. Umbragos may whisper to visitors who approach it, asking for Essence in exchange for favors, or Umbragos may bide its time and slowly grow. If Umbragos is fettered to a locus, the spirit may have no desire to take on a form at all — Umbragos is more

than capable of tempting and corrupting spirits from a location of spiritual power, polluting an oasis in the spirit world.

Rules of Intrusion

Umbragos is a living filter for Essence. The spirit's overriding goal is to absorb as much Essence as possible, color it with Abyssal resonance and then feed it to other spirits. If Umbragos can infect a locus, its job is easy; spirits instinctively seek and draw upon loci for power. If Umbragos lacks a steady stream of Essence, Umbragos



must either locate such a source — a locus, a mage or a werewolf pack — or forcibly drain other spirits. Umbragos can then offer its gifts to malnourished, credulous or hateful spirits, tempting them with fast power.

A spirit that accepts Umbragos's Essence doesn't lose the spirit's original nature, but begins to epitomize all the negative traits of whatever the spirit embodies. A hospital-spirit becomes a purveyor of sterility, fear and bodily change. An electricity-spirit becomes fickle and violent. Even a murder-spirit becomes self-destructive, harming itself as much as others. The good becomes meaningless, and the bad turns inward. A spirit whose entire pool of Essence is filled by Umbragos loses its old allegiances, and is no longer counted among whatever courts or choirs the spirit used to recognize; it is a part of Umbragos's choir alone.

Gradually, an entire region may be tainted by Umbragos's efforts. Spirits that refuse to feed on the tainted Essence may be affected by nearby resonance anyway, and spirits who resist the taint are inevitably destroyed or forced out by Umbragos's growing choir. The Shadow Realm begins to reflect the Abyss nearly as much as it does the Material Realm.

The effects on the other side of the Gauntlet are much more subtle. The atmosphere becomes oppressive, resentful and full of loathing, as spirits grow disdainful of materiality. Under ordinary circumstances, even spirits of hatred or despair bring a measure of passion to the world around them; but Abyssal spirits disassociate themselves from the physical world, leaving their constituents empty and distant. While mortals in a tainted area might become angry and violent, they're just as likely to give up on life altogether.

Once Umbragos has solidified its control over an area, the spirit begins to destroy possible sources of resistance. Beings from the physical world that can contact the Shadow Realm are either shunned (if they lack the power to be a threat) or attacked (if they can harm spirits through the Gauntlet). The appearance of a Verge marks a time of simultaneous opportunity and vulnerability: spirits may cross into the Material Realm and wreak havoc, stealing Essence and damaging the world that once bound them, but at the same time, mortals may get a glimpse of what has happened behind reality's curtain.

And what happens after the Abysmal Choir entirely devours a location's former spirit? When the transformation of the Shadow is complete? No one really knows. Sometimes, Umbragos promises that with enough Essence, the Spirit-Eater can shatter the Gauntlet and replace the material world altogether. But Umbragos isn't a trustworthy source. Perhaps a more likely scenario is that

the tainted region of the Shadow Realm would cease to be, and the gap would fill with stuff from the Abyss.

Whatever the final stage of Umbragos's intrusion, defeating the Spirit-Eater seems to be the only way to prevent it. Should that happen, however, what about all the tainted spirits left behind? Would they need to be banished or destroyed, as well? And what fate would befall a spirit world without its spirits?

Mortal Response

As a rule, Sleepers don't pay much attention to the spirit world. However, this doesn't mean that the symptoms of Umbragos's presence go unnoticed. Mortals who live in a region under Umbragos's control can see the despair around them, though they tend to explain it away as ordinary misery or deny that life was ever different. Outsiders stay away from tainted neighborhoods and towns, abandoning them to their fate.

The symptoms of spiritual decay can increase to the point where authorities must take action: Sleepers driven mad by oppressive spirits can become killers, disease-spirits twisted by Umbragos may unleash bizarre plagues, forests abandoned by spirit guardians may wilt and disintegrate. Visiting FBI agents, CDC officials and park rangers are likely to have their will and sanity quickly sapped. Hardened investigators might be able to escape unscathed, but will find no satisfactory explanation for what they see unless they open their minds to the supernatural world.

Means of Exile

It's a mistake to think that destroying Umbragos's locus is enough to destroy the intruder. The destruction of the locus would be a setback for Umbragos, true; but nothing would prevent Umbragos from taking form again afterward and seeking another source of Essence. Destroying Umbragos's spirit form is no solution, either. If the Spirit-Eater spread tainted resonance to even one spirit, Umbragos can use that spirit as a gateway for its return.

Umbragos's vulnerability is its need to separate the material and spiritual realms. The Spirit-Eater's power comes from the desire to wrest the two apart, despite their natural tendency to reflect each other. If a Sleeper knowingly and willingly volunteers to be Umbragos's fetter, the intruder is torn through the Gauntlet and locked to the mortal. In such a state, Umbragos is powerless, and falls back into the Abyss if the Sleeper dies.

The volunteer must reach Umbragos's equivalent location in the material world before bonding with the intruder, and must bring a gift with strong personal resonance as a tribute: a lost childhood toy, a wedding ring or a painting years in the making. Through the exchange, the ties between matter and Shadow are reaffirmed.

If there's any truth to Umbragos's story about having once been a spirit, there might be another way to defeat it, too. If mages could identify Umbragos's original form – perhaps through clues unwittingly provided by Umbragos, extensive research through the libraries of spirit-binding mages and consultation with the spirit courts – the mages might learn the spirit's original name and ban.

Doubtless, this would be sufficient to drive Umbragos away... but a truly ambitious mage might go a step further, attempting a permanent solution by redeeming Umbragos and restoring it to its original state. By binding Umbragos to a object or location that shares the Spirit-Eater's original resonance, and by subsequently overwhelming Umbragos with appropriate Essence, reversing its Abyssal transformation might be possible. On the other hand, by now there may be nothing left to redeem.

Researching Umbragos

Capping Skill: Occult

Action: Extended – 9 successes

Research Time: 1 hour; 20 minutes

Appropriate Libraries: Ancient Spirits

Possible Modifiers: Researcher is an Initiate of the Spirit Arcanum (+1), researcher possesses the Familiar Merit (+2), researcher has no evidence of an Abyssal connection (–1)

Successes	Information
0–2	Nothing.
3–4	Occasionally, when a locus or other spiritual site is damaged, local spirits suffer from delusions and begin acting strangely. They ignore their normal sources of Essence and become disdainful of the material world.
5–6	In an incident recorded by a medieval Thyrsus Shaman, the deluded spirits of a farming village pledged themselves to a new choir, abandoning all previous loyalties. The spirits claimed to receive their Essence from the new choir's master.

7–8

The new choir's Essence was deeply corrupt, and the region of Shadow where the spirits lived became horribly warped. The spirits tried recruiting others to their cause, saying that the lord of their choir promised them freedom from materiality.

9+

The Thyrsus Shaman fled the village after confronting the lord of the choir, who claimed to be an ancient spirit from the age of Atlantis. The Shaman believed the spirit was from the Abyss. The village's fate is unknown.

Story Hooks

Umbragos is an ancient and powerful Abyssal entity capable not just of tainting the spirit of the Fallen World, but of corrupting those spiritual entities found there as well. The danger of Umbragos is not in the threat the Spirit-Eater poses – the danger is in the corruption Umbragos spreads and the terrible changes it wreaks in normal spirits, making them serve it. The following are some ideas for using Umbragos in a chronicle.

The Choir's Fall

A century ago, a Banisher attempted to magically obliterate a locus within a small-town church. Instead of destroying the locus, however, his magic allowed Umbragos to infect the site. The intruder gained a small following of spirits and began to transform the Shadow Realm, before the Banisher realized what he'd done. He battled the Abyss-tainted spirits and eventually burned down the church. Umbragos – for the moment – was defeated. The Banisher settled in the town, started a family and died some years later.

Today, the spirit world is abnormally quiet. In the area around the town, spirits refuse to come when called, and make no mischief among humans. When forced into compliance, the spirits express resentment toward the material world and refuse to explain their change in attitude. Only when forced or tricked do they reveal that they've pledged their loyalty to a new choir, and that they believe they will be led to their rightful place in the cosmos – a place free from meddling mortals.

The spirits have been recruited by Umbragos, who was rejuvenated due to the recent reconstruction of the church – and, accidentally, the reconstruction of the locus. The reconstruction is headed by the Banisher's great-grandson, a Sleeper unaware of the area's history.

As Umbragos's power grew, the intruder gradually turned the spirits of the area to its cause. Those refusing the intruder fled or fell into sleep.

The players' cabal may notice the unusual activity while passing through the area, or a Thyrsus mage from a nearby Consilium may come seeking the cabal's aid. Alternatively, the cabal may be drawn to the town after noticing an influx of "refugee" spirits escaping Umbragos's influence. It's easy to see that the town itself is suffering from an unusual affliction, both from the negative resonance present and the string of recent suicides. The townspeople who live and work closest to the church seem to know that something's wrong, but can't bring themselves to care.

Although the cabal may soon realize that the heart of the problem is the church's locus, approaching the locus in Shadow is nearly impossible. Twisted spirits block the way, and while they don't aim to start a fight, they have numbers on their side and fiercely protect their territory.

Magical and mundane research into the church's history leads to other sources of information. The Banisher is painted as a crazed arsonist by townspeople who know the old story, but mystically concealed within the Banisher's former home is a true record of what occurred. Although the Banisher didn't recognize Umbragos as being from the Abyss, he knew the intruder was something from far beyond the Shadow Realm.

The Banisher's records refer to several spirits around the town — a railroad-spirit, a lake-spirit and a wheat-spirit — that assisted in the fight against Umbragos, warring against their kin while hating the Banisher himself. Since then, the lake-spirit has succumbed to sickness and pollution, and the wheat-spirit has disappeared along with the local farms.

Only the railroad-spirit survives, and though it's slow and reluctant to awaken, it has no interest in joining Umbragos. The railroad-spirit owes its existence to humanity, and enjoys being tied to the Material Realm. The spirit offers to help the cabal reach the locus, but says the only way to defeat Umbragos is to convince the Banisher's grandson to make up for his ancestor's misdeeds. The grandson must become Umbragos's fetter.

The grandson, of course, isn't interested in doing any such thing. Convincing him of the reality of the situation, and furthermore convincing him to sacrifice himself, isn't easy. However, the man isn't unkind, and if shown the Shadow Realm and the horrors that are coming, he may be swayed.

Getting the grandson to the locus is tricky, as well. Once the spirits realize what the cabal is attempting, the

spirits do everything they can to keep the mages away. The railroad-spirit is willing to take the cabal into the Shadow Realm and to the locus, where the characters can fight Umbragos. While the spirits are distracted, the Banisher's grandson can enter the church and make his offering.

Umbragos urges the characters to allow it to complete its work; the Spirit-Eater says its servants would have died without its Essence, just as the lake- and wheat-spirits. If the cabal is able to protect the Banisher's grandson, however, Umbragos is rendered helpless. The cabal may choose to rid the world of the intruder by killing an innocent man, or to let the Banisher's grandson live and risk Umbragos's eventual escape.

Without their master, the surviving transformed spirits flee or bargain for their lives, perhaps submitting to the judgment of their former lords. The town may recover, if the Shadow Realm is repopulated... or the town may be free of the Abyss, yet forever scarred.

The Servants in Shadow

Occasionally, mortals possess gifts that allow them insight into the spirit world. They can hear spirits, or they dream of the Shadow Realm. They may be Sleepwalkers, or they may have lived and played near a locus as young children, gaining an affinity for ephemera. They may also possess the Merits of mortal thaumaturges (see **World of Darkness: Second Sight** for more information).

One such individual has been approached by Umbragos. The intruder is weak from its arrival (or from a previous defeat), lacking Essence to give to other spirits... but a human may be just what the intruder needs. Umbragos explains its desire to help lift the Shadow Realm from the Fallen World, and enlists the sympathetic human's aid. Umbragos's plan is twofold:

First, it aims to bring a small group of Sleeper followers through a Verge into the spirit world. These Sleepers are chosen from the destitute, the desperate and the mad. They are people who embrace the chance to be "special," and who willingly leave the physical world behind. They are poor servants, but Umbragos doesn't want them as foot soldiers — instead, by bringing Sleepers into the Shadow Realm, Umbragos greatly increases the odds of mages causing Paradoxes there. In this way, the Spirit-Eater brings the Abyss into the Shadow and sends a call to Abyssal denizens.

Second, Umbragos wants to send its first acolyte on a journey into the deep spirit world. While the other followers work to secure Umbragos's power, the acolyte seeks to awaken ancient, powerful spirits that Umbragos knew of old. Perhaps these spirits pledged themselves

to Umbragos during a previous incursion, or perhaps Umbragos knows how to bribe and cajole them.

A cabal may become involved in Umbragos's machinations when the intruder's acolyte disappears — she may be a friend to the mages, or a cabal Retainer. Alternatively, the cabal may stumble upon a Sleeper in the Shadow Realm, and begin learning about Umbragos's cult of followers. Only the acolyte knows the secret to Umbragos's defeat, however — the Wound in the spirit world where the intruder resides — and tracking the acolyte will require a long and taxing journey.

Junkyard Dogs

The spirits of a junkyard slept restlessly until Umbragos arrived. They were once spirits of steel and plastic, refrigerators and toasters; now, humanity's apathy is transforming them into spirits of garbage. Swayed by Umbragos's promises of freedom, independence and greatness, the junk-spirits allied with the intruder. They are building a great tower of trash in Shadow — a monument to the Abyss. A pack of werewolves who loathe the spirits' material nature acts as the junkyard's defense in the physical world.

Umbragos has an enemy, however. A powerful and ancient spirit of spite — an Incarna called a Maeljin — remembers Umbragos from antediluvian times. The Maeljin has no desire to see Umbragos achieve its goals. The Incarna likes encouraging and feeding on mortal negativity, and has no desire to lose its bond with the material world. The Maeljin is willing to share information about Umbragos's true form with a cabal seeking to banish the intruder, but there is a price: the Maeljin

wants to flood the junkyard with its own power once Umbragos is gone, and take the spirits and the intruder's stores of Essence for itself.

The Maeljin claims that Umbragos was the spirit of a garden grown by Atlantean refugees, and that the Spirit-Eater cannot harm a person who carries a pot of that garden's soil. The cabal must find the ancient ruins of the garden while running from Umbragos's werewolves, and ultimately confront the forces that pulled a kindly naturae into the Abyss and transformed it into a horror. Ultimately, the cabal must choose whether to try to redeem Umbragos or to sacrifice a slice of reality to the Maeljin in order to ensure Umbragos's exile.

Traits

The Umbragos possesses the following Traits.

Umbragos

Rank: 3

Attributes: Power 8, Finesse 4, Resistance 6

Willpower: 14

Essence: 20 (max 20)

Initiative: 10

Defense: 8

Speed: 17

Size: 5

Corpus: 11

Influences: Abyss-tainted Spirits 3

Numina: Blast (dice pool 12), Discorporation (dice pool 14), Innocuous (in certain forms only)

Ban: Unknown.



The Unwelcome Guest

Invisible Playmate, The Leech, Psychic Vampire
June 1.

I met the most incredible person today! He was at Baylor's Bookstore walking around as if lost. I asked if I could help him since I was a regular there and knew their collection better than some of the staff. It turns out he was looking for their books on medieval alchemy, one of my pet topics! I took him to the section and pointed out a few of my favorites to him. It turns out he'd read a lot of them and had the same high opinion of them that I did. We managed to spend an hour talking alchemy before I realized that I would be late for our evening meal. I hate disappointing my cabal, so I thanked him for a lovely conversation and left. He said he'd probably be here tomorrow.

June 2.

He was at Baylor's again. I hadn't planned on going there today, but I couldn't stop thinking about him and our great conversation. This time we went to the coffee shop across the street, and I spent the entire afternoon with him, just conversing. He was really interested in my theories and seemed to agree with everything I said. I only left because I was already late for dinner. I have to introduce him to my cabal soon.

June 3.

He told me to call him Victor. I have the feeling that that is not his real name, but I don't care. Forsythiana is not my real name either, after all. I don't think he is a mage, but I know he's interested in magic. I'm hoping that I can take him on as a helper and maybe Awaken at least a part of him. More conversation today at the coffeehouse. I was late again to dinner.

June 10.

Victor finally moved into our sanctum after the rest of my cabal agreed that he could stay here. I'm afraid I told them I'd have to leave if they didn't respect my request. I'm so happy that my friend is here. He's taken the room next to mine and has promised not to get in the way. We talked all morning. I grabbed a quick lunch and then we talked more until I had to stop and take a nap. I've been quite tired of late. I may just sleep through dinner.

June 14.

I can hardly get out of bed, I'm so tired. Only Victor has been able to rouse me from my lethargy. He brings me soup and sits by my bed. We talk as I eat. I wish I could shake the fuzz that seems to fill my head these days. I know I was more alert than this when I first met Victor. He tells me not to worry. That's nice.

June 17.

Victor says the others are mean to him. Want him to leave me. Well they can go fuck themselves. Victor will take care of me. Victor likes me.

June 20.

Where's Victor? They want to make me eat. I want Victor. They say no! Eat! I want Victor!

Jun ?

Gone. Hes gon. Cant think. Just wnt to sleep.

Some people seem to exist for no other reason than to sap the energy and intelligence from others. They insinuate themselves into the lives of their "victims" and, little by little, gain control over as many aspects of their victims' lives as possible. Such people are called by many names, but one of the most accurate labels for them is that of "psychic vampire." Similar to the vampire, they thrive on what they take from others; unlike the vampire, what they take is not blood but energy, creativity and will.

The Abyss generates its own form of psychic vampire. The Unwelcome Guest, as it is more generally termed by those who study Abyssal lore, can appear almost anywhere, take almost any form and attack almost any one. Usually, the Unwelcome Guest's preferred target is an Awakened individual, with mages being predominant among that category.

Though not very powerful in and of themselves, Unwelcome Guests can be hard to identify until most of their damage is done, and they are very deft at defending themselves from those who might accuse them of anything less than the most altruistic behavior.

Form

The Unwelcome Guest is usually, but not always, a physical creature. It may take the form of a person, an animal or (rarely) an inanimate object. Sometimes the Guest prefers to appear as a spirit, seen only by its victim, much as the invisible playmates of children or the unseen people who speak to those individuals touched by madness. The Guest chooses which form it takes after it has chosen its victim and determined the best way to attract and hold its victim's attention.

When its victim accepts the Guest, the creature forms a supernatural bond with the unfortunate person and



begins to sap any kind of energy the Guest can from him, whether magical, physical, emotional or mental. The Guest monopolizes its victim, cutting him off from friends, family, fellow cabal members and other social and professional contacts. The victim stops going to work or attending important meetings and social events. Eventually, the victim stops wanting to leave his room (or wherever the Guest has ensconced itself), wishing only to spend all his time with the Guest. If nothing is done to halt the process, the victim eventually dies, but not after he has been rendered mindless, emotionless and physically unable to help himself. The Guest then takes its leave and seeks out another victim.

Rules of Intrusion

The Guest must abide by certain principles in order to enter the Fallen World. These rules are part of the

Guest's nature, however, not arbitrary dicta that proscribe its actions. Because it is the Guest, it follows the rules set forth below.

Victim

This entity begins the process of entering the Fallen World by observing its potential victims using the Material Vision Numen. When and only when the Guest settles on a specific individual, the Guest proceeds to the next step in its crossing. The Unwelcome Guest cannot take material form until the entity has found a victim.

This entity, unlike some other Abyssal creatures, does not necessarily target Awakened creatures every time. Occasionally, it attempts to attach itself to normal humans, though they usually possess tremendous physical energy, great creativity, genuine innocence or some other potential energy source.

Concept

By studying the victim, taking note of his haunts, his likes and dislikes and other personal factors, the Guest develops an idea of the form to present to the victim. If the victim, for example, enjoys outdoor activities, the Guest may take the form of a fellow hiker, jogger, climber or whatever sport the victim favors. If the targeted individual loves animals, the Guest may take the shape of an animal in need of rescue. Sometimes the insane are targeted due to the great amount of mental activity they possess; when this happens, the Guest often remains invisible to everyone except the victim, who then appears to "hear voices" or have an invisible friend. Many variations on the Guest's form exist, limited only by the requirements and needs of its victim.

Bond

The final requirement for intrusion into the Fallen World is the formation of a bond between the victim and the Guest. Technically, this may be as simple as defeating the victim in a contested Willpower roll. In terms of the characters, however, the bond is created whenever the victim "claims" the Guest, either as his

best friend, soul mate, adopted pet, guardian angel or some other close relationship. Intrinsic to this bond is the idea of “naming.” The Guest may suggest a name (“Call me Evelyn”) or the victim may name the Guest himself (“Let’s call you Lightning”). The speaking of the name of the Guest seals the bond and allows the Guest free rein to accomplish its purpose.

Means of Passage

The rules that govern the conduct of the Guest while it is in the material world are few but far-reaching. This Abyssal creature has a great deal of apparent “personal” freedom to act in its best interests. If the Guest takes the form of a human, it mimics a person in every way. The Guest can move, think and converse as a human. It can even eat and, presumably, eliminate its food. In animal form, the Guest behaves in every way as the animal of its choice. The Guest’s spirit or ethereal form takes whatever form its victim desires, whether invisible playmate, guardian angel or the internalized “voice of God.”

The Offer

The Guest may initiate contact but must wait until the victim takes the bait before continuing. Since individuals must meet or encounter one another before they can form any kind of relationship, the Guest has the ability to take the first step toward securing a meeting. For example, if the Guest has taken the form of a music lover to attract its victim, a concert violinist, the creature may “run into” the victim at a music store and strike up a conversation. If the victim seems interested in continuing the conversation, the Guest may use all its abilities to gain the permanent interest of the victim.

This means that the Guest needs to have the ability to absorb specific kinds of knowledge to maintain its victim’s interest. The Guest does this by “stealing” the information from others who might possess it. This involves a simple Willpower roll (or a Storyteller fiat) since the Guest does not remove information from the minds it targets; it merely acquires the knowledge and stores it in its own memory.

A Guest in animal form may automatically acquire knowledge of animal behavior by encountering animals of its chosen type (i.e., dogs, cats, parrots, horses, etc.). Invisible Guests, likewise, take whatever knowledge they need to make their form convincing to their victims.

The Name

The Guest may not form a bond until the victim is firmly in its grasp. Since the formation of the bond between Guest and victim occurs with the naming of

the Guest by the victim, the Guest is very careful not to give itself a name unless it is certain that the victim will make use of the name. Usually, this is simply a matter of timing. The Guest may meet with the victim several times before the victim realizes that the Guest is indispensable and that he must have the Guest around him as much as possible. When this happens and the victim pronounces the Guest’s name (or gives it a name in the case of an animal), the bond appears and the victim’s fate is sealed.

The Relationship

The Guest may make suggestions to but never command its victim. The Guest never seems to coerce its victim. Rather, the Guest makes suggestions to him that encourage the victim to make choices that result in isolating himself with the Guest. As a human, the Guest may suggest that the victim skip a family or group meal, miss meetings or classes, stay home and listen to records instead of going to the concert, stay home from work or take a long weekend to hike up a mountainside. As an animal, the Guest may make its feelings known by acting terrified around people other than the victim, whining or causing a disturbance when separated from the victim or otherwise keeping the victim from leading his normal life. At the same time, the Guest continues the process of draining its victim.

Conversations that were once stimulating (or seemed to be) now consist of the victim repeating himself over and over, having become unable to learn anything new or retain the knowledge he once had. He grows unable to participate in his favorite sports, or becomes depressed and uninterested in doing anything to entertain himself (particularly if it involves interaction with others). If the victim is a mage, he gradually forgets essential portions of magical knowledge and finds his Gnosis dwindling steadily. And all of this happens without the Guest acting domineering. Eventually, the Guest has complete control of the victim’s life.

Protection

The Guest may take any protective measures necessary against the victims’ allies. While the Guest does nothing active to alienate its chosen victim, it may do whatever it needs to do to protect itself from its victim’s friends, particularly if someone has penetrated the Guest’s disguise and sees it for what it truly is. The Guest usually first tries to turn the victim against his friends, whispering lies about those friends and claiming that they are persecuting it. This is often enough to cause the victim to cut himself off from those friends, even if they are cabal-mates.

Insofar as it is able, the Guest may engineer “accidents” to harm its opponents, then disclaim any guilt in the matter. (“I did not shove Rudy down the stairs! He’s lying to you!”) A Guest dog may threaten a potential enemy or a cat may hiss and scratch the threatening individual, provoking an outraged response from the victim. (“What did you do to Rufus? He never growls like that at me!” “Did you hit Mitzi? She’s acting like you’ve hurt her paw!”) Invisible voices will simply inform the victim that other people are planning against him or against it. (“Leslie is going to try to poison your food tonight.”)

The Connection

The Guest will never leave the victim of its own accord, even if the victim sees what is happening and tries to rid himself of the Guest. Once bonded to the victim, the Guest is stuck fast, literally unable to leave his chosen one. If the victim’s friends physically remove the Guest from the victim’s presence, the victim will find a way to go to the Guest. Victim and Guest may even run away together to prevent others from trying to tear them apart.

If the victim ever becomes aware of what the Guest is really up to, he may try to rid himself of the Guest. This is not possible. No matter how hard he tries, something inside him still wants the Guest to stay. Getting rid of the Guest requires outside help. This is usually where the characters come in, particularly if the Guest is attached to one of their close friends or cabal-mates. The sheer tenacity of the Guest may, in fact, be the first clue that the characters are dealing with something other than a “normal” person or creature.

Mortal Responses

Responses to the Unwelcome Guest’s influence generally focus on the victim rather than the Guest itself. Those suffering from the Unwelcome Guest’s attentions may find themselves medicated and perhaps eventually institutionalized. The families of the victims may ask the Unwelcome Guest — this virtual stranger whom the victim seems to obsess over — to leave their family member in peace, which only plays into the Guest’s normal goals.

Means of Exile

Getting rid of an Unwelcome Guest is harder than it seems. Although only a single, fairly weak spirit is involved, the bond between Guest and victim is quite strong and difficult to break, and doing so is only the first step in sending the Unwelcome Guest back to its

Abyssal home. In many cases, the Guest has become so attuned to the material world that it is reluctant to leave, often falling into its own elaborate lie and believing that it is the person or creature it pretends to be.

Break the Bond

The first step in banishing the Unwelcome Guest consists of breaking the bond that connects it with its victim. Mages conversant with the Spirit Arcanum can adapt the Spirit spells “Control Spirit,” “Exorcism” or “Bind Spirit” for use as a means of breaking the bond. Mage characters may discover other spell variations from other Arcana that will serve the same purpose. The Storyteller should be the judge as to what seems reasonable. If the victim is in any condition to do so, she will probably try to resist the breaking of the bond, as will the Guest. More often than not, the victim is in no condition to offer any opposition since most of her energies and abilities have been sucked away by the Guest. In the majority of cases, the characters have only to worry about the Guest itself when destroying the ethereal connection between it and its victim.

Restore the Victim

Once the bond has been broken, and not before, the characters may attempt to restore to the victim as much of what she has lost as is possible. Physical strength, dexterity and endurance can return with time, through tried-and-true methods of diet and exercise. Mental abilities and emotional faculties may need intensive therapy and re-learning as well as a little magic to restore them to their former levels. (Player characters who have fallen victim to an Unwelcome Guest can recover their losses through spending experience points as well as roleplaying the recovery.) Storytellers may wish to assign temporary derangements to characters who have suffered severe losses due to their bond with a Guest.

When the bond is no longer intact, the victim is usually grateful for her rescue and restoration. Few former victims willingly seek out another such relationship with a spirit creature, having been thoroughly exposed to the possible dangers. Unfortunately, mage characters who were once victimized by an Abyssal Guest spirit are often reluctant to create familiars and do so only after much soul-searching.

Destroy the Concept

The Guest itself must be addressed after the bond has been broken. By this time, the Abyssal entity has gotten “comfortable” in its current form and usually does not wish to leave it. Some Guests seem to forget what they really are and need to be forced to see themselves as the

spirits they are rather than the people or animals they have impersonated.

When a Guest impersonates a human, it usually assumes a form that is an amalgam of people it has seen through the Gauntlet, filling the Guest's mind with the borrowed thoughts and memories of many individuals. Few Guests go so far as to ensure a paper trail or proper documentation of their identity, and their false memories don't go very deep.

Repeated questioning of the Guest's identity, his childhood, birthplace, parents, school, first date or other significant life events eventually turn up a blank in the Guest's memories that cannot be filled in. Confrontation with the fact of its non-existence usually causes great trauma to the spirit and often drives it to a violent reaction as it tries to lash out against the people who are exposing its true nature. Characters should be prepared to do spirit battle when the spirit finally admits its pretenses and assumes its natural form.

Often a ritual that strips the creature of its material name is necessary to finalize the realization for the spirit. Once such a ritual is performed, the spirit can no longer call upon its former fake identity for information or energy in a battle.

Banish the Guest

The final step consists of sending the Guest back to the Abyss. Use of the Spirit Arcanum is essential in this matter as the spirit must not only be exorcised using the "Exorcism" spell but must also be expelled from the Fallen World or else bound in an object or place through the use of the "Bind Spirit" spell. The worth of using Abyssal spirits to power fetishes or other magical objects is a point of discussion by many scholarly mages, some of whom feel that the Abyss's energy only serves to undercut and betray magic and should be avoided at all cost. Once the Guest has been banished to its home realm or otherwise disposed of, the process of picking up the shattered pieces of several lives can continue.

Researching the Unwelcome Guest

Capping Skill: Investigation

Action: Extended – 15 successes

Research Time: 1 hour; 20 minutes

Appropriate Libraries: Abyssal Spirits, Psychic Manifestations/Powers, Spiritual Diseases, Psychology

Possible Modifiers: None

Successes Information

0–3

Nothing.

4–6

The researcher discovers information relating to obsessive tendencies in Sleepers, and the strangers Sleepers obsess over.

7–12

The researcher discovers an account from a psychologist regarding several similar cases in the same area, noting the time it takes for the fascination to fade, and relating the damage inflicted to the amount of total time the patients spent in the company of their obsession.

13–14

The researcher discovers an old journal entry from a 16th-century monk who details the obsession a widow displays with a handsome stranger, to the point that she needed to be bound up by her children for her own good and to prevent her from trying to flee to him. The monk suggests that the stranger may be an incubus of some sort, and details the performance of an exorcism. Mages can glean enough relevant phrases used in the account to gather that the monk was probably Awakened.

15+

The researcher finds information on the Unwelcome Guest, gleaned from a Mysterium mage who accidentally shattered a fetish that held one. He prevented the spirit from escaping by binding it into place, and forced it to relate its story. A mage learns the four steps of banishing an Unwelcome Guest (as related in "Means of Exile," above).

Story Hooks

Stories using the Unwelcome Guest are as varied as the types of spiritual parasites the Storyteller can imagine. The story hooks that follow use just three possible conceptualizations of the Unwelcome Guest. Each one illustrates a different aspect of the entity and provides a

starting point for further investigations of this and other Abyssal creatures. Though the Guest is not the most powerful of Abyssal spirits, it can pose many challenges due to the difficulty in spotting it and the complexity of banishing it once its presence is discovered.

He Followed Me Home — Can I Keep Him?

This story traces the development of an Unwelcome Guest from beginning to end, showing each step along the path, from the initial arrival of the Guest to its first encounter with the victim to the slow and remorseless winnowing away of the victim's energies. Since the Guest does not necessarily attack only mages, this story, by using a person close to the characters but not one of them, enables the player characters to witness every stage of the process, provided they don't discover it too early to observe the full deterioration of their friend.

The story begins for the characters with a group outing or other social event that includes not only the cabal members but their Sleepwalker friends and associates. At some point, one or more of the characters should notice a particular Sleepwalker deep in conversation with a stranger. This may not be strange in and of itself, but their friend does not break off the conversation for the entirety of the cabal's stay. In fact, he has to be pried away from the stranger, whom the Sleepwalker doesn't immediately introduce to the cabal members, before he will leave.

If the characters question their associate about the stranger, they hear a long, convoluted version of his encounter, focusing on how entertaining his new friend is, how fascinating his conversation was, how warm and friendly he is — all without going into specifics. The Sleepwalker does not remember what was talked about or any other details about his friend.

In succeeding days, the Sleepwalker is more often absent from the cabal's sanctum, where he lives, than not, missing meals and coming in later and later each evening. He seems more distant from the mage character he is particularly associated with, almost as if he is constantly preoccupied. (He is, of course, because his mind is fixated on his new friend, whose name he has now learned.)

Eventually, the Sleepwalker broaches the topic of having his friend move in. He vouches for him and says he thinks that the person could cope with the idea of magic's existence, thus becoming one of the Sleepwalker Retainers for the cabal. The characters may agree because they innocently believe their Retainer or they may decide that if this stranger is a threat and is using their Retainer to get close to the cabal, they might be better served inviting him to stay with him where they can keep an eye on him. If the characters refuse the Sleepwalker's request, he grows upset

and insists that he will move out, accusing the characters of elitism or any other "ism" that comes to mind.

If the characters still refuse, the story continues, but with the Sleepwalker renting an apartment with his new friend. The characters hear of their former friend's deteriorating condition from some concerned parties, perhaps other Sleepwalkers. At this point, the characters may bring both their Sleepwalker and his friend into the sanctum to find out what is going on.

If the characters allow the Unwelcome Guest to move in, matters progress in front of them and they have the opportunity to intervene whenever they suspect that something supernatural is going on. At first the Sleepwalker seems (mostly) normal, although he spends most of his time ensconced with his new friend in the cabal's library or in one of their own rooms.

After a few days, the Sleepwalker complains of physical ailments such as joint pains, weakness, fatigue, sleeplessness and other ills. He may seek the aid of a doctor and, in fact, may be diagnosed with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS), fibromyalgia or arthritis. Medication doesn't seem to help, and the situation only gets worse. The only time the Sleepwalker seems to find relief is when he is in the company of the Guest.

This fact may be the final tip-off for the characters and may occur at around the same time as the Sleepwalker begins losing mental faculties. He starts gradually, by forgetting to keep appointments (such as all those doctor's appointments for his physical ailments) or not remembering to perform any regular duties for the cabal. Matters take a more serious turn when the Sleepwalker forgets the names of cabal members or confuses them and when he starts neglecting himself by forgetting to eat, bathe or otherwise take care of himself. Again, only the Guest can intervene, feeding the Sleepwalker, leading him to the shower and seeming both solicitous and omnipresent. The characters, at this point, never see their friend without the Guest present.

The characters should realize soon that the life of their friend is at stake and that something unnatural is going on. Characters with the Spirit Arcanum succeed in detecting the presence of a spirit, though they must be actively trying to find such an entity. Further use of appropriate magic may narrow the nature of the spirit down so that the characters finally realize they are dealing with something from the Abyss.

They can then proceed through either trial and error or by consulting any experts they can find to discover a way to banish the Guest and save their friend.

Room for intense roleplaying exists in this scenario as the characters confront the Guest to break the bond that holds

their friend in thrall to the Guest. The Guest half-believes his own story and is sincerely troubled by the thought that he might not be “real.” Furthermore, he really wants to stay in the Fallen World. He may draw on his stolen knowledge of emotional blackmail to make the characters feel sorry for him. The sight of their fading friend, however, should act as a deterrent to the characters’ pity.

At the same time, they need to address the worsening condition of their friend, making certain that he does not die while they are in the process of saving him. The mages should realize at some point that they cannot accomplish everything totally by themselves and that they must reach out to the larger community of mages.

If the characters do this, they find they have an easier time giving attention and care to their Sleepwalker friend while simultaneously ridding themselves (and the Fallen World) of a troublesome, parasitic spirit.

The story might end with the characters determined to learn more about the things that come from the Abyss. It is also possible that the traumatic experience has Awakened the Sleepwalker, thus allowing the characters to act as guides and teachers to their former Retainer, now a fellow mage.

A Friend in Need

This story has a sense of urgency about it. The characters must act quickly to avoid a friend’s death and the danger of a spirit on the loose in search of another victim. A mutual friend, perhaps a fellow mage, comes to the characters in desperation. He has become worried about one of his cabal members who had been acting strangely and had finally moved out of the sanctum to live with a new girlfriend (or boyfriend). This would not have been a problem except that the cabal had allowed their cabal-mate’s friend to stay in their sanctum for awhile and found her (or him) distinctly “creepy,” monopolizing their friend and driving a wedge between him and the rest of his cabal.

The contact goes on to say that he finally tracked down the errant cabal member just to make sure he was okay. The contact found his cabal-mate on the brink of death, crying because his friend was not around. The contact found a diary and looking into it, found enough information to become both suspicious and afraid. He asks for the characters’ help to cure his friend from what he believes is a case of possession.

This story can be used to introduce the concept of the Unwelcome Guest by presenting it at a distance from the characters. Later on, if they encounter the Guest up close and personal, they may not take long to figure the situation out and combat it once more.

The Invisible Pony

The characters encounter a young girl in a park acting as if she is leading a large, pony-sized animal around although nothing is visible. Every now and then, she stops to pet the unseen animal, perfectly miming the act of stroking the beast’s forehead and nose. If the characters ask around, they find out that the girl is the daughter of well-to-do parents who fear that their little girl has some severe mental problems, such as autism or schizophrenia.

Checking out the child with various kinds of magical sight reveals that she is on the verge of Awakening and that she has a spirit seemingly attached to her. The characters may not intervene immediately unless the child’s family is known to them, but eventually the characters will notice the girl is losing her childhood grace and beauty and seems to be not only disturbed but less smart than on their first encounter. They may also detect a lessening of her magic potential. This should scare them, since mages are all too aware that their enemies seek to strengthen the Gauntlet so that magic has trouble working.

The uniqueness of this scenario involves dealing with a potentially Awakened child and an invisible opponent. Since the spirit is partially in Twilight instead of fully materialized, the characters may end up having to do battle on two fronts, in two realities.

Traits

The following Traits are for the Unwelcome Guest in its most common manifestation.

The Unwelcome Guest

Rank: 3

Attributes: Power 7, Finesse 8, Resistance 7

Willpower: 14

Essence: 20 (max 25)

Initiative: 15

Defense: 8

Speed: 20 (species factor 5)

Size: 5

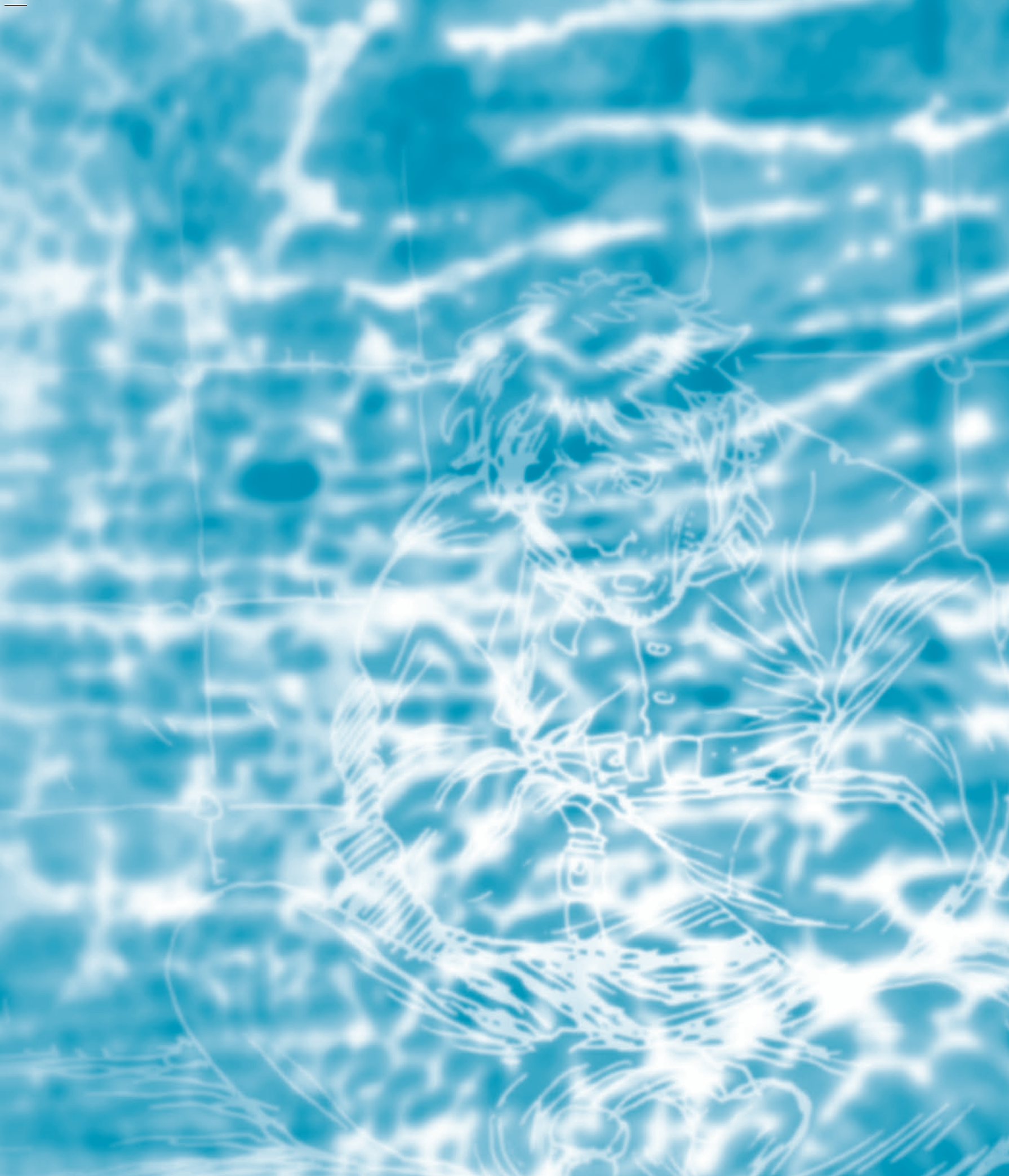
Corpus: 12

Influence: Chosen Target 3; the Unwelcome Guest can use its Influence to manipulate, heal and control its chosen target.

Numina: Compulsion, Harrow, Material Vision, Materialize, Soul Snatch, Spirit Speech (as the Ghost Numen Ghost Speech; see the **World of Darkness Rulebook**, p. 211)

Ban: The entity may not attack the same victim twice.

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ



From beyond, they come.

*They are spawned of That Which Is Not,
and they hunger for That Which Is.*

*There are a thousand-thousand blasphemies reflected
into the gaze of the Abyss, and a thousand-thousand
more beyond sight. One by one, slithering in secret,
they crawl into the world. The day will come when
the Awakened look up from their tomes and ruins and
petty factionalism, and wonder where all the light in
the world has gone.*

But it will be too late, then.

*— Govannon, Guardian of the Veil
archivist of Abyssal manifestations*

This book includes:

- More than 20 strange Abyssal entities and phenomena, including rules on how they enter the Fallen World, their goals and how to send them back to the void.
- Ample story seeds and advice for using the creatures presented herein.
- Speculation on the nature of the Abyss, including its effects on the physical world, Twilight, Shadow and the Astral planes.



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