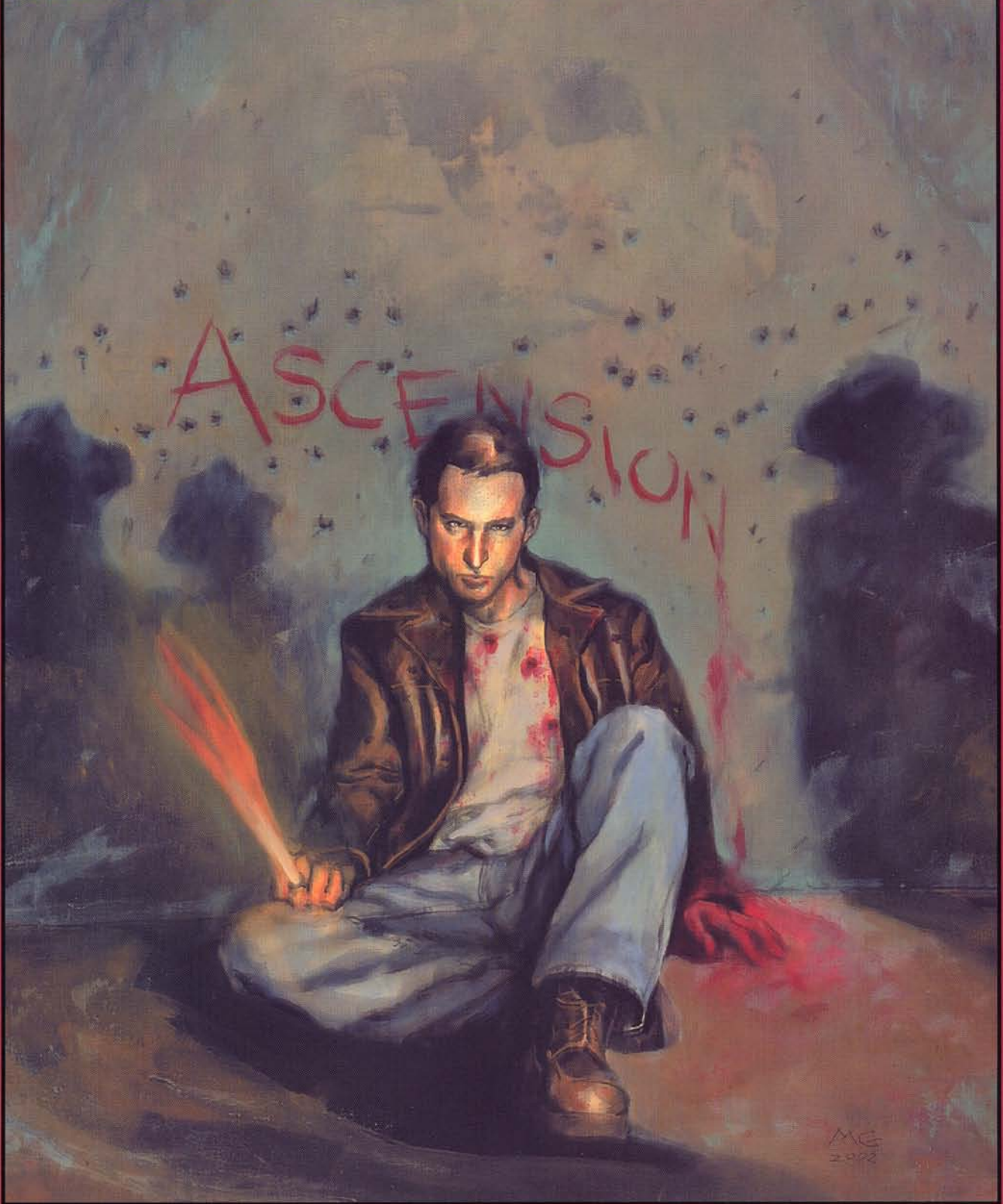


MANIFESTO:™

TRANSMISSIONS FROM THE ROGUE COUNCIL



A SOURCEBOOK OF RENEWED STRUGGLE FOR MAGE: THE ASCENSION®

MANIFESTO:™

TRANSMISSIONS FROM THE ROGUE COUNCIL



Ace of Questing.

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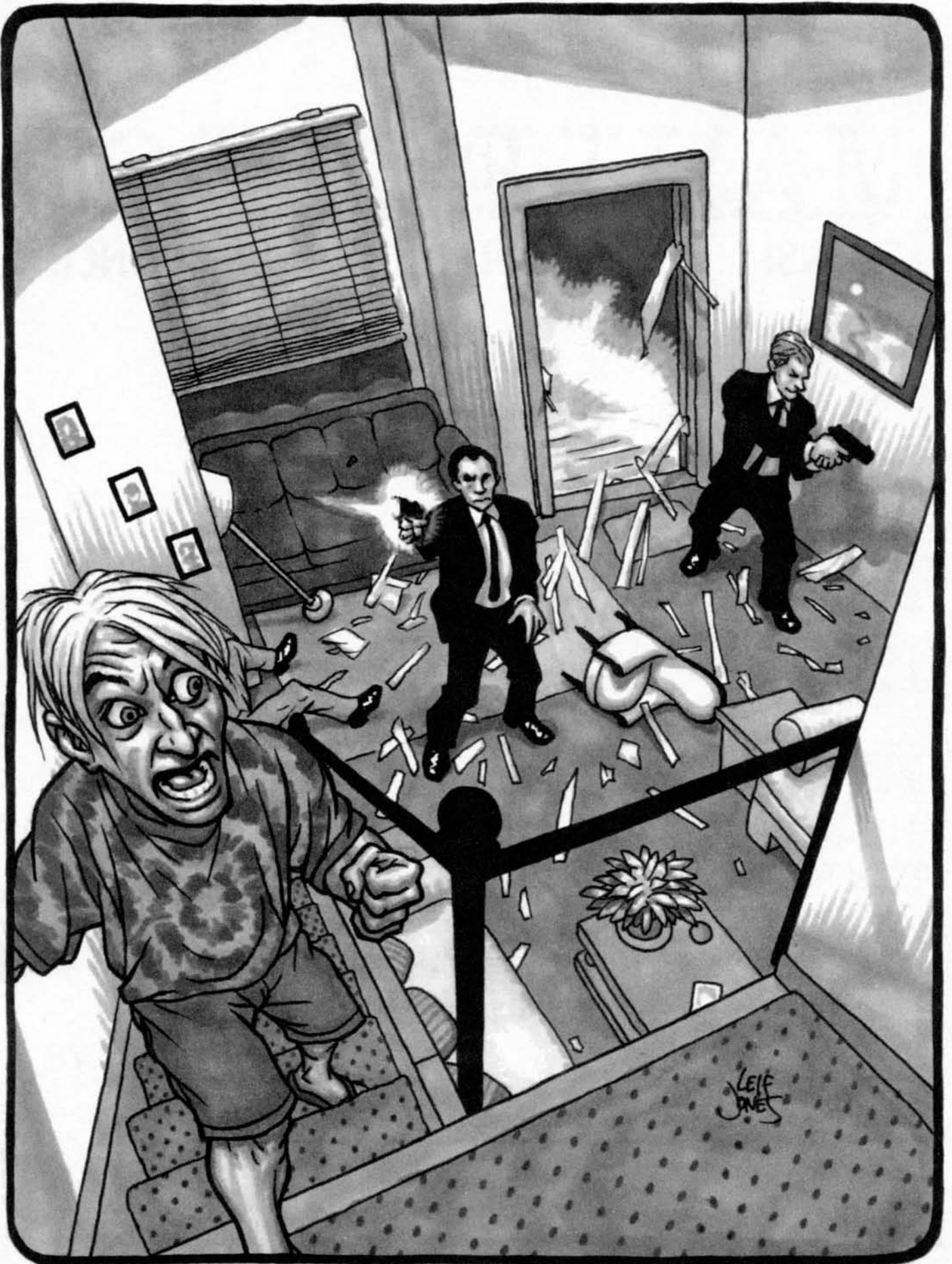
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PROLOGUE: THE LABYRINTH



Six-year-old Chelsea finally quit crying. The cat's bite hadn't even pierced her skin. It was more the fright than any physical trauma that had made the child cry. It didn't even hurt anymore. Her mother had cuddled her and put on a princess bandage. Chelsea pretended to ignore the cat where it sat on the windowsill, calmly licking a white-booted paw. The little girl sat on her

heels and sang. "Oh, I stuck my head in a little skunk's hole, and the little skunk said, 'Upon my soul, take it out. Take it out. Remoooooove it.'" She danced her doll across the surface of the coffee table, her small voice rising and falling.

"Shut up, Chelsea!" cried Michael, the older of the two by a year.

"No," replied the girl. "I wanna sing."

Michael eyed her from his side of the room. "Then sing something else."

Chelsea insisted, "No. I like this song."

"I'm gonna tell Mom." The boy threatened, but he didn't move.

"No you won't," stated the girl.

Her brother met her gaze head-on, for a moment, then dropped his eyes to his drawing pad. He clenched his jaw and squeezed his fist around the pen in his hand. "What are you gonna do?" he asked more quietly.

Chelsea didn't answer. She sang, "Well, I didn't take it out and the little skunk said, 'If you don't take it out, you will wish you were dead. Take it out. Take it out. Remoooooove it.'" A beat of silence crackled with energy. Chelsea gestured, a flick of fingers toward the window. She hissed, long and low, "Psssssssssst."

The open window suddenly slammed shut. The full weight of the wooden frame and the glass came down in the middle of the cat's back. The creature let out a howl of pain and terror.

Michael covered his ears with his hands and squeezed his eyes shut.

The cat screamed. It clawed. It twisted back on itself, biting at the window and its own flesh. It tore its mouth and smeared blood on the white wood. Its back legs lay limp.

Chelsea sang, "I removed it. Too late." She watched her brother for a moment, like a psychologist watches the patient through a one-way mirror, dispassionately, clinically.

The boy was shaking and crying through eyes so tightly shut that he broke blood vessels around them.

The cat continued its contortions. It hissed and yowled. It dug fruitlessly into the wood with its front claws until its white paws were stained with blood.

"What the hell's going on in here?" Mommy was coming.



Chelsea broke into tears as well. "Mommeeeeeeeeeeee! Something's wrong with Misty."

• • •

It came in the mail, in a padded manila envelope. It never even occurred to Brandon Quint that it might be something dangerous. The package was addressed directly to Quint. It had no return address.

Quint's apartment was as unkempt as he was. He shoved aside the books and bills and dirty plates on the dining table to make room for the package. He left it sitting there while he went to the toilet. The padded envelope lay pregnant upon the scarred surface of the oak table. It waited, patiently, while he pissed, fixed a peanut-butter and jelly sandwich, played a video game, and called his girlfriend. It waited and watched when she showed up, while they made out on the couch, and while they sat through a movie.

"You ever wonder if they're watching us?" Quint's girlfriend asked him.

"I don't know," he replied.

She told him, "I do."

"Mm."

"Sometimes, I can feel them. Their eyes crawl up the back of my neck, on a zillion prickly legs, and they drill in, deep in, ya know? To my thoughts and stuff."

"You think too much."

"Yeah, maybe. I dunno. Sometimes I think you don't think enough."

"Nobody's watchin' you. Who ya think watches?"

"I dunno. Could be lotsa different folks, things, whatever. You've seen 'em. Maybe they all watch us, and like, just let us live cuz we amuse them. You ever think about that?"

"Nope."

The package waited.

"Hm. Wish I didn't." She sat up, away from him.

"Yeah, me too," Brandon agreed. His eyes came to rest on the package.

The girlfriend picked at a cuticle. "Brandon, do you love me?"

"Yeah, sure." Brandon stood. "Hey, I almost forgot. I got something weird in the mail today." He crossed to the table.

"Something weird?"

"Yeah." Brandon's hands were heavy and brutish around the package. The manila paper felt dusty.

Brandon shook the package.

The girlfriend asked, "What is it?"

"I dunno." Brandon tore through the closure and popped open one end of the package. He pulled out a

mini tape recorder. Its sleek, silver plastic appealed to him. "Damn," he commented.

"Hey, cool!" interjected the girlfriend. "Who's it from?"

"I dunno." Brandon opened the tape slot and pulled out the cassette that was in there. Imprinted in white on the black, there was a symbol — a sphinx seated primly, nobly, to one side.

"I'm gonna get something to drink," the girlfriend announced. "You want anythin'?"

Brandon shook his head. "No, thanks." He didn't take his eyes off the recorder and its mini tape. An unsettled feeling had come into his gut. Carefully, he pushed the tape back into place and closed the slot. He searched for PLAY, found it, and hesitated. He heard the refrigerator door open. He heard his girlfriend hum a pop tune whose name escaped him. He heard his own heart beating in his ears.

• • •

Wasi Rostyevic and Dave Chang sat in the backseat of the car. Rostyevic watched out the left. Chang watched out the right. They couldn't have been any more alike if they'd been born one after the other from the same womb, except for the fact that one was White and one was Asian. Chang came from Chicago. Rostyevic came from the Czech Republic. Both clean-shaven, both with short-short dark hair, both with stern expressions, both with black suits worn over bulletproof vests, they aimed for homogeneity and hit the target dead on. Anyone asked to describe the two men would have had a hard time distinguishing between them, other than to say that one was Asian and one was Caucasian. That wouldn't give the police or anyone else much to go on.

"What time you got?" Rostyevic asked softly.

Chang turned his wrist over and raised his cuff. "8:35," he replied. "Where's *your* watch?"

"Some kid stole it from me this morning."

"No way." Chang quirked an eyebrow. "You got robbed?"

"Yeah. It's not funny." Rostyevic frowned. "Some kid dropped his frisbee in the fountain. He asked me to help him get it, so I took the watch off and stuck my arm down in the water. While I was doing that, the kid took off with my watch, little bastard."

"I can't believe you let him get away with it!"

"What was I supposed to do? Fry his ass in a public square on a busy Friday morning? I don't think so."

"You coulda used the other arm when you reached into the fountain."

"I'm left-handed."

Chang grinned and returned to watching out the window.

Rostyevic changed the subject. "8:35 on a Friday night," he mused, keeping his voice low. "I remember a time when Friday night meant I'd be out at the disco with a woman on each arm, dancing, drinking and fucking."

"Times change," murmured Chang. He watched out the window, studying the surrounding houses, the joggers and the kids playing in yards.

Rostyevic sighed, "Those were the good ol' days."

"Not in my book," Chang grunted quietly. "Sex, drugs and rock-and-roll became disease, death and disco. There's nothing good in that. I'd rather do what I'm doing now. At least I'm risking my life for a good cause this way. I like to think I'm doing my part to keep the streets safe for today's kids."

"Yeah," snorted Rostyevic. "Like the one who stole my watch? Shit. Kids today don't need our help. They got bigger guns than we do. Hell, Chang, a six-year-old could kick your flabby ass."

"You're out of line, agent," Chang replied, though a small smile tugged at the corner of his lips. "Don't make me give you a lesson in ass-kicking."

"In your dreams," Rostyevic chuckled. "You couldn't kick my ass. I know all your weak spots."

A voice from the passenger seat in the front of the vehicle interrupted, "Cut the chatter, agents. This is a mission, not a baby shower."

Chang and Rostyevic replied together, "Yes, Dr. Hawthorne. Sorry, sir."

• • •

The voice on the tape sounded remarkably clear, and yet, Brandon Quint couldn't tell whether it was a man or a woman. It had a neutral tone that gave no hints to the speaker's identity. While Quint's girlfriend dropped ice into a glass in the kitchen, Quint sat down at the dinner table and listened to the tape that had come in the recorder.

It began, "We all strive for Ascension in our own way. All roads lead to Rome. All roads are one. All destinies lead to enlightenment. All destinies are one. Your call to service has come. You must go alone to 15935 36th Street on Friday, April 19 at exactly 8:50 p.m. You will stand at the oak tree across the street from the residence and walk directly southeast. You will arrive beneath a second-story window in the house. Enter the house through that window. Do not deviate from this path if you wish to save the lives of those who live there. Take no one with you. Tell no one about this until you have accomplished your purpose. Afterward, when they ask, tell them that this organization is not the one who traced the download. If

you fail to do any part of this directive, the wrong person will die. Do not fail. Enigma takes you where dogma cannot. We do not create the path to Ascension; we explore it. You may play this message one more time, after which it will erase itself."

The tape ended and shut itself off with a loud click.

"What was it?" Quint's girlfriend asked, returning with a glass of soda.

Quint shrugged. "I dunno."

• • •

"What you hold in your hands, Paddy, is a haystack. All those pages, so neatly bound, contain one tiny needle that's the key to this mystery. I'd bet my life on it." Darlana Newcastle pushed her hands back through her ragged curls, further ruffling their mousy-brown disarray. She sighed and then added, "The hard part, of course, will be finding the needle in the haystack."

Padmanabhan Krishnam sat across from her at the kitchen table. His skin was the color of spiced rum, his eyes the brown-black of ancient mysteries. Padmanabhan had recently let his beard spread unchecked across his face and his hair grow to his shoulders. He had neglected his grooming while he wandered the mountains of Tibet in search of wisdom. Though profoundly straight, his hair held a surprise curl at the very ends. The sun had burned highlights of silver and copper into the otherwise black flow. The unkempt look of his head contrasted sharply with the slim, neat cut of his suit and tie.

Padmanabhan studied the report in his hands. He turned it to read the spine, and his laugh tumbled out like a low rumble of boulders. He commented, "You're calling them the *Rogue Council*, hmm? I like that. It's as irreverent as I've come to expect from you, my dear." His accent had a gentle roll to it, an East Indian lilt that made him sound either amused or intense.

Darlana smiled, smug, "Well, isn't that what they are?"

A nod, then Padmanabhan replied, "They. He. She. It. Yes. I suppose that's about as appropriate a descriptor as any — for now."

A toilet flushed in the upstairs bathroom. Darlana cocked an ear to listen, suddenly alert. The sound of bare feet swish-swished softly, somewhere, up there. A door closed quietly. "Babies," murmured Darlana.

Padmanabhan studied Darlana with a subtle eye and thought again how beautiful she was in that natural, mother goddess sort of way. Her simple, comfortable demeanor pleased him similar to how a healthy, vegetarian meal pleased him. He appreciated her pale skin, water colored pink across her cheeks, her hazel eyes framed with laugh lines and the graceful expressiveness of her lips. He knew she was good for him and felt no guilt about it. It had

long ago ceased to amaze him that a woman of such earthy moods, such basic needs and such country wisdom would be one of the most accomplished Virtual Adepts he had ever met. Padmanabhan had promised himself that he would try to court her when he returned from Tibet. He knew it wouldn't be easy for him. He had to win over her kids first. He felt he'd made good progress with the youngest, but the elder child resisted him. "How *are* the children?" he asked.

Darlana turned away, her physical shift as abrupt as her one-word answer, "Fine." She moved to the coffee pot to check on its progress. She rearranged the two mugs she had already pulled down from the cabinet.

"You're worried about them." Padmanabhan set the report on the table and folded his hands on it.

Darlana shrugged. "They're my kids. Of course, I worry." She hesitated before continuing. She focused on the feeling of Padmanabhan's gaze boring into her back. For the first time since the death of her husband two years earlier, Darlana felt vulnerable.

"Has something happened?" Padmanabhan asked gently.

Darlana shrugged, "They almost traced me this last time, Paddy." She picked up the coffee pot and poured. "They got too close for comfort."

Padmanabhan nodded, unseen, and said nothing.

"I gathered everything I could find into that report," Darlana continued softly, her back to her companion, "and even some things that had no obvious connection but that seemed just strange enough to perhaps be related. I got you everything I could." She wove her index fingers through the mugs' handles and lifted them off the sea-green, tiled countertop. "I can't get any more." She turned to face Padmanabhan, steam rising from the coffee in her hands. "These people, or whatever it is, this *Rogue Council* is too savvy. They know too much. They seem almost omniscient at times."

Padmanabhan watched as Darlana approached. He noted the furrow of her brow and the conscious effort to control her voice. He hadn't noticed that before. He guessed she thought he'd be angry, or worse, disappointed perhaps. He reached to take one of the mugs from her.

"I have to think of my kids, Paddy," Darlana apologized. "I'm sorry. I can't work on this project anymore." She reclaimed her chair at the table and sat down, placing her own mug in front of her. "It's too dangerous. We don't know what these people are capable of. We don't know whether they're on our side or not. We don't really know jack shit about them."

Padmanabhan met her clear, gray eyes as they lifted to look directly into his. For a moment, he said nothing;

she said nothing. Padmanabhan imagined he saw the flash of zeros and ones deep in her eyes, ticking out her thoughts. He heard and felt every edge, every point, every warning in her next words, "I'm afraid of them, Paddy." And though she didn't say it aloud, he also heard 'and you should be too.'

• • •

"Hi, Michael," the little girl said. She twirled a curl around her finger. Such dark, mahogany hair she had, not at all like her mother's — more like her father's, her dead father's.

Michael sat up in bed and pulled the blanket up to his chest. "Hi," he replied quietly. "What's the matter?" In the darkness, the whites of his eyes stood out like those of an owl, bright and startled, abruptly alert.

"Nothing," Chelsea whispered. "I just wanted to sing you a song." She sat down on the edge of the bed and reached to pet Michael's dog, a pug named Chubby.

Tears welled up in Michael's eyes and his bottom lip began to tremble. "You do?"

Chelsea nodded big. She brought her hands back together in her lap and gazed at her brother.

"Why?" he asked. "Why, Chelsea?"

"Well," the little girl answered with matter-of-fact calm, "You said you were gonna tell on me. I can't let you do that." She looked down and picked at the princess bandage on her bite wound. The edge came up, and Chelsea pulled it all the way off. The bite had bruised slightly, a sliver half-moon, disturbingly reminiscent of an animal with a bowed back and raised tail, stamped into her small arm.

"I won't tell. Honest." Michael drew a cross on his chest. "I swear. I won't." He let out a quiet sob. "Please, Chelsea. I'm your brother."

"Shhhh," Chelsea soothed. "It won't hurt. I promise. I won't let it hurt. You'll just go to sleep, okay? And you'll have lots of nice dreams. Lay down now. I'll make it a pretty song."

Michael was shaking. His tears streamed down his face now. He looked to the window and to the door.

"There's nowhere to go. And Mom won't hear you. She's downstairs playing kissy-face with Paddy. If you call her, I'll make it hurt. You know I will, Michael. You know I can."

"Chelsea," the boy begged. "Pleeeeeease no. I don't wanna die."

"You're not gonna die, silly. Just sleep. You'll wake up again. You'll see. Now lay down."

Michael lay down again. He curled into a fetal position and hugged the blanket to his neck.

Chelsea began to hum softly. She paused to say, "Close your eyes, now. Everything will be okay." Her eyes shone like diamonds, even in the darkness, gleaming splinters of power and cunning.

Chubby sat up and began to growl.

• • •

The sedan turned a corner. The man in the front seat, Hawthorne, flipped his PDA shut with a sharp slap. "You gentlemen ready?"

Chang nodded, "Yessir."

Rostyevic tugged on his cuffs, "Yessir. Ready when you are."

"We're heading into the final approach." Hawthorne leaned forward to peer around the driver and down a side street as the car slowly cruised through the residential neighborhood.

Chang withdrew the automatic handgun from inside his coat and gave it one last check.

"Precision, gentlemen," droned Hawthorne. "That's what it's all about. Remember the objective."

"Yessir," the two agents replied simultaneously.

• • •

With her slim, pale hands wrapped around her steaming mug, Darlana dropped her gaze to her coffee. She could barely stand to look at Padmanabhan and tell him that she had to let him down. He kept his guard up so well that she could rarely read him. A lack of expression fit his Hermetic persona, complemented the modern magician's suit and the deep-set brown eyes with their surprisingly full lashes that sheltered and hid what lurked in those depths. Darlana had thought many times how she would give anything to catch a glimpse of Padmanabhan's true emotions. Some day, she promised herself, she would find the courage to really look. Not today. Today, instead, she looked at herself reflected in the coffee's shiny surface and sighed, "I'm sorry."

"I understand," Padmanabhan stated. He did. Understand. He moved his hand. It wanted to reach across the table and rest over Darlana's, but Padmanabhan couldn't do it. He pulled it back into submission and curled it around his mug instead. He hated that he had such a hard time showing compassion, empathy, affection or anything similar. He hated that.

Darlana looked up to catch the tightening of Padmanabhan's jaw just before he lifted his mug to drink from it. She felt tears rising, tight in her throat. "Please don't be angry with me," she whispered.

Padmanabhan frowned even deeper. Anger was the last thing on his current palate of emotions. His hand itched, twitched. "I'm not," he said. His hand itched,

twitched and reached. Across the table, his hand slid until just the tips of his fingers touched the back of her hand. Padmanabhan stopped the gesture there. It was the most he would allow himself. "I'm not," he insisted.

The silence stretched out from there, all attention at the tip of Padmanabhan's fingertips pressed to the back of Darlana's hand. Unexpectedly, a computerized voice, Darlana's, broke the stillness. It sounded from the far corner of the room, "Unidentified presence. Bedroom 3."

Both Padmanabhan and Darlana turned sharply toward the voice. A sliding door had opened automatically to reveal a computer screen. The screen showed a shadowy bedroom with an equally shadowy adult figure standing beside a child's bed. In an instant, a small movement on the bed unfolded into the family pug dog. The dog moved to the end of the bed. The two mages heard the dog's barking in stereo, through the computer and live from the distant bedroom.

Darlana launched herself from her chair. "Security Level 3!"

The lights went out.

• • •

There was a second tape in the padded, pregnant envelope, a twin to the first but for the message.

Once his girlfriend had gone to bed, Quint pulled the second tape out of the envelope and inserted it into the recorder. He perched on the edge of the couch and pressed PLAY. The quiet whirr of the wheels provided a prelude, a warning, an introduction. Quint held his breath and turned up the volume on the machine.

The same voice, neither masculine nor feminine, neutral, without accent or inflection, spoke from the speaker. It said, "You must remember that you are the monkey wrench. You are not expected. That is your strength. Murderers, liars and thieves have infiltrated where you go. Watch and listen. One is female. One is male. The one corrupted the other. Destroy them. The disease will spread if you fail, and we will lose more than we already have. Look for the one who knows too much. That is your enemy. Your enemy's ally is your enemy. Do not hesitate. You will have limited opportunity to save the innocent."

• • •

Darlana took only three steps before crossing the threshold into the living room.

Any Sleeper would have missed the snap, the crack of imploding reality that followed in the wake of her jump, but Padmanabhan didn't miss it. He tasted



the acrid, ozone residue of Paradox left behind as she barely kept from doing a totally vulgar move. He hesitated only a moment, instinct holding him back for a second from the unstable spot where she had just vanished into thin air, and then he ran through and headed for the stairs. He had to make it to the second floor the old-fashioned way, in the dark. As he took the stairs two at a time, he pulled a pendant out of his shirt and let it hang free. His skin missed the press of the heavy mandala, but the talisman held more power for him outside his clothes, where he could take hold of it if he needed it.

Padmanabhan approached the top of the stairs with caution, listening. He wasn't sure which bedroom was which, though it took only a second to pinpoint the sound of voices. He quietly approached the bedroom door, sticking to the wall. More ozone assaulted his nose and put the short hairs up at the back of his neck. Magic. Another smell, the unmistakable aroma of burning flesh, added a putrid edge to the air. Padmanabhan's heart beat picked up speed. The mage turned his senses on full, expanding his awareness in a wide diameter around himself.

Darlana spoke from within the bedroom, "Back away."

The feisty little pug barked and barked and barked some more.

A child, a little girl, asked, "Momma?"

A man spoke, "I didn't mean any harm."

Darlana said, presumably to her daughter, "It's okay, honey. Go on back to your room, hm? Go on. Michael, you go with her, and take Chubby with you."

Padmanabhan flattened himself to the wall just outside the bedroom door.

"I wanna stay with you, Mom," The other child said, sounding far more mature than his seven years.

"Not right now, Michael." Darlana replied. "Go with Sis. It's okay."

The intruder said, "Look, there's something you should know...."

Darlana cut him off abruptly, "No. You will not move. You will not speak."

Padmanabhan marveled at Darlana's ability to maintain an air of calm authority in the face of a challenge. He crouched down to the child's level just before the girl came out of the bedroom with barking, growling Chubby in her arms. He smiled and put his index finger to his lips.

Chelsea wasn't surprised to see him there. She returned the smile and said nothing, though she looked back with curiosity as she headed for her own bedroom.

Padmanabhan waited until Chelsea was out of the hallway, then turned to peer around the doorjamb into

the bedroom. He could just barely make out three human forms in the darkness. Darlana stood near the bed. Her son clung to her leg. Someone else, the man, the intruder, stood in the far corner just outside the stream of moonlight coming in through the window.

"Go on, Michael. I need you to take care of your sister. You're a big boy. I need you to be the man of the family right now. Can you help me out?" Darlana coaxed her son without taking her eye off the man in the corner. She reached down with one hand to begin the process of unwrapping him from her.

Michael hesitated.

"Michael, please," Darlana begged. "Honey, it's okay. I'll be fine. You go and make sure Chelsea's okay, okay? Please, baby. Please just go."

Just as Padmanabhan thought he was going to have to go in and retrieve Michael, the boy whispered something to his mother's hip and walked slowly out of the room. Padmanabhan remained crouched, down where he was face-to-face with Michael when the boy came out. Their eyes met.

Padmanabhan smiled. He whispered, "You're a brave boy, Michael." The man looked into the boy's eyes and saw something there he hadn't expected. He saw understanding and acceptance of one's own destiny. Padmanabhan was taken aback. He hadn't expected such maturity from the boy.

"Take care of my mom, Paddy. Okay?" the boy requested, seriously, quietly.

Padmanabhan hesitated a moment, then tried to reassure the boy, "I will, Michael. Don't worry. I'll take good care of her." He patted Michael on the shoulder.

Michael nodded and turned to head toward his sister's bedroom, walking slowly, deliberately, one step at a time.

A low snarl sounded from the first bedroom. Darlana. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't fry your brain right now and leave you to live out the rest of your life as a vegetable?"

"C'mon, Darlie, you know me! I wouldn't hurt you or your kids. Gimme a break!"

Padmanabhan suddenly recognized the voice. A chill went up his spine. Something was amiss. His internal bells rang loud and clear.

"Look, Darlie," Quint intoned, voice low and cautious, "when I got here, your little girl...."

Padmanabhan stood back to his full height and stepped into the room.

"...was...." Quint cut himself off, gaze shifting immediately to the new arrival.

Michael walked to the end of the hall and went into his sister's room without looking back.

"What about my kid?" Darlana spat, shaking with fury.

Hesitation spilled over Quint. His options skidded through his mind, none finding enough traction to direct him. He opened his mouth. Closed it. "Your boy... looked sick or something."

After a moment's silent stewing, Darlana hissed, "Not good enough." She raised a hand, ready to point it at the intruder.

Padmanabhan caught the gesture and halted it. He felt the tingle of magic race up his own arm and head for his brain.

"Paddy!" Darlana cried. She too felt the magic flow to the wrong target. She curbed it at the last minute, pulled it back into herself so quickly that it made her stomach twist.

The magic cracked a whip in Padmanabhan's brain. He experienced a flash of light behind his eyes and immediately countered it with a weave of Life that seeped in through his temple and held the aneurysm together. "That..." he managed to say before he lost the ability to speak.

"Shit!" Darlana exclaimed. "Lights on."

The lights came up in the bedroom.

"Jesus, Darlie!" the man in the corner huffed, incredulous. "You were gonna kill me!"

Darlana reached out to support Padmanabhan as he swayed on the edge of passing out. "I'm going to do worse than that if you move," she growled to the man in the corner.

"I'm not going nowhere," replied the other man.

Padmanabhan's face and hands felt clammy, cold-sweaty, but he made it through the onslaught of diverted death magic. He put a hand on Darlana's shoulder, as much to keep her in check as to maintain his own balance. His vision cleared slowly. The room came back into hazy focus. The light hurt, but it allowed Padmanabhan a look at the intruder. He blinked. He'd been right. He had recognized the man's voice. A careful study of the man's features, of deep-sunk eyes above a hawkish nose that dominated a chinless face, of the dripping blond hair that belonged on a buff, tanned surfer, not on a skinny, patchouli-scented hippy, confirmed it. Padmanabhan saw nothing out of place, no indication that this wasn't the man he thought it was. He detected no deceit in the man's identity.

"Paddy? You okay?" Darlana sounded truly, profoundly concerned.

Padmanabhan liked the tone that had come into Darlana's voice. He liked it a lot. It distracted him for a brief moment. A small smile tugged into his dimples,

ironic when arriving in conjunction with a monster headache in his temple. "That..." he tried again, "...would bring you very bad Karma, Darlana. There's no need to kill him..., yet." He lifted his dark, dark eyes to the intruder. "Quint, are you here alone?" He had to know.

"Yeah," Brandon Quint replied hastily. "There's just me. Honest, I didn't mean to scare..."

Darlana turned a black look upon Quint. In two strides, she was at his side. She reached up, took a handful of his hair and dragged his head down cock-eyed toward her, "The fuck are you doing in my house?!"

• • •

Hawthorne dropped the two agents off near the oak tree, then got out himself a half block further down the street. Chang and Rostyevic crossed the street, taking a purposeful southeasterly route. Their smooth-soled shoes, perfect size 13s, left no distinguishable marks in the lawn.

Step. Step. Step. Step. They walked casually, unhurried, and in unison. Step. Step. Step. Step.

• • •

Step. Step. Step. Step. Michael entered his little sister's bedroom. He stopped just inside and looked for her in the darkness.

Chelsea sat amidst a pile of stuffed animals, her own eyes gleaming as unnaturally as the button eyes of the others.

Michael took a deep breath and walked over to her. He sat down beside her, expression resigned. "I love you, Chelsea," he murmured without looking at her.

The little girl smiled. "I love you too, Mikey." She flung her arms around him and hugged him. "That man scared me."

"Me too," Michael murmured. He wrapped his arms around Chelsea's thin body and held her.

Chelsea crawled into her brother's lap and rested her cheek against his shoulder. The song began as a quiet hum that bloomed into whispered words, "Oh, I went to the animal fair. The birds and the bees were there. The big baboon, by the light of the moon, was combing his auburn hair. The monkey, he got drunk, and climbed up the elephant's trunk. The elephant sneezed and fell to his knees, and that was the end of the monk... the..." The song died abruptly.

• • •

Quint hurriedly explained the missive from the Sphinx, as much of it as he was willing to share.

Darlana stared, incredulous, at Quint. She didn't care for his explanation and was about to show him just how much when something else occurred to her. "Wait a minute. How'd you get inside? You never said. How'd you get past my security?"

Quint shrugged, "I dunno. They told me to walk straight to the house from the oak tree across the street. They said to keep to a strict southeast trajectory and that'd put me beneath a 2nd floor window. They said to look up and jump into the room. So, I did. Just 'sponded up here. No trouble."

The woman's eyes narrowed, "They told you..." She crossed the room to where her son's computer terminal stood in the corner. With a tap to the spacebar, she woke up the monitor. Fingers flying, she entered a command, then another, and watched as the monitor began to show views of the exterior and interior of the house. She clicked here and there to adjust the views of the exterior surveillance cameras and sensors. Eventually, she shook her head in disbelief. "Holy shit."

"What's the matter?" Padmanabhan wondered.

Darlana glanced over at him. "He's right. I've got a blind spot in my security. Brandon walked right in through..." She turned to point to the screen, to show Padmanabhan the spot, and stopped. "Oh my god," she gasped. "Paddy, there's someone else out there."

Padmanabhan leaned over to stare at the screen. "Damn."

"I have to secure my system and get the kids," Darlana announced. She paused to enter a few extra commands.

Padmanabhan peered through his suspicion at Quint, "They with you?"

The other man shook his head. "I came alone."

The tick-tack of the keys under Darlana's fingers filled the moment, then the woman said, "We'd have been sitting ducks if we hadn't caught Brandon coming in. Maybe that's why he was sent — to warn us?"

Padmanabhan shrugged and kept an eye on Quint. He didn't look convinced.

Quint nodded slowly, "Maybe."

"Time will tell." Without turning his back on Quint, Padmanabhan headed for the door, but stopped just inside the threshold. He indicated that Quint should accompany him. "Come on. Let's go downstairs and see if we can see what's going on."

"Right," Quint commented.

The two men headed down into the living room, Quint in the lead, and took up defensive positions.

• • •

Chang and Rostyevic crossed the street toward the house. On the outside, they were the epitome of cool, calm and collected. Just two good-looking guys out for a stroll in three-piece suits on a warm Spring evening. *Nothing to see here, folks.* On the inside, they were tightly

wound springs, highly alert and ready for anything. One never knew what a Tradition mage would throw at you.

"This is supposed to be routine, right?" Rostyevic asked as he crossed the sidewalk.

"That's what they told me," Chang confirmed. "We get in, get the goods, kill the bad guys, and split. Easy. A grade-schooler could handle it."

"Right." Rostyevic eyed the front of the house. "Then why do I get the feeling I'm back in kindergarten about to get beat up by the big bully?"

Chang paused. "Hell if I know."

Rostyevic stopped as well and glanced at his partner. "What?"

The other agent nodded toward the house, "You don't suppose they're expecting us, do you? You notice how all the lights are off inside? It can't be much past 2100 hours. Nobody goes to bed that early. And these lawn lights aren't your standard garden fare. We can't see in the windows. But, we're sitting ducks out here."

"Let's knock," Rostyevic suggested. "Maybe they'll think we're Mormons." His smile quirked up on one side.

"Cute," Chang commented. "But, I think you got something there. Hawthorne's climbing up our asses. Let's do it direct. No point in pussy-footing around at this point. I'm pretty sure they know we're here. I've got one of those specially designed super doorbells in my pocket. Explosive ding-dong. Let's do it."

Rostyevic nodded and diverted his path to fall in step just behind Chang. "Got your back, pal."

Together, they strode right up to the front porch.

• • •

Everything happened quickly after that.

From upstairs, a scream cut through the stillness, "No!" Darlana had finally left her terminal to go check on the kids. "Paddy!" she cried. "Oh my god, Paddy! My baby. Oh god, my baby! No!"

Padmanabhan and Quint both turned to look back up the stairs.

An explosion tore through the front door. Wood chips and splinters burst into the room followed by two black forms. The first bullet flew. Blam!

The security alarm began to scream, high-pitched and furious.

Padmanabhan crumpled. He went down, hard and fast. Just like that. There one moment, gone the next. A slug to the head had bored a cone-shaped hole through his brain, entering small, exiting big, big, big, with a splatter of blood and gray matter.

Quint wanted to save his own head. He ducked down, leapt over Padmanabhan's twitching body, and

sprinted up the stairs. "Darlie! It's time to go!" He hit the hallway and slid across the wooden floor. He fell hard onto his side and banged his elbow. Needles spread up to his shoulder, neck and jaw. It began as a tingling, but quickly exploded into full-blown pain.

Voices down in the foyer, calm voices, cool voices, too cool, urged Quint on. He scrambled to his feet and headed for the far bedroom. Once inside, he shut the door behind him and paused, gasping. Fortunately, his eyes had grown accustomed to the lack of light in the house.

Moonlight streaming in through the window illuminated Darlana. She knelt on the floor over a small, limp body, administering tearful, hopeful CPR. She hunched over, sobbing, breathing, sobbing. "Help me!"

"C'mon, Darlie. We're leaving now! We don't have time to figure this all out right now. Bring her. I'll get Michael." Quint peered around the room and found the boy, sitting upright in the corner, the dog in his arms, staring into space. He appeared to be in shock.

"Paddy?" Darlie choked out.

"It's too late for Krishnam. Don't think, Darlie. Just do, or we're all dead. C'mon." Quint rushed over to the corner, crouched and arranged Michael so he could snatch the boy around the waist with one arm. The dog squirmed free of Michael's grasp.

With his free hand, Quint pulled a guitar pick out of his pocket and blew on it. "Darlie, get up."

"Chubby?" Michael queried, rising up to some semblance of conscious awareness.

Darlie rose shakily to her feet, Chelsea's limp body in her arms.

Quint shook the guitar pick in his hand as if shaking dice. "Fuck, this is dangerous. But not as much as staying here. Okay, gimme luck. Gimme luck." He threw it like dice too, as if playing Craps. The pick bounced off the wall and landed on the floor with a soft, plastic tink. "Now! C'mon!" Quint grabbed Darlana's arm none-too-gently and pulled her through the opening made by the magic.

"Chubby!" Michael called, the end of the last syllable cut off as he passed through the portal.

A tall, slim man in a black suit opened the bedroom door.

Chubby ran after Michael, nipping at Quint's heels. He disappeared with the others.

The portal closed.

The man in the suit sniffed the air, then snapped his fingers behind himself. "Activity in here. But we're too late. They're gone."

• • •

"I was just doing what I was told," the man shown on the large-screen TV muttered. He was walking down a mundane hallway, in the dark, then down a set of stairs. He glanced back to the other man, the cinnamon-skinned one, the one who was following along behind him, directing, commanding, threatening.

There was no tense music to accompany their descent down the stairs, no dramatic soundtrack to warn of impending doom, though every viewer in the room held his or her breath. The audience leaned forward as one body, watching intently, listening, anticipating what it knew must eventually come.

"Turn it off," commanded Hawthorne. He stood primly at the back of the kidney-shaped room, hands clasped behind him, and gazed down upon the college-classroom-style rows of seats. His white coat smelled of bleach to anyone who dared get close enough. For that matter, his entire being had a sterility that seemed to go all the way to his heart. Even his voice was devoid of emotion, devoid of color. Sterling eyes received the streaming images as the recording continued for a moment longer. Then, the TV screen went dark.

"Thank you," Hawthorne stated, staccato.

Some of the viewers squirmed in their seats and turned to look at Hawthorne. Others showed no sign of being intimidated. They knew Hawthorne and his crisp ways. They knew to worry only when Hawthorne lost his cool, not when he was at his chilliest.

"You were there, weren't you, Dr. Hawthorne?" someone asked.

Hawthorne nodded. He walked slowly toward the front of the room. "Yes, Mr. Chettely, I was there. I was the lead on the mission. Mr. Chang and Mr. Rostyevic made up my unit. We had received a tip that there was an active Virtual Adept working out of the house. We tapped in, and found enough corroborating evidence to make it worth an assault."

"Sir," someone else asked, "weren't you skeptical? What if it had been a set-up?"

Hawthorne slipped his hands down into the pockets of his lab coat and wrapped his fingers around the small, rainbow-colored, rubber ball hidden therein. "We were skeptical, yes. That's why we proceeded with extreme caution. Plus, we all understood the risk involved in the mission. We did what we could to stake out the residence prior to the invasion, but we had only a 26-hour warning. We felt it was worth the risk if we could succeed in ferreting out a renegade or two."

"Do you have proof that you did so?" A masculine voice called from the back of the room.

Hawthorne squinted in the direction of the speaker. "We do not, no," he replied. "Though it matters little. The mission was still a success."

"On what grounds do you base this assumption, Dr. Hawthorne?" continued the voice.

The viewers turned this way, then that, watching the volley between the voice at the rear and Hawthorne at the front. Their attention shifted back to Hawthorne. They awaited his response.

Hawthorne paused, expression hardening perceptibly. Eventually, he said, "I don't make assumptions, sir. But, I will humor your question. We base our conclusion on the facts that we lost no agents and that we managed to disrupt the central hacking station of a criminal. Furthermore, we managed to secure a number of extremely useful files, such as the security recorder you were viewing when I came in." He tipped his head in pause, thoughtful, then continued, "I'm sorry. I don't believe I know you."

"No," replied the voice. "You don't yet. But you will. My name is Metropolis. I had been watching Darlana Newcastle for some time."

The man named Metropolis rose from his seat. He stood over six and a half feet tall. Navy linen suit and a cream, button-down shirt belied the coldness of his demeanor. He could have been a grad student with little more to do than break hearts, drink beer and write term papers, except that the clear, intense seriousness of his gaze and the stiff lines around his mouth denied that Metropolis had ever done any of those things.

The challenge in Metropolis' stance was not lost on Hawthorne. He pulled himself up a little taller and crossed his arms on his chest. "Mr. Metropolis," he commented. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Unless I'm mistaken, you're the one to thank for tracing Ms. Newcastle's net stream. Keep up the good work."

"What you don't seem to understand, Dr. Hawthorne," Metropolis said as if he hadn't heard the pleasantries, "is that you disrupted a long-term informa-

tion-gathering project. We were on the verge of a major breakthrough."

The corner of Hawthorne's mouth twitched tighter. "I see. Well, Mr. Metropolis, I'm sorry we interfered with your pet project, but we had more pressing problems."

Metropolis didn't bother to keep the criticism out of his voice, "You had an unsubstantiated tip from an unidentified source."

"Yes," Hawthorne nodded firmly. "One that proved reliable. In these changing times, sir, we no longer have the luxury of unlimited time. When we perceive a threat, we must respond immediately and with sufficient force to neutralize the threat. The moment to act arrived. We acted."

"You had only limited information, doctor. A maternal Virtual Adept was the least of your worries in that house. Now, we've lost track of them all. One is dead and the others have gone underground. I sincerely hope this situation doesn't come back to bite you in the ass."

Hawthorne huffed. "I beg your pardon. Mr. Metropolis, I don't like your tone. Thank you for coming to the seminar. I believe I've said all I have to say on this subject." Hawthorne didn't move, daring anyone to press him. He stood in the ensuing silence like a statue from Atlantis, erect and austere, in the secret depths of the sea, eternal. After an appropriately dramatic pause, he turned and made his way to the exit. The room remained coated in heavy silence until the door had closed on his heels. Then, and only then, did the viewers begin to mutter among themselves.

Metropolis said nothing more. He walked directly to the other exit. No one got in his way.

• • •

Michael and his mother moved to a new city. They took a new name and built a new life. They started anew. Michael has lived up to his role as man of the family. He is a great comfort to his mother when she finds herself missing her daughter.

More is revealed in Chapter One...



INTRODUCTION: A NEW CREED



Lost Horizon isn't just the title of an old Frank Capra movie about Shangri-La — it also aptly describes state of affairs for the Nine Traditions' greatest Umbral chantry. Horizon has fallen and is now in ruins. Nobody goes there anymore. Many of the paths, airts and gates have been rerouted.

Also lost is the Council of Nine. The greatest Archmasters of the Traditions are either dead or hidden. Many other Masters, trapped in the Umbra when the Avatar Storm began, have yet to communicate again with their earthbound fellows. Some have willingly retreated into Umbral realms of high magic, forsaking the earth as a lost cause. Others have made the journey back to Earth, but only after suffering wounds both physical and magical. The few Masters remaining on Earth have opted out of leadership roles, retreating to monasteries or hidden chantries, seeking either inner peace or delving alone into long-hoarded secret lore. They cannot be counted on to aid the next generation of Awakened.

Hence, the Traditions are now loosely run by a collection of Adepts and Disciples — whoever stepped forward and took up the reins. Not all of them have the proper pedigree for the job — none holds any recogni-

tion from the lost Council for his role. They claim such heritage nonetheless, causing many to grumble about coups and illegitimate leaders. Some call for democratically elected councilors. Others abhor the idea and say it's against the very nature of the Awakened — for some are clearly more Awake than others; only those who earn leadership roles should be allowed to have them. But this does little to defend the current leaders, some of whom certainly did not earn their posts so much as inherit them by being in the right place at the right time when the Avatar Storm hit.

One thing the new leadership did was to take the Traditions underground. While they were hidden before, they're really deep undercover now. There is little, if any, open aggression against Technocratic schemes. A few individual cabals have stuck their heads up once and a while and gotten shot at, so to speak, but for the most part, the defenders of magic and Ascension gave up the fight and crawled into the sewers to contemplate their navels, leaving the fate of Sleepers and the world in the hands of the Technocracy.

Most mages believe it was Sleeper apathy that won out, not the Technocracy. Few bother to ask who planted the seeds of that apathy and nurtured a world of meaningless endeavor over the last few decades: the

Technocracy. An apathetic world is the inevitable outcome of a world without magic. Many Technocrats may not have foreseen this, but some certainly did. The leaders of the Conventions knew perfectly well what damage their creed of material reductionism would wreak on the Consensus — and they did it anyway. It all fits into their Time Table somehow, even if their street-level agents don't exactly know this.

Regardless of what your average Progenitor surgeon or NWO operative might believe about the utopian nature of his endeavors and his science, the Technocracy has never been about *science*. That was only its method, the means by which it gained control of the Consensus. And that's exactly what it's really about: *control*. Regardless of its initial origins, control has been the Technocracy's main goal ever since its paradigm gained the upper hand nearly a century ago. Its leaders do a great job of convincing their Technocrats otherwise. Their "better world through science" propaganda has even worked on many Tradition mages, some of whom fell for it and even equated the Technocratic paradigm with a humane, beneficial science. The fact that Sleepers even helped to create these breakthroughs in medicine, agriculture and economics only reinforces the idea. But the argument between science and magic has been false all along, as any Son of Ether can tell you. The real conflict is between *liberty* and *control*. And the Technocracy is all about control. Its so-called "progressive" science is only a cloak for its true motives.

And so we come back to the Traditions and their current predicament. Not everyone has fallen for this sorry excuse to give up Ascension. Some see through this ploy and recognize it is for what it is: a trick designed by the Technocracy to make mages accept their lowest common-denominator reality. Either that or a petty excuse used by the Traditions to give up on their ideals. Neither option is acceptable. Some believe that it's time to rise up again and once more seek Ascension — no matter who stands in the way, whether it be Technocracy or Tradition.

Enter the Rogue Council, also called "The Sphinx." This mysterious entity — supposedly a cabal of unknown mages — has begun sending messages to chantries all over the world, urging the Traditions to once more take up the banner of Ascension. Claiming a direct chain-of-command from the previous Council (yet providing no proof), these "rogues" — as the current, earthbound Tradition leaders call them — demand to be heard. Their transmissions get through most wards and attempts to block them. These "messages from beyond" are on the minds of every young mage who is tired of hiding — and they vex the minds of those who maintain the status quo.

The Rogue Council's creed is that Ascension is real and still possible. Apathy is exactly what needs to be overcome; it is not the inevitable or even natural state of the Consensus. It's not just a matter of magic and the freedom to work it however a mage wills. It's also survival. An Avatar needs magic, and without it, it slumbers like unto death — or even dies. The Technocracy's assault on magic is an assault on every mage's Avatar — and on the potential of the human race itself. To lie down and take it, or to simply let it happen without intervening, is to condone the genocide of hope.

And make no mistake: The Technocracy won through apathy. It planted that seed and watched it grow into a garden of rotten vines. It's now up to the Traditions — and those truly enlightened, truly progressive Technocrats who actually know better — to bring the wilderness back to the garden. To bring chance, possibility, hope, and maybe a little meaning, to this thing called existence.

ΜΕΤΑΠΛΟΤ

The appearance of the Rogue Council is a metaplot element that can affect a cabal as much or as little as its members desire. Regardless of what they do, the tensions will escalate around them, but not necessarily in predetermined, fixed story fiats from White Wolf. It's up to individual Storytellers to weave these events into their games. If a Storyteller doesn't like them, she can keep the transmissions away from her cabal; they simply don't get deliveries and are not directly embroiled in events. She can opt to use the transmissions as part of the world's backstory, causing political upheavals that indirectly involve her cabal — or not; her choice (the backstory will continue in White Wolf sourcebooks, however).

The transmissions are often stirring calls to arms and testimonials to the victories (and defeats) of others in the struggle. A major goal of some mages is to be mentioned in a transmission, giving them a high degree of street cred with others who heed the Sphinx. Nobody really knows just how the Sphinx finds out about these endeavors, but people have figured out that the chance of being mentioned increases if they network with one another, telling about their exploits towards Ascension on private internet chats, in coffee houses and in hidden messages passed through the underground.

Some incognito cabals, however, might find some exploit of their broadcast to others by the Sphinx, even if they keep to themselves and tell no one about their activities. This leads many to suspect some degree of sophisticated Umbral spying, but no proof exists. No trail can be traced. These unknown affairs only show up rarely in transmissions, but that they shown up at all

worries and scares some — and only emboldens others all the more, convinced that the Council they follow is powerful indeed, maybe even angelic.

JUDGE NOT LEST YOU BE JUDGED

Storytellers should strive to keep an objective viewpoint about the Council and the mages who praise or condemn it. Characters have many passionate responses to these events, but Storytellers might want to remain more open-minded — Guardians aren't "wrong" and Emissaries aren't "right," or vice-versa; they're each a mix of both. Whatever else it is, the Rogue Council is cause to question all viewpoints.

Many Tradition mages see the Rogue Council as a threat to the status quo, and their creed as a stupid, youthful call to anarchy without consequences. Some truly wise mages are committed to paths of inner enlightenment, and they believe that those who engage in this new Ascension War are only mistaking external victories and struggle for internal growth and enlightenment. They're not necessarily wrong.

There is a real danger here: Most of those with the highest level of commitment to this new creed are too young or too newly Awakened to have any idea just how bad a Technocratic pogrom can be. They've heard stories, but most believe they're exaggerated. The folly of youth is that it believes it has a special birthright that will win through when those older than they fall. The folly of old age is that it refuses to believe this can ever be true.

The Rogue Council's creed is a call for Ascension, but one that integrates the views of all Traditions. The bottom line, however, is that Ascension comes to those who achieve it. It won't happen for those sitting on their butts whining. It must be won through hard experience. Awakening is the birthright of all beings, and it is the duty of the Awakened to help all beings wake up.

Even those who disagree with the Rogue Council's vision can't argue that they don't have one — and a grand one at that. This, at least for now, is what makes the Sphinx more popular than the Nine Traditions. Until the Traditions can recreate their own vision to compete with the Rogue Council's, they're going to have trouble winning away converts.

THE TRUTH

What's the real story here? Who is the Rogue Council really? Nobody knows. It's a Mystery, with a capital "M." Some mysteries can't be solved, and some require years of research. Cabals may get frustrated with the lack of leads or suspects, but each new transmission is another excuse to keep asking the question.

Mage is an entry into a world of deeper and deeper mystery. With each new piece of knowledge or understanding gained on the path to enlightenment, whole new mysteries arise, tantalizing the Awakened to answer them. Some mages can't stand this idea: that the Mystery beyond mysteries might never be known; they want to solve a problem and lock it down, so it is frozen forever. But that's only one side of the triple-sided coin of Dynamism, Stasis and Entropy. If the enigmas of the universe can be solved, one may have to be an Oracle to unravel them — and they're not talking... or are they?

WHAT'S IN THIS BOOK

Prologue — An enigmatic story to set the tone and illustrate just how the Rogue Council's transmissions are received — and the reactions they create.

Chapter One: The Beginning... or the End? — What the hell is the Rogue Council? This chapter tells us when and where it first appeared and just what sort of havoc it's caused already. The nature of the Rogue Council's transmissions is also covered. These messages are delivered through a variety of unpredictable means, either by mundane post, email or actual radio or TV messages that show up on most channels a mage listens to. (No, owls don't deliver them in the post — these aren't invitations to Hogwarts.) No matter what most mages do, the transmissions get through to them.

Chapter Two: The Sphinx's Riddle — Just what is this Rogue Council asking for anyway? Is it all just some sort of Marauder plot? This chapter addresses the feelings and opinions of those mages who are for and against the Sphinx.

Chapter Three: Rogue Factors (Storytelling) — This chapter is geared to the Storyteller, specifically addressing how she may introduce the Rogue Council into her games, along with some specific factions that are developing among the Nine Traditions. It also includes a rough timeline of sorts for adopting the Rogue Council metaplot into chronicles. It begins small and grows to a persistent phenomenon.

Chapter Four: Anarchy and Authority — A sample cabal serving the Rogue Council's new crusade — and the Technocratic response to it: Panopticon, a new, cross-Convention Methodology designed to hunt down and expose Rogue Council followers.

Chapter Five: Alien Avatar — A sample story that begins with a Rogue Council transmission and ends in a cold, Arctic hellhole where an ancient spirit given flesh threatens to tear Avatars asunder.



CHAPTER ⊕ ONE: THE BEGINNING... ⊕ OR THE END?

Because of the envious nature of men, it has always been as dangerous to discover new methods and institutions as to explore unknown oceans and lands....

— Niccoló Machiavelli, *The Discourses*



NEWCASTLE REPORT ⊕ ON ROGUE COUNCIL ACTIVITIES AND IMPACT

The author respectfully submits this document with the assertion that it cannot answer the question of the Rogue Council's identity. Rather, it gathers together what data is available to date on this mysterious organization and attempts to sort it for further study. It presents theories heard in the Awakened community and draws lines between mythological, astronomical, scientific and historical commonalities. (D.N.)

Cut the head off the hydra and two more grow back to replace the lost one. In our case, the Avatar Storm has cut the head off the Traditions. The Council of Nine, our elders and our Masters remain lost to us beyond a barrier of unknowing that lies between us and Horizon. Amidst all this chaos, a new player has emerged — or perhaps it's an old player with a new face. In any case, this mysterious entity or group or organization has begun to exert an influence upon the Awakened. While much of the leadership within the Traditions remains unstable,

this entity has shown a level of organization, knowledge and power that is both disturbing and reassuring at the same time. Now, the noise begins: whispers and hissings about the rise of a new Council stepping up to replace the old one.

But who are they? How can we trust them? What if it's a trap? Technocracy? Marauder? What if this new Council is the real Council, reaching out to us the only way it knows how from beyond the Avatar Storm? What if this new Council is the real Council — testing us? We have so many questions. We have so few answers.

In this document, I make an attempt to gather what information we have on this particularly secretive force, what it's done and whom it has contacted. I recognize that we are only now becoming aware of the inevitable changes occurring within the Traditions. Some believe it's too early to do anything more than wait and watch. Others feel they must seize their opportunities while they can. I prefer something closer to the middle ground. Wait, but watch *actively*, to remain on top of the situation. Otherwise, important facts may fall between the cracks.

I will preface this preliminary report by asserting that I have tried to remain neutral. I have documented, and will continue to

document, every known communication claimed to come from this new voice and every known theory as to its origin and intent. I, being human, cannot entirely remove my own biases. However, I am making a concerted effort to do so. Furthermore, I recognize that this collection is in no way complete. I'm convinced that there are many things we have yet to uncover. Finally, I neither endorse nor refute any of the theories described herein, nor can I substantiate every report of contact with this mysterious entity.

BACKGROUND

When the Avatar Storm swept through the Umbral realms, it caused great damage and changed the face of the Umbra forever. We have little to no contact with many areas where we once traveled freely. Horizon, our political, spiritual and magical center, remains our greatest loss. We have had no substantiated contact with anyone who was in Horizon when the Storm hit. No magical means have managed to break through the veil to see into the past, present or future of Horizon. Many who attempted to get there have not returned. Those who started out and

returned never make it there; they gave up when the trip became too dangerous for their tastes. We have nothing left but assumptions, hopes and fears of what might have become of our beloved Horizon — and of our leadership, the Council of Nine, which was in session there at the time of the catastrophe. This has left each of the nine Traditions bereft of leadership. Chaos and political upheaval has followed in the wake of this disaster.

THE UPSTARTS

Some Masters weren't caught in Horizon when the Storm hit. They were traveling or in their chantries in the material plane. Suspiciously, each of these Masters has chosen to back down from assuming leadership roles. They have refused to take Council seats, even temporarily. None have offered satisfactory explanations for this, though theories abound. Each Master has his or her own stated rationale for refusing to lead the Traditions. While we may eventually discover that this is part of some grand conspiracy to shake up the status quo, for the moment, we have no idea what it all means. More importantly, we have no real

SPH1646.5.02-x

Date received: ~4/18/02

Format: audio tapes

Primary recipient: Brandon Quint

Witnesses: 1

Sphinx present? Y

Delivery: The audio tapes arrived in a padded manila envelope, delivered by the U.S. postal service to Quint's home address.

Transcript: (Security Playback) 4293.1165-2; Newcastle household

Padmanabhan Krishnam (P.K.), Brandon Quint (B.Q.) and Darlana Newcastle (D.N.), owner of the home and mother to the two children also residing there, face off in the upstairs bedroom. Newcastle strides up to Quint and grabs a handful of his hair.

D.N.: *The fuck are you doing in my house?*

B.Q.: Jesus, Darlie. Ow. Fuck.

P.K.: Come on, Darlana. We've got this under control. Let's calm down.

D.N.: Screw that! He breaks into my house, scares the shit outta my kids, and I'm supposed to calm down?

B.Q.: Sorry! I didn't know that was your kids' room.

D.N.: What were you doing? Why are you here? How'd you get in?

B.Q.: They told me to come here. They said it was important. Fuck, they said it was a matter of life or death.

P.K.: They?

B.Q.: Yeah, you know. That mystery group everybody's been talking about. I got a tape in the mail. It told me to come here, tonight.

D.N.: Why?

B.Q.: I don't know. They said I'd find out when I got here.

P.K.: How do you know it was them? Do you have the tape with you?

B.Q.: No, they warned me it was a self-erasing tape the second time through. I tried to play it a third time, and the tape was blank.

D.N.: What?! You're feeding me a line of bullshit.

B.Q.: Look, I played it through once. It was cool. Then, I played it again to write down the details. I was kinda freaked, okay? Jamie sorta heard it too. The dude said that the tape's self-erase function had been triggered. After the second time, when I rewound it and tried to play it again, it was blank.

indication that a conspiracy exists. These Masters who missed the Storm sometimes make themselves available to visitors, but most of them have refused to offer more than advice for the political organization and leadership of the Traditions.

Nature abhors a vacuum. Political struggles to fill the empty spots left behind by the missing Council of Nine are currently in full swing within each Tradition. Adepts and Disciples have stepped up to take the places of the Masters. Others challenge them. Factions begin to form.

It's a rapidly evolving process, this political upheaval. The majority of Tradition mages have decided to simply wait for the Storm to pass, or for the world to end. A feeling of hopelessness has spread through the Awakened, making politics seem pointless and petty. Only a few have decided to get involved. Some are jumping at a chance for advancement and power. Others have noble motives and are stepping up to take responsibility for the future of the Traditions. Still others find themselves volunteered by their fellow mages though they have no real motivation or talent for leadership. The faces guiding the Traditions are changing, and thus, the face of the Traditions themselves will also inevitably change.

⊕ QUICKENING INTRIGUE

All those aspiring to positions of power in the Traditions seem to be maintaining a relatively low profile at the moment, perhaps because the situation remains so unpredictable and solutions so tenuous. No one wants to overplay their hand. So long as there's still a chance that the Council of Nine could return, everyone's playing cautiously.

This doesn't stop the rumors, however. I've heard it whispered that the Avatar Storm didn't cause the disappearance of the Nine, but was merely a convenient cover-up for a more sinister coup. As paranoia increases all around, eyes turn toward allies, as well as enemies, with suspicion. The first leaders to step up and claim the crowns will suffer extreme scrutiny by their fellow Awakened. This may well add to the reluctance of the remaining Masters to take leadership roles in the Traditions. One must admit they would then become prime suspects.

With no information coming out of the lost areas of the Umbra, and little coming from the damaged and dangerous sectors, we can only make assumptions, and fear what might have happened to the Council. We don't know if they will return. We don't know if they can. If anyone does know, he or she isn't talking.

UNDERGROUND

Apathy and pessimism are spreading like a disease among the Awakened. So many took the damage wrought by the Avatar Storm as a sign that either the Technocracy has finally won the war or that humanity has ceased to care entirely. It is quickly becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. So many of the Awakened have gone underground to "contemplate the state of things." So many seem to have given up hope. Whole Traditions have pulled out of the trenches and left humanity to its own resorts. Chantries, once bases for noble warriors, have become fortresses against the world.



They say they want to regroup. They say they want to rethink things, because obviously they made a mistake in the formula for a brighter future. They say they want to take an inventory of the current situation. They remove themselves from the space-time continuum, for whatever reason, but the world continues on without them. The Earth continues to change. Humanity continues to struggle, live and die, Awaken and choose loyalties.

Whole cabals have disappeared. We know they're out there, somewhere, because they touch base with friends and contacts from time to time, but they have chosen to isolate themselves, to hole up until the insecurity passes. Every mage and cabal has found some philosophy or theory or escape that allows him to cope with the changes occurring in the Umbra, in the mortal realm and in his own heart. The mortal equivalent of this would be the myriad possible ways in which different people would cope with a global catastrophe that threatened the very foundation of civilization itself. We may not have been safe fighting the Technocracy all this time, but we knew our enemy. In many ways, we were comfortable with them. Now, all that has changed. Strange things are happening, things no one can explain. This has scattered and discombobulated the Awakened.

One cabal of Cultists of Ecstasy, and probably others as well, have given up trying to blend into society. They seek a pure connection with experiential bliss on a ranch in the bleak expanses of the Texas Panhandle. Are they escapists? Or are they on a path that will eventually end at Ascension? Does Ascension matter anymore? Is it still possible? That is the question of the day. Some are even asking, *Was it ever possible?*

One cabal of Choristers, and maybe others as well, has withdrawn deep into an ancient monastery in Eastern Europe. There, its members revert to the old ways, the ways of monks and ascetics. They live strict lives with strict diets and strict rules. They do this in the hope that it will bring them closer to Ascension, or further from the horrible thought that the Awakened blew it and now the world will simply turn more and more monotone as time passes. Perhaps, they simply don't choose to bear witness to the death of the universe.

This gives you a couple of examples of the Awakened's growing trend toward pulling into their shells. They believe that the wolf has eaten the strongest of their flock and is knocking at their doors. They see signs of the End, and like children, they want to find a safe place to hide until the wolf goes away. Of course, that's an overly simplistic explanation for their withdrawal. Many believe they need to regroup in order to rebuild their power. Others have begun to change their views regarding Ascension. Many have given up on Ascension. They see a blow this wounding and painful as a sign that they're outmatched, and always were. They've lost their sacred places and their holy leaders. They've lost their Wonderland, their Oz and their Shangri La. They've lost so much. To many of them, rebuilding seems an impossible pipe dream.

A VOICE FROM BEYOND

In this atmosphere of hopelessness and abandonment, it makes perfect sense that only a strong leader could capture

the attention of the limping Awakened. It makes further sense that this leader will draw an even greater following if it remains a mystery, a conundrum to be solved, just the kind of thing that the Awakened love. In anonymity lies the force of imagination. What the Awakened don't know about this newly emerging entity won't hurt them. They will undoubtedly fill in the blanks with something clever and imaginative and fantastic. That's how they are, how we are.

So, a voice begins to make itself heard. It is subtle. It is mysterious. It is anonymous. It is quiet. It is extremely powerful. Who is it? We don't know. How many are they? We don't know. Are they on our side? We don't know. How do they know all the things they know? We don't know.

What *do* we know? Well, we know that this entity has begun to reach out to the Awakened. It has shared information on our enemies and guided us to other mages in need. It seems to be on our side. It seems to be. All we have in evidence are the missives it has sent.

Newcastle paces. Neither Krishnam nor Quint move.

D.N.: They said you'd know why you're here when you get here? What's that supposed to mean?

B.Q.: I don't know. Maybe I'm just dense. Maybe they were fucking with me. Maybe I was just supposed to find out what it's like to get my ass RAMmed by a computer geek.

D.N.: Don't be a fucking smartass, Brandon. This is serious.

B.Q.: I know. Sorry.

D.N.: Wait a minute. How'd you get inside? You never said. How'd you get past my security?

THE MISSIVES

From the emptiness of nowhere, someone is contacting mages.

These transmissions originate from an unknown source. To my knowledge, no one has managed to backtrack along the Pattern trail to find out where they originated. We have very little to go on. We have, however, identified seven qualities that all the missives have in common, as follows:

1. The transmissions come from an exceptionally knowledgeable source. Whoever is sending them knows things that the standard Sleeper wouldn't suspect in her wildest dreams.

2. The transmissions guide the receiver in some way. They reveal Technocracy hide-outs or give hints to Marauder plots. They have saved lives by warning the Awakened of imminent attacks. For now, the senders seem to be on our side. Few of the missives have delivered faulty information, and those that did remain suspect as to their validity. We suspect that copy-cats have begun to send out their own less-than-reliable directives.

3. The senders use coincidental effects to deliver the messages. We have no concrete indication that the senders are Awakened, aside from the amount of knowledge they have about magic.

4. The transmissions cannot, yet, be traced. Those who have tried run into dead ends. No Sphere has allowed us to

follow any transmission back to its source, not Correspondence, not Time, not Forces. None. Furthermore, we find no Pattern signature that would lead us to the sender. These transmissions arrive clean, and that in and of itself, might suggest the involvement of powerful mages.

5. The senders target mages from all the Traditions. We have found no indication of loyalty to any one Tradition over another. We have found no indication that the senders subscribe to any particular belief system other than that of Ascension and an unyielding pursuit of it.

6. Somewhere in most of the transmissions, the senders “sign” it with a particular symbol. This symbol is a graphical representation of a sphinx. This symbol may appear on the missive itself, but in some cases it accompanies the transmission in much more subtle ways. Some who have received transmissions have reported seeing the symbol as a logo on the lapel of the delivery man, as a shadow on the wall, as an image that “pops” into their heads, as a splash of graffiti on a wall, or incorporated into a billboard or other advertisement that accompanies the missive. Whatever the case — and they are as diverse as are the methods of transmission — it does not linger. The symbol disappears, gradually. It may blend into the surrounding forms or change into something recognizable by mundane citizens. Photographs taken of the symbol do not fade, however, so we do have the symbol on record. It is this symbol that has prompted some of the Awakened to call this entity, “The Sphinx.”

7. A majority of the transmissions reported thus far have two phrases that occur in them, either together or separate. Not every missive has one or both of them, but we’ve managed to document that more than 75% of them do. These phrases are, “Enigma takes you where dogma cannot.” and “We do not create the path to Ascension; we explore it.” In most cases, the phrases are quoted exactly as shown here. In others, we’ve found variations on the same theme, though not in those exact words. It seems safe to conclude

Newcastle types a command into the computer that places a call to the local police. Silent alarm (on record). When Quint arrived, she initiated Security Level 3, which triggered all the locks in the house, ensuring that every door and window was securely locked. Any attempt to open them or break through them triggered a screaming alarm. That also turned on bright lights in the yard, while simultaneously turning off all the lights inside, making it impossible to see in through the windows and, theoretically, blinding anyone in the yard.

D.N.: I’m counting three of them now. They look like Techno Ops. Those guys blend so well.

P.K.: Brandon, was there anything else they said that we should know?

B.Q.: No. Not really. The only other thing they said was that they weren’t the ones who traced Darlie’s download.

D.N.: Duh.

that they represent some sort of motto or central message for the entity. They certainly have great importance in the missives.

These items listed above describe all that we know for certain about the missives and their source. We have to be careful of making assumptions. Mages around the world have developed theories about this entity, usually based on assumptions, guesses and fears or wishful thinking.

REACTIONS

The emergence of a new player on the political scene has caused quite a stir in some circles. Several of the Traditions have ordered their mages to immediately report the receipt of any transmission that might have come from this entity. Wisely, none of the Traditions have yet to make a proclamation of who or what they believe is behind the messages. Nor have any Traditions even stated unequivocally whether they believe the source of the missives to be from an ally or a foe.

Of course, that’s all on the surface. Behind the scenes, the reaction has been varied across the board. Opinions are forming. Some of the mages with whom I spoke have very definite and divergent ideas about what’s happening and why.

To my knowledge, the current leaders and elders of every Tradition have met to discuss this emerging power. Whereas, as far as I know, the Cultists of Ecstasy have only met once — “to celebrate this new contender’s balls for shoving our own inadequacies in our faces” — other Traditions have convened several times, with much more serious discussions on the agenda.

Akashic Brotherhood

I’ve had one hell of a time finding any information on the Brotherhood’s reaction to the appearance of the missives. I’m not sure they’ve really had much of one. They seem to be of the “watch and wait” school. My one A.B. contact suggested to me that some A.B. elders were consulting various sources after having found, in an ancient text, a minor prophetic passage that could be interpreted to predict the coming of a new leadership to the Traditions. My contact downplayed this study, however, and insisted that the elders weren’t really concerned about it. The Tradition’s members, for the most part, have changed little since the Avatar Storm. Though a minority has retreated to monasteries and sacred dojos to further their personal training, the majority continues to do what it’s always done. To help those who may have become lost upon their paths, the elders have sent out word that this is a time for sharing wisdom, practicing *kata* — techniques — and for re-centering and re-grounding.

Celestial Chorus

The Choristers have suffered chaos for some time. They can barely afford any more dissent among their ranks. The loss of their leaders has thrown them into disharmony. Those I talked to have made welcoming noises, suggesting that the hidden messengers should come out and join everyone else. The Tradition seems unwilling to acknowledge them until they come out of the shadows. Chorister theories seem to vary between individuals, but they all express discomfort with the

anonymity. God, they claim, works in the open. They wonder why a force for harmony would be afraid to show its true face.

Cult of Ecstasy

As I mentioned above, the most powerful Cultists held a gathering, a party, "to celebrate this new contender's balls for shoving our own inadequacies in our faces." They came to no conclusions at this event, which shouldn't surprise anyone, of course. They did, however, discuss the situation in depth, and produced a list of possible explanations for the missives — some of which were quite extreme. Needless to say, they came up with creative ideas that none of the other Traditions had. A Cultist acquaintance of mine gladly offered me a copy of this list. I added most of them to the cross-Tradition list of theories I compiled below, including even the most... farfetched of their suggestions.

Dreamspeakers

A Dreamspeaker recently told me that their surviving elders were only passingly interested in the anonymous party sending the missives. They have more important things on their minds, and politics isn't it. The Avatar Storm cut them off from vast portions of the spirit realms. Still, my Dreamer friend told me that they don't know what to make of the missives or their sender. Some believe it's a bad sign. The spirits have offered no answers to questions regarding this secretive entity. Another Dreamer went so far as to suggest that the source of the missives is so powerful that even the spirits fear it, but then he shrugged, apparently unconcerned. Spirits under a gag order? Sounds silly, eh?

Euthanatos

Of all the Traditions, this one has expressed the most active interest in the appearance of this mysterious messenger. They whisper of the beginning of the end. The Euthanatos I spoke with said, "We can watch the process of death without realizing that's what we're seeing. Everything experiences the cycle from birth to death. Will you know the face of death when you see it? I doubt it. It may come in the form of your closest friend, or your greatest nemesis, or as a complete stranger, anonymous and driven by forces you cannot understand. You are of no more interest to the Wheel than an ant is to you. You step on them whenever you walk down the street, without giving it a single thought. Change is upon us. Do you really believe that the cycle could turn so abruptly back up toward creation when it has been diving down for so long now? I don't."

The Order of Hermes

The Hermetics haven't shown any public interest in current events whatsoever. Of all the Traditions, they are the ones who have most clearly chosen a path toward isolation. They've retreated to their laboratories and their libraries. Though I am not privy to every Tradition's internal politics, I do have my sources. An old friend told me not to think that the Followers of Hermes have run away. She implied, without actually saying anything specific, that the Hermetics had decided to take a different route, a more dangerous and

intense course of study that would lead them to the knowledge that everyone seeks. Unfortunately, she also indicated that they had not yet achieved success.

Sons of Ether

Most Etherites don't give much of a damn about an anonymous entity sending messages to mages, telling them how to renew and win the Ascension War. The only Etherites left on this side of the Gauntlet haven't been around long enough to care. They may view it as a curiosity, and may even find it intriguing, a mystery. A few have made it a personal quest to solve the mystery, but as a whole, the Tradition could care less. The Etherites to whom I spoke showed little knowledge of the current political situation among the Traditions. They had a few outrageous theories to offer about the messenger, and seemed momentarily enamored of the puzzle, but it didn't take long for them all to tire of my questions and of the topic in general.

Verbena

The Verbena has taken the appearance of the messenger in stride. As one Verbie told me, "It's the cycle of Life, don't you see? The old pass away to be replaced by the next generation. Haven't you ever heard that fire destroys the forest so that new growth can occur?" From what I hear, they've been celebrating the arrival of new political forces even as they mourn the loss of the old Council of Nine. The Verbena Tradition has fallen into disarray, however. Their limbo seems worse than that of other Traditions because they have not seen the need for new leadership within their own structure. They've splintered.

Virtual Adepts

I am the V.A. response to this encrypted entity that has inserted itself into our system. I was asked to gather data, and I have. Once we have a good sum of data to examine, we will begin to manipulate it and extract all we can from it. This report will help us do that. The V.A., in general, have seen no reason to panic. We continue to focus on challenges following the recent crash and whiteout of the Digital Web. Our own problems with Sleepers, Technocrats and other beings intruding into what was once our domain (the Digi-Web) has made some of us wonder whether this anonymous messenger is actually Awakened or not. Most others have assumed that it is either a single Awakened being or a group of Awakened. We are not so convinced. We learned our lesson. No place or knowledge is sacred or safe.

COLLECTED MISSIVES

Searching for the best way to explain what's happening with the missives, I have chosen to present the actual content itself. I've included comments after each one. In these comments, I describe what happened as a result of acting on or not acting on the information in the transmission. Also in this material, you'll find direct quotes from those mages involved in the situation surrounding each transmission.

The following notes record some of the known instances of contact with the entity. This is just a representative sampling. My collection of missives is nowhere near comprehensive, for a couple reasons. First, I'm sure that I don't hear reports of all the missives received. I've heard unsubstantiated rumors of transmissions for which there is no factual data. I have not included those in the database. Second, there are so many that I haven't yet had the time to input all the data.

I've organized the information for easy sorting and comparison in the database. I've identified six factors that we can use to compare the transmissions. These factors include the date it was received, the format it came in (such as radio, letter, email, audio tape, public signage, and etc.), what physical evidence remains of the contact, the number of witnesses who saw or heard it and the identities of those witnesses, including their Tradition affiliations. I also ask whether the Sphinx symbol was present or not, and if so, what form it took, and whether anyone attempted to track the transmission, and if so, whether the tracking was successful or not. Also attached to each entry you'll find, when I could gather the information, a description of how the transmission was delivered, a transcript (often paraphrased for lack of permanent record) of the content, and comments regarding events surrounding the receipt of the missive.

NOTE: With regard to the primary recipient, I should point out that it's not always clear who that was. In instances where an entire cabal was targeted, I have listed the cabal leader as the primary recipient.

SPH1643.3.02-x

Date received: ~3/02

Format: flyer

Primary recipient: unknown

Witnesses: 0

Sphinx present? Y

Tracking attempted: Y

Physical evidence: flyer

Recipient Tradition: unknown

Identities: none

Sphinx form: image

Tracking successful? N

Delivery: Reportedly placed under the windshield wipers of the recipient's parked vehicle while the recipient was at home.

Transcript: (translated from Spanish) Ascension is possible. Common sense dictates that we strive for a reason. Our hearts have not lied to us all these centuries. We remember, without remembering, the promise of release from our bonds. Eliminate fear and what remains is faith. What are you afraid of? Afraid Ascension is an illusion? You know better. It's not. So, it's simple. Don't give up.

Comments: A couple weeks after I put out the call for reports of transmissions, I received this flyer in the mail, from an anonymous source. The postmark indicated that it had been mailed from Barcelona, Spain. This one came with a note, also in Spanish, that said:

I came upon a friend one day, in a sunny sidewalk café on La Rambla. He had on a sad face. When I joined him, he told me, "I am not afraid. I can only be afraid of what has not yet happened.

I have already blown my chance at Ascension. I am living the consequences of my actions and can no longer fear them. They are here." He was inconsolable. When we parted ways, he shook my hand and gave me the flyer I am now sending you. He told me he had found it upon his windshield, but that it had arrived too late. Then, he left. I have neither seen nor heard from him since. I wish he could have embraced the message in the flyer as I have. I pass it on to you now in the hope that it will inspire others less broken than my friend. The message is a good one. If we give up, we ensure that the future we fear the most will come to pass.

SPH1633.5.02-x

Date received: ~5/02

Format: television newscast

Primary recipient: Mason "Z" White

Witnesses: none

Sphinx present? Y

Tracking attempted: N

Physical evidence: none

Recipient Tradition: CoE

Identities: none

Sphinx form: icon on screen

Tracking successful? NA

Delivery: White reports that he was sitting in his living room, watching the evening news. The show progressed as normal until a special report broke into the broadcast. Nothing about the show changed. The image in the small screen beside the anchor's head showed a rundown barn, and in the corner was a small icon, the symbol of the Sphinx.

Transcript: (White's statement) "I wasn't really paying that much attention. I'd had a long day and I just wanted to lose my head for awhile, quit thinking and just float, you know? So, I'm not too sure what it was about that particular story that grabbed me, but something did. It was like suddenly I was fascinated. Somehow, inside, I knew it was important, you know? So, I started paying attention. And the news guy said that there had been an explosion out at this barn. But the picture on the screen didn't look like the barn had blown up or anything. It just looked like it was old, you know? So, the guy was still talking, right? And he said that police think there was a meth lab in the tunnels under the barn. And then, they showed some pills, and suddenly I knew what this was all about. We'd been looking for some pills that zone people out. We figured the Tech-heads were behind it, 'cause the pills kill your imagination and shit. But, we didn't know where they were making them or how it was getting distributed. You know, those were the pills that guy showed on the TV. My friends and I figured we'd better check it out, so we did. Sure enough, there it was, the grand-daddy of all drug labs, down there under that damn barn. We blew it up. Next day, I saw the same exact thing on the news, but this time, the barn in the picture was blown to hell, just like we left it. Freaky shit, man. How'd they know? How'd they know?"

Comments: I think I should note that White's memory of the original newscast is suspect due to his state at the time. He also stated, though, that he could tell right where the barn was from the picture on the news. He saw landmarks that he recognized in the background. He remembered those landmarks and their orientation well enough to lead his cabal

straight to the facility, so that might indicate that he wasn't impaired at the time of the transmission. His cabal backs his story from the time when White contacted them.

SPH1634.5.02-x

Date received: ~5/02

Format: web page

Primary recipient: Mochi Katame

Witnesses: 4

Sphinx present? Y

Tracking attempted: Y

Physical evidence: file copied, saved

Recipient Tradition: DSP

Identities: Bea Aquarius/Dreamspeaker, Espiritus/Dreamspeaker, Mourning Doe/Dreamspeaker, Michael Franklin/Akashic

Sphinx form: image

Tracking successful? N

Delivery: Katame reports that he was doing a web search for a book on sea kelp when he suddenly found himself looking at a page built to spotlight the staff at a local fish hatchery in Karakuwa, Japan. He immediately saved the page and its graphics to his hard drive. This copy remained intact, but when he navigated away from the original page, then tried to return to it, he discovered that the link suddenly led to a porn site. He never found the original site again.

Transcript: (Katame's statement) "The page was simple. It had only four graphic images, including the logo for the hatchery, a sphinx symbol, and two pictures. The photos

showed men and women working in the hatchery. The people didn't look good. They looked unhealthy and very unhappy. At first, I thought it was the lighting or the picture, but the more I looked, the clearer it became. They were all ill. They looked half dead. Something was wrong. I just knew it."

(text from the web page) "Kokanee Salmon Hatchery. At the Kokanee Salmon Hatchery, our employees give their lives to raising the healthiest, cleanest fish. They work around the clock to ensure that the recirculation system and filters remain in good working order. They monitor the freshwater tanks where the young salmon grow to an age where they are released into the rivers. Kokanee Salmon Hatchery incubates more than 500 million eggs per year, more than any other in Japan. During this process, the employees endure their long hours by drinking a healthful, enriched beverage provided by the management. Join the fight to save the little fishes. A clean tank is a good tank. You know what to do, Katame-san."

Comments: Katame and his cabal went to check out the fishery. They discovered that the owner and much of his staff had come under the influence of a mage who had chosen to run solo. They knew this was significant, but it wasn't until they discovered that the mage had fostered ties with a questionable being, a spirit force of profane resonance, that they began to see the full implication of the operation. They further learned that two of the employees at the hatchery were Verbena from Eastern Europe, brought in and brainwashed to aid the operation. They discovered that the hatchery was selling fish



byproducts — such as oils and caviar — to fund the rogue mage's more sinister goals. Katame lost several allies during the initial battle that ensued, including Mourning Doe and Espiritus. They did not succeed in finding the answers to all their questions, and the rogue mage managed to escape. This story is not yet over. Katame and his cabal have put their official report on hold, pending further investigation.

I should also note that Katame's cabal have had internal conflict since the deaths of Mourning Doe and Espiritus. The cabal members have differing opinions about how the mission was handled. Some blame Katame for rushing in with only the limited information provided in the Sphinx's message. These mages have even suggested, according to Katame, that the missive was a set-up intended to put them in excessive danger. They view the whole affair as a failed mission that cost them the lives of two beloved friends. I certainly cannot blame them for their anger.

SPH|635.5.02-x

Date received: 3/2/02

Format: email

Primary recipient: Frontier Frank

Witnesses: 3

Sphinx present? Y

Tracking attempted: Y

Physicalevidence: emailsaved

Recipient Tradition: SoE

Identities: ZiggyPulanski/Euthanatos,
Yang/Etherite, Ying/Etherite

Sphinx form: image embed-
ded in email

Tracking successful? N

Delivery: Message arrived in the form of an email to Frontier Frank's personal, private email address. FF asserts that he uses this email only for secured communications and that he has installed a number of technomantic filters and firewalls to ensure that no one can hack it. I didn't understand exactly what he said he'd done. He said something about a "mapper zapper" and a "hyper-electron sentinel." I can imagine what these things do, but SoE technomancy in no way resembles VA technomagic. Anyway, he assures me that no one outside of those he has approved could have hacked in to find that email address.

Transcript: (from saved copy of the email)

From: "Me" <unknown@elsewhere.com>

To: "You" <openskies@dream99.com>

Subject: Urgent — Security

Date: Thursday, 2 Mar 2001 14:26:06

1615 3rd Street NW

Comments: All Frank received was a street address. The address recorded above is not the true address, as per Frank's request to protect the location, though the false address does express the brevity of the missive. The email gave him no other direction, no indication of what he would find, and no guidance regarding what he should do with it once he did. Frank and the witnesses listed above went to investigate. In Frank's own words:

"So, first, we figure we better find out what city we're lookin' at, right? So we go to one of those online map sites and plug in the address like it was in our city. That was easy enough, 'cause there was one here. Made our job easier, but then I figure that's the whole point, right? To make our job easier. So, here we got the address and a map to it, and it's on the nice side of town, so we're thinking we're gonna have to go in real careful-like 'cause all those prigs up there got security and shit out the ass. Well, we hit that nail on the head. We go stake the place out, right? We got the electric company van and our uniforms and we go cruising through the neighborhood, and we find out that this place has fences high as Heaven. A quick scan with the e-deet gives us... what's that? Oh. The ether detector. It tells you when there's jazz or spark in the air. You know. Magic. Quintessence. Shit like that.

"So anyway, the e-deet goes off the scale, right? I got no idea how come the Techno-toads didn't find this place before we did. It's like a freakin' beacon. Shit. We didn't know what to do, so we went and had lunch and talked about it and decided that we needed to figure out what was going on. Hell, for all we knew, it could have been Tech Central, right? Can't just go waltzing in without knowing what you're up against.

"Over the next week, we staked the place out. We had to get clever about that, 'cause they got this neighborhood watch shit going on out there. Between the fat man in the Bermuda shorts with his bulldog and the old lady with the chartreuse mu-mu, we had our hands full. Did lotsa disguises. Anyway, don't matter how cunning we were. This ain't about us. It's about the house. In all that time, nothing moved. Not a damn thing bigger than a bird. We got one of the kids in the neighborhood to tell us that there used to be some "Arabs" living there, but that nobody'd seen them for a long time. Kid said he figured they were on vacation or something.

"Eventually, we figured it was time to make our move. We couldn't see past the barrier with anything but our own two eyes and a pair of mundane binoculars. None of my special devices could break through. So, we were going in blind. We all made sure our wills were in order, dug out the flak jackets and loaded our weapons. We hit an hour before dawn. That's when we figured the neighborhood nosy-asses would be asleep. Zig blasted a small hole in their magical wall so we could crawl through. That actually looked a lot easier than it was to cut through the steel of the mundane fence, and turned out to be a Hell of a lot easier than dodging the laser weapons shooting at us from the roof and the life zappers on the lawn, but we did it.

"So, we get in and, to make a long story short, we scouted the place out. We're walking through rooms filled with antiques and old-fashioned décor and Yang finds this equipment, right? He kicks it and it chugs to life. That's what I love about Yang. All it takes is one good boot to the right spot and the machine sits up and pays attention. Anyway, so suddenly we got people walking around, a whole family. We don't know where they came from and we're kinda freaked, right?

But it don't take us too long to realize that these folks are ignoring us. Not only that, but they're not making any noise. No footsteps, no nothing. They're like fancy holographic images. So, Ying starts playing with the equipment, talking to it, right? She figures out that this place was set up with an automatic defense system that would kick in if nobody put in some sorta code or something.

"Coulda knocked me over with a feather when I realized there wasn't nobody there and hadn't been anybody there for a damn long time. Decades. Come to find out, the "Arabs" the kid had mentioned were projections designed to make it look like somebody was home. The whole place was rigged that way, to make it look like somebody was home.

"We found out why quick enough. There's a big stone room in the center of the house. In that room, there's a Node. Can you believe it? Just sitting there, waiting for someone to come and discover it. So, we're thinking that whoever set this place up was really serious about protecting it. We've moved in and are going through the stuff stored there, trying to figure out who those folks were and what happened to them. And now we got another question to answer. One day, Ying was looking out at the yard and suddenly she asked, 'Who do you suppose mows the lawn?' Good question. I reckon we'll find out soon enough."

SPH|644.6.02-x

Date received: 6/6/02

Format: graffiti

Primary recipient: Aaron Dogon

Witnesses: 3

Sphinx present? Y

Tracking attempted: Y

Delivery: Message painted in graffiti upon a wall in the neighborhood where Dogon lives.

Transcript: (translated from the Japanese) Morning sun rises pure and white. Ascension comes. Do you rise to meet it or do you shrink into your dark sheets of mourning? The Way to Ascension changes with each step you take.

Comments: Dogon noticed this graffiti one evening on his way home. He views it as confirmation that his participation in the pro-Sphinx cabal known as Jupiter's Forge is essential. Unfortunately, it has also caused tension between him and his cabal-mate Alexei DesJeans who practices Voodoo and tends to approach his magic along more morbid avenues.

SPH|636.5.02-x

Date received: ~4/02

Format: billboard

Physical evidence: chips of paint, photo

Recipient Tradition: AB

Identities: Phillip Morcant/Hermetic, Janet Wolf/Etherite, Alexei DesJeans/Cultist of E

Sphinx form: image incorporated into the graffiti

Tracking successful? N

Physical evidence: Mind capture

Primary recipient: chose to remain anonymous

Recipient Tradition: OoH

Witnesses: 0

Sphinx present? Y

Tracking attempted: Y

Delivery: The message appeared on a billboard along I-95.

Transcript: (paraphrased by recipient) "Alchemy: the Path to Ascension. A new book by John Crow. Coming to an Awakening near you. For more information, call 1-800-555-1693."

Comments: The name and phone number shown in the transcripts are not the real ones. For reasons of security, the recipient has chosen to keep both himself and the other person anonymous. When the recipient saw the billboard, he became immediately intrigued. He went home and called the number himself before telling anyone else about it, in case it turned out to be nothing at all. He reached a young person who had begun dabbling with alchemy and had begun to have some unusual success. It didn't take the recipient long to realize that the young person was on the verge of Awakening. The recipient arranged to meet with this person, using his own knowledge and interest in alchemy to cajole the young person. The recipient quickly befriended the young alchemist and thus was able to be there when, within a week, the young person Awakened. The two immediately went into hiding to avoid a Tech team who had also sniffed out the alchemist's growing awareness.

I should also note that, as expected, when the recipient went back to the billboard later that evening, it had already been changed to a milk advertisement. Furthermore, there was no book. The whole thing had been a code to get the recipient to call the young person before the Technocracy got involved.

SPH|637.5.02-x

Date received: 5/7/02

Format: stadium security passes

Primary recipient: Malcolm Dugall

Witnesses: 1

Sphinx present? Y

Tracking attempted: Y

Delivery: The passes arrived in the mail, addressed to Dugall. They came in a plain brown wrapper and had only the symbol of the sphinx in place of a return address. The passes gave Dugall and a companion access to Sidney stadium during an upcoming soccer game.

Transcript: (Dugall's statement) "I didn't have the foggiest idea why anyone would be sending me security passes to the game. I'm not especially a fan of soccer, never have been, and certainly not of crowds of screaming, atonal Sleepers. But I had two passes that would allow me access anywhere, including the locker rooms. I'd heard something about the Sphinx, so I did some research. You know what I discovered. That convinced me

Identities: none

Sphinx form: image

Tracking successful? N

Physical evidence: the passes, envelope

Recipient Tradition: CC

Identities: Lady Sasha Nebtov/Chorister

Sphinx form: image on passes and envelope

Tracking successful? N



to attend the game. I took Sasha with me. We didn't know what we were looking for, or even if we were looking for anything until we found it. Imagine our surprise when we spied one of our chantry-mates in the crowd. Devon hated soccer. Sasha and I were confused. We watched him. He looked nervous and guilty. Turns out he had good reason to be. Bastard had stolen a Talisman from the chantry, an important one, and was trying to sell it. I still don't know who he was meeting there. Sasha and I, soon as we figured out what was going on, went up to them both. The other guy figured Devon had set up an ambush and gave Devon a bullet through the heart right there on the spot. He split. We let him go. We had the Talisman. It was more important to get it home safely than to chase after Devon's contact. But, thing was, if we hadn't gone to that game, we never would have known what a traitor Devon was, and we'd have lost the Talisman."

Comments: Dugall and his chantry never did discover who Devon's contact was, but they didn't try too hard from what I've heard. They took an inventory of all the chantry assets and found nothing else missing. An inquiry into Devon's personal life showed that he owed a huge gambling debt. You wouldn't think that a mage would have to steal to solve a problem like that, and Devon died with his motives.

Update (5.30.02): More recently, Dugall called to tell me that the story didn't end there. Devon's contact turned out to be more dangerous than they had at first suspected. He followed Dugall and Nebtov back to their chantry and later assaulted the chantry in an attempt to steal the Talisman. The consequences have been dire. In the ensuing battle, the chantry's security was so severely breached that the cabal has had to move. One of the cabal members was badly injured during the battle, and Devon's contact succeeded in stealing the Talisman. Dugall stated that he and his cabal have every intention of finding the thief and retrieving the treasured item.

Krishnam and Quint stand together on the last few steps of the staircase, near the front foyer of the house.

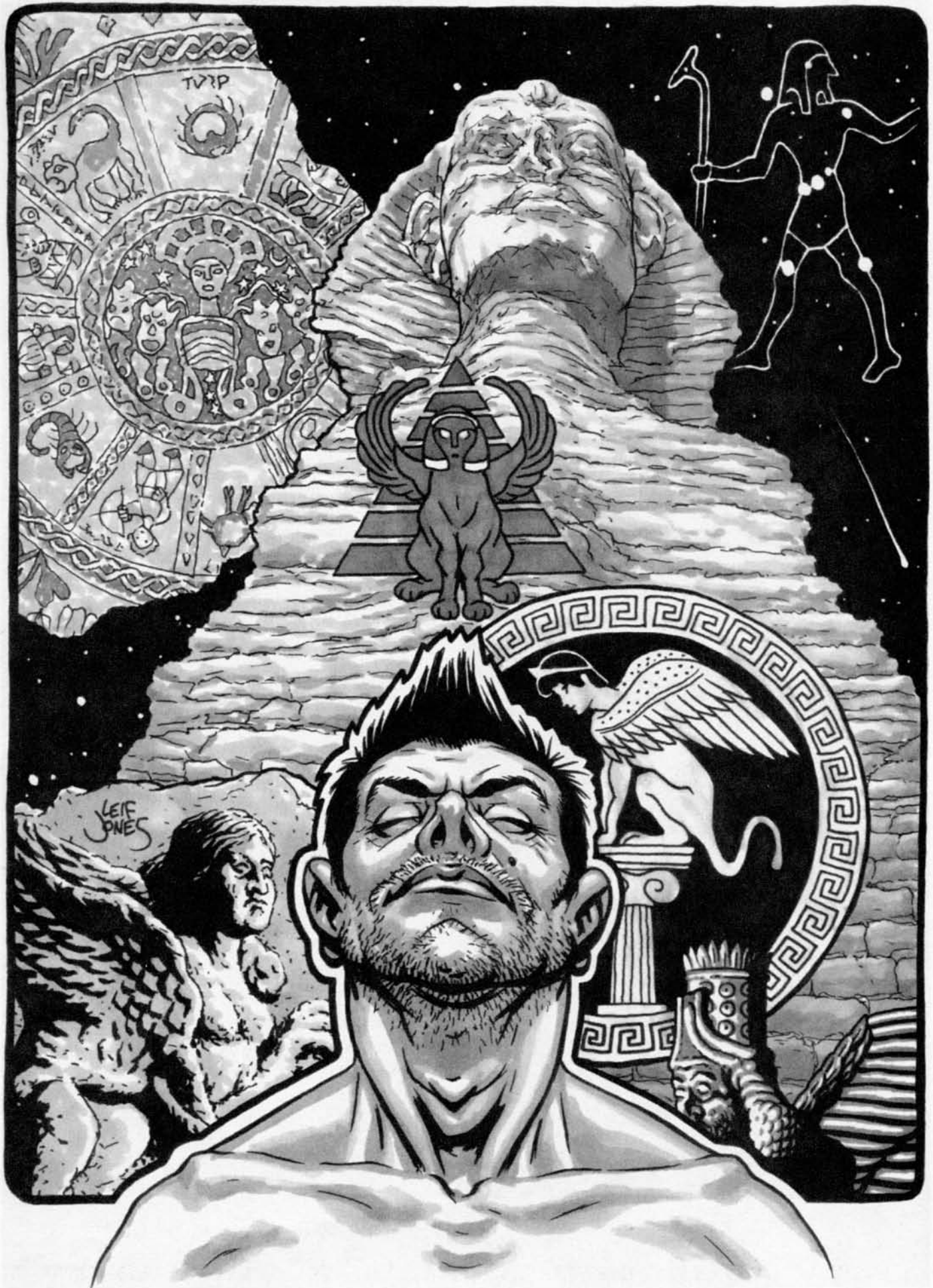
D.N.: (from upstairs) No! Paddy! Oh my god, Paddy! My baby. Oh god, my baby! No!

P.K.: He's dead.

Quint drops his gaze from the top of the stairs to Krishnam.

An explosion destroys the front door. Quint raises his gun to the back of Krishnam's head and pulls the trigger. The bullet blows through Krishnam's brain and exits out his face.

B.Q.: Just doing what I was told, man. No hard feelings.



CHAPTER TWO: THE SPHINX'S RIDDLE

And there followed a great dispute about who was more ambitious, one who wished to maintain or one who wished to acquire; for one or the other passion can easily be the cause of very great disturbances.

—Machiavelli, *The Discourses*



NEWCASTLE REPORT ON ROGUE COUNCIL ACTIVITIES AND IMPACT (CONTINUED)

Dire events, such as the Avatar Storm, have really shaken things up. The Tellurian just got a hell of a lot more dangerous and ambiguous. It has become harder to know whom to trust. The political environment has become shaky. Some of the Awakened have lost their faith in Ascension. Some have begun to believe that the Technocracy has won, and we all know how powerful *belief* is in forming the current reality. It's like a disease spreading among the Awakened, a virus that derails hope and weakens the troops. It's an illness that corrupts as it is transmitted from one mage to the next, growing stron-

ger and stronger as it approaches epidemic proportions. Belief feeds on itself.

In these pages, you'll read about the metamorphosis the Traditions are facing in the wake of catastrophe and how "the Sphinx" is influencing so much of what's happening.

Consider, just for a moment, the implications and repercussions inherent in the changing attitudes of our Traditions. With defeat comes pessimism, fatalism, isolationism and many other -isms that risk dragging the Awakened even deeper into darkness.

We're asking the question, "What would happen if we and our allies took a devastating blow in the quest for Ascension, and someone wiped out our spiritual leaders?" The Sphinx is just one part of the answer to that question, but it's a very important part of it, perhaps even the *most* important part.

THE SPHINX



I'm calling this entity "the Rogue Council" or "the Sphinx" for obvious reasons. As far as I can tell, it was shortly after the Avatar Storm swallowed Horizon that the Rogue Council began sending messages to mages around the globe. These transmissions have all had very specific instructions and details in them. They have served a purpose. The purpose, at least for now, seems to be to encourage Tradition mages. The missives deliver information that gives the mages the upper hand in their local battles against their various enemies. They warn of trouble and offer direction for where to and how to attack. The messages seem to be not only benign, but helpful.

NO ONE KNOWS

No one knows who or what they are, it is, she is, he is..., whatever. The Sphinx, or Rogue Council, has obviously made a conscious decision to remain anonymous. The most disturbing aspect of this is that they have the power to make it so. No one has managed to track any of their messages back to their source, nor has anyone managed to figure out how the Rogue Council knows so much.

Like the sphinx of Egypt, the Rogue Council's very existence remains a mystery. The entity represents a puzzle to be solved, a nearly impossible puzzle. Will the answer to this riddle, like the answer to the Greek sphinx's riddle, be man itself? It's an interesting thought, but currently only the Sphinx knows the answer to its own riddle.

THE SYMBOLISM BEHIND THE SPHINX

In Greek mythology, the sphinx has the head of a woman, the body of a lion and the wings of a giant eagle. The word "sphinx" comes from the Greek *sphingo*, which means to strangle, or *sphingein*, to bind tight. The sphinx of the Greeks strangled those who couldn't answer its riddle, those who weren't smart enough, wise enough or enlightened enough to solve its mystery. This symbolism has not escaped some mages. Despite the good deeds done by the Sphinx, many mages have serious concerns about the entity's long-term goals.

The most common version of the Greek myth of the sphinx puts the creature in Thebes at the end of its life where it reportedly devoured the townspeople until someone could answer its riddle. The riddle has been translated many ways over the years, but the most commonly accepted translation is, "What creature has

ENIGMAS

Metropolis sat at his desk, remote in one hand, coffee mug in the other. For the twelfth time that morning, he hit the rewind button, counted to three, and then hit PLAY. He set the remote down on the desktop and tugged at the collar of his shirt. He unbuttoned the top button and made a conscious effort to relax his shoulders.

On the TV screen, Brandon Quint and Padmanabhan Krishnam came down the stairs in the Newcastle household.

Metropolis knew every detail.

Quint came down first, then Krishnam. They stopped at the bottom of the stairs. Krishnam pointed to indicate that Quint should take a position on the bottom step where a corner offered him cover should anyone assault the front of the house. Krishnam stayed just behind Quint, one step up, inside the stairwell.

Newcastle's voice came from upstairs, drawing both men's attention that way. "Paddy!" Newcastle shouted. "Oh my god, Paddy! My baby. Oh god, my baby! No!" Both men turned completely to look back up the stairs.

The microphones barely picked up Krishnam's comment, "He's dead."

Metropolis leaned forward, watching closely.

Quint looked at Krishnam.

Metropolis ran a fingertip over the on-screen image of Quint. He murmured to himself, "Shoulders release. Cheeks relax downward. Eyelids lower. Eyes harden. Body language implies... sudden understanding of something he doesn't like."

Quint drew a pistol from the back of his pants. Without a moment's hesitation, he put it to the back of Krishnam's head and pulled the trigger.

Metropolis watched again as Krishnam's face sprayed across the wall and the stairs. "What did you figure out, boy?" he asked the unresponsive TV screen. "Whose side are you on?" Metropolis turned sideways and let the video recording play out in the background. He opened a folder labeled, "Newcastle, Darlana." A number of photos lay just inside the folder, but on the very top of all the paperwork, Metropolis had placed a scrap of notepaper. He picked it up and studied the symbol of the sphinx. The icon was already beginning to fade.

one voice, but moves on four limbs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening?"

Oedipus solved this riddle. The sphinx spared him and threw itself over the cliff-edge to its death. Oedipus saved Thebes, but his story did not end happily. To reward Oedipus for saving them, the people of Thebes made Oedipus their king and gave him their queen, Jocasta, in marriage. Tragically, Oedipus discovered that Jocasta was his own mother. Horrified by his participation in incest, Oedipus poked out his own eyes and spent the rest of his life unable to care for himself. The queen lost her husband, Oedipus lost his throne and his sight, Thebes lost its leadership, and the sphinx lost its life. No one wins in this tragedy.

The answer to the riddle, of course, is a human being. We crawl on all fours as babies, walk upright on two feet as adults and require help to stand upright in our old age. Some mages find the symbolism of this, relative to the Rogue Council, worthy of long discussion. Is the Rogue Council implying something about its relationship to humankind, Asleep and Awakened alike? Is it attempting to be our crutch in our final days? Or perhaps the Rogue Council believes in the proper cycle of life and death, creation and destruction, as expressed in the riddle. Perhaps, like the Euthanatos, it thinks its duty is to ensure that the cycle remains intact. Or maybe it believes it can control the cycle, as the Greek sphinx tried to do, by holding the power of knowledge over the heads of its victims. *Ha ha. I know something you don't. I know the answer to the riddle.*

EGYPTIAN CONNECTION

And then, there's the Egyptian sphinx. No one says the sphinx icon used by the Rogue Council refers to the Greek creature. In Egypt, the sphinx held enormous significance. It has the head of a king or pharaoh, and the body of a lion. At Giza, in Egypt, near the pyramids, there stands a giant statue of a sphinx. It measures 241 feet (73.5 meters) in length and 65 feet (20 meters) in height at its highest point. Its builders carved it from living rock, unlike the pyramids, creating its form directly from the bedrock surrounding Giza.

Khafre Theory of the Egyptian Sphinx: We have only theories as to when the Egyptian sphinx was built and why. Most scholars seem to feel that it was commissioned by King Khafre in the 4th Dynasty (2558-2532 B.C.E.). It marks the end of the causeway leading to the Pyramid of Khafre. Others believe that Khafre usurped the throne from Pharaoh Djedefre, his older brother, and then took over Djedefre's pyramid and sphinx. The face of the sphinx strongly resembles Djedefre, a factor that supports the theory that Khafre took over the throne and the construction of the site in the midst of

his brother's reign. Djedefre later built another pyramid in another location, of inferior quality.

Between the paws of the sphinx at Giza there stands a stela, a stone slab carved with Egyptian pictographs. Commonly called the "Dream Stela," this slab tells the story of 18th Dynasty (1400 B.C.E.) Egyptian Thutmosis IV, who came to the sphinx at a time when it was buried up to its neck in sand, a thousand years after Khafre's rule. Thutmosis IV fell asleep beneath its head and dreamt that the sphinx spoke to him. The sphinx told him that if he dug the sphinx free of its sand prison, he would become the King of Egypt. Numerous times over the course of its history, the sphinx has become buried in the sand and subsequently dug out. Thutmosis IV probably did have the sphinx dug out, and did become Pharaoh, however many believe that the story was nothing more than political propaganda designed to support the legitimacy of Thutmosis' claim to the throne — a lie, basically. This lie still sits between the front paws of the sphinx at Giza, being retold time and again for any who will listen.

Orion Theory of the Egyptian Sphinx: Other scholars believe the sphinx was built much earlier than Khafre's reign. Recent evidence that the sphinx has suffered erosion from rainfall supports this theory. Water erosion, such as that which is in evidence upon the sphinx, could only have come about as a result of the rains that happened in northern Africa between the last Ice Age and the present interglacial epoch (between 10,000 and 5,000 B.C.E.). The signs of water erosion strongly suggest that the sphinx is much older than the pyramids.

Scholars also point to the fact that there is no mention of Khafre's construction of the sphinx, only of his association with the pyramid that stands just to the left of and behind the sphinx. Furthermore, the position of the pyramids themselves suggests that they were built as indicators of sorts that point back to an earlier time, a time with a compelling reason for someone to have built the sphinx.

One scholar claims the pyramids are positioned to match the pattern of the three stars that make up the belt in the constellation Orion. Constellations, as time passes, move in the sky. They do not always pass at the same altitude but very gradually migrate with each passing year. The Egyptians understood this. According to this theory, they built the pyramids as a code to refer to an epoch they called, "the First Time of Osiris." Osiris, a god of the ancient Egyptians, lived in Orion. The First Time of Osiris occurred long before the construction of the pyramids and was considered a mystical, magical time when Osiris regularly walked the Earth. With a few simple calculations and some knowledge of astronomy, we can determine that this time occurred around 10,500

B.C.E, approximately 7,500 years prior to the construction of the Khafre pyramid at Giza.

The Egyptian sphinx faces directly East, into the rising sun. Scholars have also noted that the First Time (10,500 B.C.E.) coincided with the beginning of the Age of Leo, a time when the rising sun on the vernal equinox passed across the "lion" constellation from Earth's point of view.

Both the pyramids and the sphinx point back, through these astronomical evaluations, to 10,500 B.C.E. What does this mean? Some scholars have suggested that, for some reason, a group of astronomers built the sphinx to look up into the sky at its own image, its own constellation at exactly the moment when the world entered the Age of Leo, then also built the pyramids, 7,500 years later, to conclude some grand scheme. If they existed, who was this group? What sort of goals could they have had to wait 7,500 years to place a new landmark upon the face of the Earth?

If the timer began clicking at the point when the pyramids were built, readying for another 7,500 years to pass, then we are approximately 4,500 years into the cycle. Could this be significant?

Consider this. Astronomers have predicted that the Age of Aquarius will arrive sometime during the hundred years between 2000 and 2100 A.D. This event has

particular implications to the metaphorical meaning of the sphinx because Aquarius sits directly opposite Leo on the zodiac. In 2070 A.D., Orion rises to its highest declination (-1 degree, 50 seconds), and its maximum meridian altitude (midday altitude) at 58 degrees, 11 seconds. Its opposite position occurred around 10,500 B.C.E., at the beginning of the Age of Leo, when Zeta Orionis had its lowest declination of -48 degrees, 53 seconds, and a meridian altitude of 11 degrees, 8 seconds.

Certain scholars have suggested that there is a code integral to the zodiac, a time-encapsulated message, that details the global catastrophe legendary in so many cultures around the world, including the Great Flood, that occurred at the end of the last Ice Age and that wiped out so much of civilization around the globe. Some cultures speak of this horrible event as the darkening of luminaries or the burning of the Earth. Can it be coincidence that so many cultures have a common catastrophe myth? Can it be further coincidence that all these seem to have occurred shortly after the last Ice Age, around 10,500 B.C.E, when it is theorized that the sphinx was built to reflect the rise of the Age of Leo?

Awakened Theory of the Egyptian Sphinx: Recent evidence found in Egyptian texts supports the idea that ancient mages used the sphinx at Giza for a sacred purpose. These texts suggest that a collection of mages who "wor-



shipped Osiris" would send new initiates into an underground labyrinth accessed through the breast of the sphinx itself. It only makes sense that these mages, whoever they were, followed in the footsteps of the sphinx's original builders. It's not hard to imagine a line of Awakened initiated into a special organization, a secret society with knowledge that only their fellow members shared.

Modern humankind, we Awakened included, like to think that we have discovered all the secrets of this world. We find it hard to imagine that we may pass over ancient mysteries every day on our way to work, or look at them in magazines without even realizing what we're seeing. We discount the idea that anyone could keep secrets from us, *Us*, the enlightened of the Tellurian. And yet, it happens. Often. Like now, for example. The Rogue Council, the Sphinx, has managed, so far, to keep a huge secret from us, namely its own identity. It doesn't seem so far-fetched that they could have been keeping things from us all along, hiding right under our very noses. Is it possible that they're really that ancient? Some say they're a group of smart-assed punks who've recently Awakened and decided to play the mother of all pranks. Some say they have to have been around almost longer than time itself. Who's right? Who's wrong?

GALILEE CONNECTION

The date, 10,500 B.C.E., also has significance to the Beth-Alpha Synagogue mosaic. Scholars have discovered encoded time indicators in the mosaic that point to 10,500 B.C.E. This mosaic, located in Galilee, at the base of Mount Gilboa in the valley of Jezreel, in an ancient temple from the 5th century A.D., has the zodiac as its central image. At the center of the zodiac, there is a man in a chariot drawn by four horses. Two other animals figure prominently in the mosaic: a roaring lion and a Brahma bull. Remark that, in Greek mythology, the sphinx's body is that of a lion and the minotaur's head is that of a bull. The minotaur, of course, has links to the labyrinth, symbolic of riddles and puzzles. In the corners surrounding the zodiac of the mosaic, four "angels," oddly reminiscent of sphinxes, mark the seasons. The symbolism is overwhelming. What does it all mean?

GREEK CONNECTION

Is it a coincidence that 10,500 B.C.E. has also been linked to the Greek myth about Astraea? Also known as "the star-maiden," Astraea was the daughter of Zeus and Themis. She served, like her mother, as a goddess of justice and judgment. During the Golden Age, as the Greeks called it, the gods walked the Earth among mortals. At that time, it's said that Astraea lived on Earth. The myth of Astraea says that humans fell deeper

and deeper into wickedness, giving themselves over to evil, until finally all the gods abandoned the world and went to live in the skies. Astraea and her sister Pudicitia (Modesty) were the last to leave. They left perverse humankind to become the constellation Virgo. It's worth noting that the Great Flood and other such catastrophes reportedly occurred as a direct act of justice for humankind's evil and wickedness.

Astraea, by the way, is also the name of a small planetary body in orbit around Earth's sun. It resides in the space between Mars and Jupiter. At the end of 2001, Astraea nears Aquarius. Two years later, it approaches Leo. It takes a little more than four years for Astraea to make its way around the zodiac.

KX76 CONNECTION

In 2001, mortal scientists discovered a new planet in the Earth's solar system. This planet, called 2001 KX76, is biding its time near Neptune. Both Neptune and KX76 are currently passing through the zodiac sign of Aquarius. Could this be another coincidence? Where did it come from? Why has it not been recorded before, either in mortal or mage reports? Why has it been hidden from us? And what significance does it carry now that the mortal eye has turned toward it? Reality is awareness.

This newly discovered planetary body has a diameter of approximately 1270 kilometers. Scientists have determined that it has a distinctly reddish coloration. What does all this mean? Perhaps nothing. Perhaps everything. The coincidences are startling, however.

TYING IT ALL TOGETHER

Throughout history, we see lions and bulls in the mythological records of so many civilizations. In the *Celtic Book of Kells*, we find images of these animals figured prominently. Lions? In ancient Britain? So many coincidences, so many oddities. Why? Isn't it about time we began to ask the question?

Mages will. Now. They will begin to look deeper into the various mythologies of the world, on every continent and in every age, looking for the key that will tie all these clues together. The hints come to us in many different languages, in many different art forms.

The question becomes, why have we lost this ancient knowledge, this wisdom that our ancestors seem to have tried to pass down to us? While mages are out exploring the Tellurian and fighting the encroachment of static technology, could they have overlooked something even bigger? Something even more important and far more powerful ever than the Technocracy may be lurking out there, sending missives that point the Awakened back to a distant past.

The planets themselves seem to turn on the axis of this enigma. The whole of the Tellurian becomes a message board with a warning inherent in the transitioning celestial bodies. The Umbra carries diversity, differing viewpoints. It's crumbling. Reality, it seems, is being reduced like a good broth, to its simplest, most concentrated mass.

When threatened, the hedgehog makes itself as small as possible. It rolls into a ball and pulls in all its appendages. It relies on its course hair to discourage its predators.

DEALING WITH PLAYER FRUSTRATION

The mystery surrounding the Sphinx may frustrate your players if you're not careful. They cannot discover the true identity of the Rogue Council yet, but they may not know this and may want to try. You can keep their frustration to a minimum by giving them other goals to accomplish. Don't make uncovering the identity of the Rogue Council your game's sole objective.

The Sphinx and its messages are a tool for you to use to add mystery and spookiness to your game. It's only a tool, not the focus of the story. The focus of the story is the contents of the message, not the sender.

THE SYTTIBOLISTI BEHIND THE ENIGMA

Enigma takes you where dogma cannot. We do not create the path to Ascension; we explore it.

What does this mean, this phrase quoted on so many of the Rogue Council's missives? It has escaped no one's attention that the theme of riddles, labyrinths and mysteries runs like a silver thread through every aspect of this entity.

In pieces, it is a patchwork of puzzles. In its entirety, it is a larger puzzle.

And yet, clues have arisen. They're found in the transmissions that come from the Sphinx to the Awakened. The smart mage looks at the details, at the small pieces, but also looks at the entirety, at the larger implications of the message. As the number of missives pile up, it becomes more and more clear that the Rogue Council has a particular philosophy and goals that support it. This philosophy has two obvious components.

CROSS-TRADITION

All roads lead to Rome, or so they say. In the case of the Rogue Council, this phrase seems to mean that all philosophies lead to one truth. The Rogue Council

doesn't appear to harbor any prejudice against or for a particular Tradition. Mages from each Tradition represented on the Council have received missives from them, as have some of the non-Council Traditions such as the Hollow Ones. This would seem to imply that the Rogue Council doesn't play favorites.

Not only do they not play favorites, but they don't embrace any particular view of how to get to Ascension, except to say that there is no single known way. By simply evaluating their choice of words, one can tell that they use a much more general terminology for the words specific to magic. They do not, for example, speak to Choristers about songs or notes or anything related to music. Their short pep-talks and warnings, when they occur, maintain a neutrality of philosophy while still keeping within the bounds of magical knowledge. For example, the following excerpt from one of the missives sent to an Akashic Brother, makes no mention of The Way or of anything related to the Tradition's philosophies:

At the Chinese Laundry, do not speak to the man with the gold tooth. Do not acknowledge his presence. He does not see and will know you only if you make a sound. Pass through to the alley. Here, you will be tempted to stop, to alter your course. Under no circumstances should you divert from your mission. Those who die are not your concern. You have a specific goal, a destiny that awaits you behind the third door on the right, the blue door. Once you're inside, magic alone will protect you. Once you're inside, you step beyond the realm of reason completely. Let your mind be free. Enigma takes you where dogma cannot. We do not create the path to Ascension; we explore it.

ANTI-DOGMA

In some ways, the RC seems to be saying that everyone is wrong, that all the previously followed paths to Ascension won't work. Many mages find this idea offensive. They've spent their entire lives telling others that they should live their lives a certain way, use their magic a certain way, and believe a certain way. Of course, most of these conservative Traditionalists don't believe that what they preach is dogma. No, it's not dogma, it's the truth. Everyone else teaches dogma. But, who's right? Everybody thinks their own Tradition is right, of course.

And then, along comes the Sphinx, the Rogue Council, and suggests that perhaps everyone is wrong. Could it be that mages have allowed their egos to become too closely entwined with their philosophies that they've ceased to scrutinize them? It's not such a far-fetched idea. So many organizations and institutions suffer a slow, painful death because they have come to believe their own lies. They have taken their theories,

dipped them in gold and then bowed down to worship the constructs they made. They sanctify the theories themselves, like worshipping the idol rather than the god it represents. In many ways, they're worshipping themselves. They, after all, made the pretty theories. Because the theories are special, so must be the theoretician. But, there are problems with this.

One: As a whole, they are no closer to Ascension, no more special, than anyone else. Two: They become blinded by their own glorified theories and cease to look for more and different viewpoints. Three: The gold wears off. Four: The idol's insides gradually begin to decay and the whole thing collapses inward.

The Sphinx missives consistently remind the recipients to open their minds, relax their preconceptions and release their dogma. They definitely seem to imply that there is one popular truth, but that truth isn't nearly as describable as many Traditions would like. *How flexible can you be? the missives ask. Are you too anal? Are you too vested in your Tradition's dogma?*

For what it's worth, the word "dogma" comes from the same ancient root, *dokein* (meaning to seem good, to think), as the words "paradox" and "orthodox."

UNIFICATION

Have we lost our way? Have we become too political or too divided? Do we spend too much time worried about what our neighbors are doing rather than paying attention to the storm cloud moving in over the whole neighborhood? Perhaps.

The Sphinx does seem to direct all Traditions to work together, whether they want to or not, whether they are aware of the cooperative effort or not. Often, members of different Traditions find that they are important cogs in a much grander plot that includes others who have also received transmissions and who are acting on their own unique directives. Some mages will, undoubtedly, compare themselves to chess pieces on a board. They will resent that the Rogue Council appears to be using them. Who can blame them?

But the mage who releases her ego and looks at what the Sphinx is doing without letting fear and defensive habits get in the way may find an interesting perspective on the entity. She may ask herself whether the Traditions have strayed from the path to Ascension because of modern laziness, everyday fatigue, generations of ignorance stacked upon generations of ignorance, post-modern angst or any other of the many causes cited for the growing apathy among the Awakened.

If she looks deeper, she may ask herself, "What if?" What if? What if this apathy isn't natural. What if it's a

disease rather than a character flaw? What if the Awakened have been exposed to something they can fight, if they can find the antidote? What if the Rogue Council knows that the path to health no longer follows the same route it once did? What if our enemies have placed too many roadblocks in the middle of the Tradition's various paths? What if the Awakened need to find a new path, one that will require all their talents, all their differing viewpoints and all their diversities to clear it of undergrowth and hazards? What if?

Of course, no one knows the answers to these questions. Maybe even the Sphinx doesn't know the answer to her own riddle. Maybe she won't know it until it's spoken, and then she'll recognize it and will find it so disarming that she'll throw herself into the Abyss. No one knows.

TEN-SIDED COIN

Metropolis ran his finger lightly over the fading symbol. He could barely detect a difference in texture between the paper and the paper with the marking. It was ink. They'd assured him of that down in the labs. Apparently, it was fading ink, for Metropolis could almost see the image gradually becoming less visible. Almost. He certainly did notice it when he set the message aside for a little while, then looked at it again.

Surprising to him, the lettering wasn't fading along with the symbol. For the hundredth time, Metropolis read the message. It said, "The truth will blow your mind when you find it. Keep searching. You're not there yet. Enigma takes you where dogma cannot. We do not create the path to Ascension; we explore it."

Metropolis gritted his teeth. The note pissed him off. He had convinced himself that he had found the truth. He had settled into his comfort zone. This note had poked deep into his subconscious and stirred up all the monsters he'd locked in the lowest level of his inner basement. He really would have been much happier if the questions, the monsters, had been left to sleep. Once they were awake, however, there was no going back. All it had taken was one short note that caused him to ask himself the question, "What truth have I missed?" Somehow, he sensed that his question had much broader implications that just figuring out why Quint shot Krishnam.

SPECULATION



So many theories, so little time. The Awakened are creative beings. They will undoubtedly come up with hundreds of explanations for the entity that's sending messages. This is, by no means a comprehensive list. I've sorted through the most plausible. I list and explain them below.

COUNCIL OF NINE

One theory suggests that the messages are actually coming from the Council of Nine. According to this, the Council has discovered a way to reach out to us from beyond the Avatar Storm. Whether by choice or by force, they cannot physically cross the barrier to rejoin us, but they have managed to make contact. Thoughts vary as to whether they are sending the messages directly or using agents to deliver them on this side of the Storm. If they're using agents, they have not revealed themselves.

Support

— We know of few mages, apart from our elders, who know what the messengers know and who can affect coincidental magic the way this entity can.

Argument

— Why would the Council of Nine hide their identity from us? Why would they turn it all into a mystery? Why have they not directly contacted their own Tradition members?

Variants

— The Council of Nine chose to disappear in order to foster an atmosphere of evolution in the stagnant political body of the Traditions, and yet, they cannot totally abandon us in these challenging times.

— The Council is testing the rest of us, for some reason. They have set this whole thing up just to see who is really serious about Ascension and who isn't, who is loyal and who isn't.

— The Council has chosen anonymity to protect themselves from some threat as yet unknown to the rest of us. This could be why the other Masters have not assumed leadership.

— Only some of the original Council members remain alive. This theory further breaks down into accusations of betrayal and assassination. Those who subscribe to this theory believe that the surviving elders have chosen to remain anonymous so that no one will suspect their treachery until they have managed to establish a new power base.

— Something has consumed the Council of Nine, including their knowledge of magic and of the modern

world. This entity uses the sphere of Mind to learn more from the mages it contacts. The question then arises as to the entity's moral fiber. Does it wish to do good, or is it merely acting based on the mental structure of the elders it has absorbed? Will this change if it continues to grow through incorporating the thoughts, memories and feelings of other creatures it encounters?

ROGUE COUNCIL

Some mages may theorize that this entity wishes to use the tragic loss of Horizon and the Council of Nine to advance its own political agenda. Perhaps this entity is making a calculated play for power over the Traditions.

Support

— Many mages have taken the missives seriously and have followed the directions sent without question.

— Because the transmissions have proven consistently intelligent, it's not inconceivable that the sender (or senders) is extremely clever. Thus, it's not hard to imagine that the sender is capable of very subtle political maneuverings and long-term planning.

— Beginning in anonymity allows the entity to develop a reputation without having to deal with prejudice based on Tradition, age, looks, history or magical power level.

Argument

— Given the amount of knowledge and magical control this entity has shown, it makes no sense that it would need to hide behind a cloak of anonymity.

— Why so much anonymity? If the entity has the ability to remain completely anonymous, why not develop an identity for itself? Why not create an image and market itself?

Variants

(You will perhaps hear different combinations of all the following variations.)

— The entity is one mage.

— The entity is a group of mages.

— The Rogue Council wants only political power.

— The Rogue Council truly has the best interests of Sleepers and Awakened at heart.

— The Rogue Council isn't actually made up of Awakened, but is comprised of some other type of "initiated" being or beings.

UNIVERSAL UNCONSCIOUS

It has been suggested that maybe the missives don't actually come from a specific group of living, breathing beings. Rather, the transmissions rise from the Tellurian



über-consciousness. The Sphere of Mind lies at the core of all. It has power over all the other Spheres. Cripple Mind and you cripple the entire being. Strengthen Mind and you increase the being's ability to manipulate all other Spheres. The Avatar Storm has not only affected the Umbra, but it has also had an influence upon each individual's inner realm. It has touched places few can see, inside each person, and inside the mind of the universe. This theory suggests that these transmissions are phenomena never really seen before. They are messages from people's inner selves, from their higher consciousnesses, their super-Avatars. These messages guide and direct the Awakened, by bringing to light information they already have stored inside. These messages connect the Awakened with others through the pathways in the Pattern of the Universal Unconscious. Furthermore, they manifest in a manner consistent with the Awakened's own expectations and within the rules of their current reality. The messages "instinctually" avoid Paradox.

Support

— The source of these transmissions seems to have a body of knowledge that no living being could reasonably have. It doesn't just know secrets about one particular group, but seems to have its proverbial finger on every pulse.

Argument

— If it is our own minds manifesting a sort of tap into the subconscious, then why aren't we aware of it? Why is there no physical evidence of anyone actually writing the notes or dialing a number into the phone or recording a tape? Are our subconscious minds so clever that we cover our tracks as well?

— If the transmissions are nothing more than hallucinations caused by our own minds, then why can others see and hear them as well?

Variants

— It's not a Universal Consciousness, but our Avatars that are stepping up and becoming more active. They are making themselves felt in more physical, offensive ways.

— A form of Quiet has begun to spread among the Awakened. This imbalance, combined with their stress and worries, causes those affected to black out and tap into a deeper source of knowledge and guidance.

INFESTATION

Some mages may suggest that the Avatar Storm shook up the Umbra enough that a new, previously unknown creature has begun to emerge.

Support

— The missives always have a spookiness to them that would imply they're not regular to Earth.

— If the creatures have long existed outside the local Pattern, or hidden deep within it where we have not been able to detect them up until now, then it would follow that they can continue to remain hidden from us. This would explain our inability to track the sender of the missives.

Argument

— An entity new to our world would not, theoretically, know enough about our technology to use it to cover their magic with coincidental effects. They wouldn't, one presumes, know what a telephone was, or a CD burner, for example.

— Are there really creatures so close that the Avatar Storm could shake them out into the open, and yet so far that no Umbral traveler has ever encountered them?

Variants

— The Avatar Storm set something free that was locked away for a reason. It's here now, for better or for worse. The question remains as to whose side it's on.

— The Avatar Storm woke something up that had been in a long sleep. It's awake now and wanting to play.

— The advent of the Avatar Storm scared an old, old soul out of hiding. An ancient mage has suddenly looked around and discovered what a mess we've made of things. For whatever reason, this immortal elder has decided that it's time to take matters into his or her own hands.

— The Avatar Storm has drawn the attention of beings far older and more powerful than the Awakened. These beings seek to set the world back on the path to Ascension. The transmissions carry the code to unlock their identity. In particular, a Celestial Chorister suggested to me that the missives gave clues to the one tone that, when sung in chorus, would harmonize everything in existence.

TRAP

The "trap theories" will undoubtedly abound. Many mages may believe that someone is setting the Awakened up for a fall. The missives encourage the Awakened to trust the sender. The actions these missives encourage could be part of a larger pattern we cannot yet see that may form a trap from which we cannot escape, or may set off a course of events that cannot be altered, as a toppling line of dominoes. Mages may speak scornfully of the trusting nature of their fellow Awakened. These mages may claim that the Awakened cannot function without strong leaders and, therefore, they have be-

come like needy, frightened children who have lost their parents. They say that these frightened children get in the car with any smiling adult who happens to come along and epitomizes security to them.

Support

— No one has come up with a good reason for the sender's anonymity. Everyone agrees, however, that the sender must surely have something to hide.

— Many mages have leapt to the support of this new leadership, and even risk their lives to fulfill the instructions given to them in the transmissions.

— Why doesn't the sender get involved itself? Why must it use others as its pawns?

Argument

— What purpose could such a trap have? Humiliation doesn't seem like a good enough reason to go to such extremes.

— Why would an entity that knows as much as this one go to this length to lay a trap? It seems inelegant and needlessly complex compared to what the entity has the potential to accomplish.

Variants

— A group of young mages have decided to take advantage of the current lack of leadership among the Traditions.

— A group of non-Tradition mages have decided to make the Tradition mages look like fools.

— The final trap requires the aid of many mages because the entity setting the trap does not really have the power to make it work. Thus, the entity is patiently gathering followers that it will then trick into doing its bidding.

— The trap will result in the deaths of many mages who allow themselves to be led into no-win situations.

There's posterity, and that's a good enough reason to document the changes that have occurred since the Great Storm cut us off from Horizon. Nothing will ever be the same. Even if we manage to stabilize the Umbral realms, nothing can remove the memory of our own vulnerability from our hearts. We stand at the summit of the tallest mountain we can imagine, and rather than feeling like we rule the world, we've discovered just how small and insignificant we really are. How can that not change us as profoundly in our inner sanctums as it has in our outer sanctums?

— from the "Hendley Report on the State of Post-Storm Politics Among the Traditions"

FOLLOWERS OF THE SPHINX



Some mages have favorably received the Sphinx, to varying degrees. In every population, you find those who are so eager for something new, something better, something that gives them hope, they leap at the first big-talker to come along. Others like what they see, but advance more cautiously. Still others have rejected the Sphinx completely and

view it as a threat to everything they believe. And then there are those who go to extremes in one direction or the other. Not every mage has all her marbles. It's sad, but true. The ability to wield Quintessence does not automatically make you wise, sane or intelligent. Needless to say, there's been a broad spectrum of response to the Rogue Council.

CONSERVATIVE SUPPORTERS

Most of the Awakened seem to fall into this category. When they get a missive, they act on it and follow its directions. They do so carefully, however. They check things out first. They may speak with their elders to get advice.

Many of those who fall into this category are doing nothing more than biding their time, waiting to see which way the pendulum will swing. No one knows what will happen if the recipient doesn't do what the Sphinx says, whether the person will be punished or not. That kind of data simply isn't available yet. There have been those who have ignored the missives. Lives have been lost as a result, but there has been no punishment to those who ignored them. There have been those who have ignored the missives. While they suffered no punishment, other lives were lost. Perhaps it's all semantics, but these conservative supporters still harbor some doubt, thinking that the Rogue Council might pull the rug out from under them. And yet, they have no good reason not to support and praise the entity.

ENTHUSIASTIC SUPPORTERS

More optimistic than the conservative supporters, the enthusiasts have embraced the arrival of the Rogue Council. They feel the atmosphere of change and choose to believe that the Rogue Council has come to lead them through to Ascension. They look around at their Traditions' current status and at their pasts, and they find it all lacking. Enthusiastic supporters of the Sphinx cheer it on, from the sidelines, as one would cheer on the

winning team — or perhaps the underdog. The key here, however, is that they do so from the sidelines.

Enthusiastic supporters believe that the Rogue Council will make everything right, but they don't do anything above or beyond the call of duty. If they get a missive, they follow directions well and with verve. But, the rest of the time, they're just waiting for more directions. Like little children looking up to Coach and waiting for him to tell them what to do next.

FANATICAL SUPPORTERS

Fanatics have taken the ball and run with it. For whatever reason, they have come to the conclusion that the Rogue Council is the new god. Many who have had their lives saved, or who were pulled from very unpleasant circumstances by the Sphinx's missives, find it offensive to fault the Rogue Council in any way. Some proclaim that anyone who is the enemy of the Sphinx is also their enemy, including fellow members of their own Tradition.

Some fanatics dedicate themselves to finding out who has received a transmission from the Sphinx, just so they can serve as back-up if there's to be a mission. They contact the recipient and offer firepower, magic power, information gathering, whatever is needed. They're rather pushy, however, and have begun to build a manual of sorts on how the Rogue Council wants them to approach missions. They take the instructions given in the transmissions, document them, compare them, and come out with "rules" for behavior in various situations. If the Sphinx told a recipient to watch for three days before entering the warehouse, then some fanatics take this to mean they should watch every warehouse for three days before entering it. It's radical, yes, but that's why they're called fanatics.

One group of fanatics has begun calling themselves "The Emissaries." While they have not exactly divorced themselves from their own Traditions, they threaten to do so while banding together in the service of the Sphinx. They actively recruit new members, singing the praises of the Rogue Council to anyone who will listen. Whenever they hear news of a transmission, they immediately rush to it and attempt to take over, as if they will earn brownie points if they put themselves in the place of the recipient and accept the danger. Emissaries believe that they have a special purpose, a destiny. They believe the Rogue Council has chosen them to spread the word to all Awakened.

UNDERSTANDING

The phone rang. Metropolis had just hit PLAY on the remote. He watched Quint and Krishnam come down the stairs, one hand on the receiver, the other holding the remote. He pressed the appropriate button to mute the sound on the television. On the third ring, he answered the phone, "Metropolis."

"Mr. Metropolis, this is Dr. Hawthorne."

"Yes, doctor," Metropolis replied, one eye on the television. Both men had just turned to look up the stairs. Metropolis could imagine the sound of Darlana Newcastle's apparent grief as she cried out. The scene struck Metropolis as odd, with the volume turned down. Odd. Off. Yet, perfect.

"Sir, I was wondering if I could speak with you regarding your surveillance of Darlana Newcastle. I have a few questions that may help us unravel where they went."

"You have a few questions?" Metropolis murmured, focus slowly shifting more and more to the television. He watched Krishnam's lips move. Perfect. *It's perfect*, he thought. *Encapsulated truth*.

"About Mrs. Newcastle, yes. I'd like to meet with you this afternoon. 1 p.m. I'll come by your office, if you have no objection."

Metropolis found himself wishing he knew what Darlana Newcastle had found. He wished he had the recordings from the upstairs rooms. He could imagine her holding the dead body of her son. He just wanted to figure it all out. *It's an enigma*, he thought as he watched Quint shoot Krishnam yet again. *Enigma takes you where dogma cannot. We do not create the path to Ascension; we explore it.*

"Mr. Metropolis?"

"1 p.m. That's fine, Doctor. I'll see you then." Metropolis didn't wait for a response, but lay the receiver in its cradle. *We explore it*. He rewound the tape and played it through again, this time in slow motion. And he watched each step.

And this time, the lightbulb came on. Metropolis sat up. Quint shot Krishnam. Metropolis shook his head, "I don't know what happened in that bedroom. How does Krishnam know?" Quint answers that question for him. Krishnam shouldn't know.

OPPONENTS OF THE SPHINX



...false suspicions are to be considered and prudently respected, so much the more so as they are easily aroused, for anyone who has a guilty conscience can easily be led to believe that people are talking about him.

— Machiavelli, *The Discourses*

Some mages oppose the Sphinx, to varying degrees. For whatever reason, they have decided that the Rogue Council does not have the best interests of the Awakened at heart. Perhaps they knew someone who died while on a mission suggested by the Sphinx and are now angry. Perhaps they feel guilty because they didn't follow through on information they received from the Sphinx and others died. They direct their own feeling of failure onto the Rogue Council, venomously. There are tons of reasons why someone might come to the conclusion that the Rogue Council is bad, some more logical than others.

CONSERVATIVE OPPOONENTS

They grumble. You know the type. They don't like the Rogue Council, but they don't really have a good reason for it, and in their minds, they don't need a reason. They just have a feeling. Or they're jumping on the bandwagon along with their friends. Conservative Opponents can still have their opinion changed with relative ease. They're not locked into their opposition.

Conservative opponents usually don't mind telling people how they feel. They eye the Sphinx with pessimistic skepti-

cism. If they receive a missive, they may act on it, but not without making sure their own asses are covered first. They'd get permission from their cabal leader or Tradition superior, so they can pass the buck on up the line if the whole thing goes to Hell. Even if they don't pass the buck, they pursue the information from the transmission like a wild goose chase. That's what they think it is, usually. Even when proven wrong, they still don't buy that the Rogue Council is anything more than some insignificant punks getting lucky.

ENTHUSIASTIC OPPOONENTS

These folks enjoy slamming the Rogue Council. They disdain the whole thing because they're convinced that the Sphinx is either a big scam or a trick, a trap. They don't trust the Rogue Council. They encourage extreme caution when involved with anything to do with the Sphinx. You could say these are the conspiracy theorists.

To their credit, those who fall in this category are often the most active in researching the Sphinx and trying to figure out who or what it is. They believe they will find a malevolent force behind the missives, but that leads them to work all the harder to uncover the Rogue Council's identity. For many, it's just the distraction they needed to draw them out of their apathy. The mystery has re-energized them.

FANATICAL OPPOONENTS

More than mere distrust motivates fanatical opponents of the Sphinx. These people fear the Rogue Council. They



hate the whole idea of new leaders, a new political paradigm, change.... In most cases, they just want things to stay the way they've been for centuries. *Why change it if it isn't broken?* they ask. They are offended by the idea that some anonymous entity would dare to tell them what they should do.

Fanatical opponents, of course, do not believe that the Rogue Council is actually the Council of Nine in disguise. They view the Sphinx as a usurper, an upstart. They would love nothing more than to teach the newcomer a lesson in manners and respect. They believe they are guarding their fellow mages and mortals against the interlopers. This is, perhaps, why they call themselves "The Guardians."

There are also those fanatical opponents who believe the Rogue Council screwed them over. People have died on missions initiated by the Sphinx. Missions have gone wrong. This leaves scars. When you're dealing with a shifting reality, and oftentimes, shifting sanity, the Rogue Council becomes the perfect scapegoat for blame when things go wrong. It has no face, no name, no nothing. Just like people are more likely to rudely flame another person online, where they can do so anonymously to an anonymous target, it's also easier to hate an entity that has no obvious humanity. Anger, grief and fear are strong emotions. They can produce monsters.

IN CONCLUSION



If nothing else, it can be said that the Sphinx has stirred up the pot a bit. Wherever it inserts itself, people find their lives affected. People have died. They haven't necessarily died because of the Sphinx's direct influence, but they have died. The Sphinx doesn't seem to particularly care. It has its own agenda.

In its favor, the Rogue Council does not force anyone to respond to its missives. It makes no direct threats. It does, on occasion, warn of dire consequences if the recipient doesn't follow through, but those consequences do not come from the Sphinx itself.

In my study of this entity, I've found too many ambiguities for my comfort. I cannot yet trust in its benevolence, and I recommend that the entire situation be approached with caution. The Sphinx has managed, in a very short time, to influence many Awakened individuals and even whole sectors of Awakened society. The truth is that the Rogue Council's missives rarely leave their recipients unchanged. Whatever path the recipient chooses, she feels the repercussions. I predict that the day will come soon when I too will feel the influence of the Sphinx upon my life. I only hope that I and those I love survive their *help*.



CHAPTER THREE: ROGUE FACTORS (STORYTELLING)

Then let us now proceed to describe the inferior sort of natures, being the contentious and ambitious, who answer to the Spartan polity; also the oligarchical, democratical, and tyrannical. Let us place the most just by the side of the most unjust, and when we see them we shall be able to compare the relative happiness or unhappiness of him who leads a life of pure justice or pure injustice. The enquiry will then be completed.

— Plato, *The Republic*, Book VII



It's a paradigm shift. The post-Ascension War period was supposed to be a Pyrrhic victory or a liberating defeat. It was the fall of a moral paradox complex enough to entangle mages for the rest of this waning age—certainly not a time for grand ambitions or the stir of hubris. Not a time for wars.

That's now changed, but there's little comfort for old Ascension Warriors. The "Vetvets" (as they are called in Traditionlist slang) are as divided on the issue of the Rogue Council as anyone else. Rogue Council communiqués reveal secret crimes. Many mages lose their tolerance for Technocratic hegemony when the Union's crimes come to light in a dozen transmissions.

The dynamic nature of the Awakened expresses itself to the hilt on the matter of the Rogue Council. Some Traditionalists are too committed to their own projects to return to a struggle that, in hindsight, seemed so pointless before. But others are always ready to fight—the transmissions ignite a spirit that already stirs in their hearts. Technocrats are divided. Field agents are puzzled by what the secrets transmissions reveal as well as the ideology that grows in response. Weren't these Reality Deviants supposed to oppose technology? Wasn't the Union supposed to open humanity's intellectual horizons? Propagandists have their hands full justifying the Technocracy's authoritarian structure while continuing to paint Traditionalists as dangerous, deluded terrorists.

A PLAGUE OF SPHINXES



It starts with the letter. With no return address, the envelope takes its place beside unpaid bills and occult 'zines in a rented post office box. The Herald, back from trading stories with a cabal in Oregon, opens the box up, takes the curious envelope out and performs a quick divination. You can't be too careful with your mail these days.

It's clean. Too clean. No arcane ties link to the author, the paper, the envelope, or even the postal workers who must have handled it. The handwriting is crisp, with the careful loops of a hand that learned to write English at a late age but mastered it. He opens it and sees the sphinx on the letterhead. His eyes dart down and he reads:

No unity without diversity. No Ascension without freedom. Enigma takes you where dogma cannot. We do not create the path to Ascension; we explore it.

He scans the rest and slots it into a book filled with notes: new magical innovations, news from chantries and rumors about the Umbra. He drives down to San Jose; when he talks to the Virtual Adepts there, he shares the letter last. It's going to be a bon mot, a curio to buy him a little extra time in their library files.

And these kids — these barely literate VA hackers whose collective universe consists of their pipe to the 'net — give him a derisive little chuckle. One turns his laptop around so that the Herald can see the screen. They already have the letter. The sphinx glows in LCD.

It's begun.

The Rogue Council reveals itself in a number of mysterious, untraceable transmissions in a variety of media and formats. Over time, the content of these transmissions change. At first, they're instructional and questioning. Later, they become more specific (although still enigmatic), offering clues to a variety of mysteries about which no single mage could possibly know. Finally, they become more and more scarce, the number of transmissions dropping off, causing new debates to arise about the meaning of the transmissions in the first place.

Below is a suggested series of phases to use when introducing the machinations of the Sphinx.

PHASE ONE: DISSEMINATION

Email, letters, TV broadcasts and even graffiti deliver the Rogue Council's first transmissions. In most cases, the recipients are well-connected mages, though a few hermits and solitaries also get the messages.

Many of them are simply instructional; they outline the traditional structure of the Council of Nine, from its Heralds to the role of Primi and the Protocols. However,

TRANSMISSION TYPES: PHILOSOPHY AND EDUCATION

Storytellers can use the initial Rogue Council transmissions to educate players about the basics of **Mage's** setting, the structure of the Traditions and the reality of a willworker's life after the Reckoning. These don't present any political positions as such, but their contents can be provocative. Learning, for instance, that a tutor has been denying fundamental rights that his students are supposed to enjoy under Council protection has a way of radicalizing mages.

Communiqués tend to get to groups to which they are most important. Listen to what player characters talk about and how their beliefs are portrayed, then write a transmission that directly deals with them. Have the characters had difficult apprenticeships? Then deliver a communiqué outlining educational reform or describe the traditional (but rarely obeyed) obligations that tutors have to their students. Likewise, you can use transmissions to remind the characters of flaws in the system, such as the use of Sphere mastery, rather than enlightenment, to denote rank in the Traditions.

each lesson comes with a set of questions. Why did the Traditions obey the Primi? How should the Awakened govern and judge each other? A few of them provide a set of clues that lead to hidden lore: historical documents, arcane libraries and in at least one case, a minor Node. Most combine information with mysterious instructions that can be followed to further discoveries.

Different transmissions appear in different places and to different groups. Heralds then facilitate the further exchange of these communiqués, tightening ties between the scholars of this new phenomenon. Some cabals examine the transmissions with an eye toward eliminating a possible threat to the Traditions; others debate the documents and try to construct a worthy ideology around completing the tasks the missives set forth. Schisms grow in a few chantries, but they rarely lead to serious conflict — yet.

PHASE TWO: WARNINGS AND BLESSINGS

A month or so later, transmissions about the Council lore fall to a trickle. New communiqués discuss the state of the world. These messages announce threats to the Traditions. Following their directions, mages find



well-hidden Technocratic projects, such as attempts to destroy the Crafts by undermining their native cultures. The transmissions themselves rarely contain exhaustive details, but do hint at enough to send outraged cabals into action. Straightforward foes such as Infernal cults do occasionally come to light, but for the most part, the communiqués concentrate on more pervasive threats to the liberty of the Awakened.

Other transmissions seem to praise open-minded Traditionalists, reporting an increased acceptance of technology and technomancy as well as the new emphasis on cultural diversity over the old, synthetic power blocs of the Nine Traditions. Conversely, the immoral projects of a few mages known for their authoritarian ways come to light. The transmissions rarely express direct opinions, but do often lead mages to discover enlightening — or damning — facts about the world around them.

In each case, these documents provide a few facts, and then cryptically guide mages to discover the rest for themselves. Many reveal secrets that mages and Technocrats would dearly love to hide. Sometimes this provokes a radical response. When *The Case of the Brixton Five* transmission appears in England, three cabals learn that the New World Order has murdered two mages and brainwashed three for the “crime” of teaching occult metaphysics at a series of public workshops. On Hallowe’en, an explosion levels an office building in London. The IRA is blamed, but Technocracy operatives sift through the bodies and rubble at their old Construct to find a neatly stenciled sphinx.

Similar events occur throughout Awakened society. Communiqués introduce younger mages to the repressive face of the Technocracy, or remind older willworkers what the Union is truly capable of. Schisms grow; some chantries split over allegiance to a supposed

TRANSMISSION TYPES: REPORTAGE

These transmissions uncover the actions of specific mages and groups with uncompromising clarity, unless the Rogue Council (and thus, the Storyteller) feels that some mystery would be necessary to draw interest from mages. The Rogue Council isn’t omniscient; vague reports may indicate a gap in its knowledge. Reportage can serve as hooks for a number of stories, or simply act as an erratic “news bulletin” for what’s going on in Awakened society.

Some Transmissions only appear once or twice. These can hold vital clues or pieces of information that the cabal needs to share with other mages. Another cabal might have a piece of the puzzle, be it its own expertise or a complementary communiqué.

Rogue Council “ideology,” even though transmissions that present any sort of stance are rare, cryptic and prone to interpretation.

PHASE THREE: TESTIMONIALS

Six months into the Rogue Council phenomenon, new transmissions include news of victory. Several cabals who complete the missions implicit in previous communiqués are mentioned by name. These report victories over the Technocracy as well as field reports about the Union’s methods and equipment. The Technocracy tries to suppress these, but the communiqués are too widespread. Even so, possessing a copy of a transmission becomes a bit dangerous, as some Constructs order that collectors be captured or killed.

Over the next months, it becomes clear that mages who tell their stories are the ones who appear in communiqués. This encourages some mages to network, but pushes others deeper into the shadows. Mission-specific transmissions still appear, often side by side with success stories that often clue mages into what a mission might put them up against.

In some cases, schisms over the Rogue Council’s supposed ideology turn into overt enmity. Certamen between Emissary and Guardian mages becomes common for a while, until each faction settles more securely into their respective camps. Adding to the distrust is the influx of a few former Technocrats, who’ve decided its better to practice science without the baggage of the authoritarian Technocracy.

PHASE FOUR: FADING FREQUENCY

A few months after the testimonials begin to arrive, the transmissions drop off in frequency. They now arrive in any of the forms mentioned in the previous phases, but they don’t come as often. Speculation runs rampant as to why this is: Is the Rogue Council losing its power source? Is it afraid that someone is close to uncovering it? Is

TRANSMISSION TYPES: TESTIMONIALS

Testimonials may describe a mage who needs the cabal’s help, successful tactics to use against enemies, and “hot spots” in the new conflict for Ascension. The Storyteller can educate players about how to make the best use of their characters’ capabilities, along with negative examples describing failure for actions that she doesn’t want the cabal to use. Be careful with the latter; if you present the lesson too harshly, players are going to try it anyway out of sheer contrariness.

Testimonials can also reveal the cabal’s secrets. The Rogue Council can’t simply rip news out of the ether, so there should be a plausible reason why this information spread beyond the characters’ jurisdiction. *How* news gets to the Rogue Council is still a mystery, but a good rule of thumb for Storytellers is that any secret held in more than one or two minds might eventually make its way into a transmission. Testimonials about the players’ cabal can also provide a sense of reward and justify new allies and antagonists.

If player characters oppose the Rogue Council, these testimonials provide a fine enemies list. Descriptions of an Emissary cabal’s successes can build up a rivalry fit to frame a final confrontation — or unlikely alliance. Technocrats assigned to counter Reality Deviant aggression can learn about the worst their enemy has to offer, foreshadowing (and assisting them with) future encounters.

someone blocking the transmissions? Or is it that mages no longer need the transmissions to kick them into action — the hornet’s nest has already been stirred, and now the stinging has taken on a life of its own?

The latter is the opinion of the Emissaries, those who dedicate their Awakened lives to a creed they read into the Rogue Council’s transmissions. The Guardians, however, aren’t so sure; they suspect that something more sinister is yet to come.

THE TRADITIONS’ RESPONSE



By the time Rogue Council transmissions of all types saturate Traditionalist culture, three distinct camps form in reaction to the documents. These groupings aren’t terribly formal, but their slang names become well known to Tradition mages who interact with Awakened society at large. The groups hold some Traditions in larger num-

bers than others, though mages of all sects can populate any camp.

THE EMISSARIES

Mages who posit a libertarian Rogue Council band together under its symbol. The Awakened members of the faction range from outspoken supporters of the Rogue Council’s position to anonymous agents who

involve their cabal in endeavors that serve Sphinx purposes. These mages eventually call their gatherings *caucuses*, where they chart operations against Ascension's enemies and expand the paradigmatic options available to Sleepers. They produce a document detailing their beliefs about the Rogue Council's purpose called *The Rogue Council Manifesto*.

Many Emissaries are dangerous individuals, with unconventional Arts at their command and lifestyles that emphasize both martial and political goals. Some were radicals of some kind before Awakening; others had an experience with the Technocracy or Tradition authority that convinced them that following the Sphinx's banner is the best choice.

The Rogue Council Manifesto

No unity without diversity. No Ascension without freedom. No enemy except for Ascension's enemy: tyranny. This is our manifesto — the true manifesto of the Nine Traditions. The old Unity is gone; no path to Ascension will be barred to serve it, for we do not create the path to Ascension; we explore it. Enigma takes you where dogma cannot.

We are the guardians of diverse beliefs, past and present, for everyone has the right to pursue their own path. To cooperate in guarding this dream is the way of the Traditions. This manifesto records the true intentions of the Council of Nine Traditions, who communicate through those messages possessing the mystic mark of the Sphinx.

The Purpose of the Council of Nine Traditions

Our purpose is to make Ascension possible for all who chose to pursue that Path of Thorns, by any means they see fit, as long as it does not harm another, their path or their destiny. This mission applies equally to the Awakened and to Sleepers, to Consors, Acolytes, Apprentices and Masters. Let none be judged Errant who followed this purpose, and let none who stand in its way be judged friends of the Council.

The Awakened will not be judged for their Arts, but their fulfillment of this Purpose. The Protocols bind us still, but in service to this preeminent cause.

The Arts, Many and One

All Awakened Arts are equal before the Council of Nine Traditions, so long as they follow the Purpose. Science will no longer be stigmatized as the enemy's tool, but neither will it be embraced except by an act of free will. We will preserve the most ancient ways of magic and embrace the newest innovations, so long as they follow our Purpose. The future is ours, but also the past; we will ever be the bond that links them.

The oldest Arts will be preserved alongside the new. We will ceaselessly study the primal foundations of magic and science, for its roots are the keys to Ascension.

The Traditions

The Nine Traditions are our roots. They are those mages who willingly cleave to the Council's Purpose. Each has a sacred philosophy, vital to the Awakening and Ascension of humanity. The Traditions will not undermine each other's beliefs, but strengthen them through contrast and debate. Each Tradition shall govern itself according to its custom, but no Tradition shall force anyone into their service. Oaths of service and fellowship remain binding, so long as they are made without compulsion.

Mages who were called Disparate shall not be forced to our cause, unless they cleave to a Tradition of their own choice. We shall not interfere with their ways, nor they ours, unless the Council's Purpose is violated by such inaction.

The Enemies of Ascension and Their Collaborators

The Enemies of Ascension are the enemies of our Purpose; with them, there can be no peace. Any who would deny the right to choose their own path or who causes suffering will earn enmity in proportion to their deed. We willingly prosecute the war against Nephandi, Infernalists and other heralds of Armageddon. The Marauders shall be barred from harming humanity.

We do not oppose the Technocracy as promoters of the scientific Arts, but as enemies of their authority. Humanity shall not be bound to their beliefs under threat of harm and ruin, nor shall they interfere with the practice of any lawful Art or the cultures associated with them. Scientific adepts who harm none open a door to Ascension, but if they support the Technocracy, they are collaborators in the suppression of humanity's liberation.

THE GUARDIANS

Mages who oppose the Rogue Council rarely meet for this specific purpose, but those who've raised their voices against Sphinx doctrine are called Guardians by sympathetic observers. They distrust or hate the Rogue Council for a number of reasons. First of all, as the transmissions wield a greater and greater influence, whoever is releasing them can more easily predict mages' actions. If the Rogue Council is a front for the Traditions' enemies, then they've already won a sizeable advantage. Who know when they might strike?

Other mages feel that the Ascension War should stay buried. Mages should devote themselves to personal Ascension and, if they wish, the betterment of Sleepers. They would rather preserve what they have instead of gambling it away on a crusade whose instigators remain anonymous and whose success is uncertain. In their view, the transmissions obviously promote a renewed Ascension War, right down to mission briefings.

FENCERS

Short for "fence sitters" (or "fence sitting cowards," depending on who you talk to), these mages would

rather be mediators and prefer to take whatever they like from Rogue Council transmissions, fight immediate threats to Ascension, and reject grandiose revolutionary plans. Fencers (the name was given to them by the other camps) want to keep the Traditions together. This contrasts with unaffiliated mages, who simply don't care about the transmissions outside of their intelligence value.

Fencers often organize dialogues between Emissary and Guardian mages. Sometimes these only deepen enmities, but just as often constructive work gets done. Emissaries present arguments for a particular course of action, Guardians raise their objections, and a compromise results that appeals to all parties. While many injustices (such as Technocratic brainwashing or forced apprenticeships) obviously need to be dealt with, Fencer-run convocations prevent excess and even allow for some cooperation. Usually, this means that a Guardian cabal will provide resources and indirect support while the Emissaries fight it out, with the understanding that reluctance on one side or over-exuberance on the other will dissolve the partnership.

THE TECHNOCRACY'S RESPONSE



In the initial phases of the Rogue Council's appearance, the Technocracy is slow to act. The Union still lacks a common direction; individual academic fiefs, spy rings and paramilitary cadres all try to balance their self-interest and ethical sense with the Time Table and Control's other demands.

Still, most Technocrats hate and fear Reality Deviants, though other pressing concerns push these feelings into the background. Technocratic culture views repressing them as less important than it used to be, but laudable nonetheless. Combined with the usual support for authority and some morally questionable acts to fulfill the greater good, the result is a Union convinced of its mission but uneasy with its methods.

Most agents feel some moral conflict when they subvert Deviant efforts to enter mainstream culture or use Primal resources such as Nodes. Why can't Technocratic ideals simply compete on an even playing field with the obviously deranged philosophies of their enemies? But suppress them they do; mystics are killed or brainwashed to constrict the world under a single, common paradigm.

The first wave of transmission-inspired attacks go largely unopposed, simply because the Technocracy is split among too many factions and objectives to protect itself. As time goes on, amalgams and Constructs set aside their differences and make use of old policies and chains of command. This allows Control to better coordinate their efforts. Old projects are revived and new ones are rushed into action. Within months of the widespread discovery of Rogue Council transmissions, the Technocracy formalizes elements of this combined methodology into Panopticon (see pp. 63-64), an organization that cuts across Convention lines to defend the Union and suppress Deviant terrorism.

Some libertine factions in the Technocracy are restrained by Control, but for the most part, "progressive" Construct heads and agents work within the system. Most senior agents have little compunction against suppressing Deviant activity, but the old stockpiles and methods were demoralizing because they symbolized a questionable strategy. Agents can more readily assure themselves of the rightness of their cause without bioengineered monsters and involuntary cyborgs. Those sorts of radical techniques are now entrusted to Panopticon, whose agents know that almost any method is justified to defend the Union from Reality Deviants.

SCIENCE, NOT CONTROL

Front line agents are often exposed to Rogue Council transmissions. Most dismiss these as communications between Deviant terrorists, but the documents raise questions that a few Technocrats cannot easily answer. Why is the Union pursuing the projects that these documents mention?

Some Technocrats belong to secret societies that promote their own moral stance against Control's directives. The Friends of Courage and the Harbingers of Avalon (see **Guide to the Technocracy**) are two secret societies that have always done so. Scattered amalgams

often "creatively interpret" Control's directives. But with this new assault on the Technocracy, some operatives are tempted to leave rather than reform the organization from within. Within a few months of the first transmissions, many such dissidents find a place with the Emissaries. Rogue Council supporters are very secretive about the origins of these new allies, given the recent scourge of the Janissaries and lingering feuds from the old Ascension War. The irony (or, perhaps, hypocrisy) of taking in repentant Technocrats while calling for a war against the Union is not lost on the Emissaries who are aware of it.

OLD MYTHS AND NEW

Originally, Mage presented the Technocracy as a monolithic, inherently antagonistic body. Over time, the Union was given a more complex treatment. They have their reasons for defending a rigid paradigm, even if they don't always live up to their original ideals. Quite a bit of effort was made to ensure that Technocrats weren't treated as soulless antagonists with simplistic motives and that their position could, at least, elicit some sympathy.

However, the Union is not simply the defender of the scientific paradigm or Earth's guardians against occult and extraterrestrial forces. They are not a democratic body with a libertarian ethos. They do not have the only valid claim to the tools of reason. Science and technology are the Technocracy's tools, not its purpose. The Union exists to foster their own domination of the Consensus and the destruction of serious dissent. The Technocracy does not truly believe that others should have the freedom to believe what they wish — though its agents may delude themselves into believing otherwise.

The Union uses deceptive propaganda, mind control, torture and murder to achieve its aims, but usually uses the least amount of force for maximum efficiency. Newer Technocrats apply a loose moral criteria where "insiders" (believers in the Technocracy or a homogenous Consensus) shouldn't be mistreated, but Reality Deviants and dissident Sleepers are entitled to no such consideration. More canny leaders realize that some force must be used to maintain internal discipline. They regret the waste of a good agent who gets caught in the crossfire of internecine struggle, but the plotting continues.

By contrast, the Traditions originally cared little for the Sleepers, but now they are the only Awakened body that respects their right to choose their own paradigm — though even they believe that their Arts represent the ultimate tools for human development. This is riskier than the Technocratic future, but the potential rewards could be much greater.

COMPLICATIONS



In addition to developments in the Traditions, the Rogue Council's transmissions can inspire events unique to your chronicle. One such adventure, *Alien Avatar*, is detailed in this book. We've seen that the transmissions themselves and the developments they've spawned can affect a chronicle in a number of ways. Of course, it's up to the Storyteller to determine what elements of the Rogue Council they wish to use in their games. This plot arc is a tool, not a yoke. Don't let it get in the way of your chronicle's plot.

ROGUE MISSIONS AND THE GUARDIAN'S BURDEN

The Technocracy's been stung; it's only a matter of time before it brings its resources to bear on the pepe-

trators. Emissary mages keep up the momentum, while opponents of the Rogue Council try to control the damage and preserve their own Arts and practices. Aside from inter-Traditional conflict, mages with opposing views may be beholden to competing missions or even cooperation, as a Sphinx transmission provides a common motive despite the schism.

REVOLUTION!

Of course, the Rogue Council's supporters want to turn up the heat on Ascension's enemies. Technocrats are common targets, but repressive mages of any sect may be in for a challenge. Stories of this sort can feature political intrigue or fast-paced action. In the former case, Emissary mages must challenge the authority of a mage who stifles dissent and creativity without being

condemned as traitors or fools. If the target is a Technocrat, the cabal may disrupt a tenuous relationship that other mystics have made with the Union.

Otherwise, action is at the heart of these stories. Raiding a Technocracy base is something of a cliché for more experienced Mage players, but if it's well executed, it's worth using. Unlike previous iterations of this plot, their opponents aren't genetically engineered monsters and they don't necessarily coast through the Umbra to get there. In the new age, raids and sabotage are more down to earth. The majority of a Construct's staff consists of Sleepers who may not even be aware of the location's significance. Player characters will have to ask themselves how many dead, innocent Sleepers are an "acceptable" loss compared to what can be gained by disrupting a Technocratic threat. The Sleepers will have no such compunctions; the Union hires competent personnel who will do their utmost to protect their workplaces.

MORAL QUANDARIES

Similarly, what do Emissary characters do with those sympathetic to the Technocracy? Most Emissaries brand them as collaborators against humanity's As-cended destiny. The Technocracy would argue that the authoritarian tactics are regrettable but necessary, since

most Sleepers have not reached the point where they can be trusted to choose a path that won't endanger others. Most Sleepers don't *want* to risk comfort and surety for such an ephemeral goal. Is it really right to force them to make a choice?

Members of the Guardian faction may want to preserve agreements with the Technocracy in spite of Emissary hostility, but what if they are protecting the Union's worst excesses? A New World Order base may keep an eye out on local Nephandi, but when they brainwash Orphans and disappear Sleepers who threaten the Time Table, do the benefits outweigh the hazards?

HEADED FOR A FALL

Strong passions arouse hubris. An Emissary cabal can be set to self-destruct as it undertakes more dangerous and violent missions for the cause. Guardians may become overzealous in protecting the Traditions.

For this type of story, you should present characters with an example of a cabal that's on the brink of collapsing. The characters can be shown how those mages are vital to their Traditions. Despite ideological differences, they may feel compelled to save them. Storytellers can also present opportunities that are just too dangerous for the cabal. Make it obvious that they'll doom themselves



if they proceed, but tempt them with the possible rewards. Personal mention in a transmission can motivate ambitious Emissaries, as can a chance to decisively liberate a part of the world from Technocratic supervision.

Opponents of the Rogue Council may use the transmissions to confront the movement's major figures head on. Can they really expect to destroy a whole ideology by undermining key figures? Unrestrained, political tensions can lead to duels or outright murder.

CHOOSE A SIDE!

Actually, player characters don't have to. Cabals don't have to, either. Cabals are tightly knit groups that, even when members disagree, often value and trust each other over and above their differences. This is what has helped keep multi-Tradition cabals (the majority of player characters in most **Mage** games) together despite the old Council's official disavowal of policies designed to encourage them.

Obviously, when an entire cabal favors one faction or another it will be easy to determine how to use Rogue Council transmissions. They'll either want to follow up on messages or undermine the missions described therein. If a cabal has members who are of both positions or want to mediate between the two, or perhaps just don't care, Storytellers have to invest more attention.

Don't be afraid to allow some tension to build when a transmission causes a rift between characters. If you feel it's necessary, remind the players that this is a dramatic device and that they should weigh their characters' choices against the cabal's history together as well as individual positions.

A FRAGILE ALLIANCE

Finally, mages of any affiliation may simply use the information contained in the communiqués to follow specific avenues of research or defend causes that they hold dear. Transmissions can include magical techniques, noted mages and potential enemies. In a cabal deeply divided by the Rogue Council, mediation can force them to agree on a common set of ethics and objectives. Mages who normally oppose the Rogue Council may follow up on rumors of an abusive tutor simply because they have all agreed to protect apprentices. Even Emissary mages may be forced to admit that a Technocracy initiative must be allowed to proceed. They can ally with other cabals to protect an amalgam — even against their comrades.

TYPES OF TRANSMISSIONS

Ultimately, the contents of Rogue Council transmissions are up to the Storyteller. Use them as a way to

introduce plot hooks, background and other ideas to your game. Transmissions generally hint at a problem and a course of action the cabal might take to correct it. However, they don't present the whole story; mages still have to keep alert, and a transmission may be out of date by the time the cabal gets around to acting on it.

FAKED TRANSMISSIONS

There's always the danger of faked transmissions. By Phase Three, a few of these are in circulation — but it takes time before any of them are discovered. Most mages don't know how to tell a fake from the real thing, simply because they haven't encountered enough of either, but they're smart enough to be aware of the possibility. Many cabals develop a policy where a transmission is authenticated by listing the name of each person it has passed through, but the system is hardly reliable.

Nephandi employ fakes to discredit mages, using the Rogue Council's voice to accuse mages of oppressive behavior and (ironically) Infernalism. The Fallen find them especially handy when it comes to foiling Technocrats; simply accuse them of something in a counterfeit transmission and wait for an Emissary cabal to come in, guns blazing!

Of course, Technocrats can also lead Deviant terrorists into a trap this way. Unscrupulous mystics can use them to discredit the Emissary movement or direct it into a scandal.

Fortunately, there is one way to tell a real Rogue Council transmission from a fake. Real transmissions baffle scrying attempts. They show no sign of ever having been handled by another being or exposed to any sort of Resonance. Of course, after being handled, a communiqué collects the impressions of the people who touch and examine it. This is another reason why mages append their names (and often a brief description of where the transmission's been) to these documents when they pass them around. Fakes generally have sympathetic bonds to their creator or the subtle Resonance of Effects used to hide them. It is possible that an individual with a great deal of *Arcane* could simulate the properties of real transmissions, but even then, any intermediary used to transport it would leave an impression as well. This is usually not the case for authentic Rogue Council documents.



CHAPTER FOUR: ANARCHY AND AUTHORITY

In street fighting, every soldier should think like a general.
— Abbie Hoffman, *Steal This Book*



Since the Reckoning, many mages redefine cowardice as prudence, their enemies as a necessity and the struggle to Awaken the masses as a fool's dream. Cutting through this, the Rogue Council's transmissions are a call for action, leaving the original Council's heirs divided. Is it too early to reassert themselves? Will a new conflict simply replicate the results of the past? It does seem, however, that the Rogue Council is calling for a different struggle than the old Ascension War. They argue for liberty over dogma and choice over the safe, static route of Technocratic hegemony. Despite their evident hatred for the Union, it seems to simply be the largest target. Autocratic Traditionalists receive their share of the venom, too.

However, the Rogue Council actually does very little. On the street or in scattered places of power, its audience is the real actor. Rogue Council transmissions stir the pot; they incite debate and inspire action. The grip of apathy and stasis can be loosened or even broken; communiqués report successes with increasing frequency. Mages who are devoted to peace, committed to their own projects or just don't trust the Rogue Council, react according to their own interests and ideals. Some soothe rebellious tempers and cleave to their own cabals. Others fight their brethren in debates and, sometimes, violent struggle. A few aid the Technocracy, either as hidden agents or as a gesture of "good will."

Here are some mages who've entered the thick of things. You can use them to instigate change in your own **Mage** chronicle.

USING THIS CHAPTER

Aside from presenting a groups of Storyteller characters for your own use, this chapter provides examples of the kinds of mages who are for and against the Rogue Council and the sort of effects this has had on Awakened society as a whole. Mages who have been abused by the Technocracy or have a nascent desire to change the Consensus rally to the Rogue Council's cause. Mages with strong personal missions of their own or who are ensconced in private arcane studies generally prefer to tend to their own projects. If they think a Rogue-aligned cabal will endanger their own goals, they'll either negotiate with them or attempt to thwart them.

Some Technocrats find that Rogue Council transmissions hit the mark a little too accurately for comfort, revealing festering sores in Technocratic

ideology. This spawns a number of defections. However, most scientists and operatives think it's a sign that the Traditions are getting restless; it's time to take them down a notch again. With Control's sporadic help, these Technocrats come to represent the orthodox face of the Union. This has helped the Technocracy reorganize; the new regime accepts the idealism and practicality of the younger generation, but tempers it with the authoritarian stance that, in the end, is the Technocracy's purpose.

Descriptions of the groups in this chapter do not include game statistics for every character. This allows Storytellers to create antagonists and allies with Traits who suit the needs of their games. This can also be used to adjust the overall power of each group.

A ROGUE CABAL: JUPITER'S FORGE



Composed of daring agents of change, Jupiter Forge didn't join the Rogue Council's cause as much as it backed into it. The cabal is only two-years old, with well-trained representatives of individual Traditions who benefit from an exceptional access to Master-ranked mentors. Why then does it back a movement that seems committed to excising the very security that succors it?

HISTORY

Jupiter's Forge was an experiment of sorts. Tiring of self-imposed hermitage, two Masters began corresponding with each other about the future of the Council. The Bonisagus Hermetic Arthur Lethbridge weathered the storm of the Second Massassa War with a new skepticism about the ability of each Tradition to survive on its own. He contacted the Etherite adventurer Cassandra Frost with a simple proposal: to reignite the Compact of Callias. This old agreement encouraged mages to form multi-Tradition cabals. While it still holds up to the present day, the Council itself abandoned the agreement hundreds of years ago. Frost and Lethbridge wanted to give a cabal their official sanction; such an experiment would pave the way for other Masters to return and support the younger generation without the political pitfalls that doomed their colleagues in Doissetep and Horizon. Under a renewed Compact, Masters would support every member of the cabal — not just members of their Tradition.

Lethbridge brought in Phillip Morcant, a House Thig mage who had studied with him. Frost introduced him to her

apprentice, Janet Wolf. The Masters sent them to Toronto to pursue mutual research on psychic manifestations.

In truth, Lethbridge and Frost shared a vision, but they never revealed this to their respective students. Through omens and lucid dreams, the mages were given signs that the Traditions were on the edge of destruction and that only some new gesture of unity could reunite them. The sphinx that appeared in these apparitions was cause for concern, but the advice was sound, so the Masters bade their students to reignite the dream of Callias and investigate the signs that inspired it. The later appearance of the Rogue Council proved these dreams to be most prophetic.

Local mages made contact with the pair of apprentices. The Akashic Aaron Dogon was indefinitely loaned to the cabal as a sign of approval from the cloistered Eighteen Dragons Chantry. To assist their research, the mages used Dogon's connections to recruit Alexei DesJean, an expert in astral projections and self-possession. Morcant summoned the spirit El-Baal Asha, who demanded that the cabal honor him with its name, and so Jupiter's Forge was born.

Recently, though, Lethbridge was assassinated by Euthanatoi. His crime: teaching Forces Arts to a team of Janissaries who resisted the "purification" of their house by the death mages. Frost sought revenge, but the Traditions' justice system was in a shambles and she was unable to even find an appropriate Thanatoic to duel. However, her search for justice attracted Technocracy operatives eager to bag a senior Reality Deviant. After losing a lab and two apprentices, Frost returned to hiding, but not before recording her latest dream on a



technomagical device. She left the Ether-spool with Jupiter's Forge and then vanished. When DesJean called out the *loa* of the device with Mind magic, he experienced the following event...

He stood in a many-chambered memory palace. He strode past Doric columns representing the foundations of Frost's beliefs, studded with shimmering Ether-stones. Then past the braziers, into to a hall of caryatid statues, each cradling a wondrous device. At the room's center was a sphinx; it shifted on its dais, impatient.

"You know the riddle," it said.

"Then I know the answer," said Alexei. "A man. A human."

"That's the old, dogmatic answer. But enigma takes you where dogma cannot."

"It's a myth; a dogmatic archetype. I suppose I have to defeat you to meet the enigma?"

"Everything old is new again. The new dogma is steel. Management. Control."

"Technocracy."

"Who must you defeat?"

Alexei DesJean was sure he knew. Soon, Jupiter's Forge agreed with him and joined the Sphinx's side, declaring war on the agents of Control.

A SPRING ⊕ SABOTAGE

Now, Jupiter's Forge operates against Technocrats with zeal. Doctor Frost's guidance and the cabal's Etherite and Thig Arts give them some understanding of the enemy's tools, so they specialize in sabotage. DeJean and Dogon's martial skills complement each other when more visceral solutions are called for. The cabal lives as outlaws; the Herald, Ross Garfield, acts as an informant and liaison, guiding them to safe houses and allied Traditionalists. The Rogue Council's doctrine hit them when they were vulnerable, then fed them new, vengeful strength.

The Union receives the brunt of their wrath, but the Forge also harbors contempt for politically minded mages who refuse to see across Tradition boundaries and drop their grudges for the cause of mass Ascension. In these cases, they inundate the apprentices with Rogue Council ideology and use a combination of pranks and debate to make fools out of their hidebound mentors. In

one case, they used Mind Arts to subject a Technocracy sympathizer to a mock NWO interrogation. That Virtual Adept never again claimed that the Union was "vital to the safety and eventual freedom of humanity."

HOOKING UP

Mages will usually meet Jupiter's Forge for one of two reasons: Either the Forge comes to them for temporary crash space and favors, or they visit to spread propaganda and torment any mages they think are blocking support of the Rogue Council. If it's convenient, they'll ask Ross Garfield to see where another cabal's sympathies lie and collect any news. They won't physically harm Traditionalists except in self-defense and they never, ever agree to duels.

Of course, Technocrats aren't treated with this consideration. To Jupiter's Forge, membership in the Union either makes you a tyrant and murderer, a potential tyrant and murderer or an implicit tyrant and murderer. "We're only following orders' didn't wash at Nuremberg," says DeJean, "So why the fuck should it excuse some Grayface scientist who's designing better guns and truth serums for her stormtrooper friends?"

CHARACTERS

Jupiter's Forge has four members: Alexei DesJans (Cult of Ecstasy/Akashic Brotherhood), Janet Wolf (Sons of Ether), Aaron Dogon (Akashic Brotherhood) and Phillip Morcant (Order of Hermes). Janet Wolf is the nominal leader of the group, but Alexei DesJans could be described as its ideological center.

The cabal also has a number of contacts, such as Greg Sunnerton, a pagan Orphan with an intimate knowledge of the East Coast's underworld. Sunnerton is their primary contact for new weapons and contraband equipment. Finally, the cabal receives some assistance from an Umbrood Preceptor named Abba El-Baal Asha. The spirit represents the concepts of augury, creative technology and the planet Jupiter, and usually appears as a winged, sexless humanoid with a sardonic, lopsided smile. He aids the cabal in return for their adopting his name and providing finely wrought gifts broken on an anvil, along with sacrifices of Quintessence when Jupiter is at perihelion in the night sky. It demands a heavy toll, but often hints that it knows something of the Rogue Council's true nature. That in itself is enough to justify the Tass and riches sacrificed to it.

ALEXEI DESJEAN

A man of varied tastes and talents, Alexei DesJean believes his life truly began with a poker game. He had always been able to sense others' emotions. Born to a family of Haitian immigrants in Montreal, his first psychic impressions were tinged with a keen awareness of

others' subconscious feelings. As he matured, he learned to read surface thoughts by focusing his mind with repetitive chanting. Able to peer into the minds of his parents and teachers, he stopped respecting authority figures when he sensed the gulf between their words and their desires. He spent more and more time by himself. In doing so, he learned how to conceal himself from notice.

As a personal rite of passage, he walked into a biker bar on his 18th birthday with a paycheck from his summer job and sat down to play poker. Eight hours later, he walked out with \$50,000 and headed straight to the airport.

He arrived in Haiti looking for wise men and women who could help him explain his gifts. Using family ties, he met a Houngan connected to the Cult of Ecstasy and was initiated. The *loa* Emanjah entered him, sensed his rebellious spirit and marked her "horse's" body with *veves*, mystical markings that still crisscross his skin.

He still disobeyed.

His next flight took him to Nepal and an Akashic monastery. For weeks, the monks refused him on account of the *loa*-marks burned into his skin. Still, as he began to starve and freeze outside the gates, the abbot would pass by to teach him how to fight off the urges of his body with yogic exercise. Alexei mastered the disciplines and proved his dedication. The monks finally relented and taught him their techniques for self-mastery. Then, without warning, Alexei left.

He rejoined the Cult, attaching himself to the radical Dissonance Society. For the most part he worked alone; few other mages wanted anything to do with his schemes to destabilize authoritarian structures in the name of Ascension. He led a lonely life, until the nascent Jupiter's Forge offered him Tass and instruction in exchange for his help deciphering occult mysteries.

He quickly took on the role of the cabal's ritemaster; his flexible mind and rebellious demeanor help him organize the cabal's collective rituals. This satisfies a vital need. Otherwise, he simply likes to break the boundaries of what any single Tradition thinks is possible.

Informally, he's something of a polemicist and critic. Jupiter's Forge might not be as devoted to the Rogue Council's path if it weren't for his strident opinions.

Image: Alexei DesJean is a 25-year old man with spiky, blood-red dreadlocks that contrast with the dark skin of his African ancestry. The *veves* of his patron *loa* are crosses and lines that loop around his neck, chest and forearms, blacker than any real tattoo could possibly be (and are his *Primal Marks*; see **Magick: The Ascension**, page 288). Similar designs are painted on most of his clothing; he prefers loose rave and hip hop styles. For combat, he keeps a set of three African throwing knives. He uses these oversized, multi-bladed weapons for both melee and ranged



engagements. He has mobile features, a ready smile and easy grace contained in a compact, muscular body.

Roleplaying Hints: The *loa* Emanjah fills you with the flowing gifts of freedom, but Akashic discipline gives you the power to direct it for the common good. You're a merciless enemy of authority but not a complete fanatic, preferring clever object lessons to violence.

To work magic you quiet your ego so that the *loa*, who you see as powerful avatars of freedom, enter you and work their will. You keep enough of your own mind to translate their primordial desires into acts that benefit the human realm. Meditation, acrobatic martial arts, chanting and sacrifices are your main tools, though you'll use drugs and other Ecstactic methods when the occasion demands it. Your patron *loa*, Emanjah, claims domain over rivers and the innocent. You call upon her to inspire and heal. You talk to other *loa* such as Ghede (death) and Shango (war and revolution) when you need to, but always after placating Emanjah.

Tradition: Cult of Ecstasy and Akashic Brotherhood (Alexei has the *Dual Traditions Merit*)

Faction: Dissonance Society, with some ties to the K'an Lu, the Akashic Li-Hai and several cross-Traditional Afro-Caribbean sects.

Essence: Dynamic

Nature: Rebel

Demeanor: Thrill-Seeker

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 4 (Improvised Grace), Stamina 4 (Tireless), Charisma 3, Manipulation 3, Appearance 2, Perception 2, Intelligence 2, Wits 3

Abilities: Academics (Politics) 1, Alertness 2, Athletics 2, Awareness 2, Cosmology 2, Do 3, Dodge 3,

Firearms 1, Linguistics 4 (Arabic, English, Igbo, French, Hindi, Japanese, Mandarin, Portugese, Spanish), Medicine 3, Meditation 2, Melee 3, Occult 3, Performance 2, Streetwise 3, Subterfuge 2, Stealth 1

Backgrounds: Arcane 3, Avatar 3, Contacts 3, Resources 3, Totem 1 (Abba El-Baal Asha)

Arete: 4

Spheres: Correspondence 1, Life 3, Mind 3, Time 3

Willpower: 8

Quintessence: 3

Paradox: 0

Resonance: (Dynamic) Crackling 1, (Dynamic) Flowing 1

JANET WOLF

Janet wants to be anything but an adventurer, but if that's the hand she's been dealt, she won't be satisfied with anything but perfection. A dedicated inventor and fringe researcher, Wolf Awakened in the midst of performing an odd electrostatic "antigravity" experiment. Sleeper researchers had made "lifters" capable of carrying a few ounces aloft; Wolf wanted to do better than that. She developed a device that used electromagnetism to direct ionized particles through ducted fans. The contraption worked. She realized that science's potential could outstrip what theorists believed possible as she rocketed 500 feet into the air. Even though her uncontrolled fall put her legs in casts, she remained convinced that nature's secrets had to be discovered with hands-on inventing before sterile hypotheses could convince the uninspired.

She was still on crutches when Etherite adventurer Cassandra Frost offered to share Etherite research and resources with Wolf if she'd agree to be her assistant. Wolf packed her bags and joined Doctor Frost on a series of thrilling (or, as Wolf thought, terrifying) excursions to the strange, remote corners of the world. Frost was a genius and a gifted scientist, but these benefits were more than balanced out by her adrenaline-driven lifestyle. After four years of matching wits with evil witch doctors, running away from dinosaurs and confronting Things Man Was Not Meant to Know in ancient ruins, Wolf decided she'd had enough and said so. She was an inventor, not a pulp hero.

Doctor Frost relented and selected her to participate in the cabal that would eventually be known as Jupiter's Forge. She settled down to work on her inventions and took the role of Jupiter's Forge's spokeswoman. Her practical mind and natural charisma made her the natural choice. Things began to fray at the seams when Lethbridge was assassinated. When Doctor Frost was almost killed in a Technocracy attack, Janet was thrown into sudden shock. She took to Rogue Council doctrine



to deal with the change, but is now trying to determine whether or not she really believes in its ideals. For one thing, a renewed Ascension War would make it impossible for her to settle down to a quiet life of research and experimentation. However, she feels a weird mix of pride and resentment when she's forced into some sort of dangerous mission. She always hated playing the hero, but she feels that when she does it right, she's honoring her mentor.

Image: Janet Wolf is an attractive 26-year old woman with long, fine treacle-colored hair. She usually wears this in a bun or a loose ponytail, depending on whether or not there's anything nearby that could snag it. She's slender and fit; her muscles have developed in response to using heavy machinery and the grueling treks of her involuntary adventures.

Wolf normally wears practical, baggy clothes with enough pockets to hold all of her tools, but in the field she sometimes wears a pith helmet equipped with a lantern (a gift from Doctor Frost) and, rarely, a form-fitting gunmetal jumpsuit. The jumpsuit (and its associated goggles, face mask and teardrop shaped silver backpack) is an invention of hers she wears only occasionally, lest someone mistake the products of serious research for superheroic gadgetry.

Roleplaying Hints: You love your gadgets and you love to get your way — which is to stay in your workshop and keep everyone else from heading into danger without a good reason. Unfortunately, there always seems to be a good reason; if you just stuck to your work, the Technocracy would eventually show up at your door or their influence on reality would destroy the hope that you can

OTHER MEMBERS OF THE FORGE

Aaron Dogon: This Akashic Brother was sent to Jupiter's Forge as a diplomatic gesture from the Eighteen Dragons Bodhimandala in Toronto. The Li-Hai was a professional bodyguard and a part-time martial arts instructor specializing in traditional karate and jujutsu, but now devotes most of his time to Jupiter's Forge. Fortunately, he still maintains ties to his dojo and to security culture. Thanks to him, Jupiter's Forge has been able to rely on the patronage of several of his former clients, from rock stars to the occasional subversive executive. He's a large, imposing man with a military demeanor when he's on the job, but is very relaxed — even a bit of a slacker — when his time is his own.

Phillip Morcant: The other founding Disciple of Jupiter's Forge, Phil Morcant was really Arthur Lethbridge's "expendable" apprentice. Morcant

trained under Lethbridge to learn the Spirit Arts; he'd already been initiated into the Order of Hermes technomantic House Thig three years earlier. Morcant felt that Lethbridge had good intentions, but suffocated his students' creative impulses. Unlike other members of House Thig, Morcant doesn't have much interest in computers. Instead, he's something of a "mystic mechanic," and likes to use internal combustion and analog devices to focus technomantic Arts. He loves cars and motorcycles; as an engineering student, he secured a patent on a safer design for car seats that earns him a modest income from royalties. Of course, he never told anyone that he hit upon the design in a vision and that, when such seats are leaned all the way back, they form the silhouette of an Enochian vowel. His latest obsession is magically enhancing his motorbike. Phil has sharp features, framed by motorcycle leathers and a baseball cap. He never travels anywhere without a sigil-etched screwdriver — his "magic wand." Naturally, he's the cabal's wheelman.

find widespread acceptance for your inventions. Furthermore, you resent the Union for wounding your cabal and hate the petty pride of Traditionalists who let their grudges stand in the way of their ideals. You're a natural leader and organizer. Make bold statements and back them up with eloquent words. If they aren't listening, they're fools — and you can't tolerate foolishness.

Nowadays, you have to spend an uncomfortable amount of time in your jumpsuit, wearing your goggles and using your ray gun. Why *did* you even build one of those things in the first place? You always swore you

wouldn't end up a hero, but by God, if you must, you're going to do it *right*. You use a utility belt full of exotic chemicals, your ray gun (or, as you prefer to call it, an "ion emitter" — it can project force fields and tractor beams as well), your jumpsuit (which you can use to ward off hostile Umbrood because of its Ether-shielding qualities) and sensor goggles, plus a plethora of improvised devices.

Tradition: Sons of Ether

Faction: Adventurers (reluctantly)

Essence: Dynamic

Nature: Thrill-Seeker

Demeanor: Celebrant

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3, Charisma 4 (Compelling), Manipulation 2, Appearance 3, Perception 4 (Detail-Oriented), Intelligence 4 (Mechanical Genius), Wits 3

Abilities: Academics (Theology) 3, Alertness 1, Awareness 3, Computer 3, Cosmology 3, Crafts (Electronics) 3, Dodge 3, Drive 1, Expression 3, Firearms 2, Intimidation 2, Investigation 2, Linguistics 2 (French, German), Performance (Oratory) 2, Science (Physics) 4 (Particle Physics), Streetwise 2, Technology 4 (Electromagnetic Devices)

Backgrounds: Avatar 3, Destiny 3, Resources 3, Totem 1 (Abba El-Baal Asha)

Arete: 4

Spheres: Correspondence 2, Forces 3, Matter 3, Prime 1, Spirit 2

Willpower: 7

Quintessence: 3

Paradox: 0

Resonance: (Dynamic) Crackling 1, (Entropic) Variegated 1, (Static) Crystalline 1,

THE TECHNOCRACY RESPONSE: PANOPTICON



To combat renewed attacks by Reality Deviants, the Technocracy has begun to more tightly integrate its resources. In the past, each Convention was expected to look after its own, with separate security forces and command structures patrolling their own turf. Despite a few disastrous incidents where rival Conventions employed their operatives against each other, the system remained. Senior Technocrats were reluctant to give up their personal bodyguards and strike teams. Inter-Convention loans remained common, but confusion regarding command jurisdiction, awkward combined operations and professional rivalries hindered the efficiency of Union operations.

With the rise of the Rogue Council, the Technocracy can no longer afford to tolerate this inefficiency. The solution: Panopticon, a security Methodology that uses standardized ranks and integrated training.

Panopticon uses a military ranking system and draws the balance of its soldiers from Iteration X's BioMechanics, NWO Operatives, the Progenitors' Damage Control and the Void Engineer Border Corps Division. Elite Enlightened soldiers are its officers; they command military proles who train with equipment from all four participating Conventions. In return for funding, the Syndicate is exempt from contributing officers, though they supply logistics consultants on a case-by-case basis.

A Panopticon Task Force consists of on-command amalgams containing two to six officers and perhaps two to three times as many proles. Officers may call upon re-

sources from other Conventions, so that a Progenitor in the field can request the Black Suit backup that her NWO comrade is entitled to. Furthermore, Panopticon is standardizing Technocratic field gear, building on successful programs such as the X-5 Protector sidearm and common standards for communications, codes and terminology.

Despite the new Methodology's military organization, it isn't just a strike force. Smaller Task Forces coordinate espionage using the resources of member Conventions. When an imminent threat appears, however, they exercise as much force as they can muster to neutralize it. The talents of several combined Conventions acting in unison make a Panopticon Task Force a formidable challenge.

Panopticon is ultimately a tool of Control; the agenda of individual Technocrats, even high-ranking ones, have little effect on the Methodology's actions. For example, the organization has revived the use of HIT Marks despite the fact that they've been largely abandoned by Iteration X. Panopticon has the combined talent to make the cyborgs more practical (they don't have to outsource to Progenitor doctors to keep soft tissues in good repair) and knows that their infamy makes them excellent tools for psychological warfare.

PANOPTICON RANKS AND POWERS

The main advantage that Panopticon gives to Technocrats is the ability to call upon their partners' Backgrounds. Instead of using the Requisitions rules on pp. 172-173 of *Guide to the Technocracy*, char-

acters who belong to the same amalgam treat each others' Backgrounds as their own. An agent must be in good standing with her Convention and the Technocracy as a whole to do this. This does not allow characters to pool Resources that cannot normally be pooled, though it might allow a second chance if a Technocrat player blows her character's Background check. This is effectively a 3-pt. Social Merit called *Panopticon Agent*.

Panopticon members have military ranks that supercede their standing in their own Conventions and must be acknowledged by any other Panopticon operative (though not outsiders). This is treated like the *Rank* Background in *The Bitter Road*, pp. 115-117. Panopticon Technocrats must purchase at least two levels of this Background. For Storytellers without *The Bitter Road*, rank allows characters to boss around lower-ranked members of the same organization and grants access to other Backgrounds valued at no higher than half the character's *Rank* level. This does not apply to the character's personal Backgrounds, but are extra resources that belong to the organization. For Panopticon members, this includes *Resources* in the form of equipment, *Backup*, *Secret Weapons* and *Spies*.

Panopticon Rank Titles

- Adjunct: The character is not a member of Panopticon, but has some connection to it, either as an occasional advisor or low-level technician. He cannot call upon Panopticon's Backgrounds, although he may be able to tap into its agents' rumor mills.
- Agent: As a Panopticon field agent, the character can call upon one level worth of Panopticon Backgrounds.
- Supervisor: The character can boss around field agents, but he can still only requisition one level of agency Backgrounds.
- Manager: The character can requisition two levels of Backgrounds.
- Director: The character can requisition three levels of Backgrounds (we round up the math for this level).

Thus, the Panopticon "package" costs five Freebie Points at character creation (three for the *Panopticon Agent* Merit and two levels of rank), or 10 Experience points if it's purchased later. Technocrats may volunteer for the corps if they are in good standing with the Technocracy — but not necessarily their own Convention. Many ranking Technocrats resent the centralization of power and send their Conventions' undesirables to the new Methodology to rid them of a problem and express their disapproval for the venture.

PANOPTIC TASK FORCE ASIA-PACIFIC 3: "THE JESUITS"



Officially (and awkwardly) named PTFAP 3 (for Panoptic Task Force Asia-Pacific 3), "The Jesuits" earned their nickname for several reasons. Under Dorje Washington's leadership, the amalgam is accused of sanctimoniously using Control's mandate to cajole Constructs into sacrificing their own missions for the sake of Panopticon. Washington's Deviant leanings are the subject of popular rumor; his position at the helm of one of Control's pet projects is puzzling. With a humble, priestly air, the Gray Man politely asks for help — and like a Jesuit, he knows how to frame his desires with inarguable orthodoxy.

HISTORY

The Jesuits are ordered together by Control as soon as the first Rogue Council transmission is known. Long considered to be a permanent Fifth Degree undesirable, Dorje Washington receives an official directive that grants him extraordinary powers and tasks him with investigating a "Reality Deviant sphinx cult."

Naturally, the Constructs he visits are not amused by his pretensions. They don't know anything about such an organization and believe that his orders are either forged or a sign that Control is perhaps better off on the other side of a dimensional instability. To hedge their bets they give minimal deference to his "extraordinary jurisdiction;" Washington endures failing experimental equipment, incompetent Sympathizers as backup and the general scorn of the Technocrats he encounters. In the process, he manages to snag two more recruits for the Task Force he's been ordered to form. Chain and Romanow join Panopticon to escape their dead-end careers, and follow Washington as he sifts through the occult subculture of the West Coast for clues.

Months later, the mission turns out not to be so pointless after all. Several Constructs discover that some sort of "Deviant sphinx cult" is on the rise and out to interfere with Technocracy affairs. The Jesuits ascribe their foreknowledge of events to Control's Enlightened guidance — and they never fail to remind those amalgams that opposed them of this. As other

INTRODUCING PANOPTICON

With Control's Enlightened brilliance at the helm, Panopticon is formed less than a month after the appearance of Rogue Council transmissions, but takes about six months to be taken seriously by earthbound amalgams and Constructs. Local Technocrats are loath to share their resources, much less give up the personal power they amassed after the rise of the Dimension Storm. Control cannot offer much in the way of direct support for its brainchild at first, but a few well-placed orders and disappearances eventually erodes the resolve of most opponents. Ironically, the defection of idealistic Technocrats to the Emissaries also removes barriers to Panopticon's centralized structure.

This means that at the beginning, Panopticon amalgams have few advantages over their conventional counterparts. Like Emissaries, they are often brought together by enigmatic orders for a purpose they don't fully understand. At first, agents are at a +3 difficulty on Social rolls whenever they use the *Panopticon Agent Merit*, but this gradually disappears after six months.

Initially, Panopticon Task Forces are small, unless Control directly orders large numbers of Technocrats together to serve a specific purpose. Lone agents are given Panopticon's powers and are expected to recruit others as they go. Eventually, however, the new Methodology does reach full strength. With access to all of the Union's innovations and a clear sense of purpose, it becomes a force to be reckoned with.

Ironically, the rest of the Technocracy remains far behind in responding to the threat — they have moved on to other projects since the war with the Deviants and can't be bothered with what they believe is an already-defeated foe.

Panopticon teams gather and exercise their strength, the Jesuits begin to flex some of the organizational muscle Control has given them. Specializing in investigation and subversion rather than military force, the amalgam is nonetheless able to bring an impressive amount of force to bear once Panopticon fully integrates itself into the Technocracy.

OPERATIONS

The Jesuits track the dissemination of Rogue Council transmissions for three reasons. First of all, they hope to assemble a complete library of the communiqués for analysis, both to crack the authentication measures of the

Sphinx and to understand how they are done in the first place. Secondly, transmissions tend to be found by Reality Deviants likely to cause trouble. Look for rumors of a Rogue Council document and you're likely to find a superstitionist who needs an attitude adjustment. Third, tracking the Pattern by which transmissions are traded and copied will allow them to gather information about how, where and when Traditionalist terrorists communicate.

To gather this information, Washington and Chain go undercover, while Romanow uses electronic surveillance to coordinate them and collect additional data. Tradition mages may encounter them disguised as Consors or subtle willworkers, or simply fall under Romanow's enlightened gaze. The Jesuits are technically supposed to cover the Western Seaboard of North America, Australia, Japan, Indonesia, and Pacific Asia. However, local Technocrats in many of these countries refuse to cooperate, and other Task Forces often trade regions with them to bring the right expertise to bear in a particular situation. Thus, the Jesuits can be found almost anywhere.

If the Task Force encounters Deviant terrorist plans, they usually respond with subtle dissuasion. Chain can easily imperil a loved one with drug addiction; Washington's Enlightened psychology can destroy the resolve of his subjects. If violence is necessary, the Task Force calls its backup: federal agents equipped with advanced (but not vulgar) weaponry, supported by a lone HIT Mark. The HIT Mark rarely enters combat; Chain and Romanow are "Bruce's" obsessive caretakers and treat him as a tool of last resort. As Panopticon develops, their resources will increase.

CHARACTERS

PTFAP 3 has three agents: the Gray Man Dorje Washington, the Progenitor Chain, and the Iteration X scientist Mila Romanow. They work together well; after bearing the rest of the Union's contempt together, they've learned to trust each other over anyone else. All of them have sharp analytical minds and are not averse to getting into their enemies' mindset to understand Deviant motivations. This is disturbing for Washington, but his social skills make it impossible for most observers to tell.

Chain is a Progenitor with an infamous past; attributed to the widely hated former Research Director Charles Reid, he spearheaded experiments with synthetic narcotics. Reid's plans to damage the parietal lobe pathways associated with psionic powers was seen as crazed by his successors and termed "Gilgul in a pill" by Traditionalists. In truth, Chain wasn't too thrilled with the idea either, but the idea of using narcotics to influence social trends from the street level up still appeals to him. His early work was mostly coercive,

relying on enhanced addictive qualities to change the behavior of the Masses. Now, he prefers to create non-addictive drugs that improve Sleeper neurochemistry while providing a powerful high. This way, he can use the drug culture to actually improve mental health in society's disadvantaged.

Still, Chain's Enlightened pharmacology also produces psychoactive truth serums and the hyper-addictive substances that the Jesuits use to entrap enemies. He may not have Awakening or Gilgul in a pill, but he has a number of helpful and horrific intermediaries at his disposal. In addition, he's a skilled enough surgeon and geneticist to keep "Bruce's" biological components in running order as well as tend injuries and perform cosmetic surgery.

Mila Romanow was a junior Interaction X Time Motion Manager who was assigned the task of supervising HIT Mark operations. Since conventional HIT Mark AIs were actually sophisticated Expert Systems rather than digital consciousnesses, they could get easily confused by complex situations. Romanow's job was to advise the cyborgs if they ever hesitated or did something downright stupid, as well as perform basic software maintenance. While the work had little prestige, she grew to love it — until the HIT Mark program had its funding cut by almost 90 percent. Romanow was transferred into data management. She hated it, but endured until Dorje Washington arrived at her Construct to commandeer records, computer equipment and "Bruce," the last HIT Mark stationed at the facility. She volunteered for the Task Force to get back into the fieldwork she used to vicariously enjoy.

Now, she coordinates the amalgam using conventional communications and Correspondence-based technologies, as well as gathering data through electronic research, computer hacking and hidden bugs and cameras.

DORJE WASHINGTON

Dorje Washington lost his innocence to the New World Order in the same way that he felt he'd stolen it from the Tibetans. Originally Timothy Washington, he was recruited at age 22 by the CIA to drop supplies and freshly-trained insurgents in an ill-fated attempt to overthrow Chinese rule. Fresh out of ROTC, Washington piloted planes over the Himalayas and taught sparse military skills to squads of Buddhist monks who were loyal to the Dalai Lama. Eventually, the Agency packed up the operation, but not before one of the monks declared Washington to be a *rinpoche* and gave him the name Dorje.

He expected to be rewarded with a bland research job when he returned, but it was out of the Agency's

hands; an upper-level authority had plans for him. Recognizing the spark of Enlightenment in him, the New World Order put him through grueling training designed to give him a malleable personality suited for infiltration and espionage. It worked, but with an unanticipated side effect: it made him into a devout Buddhist. Exercises designed to break his will showed him the fundamental emptiness of being. Under the near torture of his trainers, he communed with the bright spark of his Buddha Nature: what mystics would call his Avatar.

Officially, the Technocracy was supposed to be tolerant of other religions, but Dorje (he began using the name after training) was soon marked as an erratic element, made even more dangerous by his trained persuasiveness. His assignments were strictly controlled to prevent him from succumbing to Deviant influences. For the most part, his new life as a spy devolved into the desk job he had originally predicted. Since his attitudes were somewhat unconventional, he was shunned by other agents. Perversely, he took to bizarre affectations to enhance the effect, shaving his head and wearing prayer beads to work. His almost religious sense of purpose, captivating voice and love for intellectual argument had another source as well — unbeknownst to him, he really is the reincarnation of a Tibetan warrior-monk. Occasionally this fact plagues him with strange dreams, but he never really thinks about it.

Nobody was more surprised than he was when a courier delivered orders for him to head a Panopticon Task Force. Over time, he's come to realize that he was, in the end, the best choice for the job. His social skills and his familiarity with scorn made the transition easy for him. A shameless eccentric like him could cut through the red tape and social niceties; through his efforts the Jesuits and other Panopticon cells are growing strong enough to deal with the Rogue Council threat.

Image: Dorje looks like a priest: earnest and honest. His gaunt, 55-year old face has large brown eyes. His head is shaved and he wears loose, ascetic black or gray with his beads poking up past an ill-fitting buttoned collar. His voice and stare are persistent and difficult to ignore. He's very thin and has excellent posture.

Roleplaying Hints: Everybody has a dharma. Yours is to fulfill your inner Genius for psychological manipulation. People — Deviants, especially — need to be shown the error of their ways through peaceful dialogue. Failing that, stronger forms of persuasion are sad, but necessary. Your faith is a rational study that came to you during psychological training. You don't actually believe there's anything mystical about it. Still, your name is a powerful memento from the



formative period in your life, not a previous incarnation. That's just a metaphor, just as the dreams that follow it are metaphors.

That's what fascinates you about this Rogue Council business. It's wrapped up in enigmas. You're going to deconstruct them with Reason, even if it means you have to get your hands dirty with a little superstition. Your Enlightened Science relies almost entirely on your tone of voice and clever speech, though you do have a number of spy gadgets, chemicals and a modest pistol that you use if you must.

Convention: New World Order

Methodology: Panopticon

Essence: Primordial

Nature: Penitent

Demeanor: Director

Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3, Charisma 4 (Dignified), Manipulation 5 (Righteous), Appearance 3, Perception 4 (Detail-Oriented), Intelligence 4 (Original), Wits 4 (Quick)

Abilities: Academics (Buddhist Philosophy) 3, Alertness 3, Awareness 3, Brawl 4 (Disabling), Computer 3, Cosmology 1, Dodge 3, Drive 3, Expression 3, Firearms 4, Hypertech 3, Intimidation 5 (Inducing Inferiority Complexes), Investigation 5, Linguistics 3 (Tibetan, Mandarin, French), Meditation 4 (Buddhist), Melee 3, Performance (Rhetorical Argument) 3, Pilot (Prop Aircraft) 3, Science (Psychology) 4 (Operant Conditioning), Streetwise 3, Subterfuge 5 (Chains of Reasoning), Technology 4 (Engines)

Backgrounds: Arcane 4, Destiny 4, Genius (Avatar) 4, Rank (Panopticon Director) 5

Enlightenment: 5

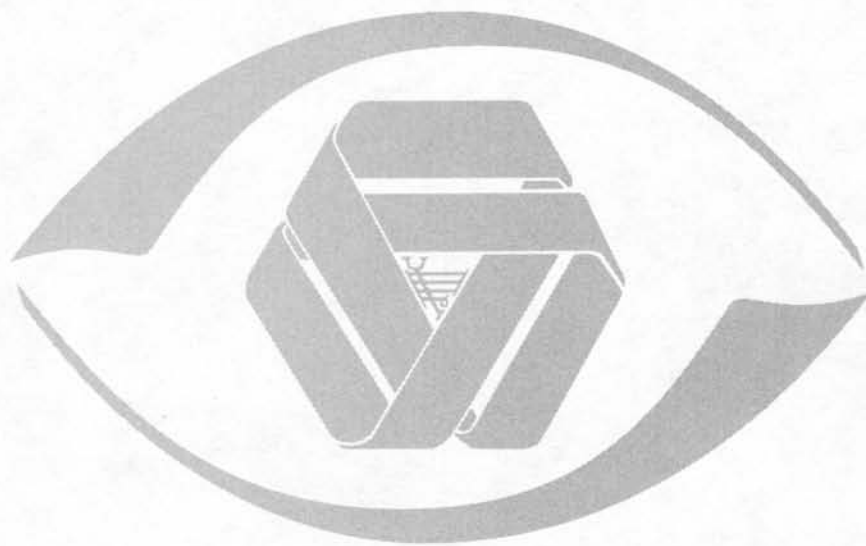
Spheres: Correspondence 2, Entropy 4, Forces 3, Life 2, Matter 2, Mind 4, Prime 3, Time 3

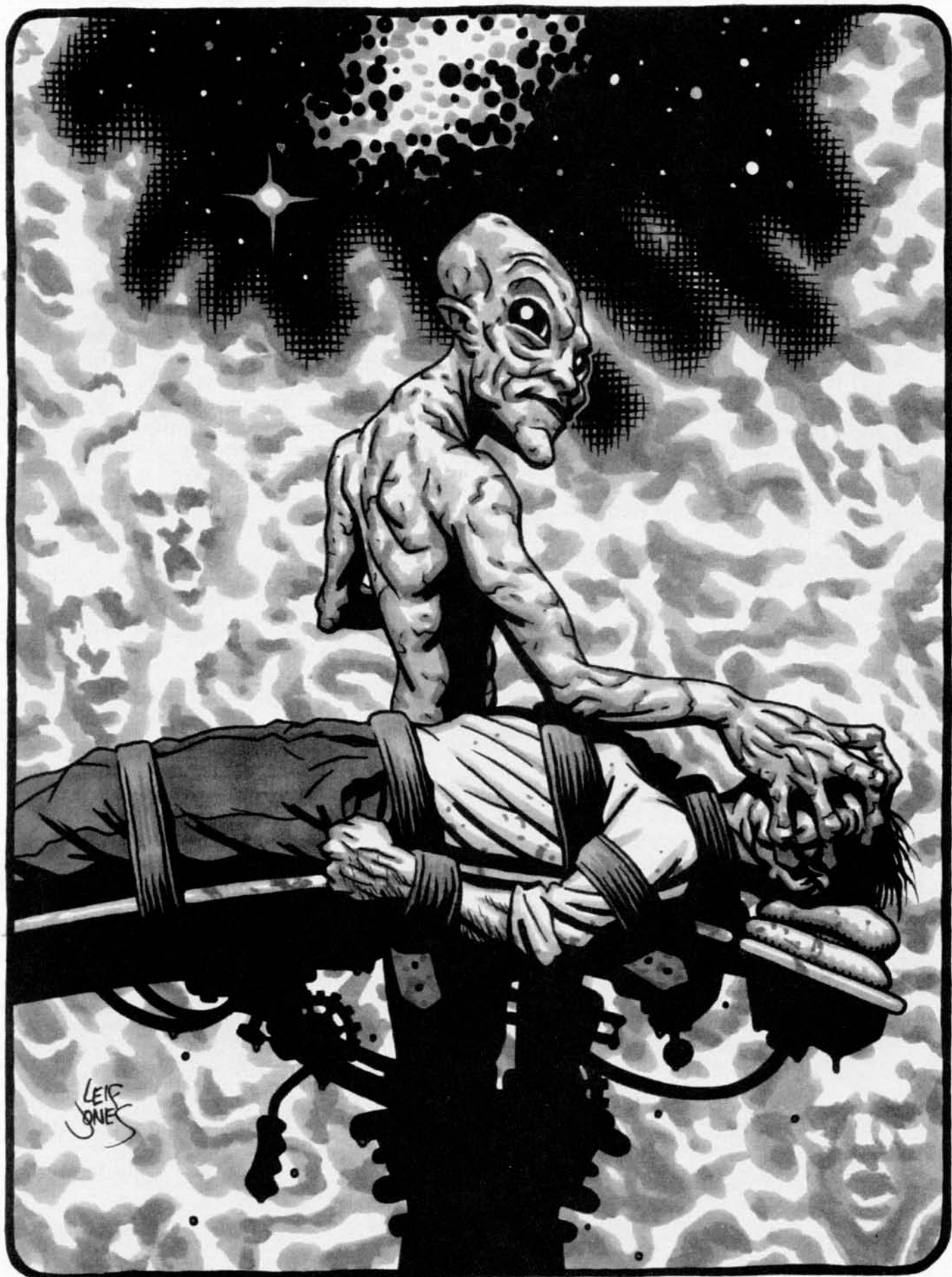
Willpower: 9

Quintessence: 3

Paradox: 0

Resonance: (Dynamic) Thunderous 1, (Entropic) Black 2, (Static) Knotted 1,





CHAPTER FIVE: ALIEN AVATAR

*Meet the military making merry where the magic people go
They are looking at us looking at them and we know they
know we know*
— Shriekback, “Nighttown”



Alien Avatar is a story designed to expose characters to the Rogue Council's influence. They may oppose the Rogue Council or they may not even care about it, but its effect on the lives of all mages is here to be explored. Its actions polarize the Traditions and arouse the Technocracy out of complacency. The Traditions' patchwork of occult conspiracies quakes with a sense of anticipation — or dread. Each new communiqué reveals a new triumph — or danger — in the Rogue Council's new campaign for Ascension.

⊕CCULT ACTION, ⓂORAL TRAGEDY

Alien Avatar is a violent, dangerous scenario. With occult discipline and bleeding-edge technology, mages skirt the summit of human potential — but risk the fruits of hubris if they exercise their abilities too rashly. In

recent years, there's been a perception that **Mage** games are unsuited for this kind of vigorous adventure, but these can be viable stories without undermining the game's unique elements. To succeed, the characters must press their mystical and mundane aptitudes to the very limit.

Sleepers won't have the same kind of power. *Alien Avatar* treats most of them as “Extras,” but they don't fall as bloodlessly as the stock villains of pulp serials. When shot, they scream and clutch at horrible wounds, highlighting the moral paradox mages encounter when they face Sleepers on the field. Add to this the danger of foul Resonance and the catharsis of tearing through ranks of enemy Sleepers becomes a mixed blessing, to say the least.

STRUCTURE

Alien Avatar has a loose two-part structure that's designed to be implemented as a part of an ongoing chronicle.

Act One: The Spirit of '42 introduces a Rogue Council transmission related to the Tradition/Technocracy alliance of the Second World War with evidence that its veterans are being kidnapped or killed for some sinister purpose. Jason Ninemen, a former NWO operative, helps the cabal unravel the mystery of the transmission.

Act Two: Vigilant takes the characters to the Arctic to infiltrate a Technocracy outpost where Control has allowed a Nazi scientist to continue his experiments. The reward: control of the Avatar Storm through a new race of spirits given flesh: the Anakim. As weapons, the Anakim are a priceless asset to any who possesses them — but is it worth the price?

BACKGROUND



In 1946 the Traditions and Technocracy performed the last official function of their wartime alliance. They gathered the Wewelsberg Tribunal to punish Awakened war criminals. Named for a chantry held by Nazi occultists of the Thule Society, the court executed 34 sorcerers and mages who were found guilty of “Crimes Against Ascension” and performed Gilgul upon nine others.

During the course of the hearings the tribunal recorded the disgusting experiments performed by the Thule Society.

SITUATION SIX

The legendary strike force called Situation Six wasn't the only combined Technocracy/Tradition cabal to enter the war, but it was the most famous. Led by the enigmatic Parisian Etherite Doctor Mondial, mages of the Cult of Ecstasy, Order of Hermes, Progenitors, Iteration X and New World Order battled Axis mages across Europe. The Six captured the Thule Cabal operating out of Dachau, but disbanded (some say, in protest) after the tribunal decided to divide the spoils of their experiments.

THE BLACK PAPERS

The *Schwartzurkunde* (“Black Papers”) documented the particular rituals performed near Dachau. The town's Node lay at a crossroads leading to the death camp itself. Thule occultists and Technocrats developed technomantic techniques to channel the camp's Resonance to the Node. The place was used to torture supernatural victims, and was dubbed the *Folterbrunnen* (“Torture Fountain”). Initially, a few of the mages studied its properties with moral reservations, but seers predicted that many Awakened would soon begin to fight on the side of the allies, giving the project a sense of urgency. Furthermore, the Thule Cabal was in a unique position: it worked for a powerful regime that devoted its official research to occult study. The benefits this offered eventually won over the recalcitrant members of the group as they worked to perfect occult weapons for the Third Reich.

The *Folterbrunnen* had one unique, horrific effect: Avatars would shatter when exposed to the Gauntlet around it. Rather than disperse into the void like the victims of Gilgul, the shards of a prisoner's spirit became a razor-edged barrier along the local Gauntlet, where they would savage the Pattern of any Awakened being attempting to enter the Umbra.

A few were spared the shards' attention. These mages were closely examined, and their auras were all determined to have a unique Resonance. Thule Verbena recognized the soul marks: they belonged to Fetches, spirit doubles assigned by the gods to conduct Avatars to their proper destiny. Mages with the Fetch-mark unconsciously used their power over spirit-shards to deflect them away, but they were incapable of otherwise manipulating the Ava-

ANGELS, FETCHES AND ALIENS: THE PSYCHOPOMPS

Certain mages with the *Stormwarden Merit* (**Mage: The Ascension**, page 295) are the modern equivalent of the “Fetch-marked” recorded by Thule Society Verbena. No modern mage knows this, but certain *Stormwardens* are actually descendants of ancient unions between mages and a special class of Umbrood. Some of these are called Grigori (“watchers”) or Anunnaki by mages who study Hermetic or Babylonian Arts (see **Dead Magic** for the mythology of an Anunnaki in the World of Darkness), but they are generally classified as Psychopomps: conductors of souls. According to ancient texts, these spirits had the power to guide Avatars into specific incarnations.

At some point in prehistory, they were barred from interacting with humanity. Obscure rituals, descended from Solomonic and Tibetan Arts, detail their True Names and are the only methods that can be reliably used to summon them. When called, they manifest according to the summoner's paradigm. Most Technocrats see Psychopomps as Grays, the willowy, large-eyed aliens from popular conspiracy literature and the Void Engineers' own explorations of UFO abductions and outer space.



tar-cloud. Hermetics identified the Fetches with their Psychopomp angels, while Technocrats envisioned them as aliens. All agreed that the Avatar Shards would be an ideal weapon in the service of the Third Reich. If a mage could somehow bind a Psychopomp to his service, he could exert full control over the anguished, ruined souls of Dachau's supernatural inmates.

OPERATION SPARKMAKER

At the Wewelsberg Tribunal, the Traditions and Technocracy argued over who would possess the Black Papers and the *Folterbrunnen*. This divided the court until the Euthanatos discovered that a few Axis collaborators were hidden among the Technocratic delegation. The traitors were subjected to Gilgul and Euthanatoi under the guidance of Voormas of Helekar were granted guardianship of the Node. Meanwhile, the *Schwartzurkunde* were given to the Technocracy for safekeeping, supposedly to keep each side from having both of the assets necessary to replicate the experiments.

In fact, the Technocracy had planned to possess the Black Papers all along as part of Operation Sparkmaker, a general policy of absorbing Nazi hypertechnical innovations. Of course, the delusional mystical elements would be rejected, and the "Psionic Dissonance Effect" would be used to guard the Masses.

The Traditions had no such equivalent, though as Voormas' power waxed, a few questioned why he didn't disperse or purify the *Folterbrunnen*. The revelation of his corruption in 1996 answered such questions once and for all.

So the Black Papers, the Torture Fountain and the Psychopomp spirits of the deepest Umbra were all forgotten — or hidden — until now.

ANAKITI RISING

The Avatar Storm was a horrific surprise for most mages — but not all. The Technocracy's Control directed what influence it had into searching for solutions to the problem. On Earth, Technocrats were evenly split between researching the subdimensional catastrophe and keeping their own projects alive in an era of unsteady funding, changing physical laws and uncertain loyalties. Progress was virtually nonexistent, until a Progenitor named Alois Richter came out of retirement. Alois was a former Nazi, shielded from the justice of the Wewelsberg Tribunal by Operation Sparkmaker. With the Black Papers in hand, he proposed an experiment that strained most of his colleagues' ethical boundaries.

Until the Sphinx Emissaries' first strikes, he was left on his own with a lab and a minimal budget.

Afterward, Control took a firmer hand and Alois Richter was allowed to finish the work he began at Dachau. Instead of searching for alien psionic gifts (the Verbena "Fetch-marks") in sample populations, he would create alien-human hybrids who could guide the winds of the Avatar Storm. His greatest advantage was his unorthodox methodology. From his days with the Thule Society,

Richter learned Hermetic rituals and secretly used Enochian rites to guide the Psychopomps into the bodies of his test subjects. Most of the captured mystics and Technocrat volunteers died, screaming in incoherent angelic tongues. One survived: NWO operative Peter Wu. Sequestered in Richter's arctic laboratory, the hybrid now develops his powers and prepares an escape.

ACT ⊕ ONE: THE SPIRIT ⊕ '42



It all begins when player characters discover a Rogue Council transmission in the form of a short film. Storytellers can introduce this in several ways; mages could have a videotape mailed to them, discover a reel of film with the sign of the sphinx, or find a new icon on a computer desktop called *sphinx42.mpg*. No arcane connections to a sender can be traced, indicating that the cabal is the first to see it. However, print, electronic and video copies of the film (along with the mark of the sphinx) reach several other cabals, including Jupiter's Forge (see **Chapter Four** for details on Jupiter's Forge). If the Storyteller wishes, she can use them as allies, enemies or rivals. Through old contacts, Ninemen is aware that the email has been disseminated; he's relying on it as a way to introduce himself to Traditionalists.

The black and white film begins with the image of a sphinx above the following words:

Sphinx Productions Presents: The Spirit of '42!

Then, the newsreel-style, black-and-white film shows five members of Situation Six (but not Doctor Mondial), waving and shaking hands with distinguished men and woman in opposing rows with severe suits and dour, archaic robes. The film has a jerky, antique quality. A voiceover begins:

Enigma takes us where dogma cannot, as Unionists and Traditionalists band together against the Axis threat! No cabal since the First Cabal has inspired such excitement among the Awakened as Situation Six, shown here greeting Enlightened dignitaries from around the world. Founded in 1942....

The voiceover is abruptly cut off and replaced with a shaky hand-held shot of a computer screen. On the screen is the following email:

From: "Alan Cordwainer - Analysis" <cordwainer@domaincloaked>
To: "Management" <M@domaincloaked>
Re: "Situation Six" retirement

Sir,

"Situation Six" related assets have been retired with the exception of Operative Ninemen (and, of course, the Deviant "Mondial," who has been missing since 1946). Ninemen's whereabouts are unknown at this time. Other retirees experienced plausible decommissioning (dementia, heart failure, cancer, schizoid episodes from previous drug use).

I recommend that these retirements be kept under strictest confidence. The war years are a delicate period of history, especially when wartime assets are concerned. Some historical de/reconstruction may be unavoidable, as old propaganda paints assets as "heroes" or "allies."

Operations suggests a high possibility Ninemen may release Operation Sparkmaker data to terrorists. Attached is a disbursement request for necessary resources to reacquire/retire this asset.

The scene cuts to a worn out looking but boyish man in a dated black suit: This is Jason Ninemen, circa 1944. Off camera, an interviewer questions him:

Interviewer: You're called Situation Six, but only five of you are here! Where's Doctor Mondial?

Ninemen: The Doctor's getting ready for the big push into Bastogne. The proletariat Allies have done their job, so the Doctor wants to make sure we can match it—and give the Hun another black eye to match the one pounded in by Yank tanks!

There's a second of blackness, then an official-looking seal that includes the Prime symbol appears over the following words:

Wewelsberg Tribunal Proceedings: Dachau 13/6/46

Over a dozen men and women sit at a long table. Many of them are the same figures Situation Six greeted

earlier in the film. One distinguished elder stands and looks past the camera, saying:

Alois Richter, and the Folterbrunnen Cabal, you are guilty of crimes "in imago infernalis." That is, you have performed acts like unto those committed by servants of Oblivion regardless of whether you have entered into any pact or association with them. You shall be held until such time as sentences of Gilgul and death are carried out. May your gods have mercy on your soul.

There's one final cut to what appears to be an examination table. A corpse lies on it covered in striated burns and cuts. The marks on the body suggest some sort of panicked writing, though the language is incomprehensible, but also resemble a common Paradox backlash manifestation.

A dispassionate voice speaks in German while masked doctors turn the body over and gesture to particularly severe points of trauma. Leaning against a wall, a man in an SS uniform cleans his nails with a knife. The voiceover says:

When directed into the Fountain, energy from the camp interacts with subjects who cross over into supernormal realms by their own power or through the intercession of others. Before death, this prisoner described it as "a curtain of bright razors." If properly harnessed, this could serve as a potent defense against the Reich's occult enemies.

Then credits roll. The listing for every credit but one is gibberish. That last credit, under the cast listings is:

A. Benedict: *Conflicted Secret Agent* — Jason Ninemen
Then, at the conclusion of the credits, it says:

Filmed in San Francisco — where enigma takes you where dogma cannot!

INDEPENDENT RESEARCH

The cabal can attempt to research the events seen in the film.

OPERATION SPARKITAKER

Operation Sparkmaker was heavily warded against Time and Correspondence perceptions. The characters must know where and when to look or have the materials for sympathetic Arts, then overcome 10 successes worth of scrying **Wards**.

If they succeed, they see three men and one woman under heavy guard in a rail car, then a boat. One of them is Alois Richter; the rest are known Awakened Nazi collaborators from the Order of Hermes, Iteration X and the Verbena.

Mundane research avails little. After all, Sparkmaker was a top-secret operation. Nonetheless, characters with Technocracy *Allies* or *Contacts* can find some

information within a day of asking their associates. These Storyteller characters will only be able to discover that the Technocracy spirited away several members of the Thule Society after the war to pick their brains for occult and scientific secrets.

SITUATION SIX

Scrying into the past reveals several pitched battles between Situation Six and mages aligned with the Axis, but characters with Sons of Ether connections can find something more: newsreels! These were filmed by British Etherites to improve Allied Traditionalist morale at the beginning of the war; when the Technocracy joined against the Axis, they kept up the practice.

Starting in 1942, Situation Six fights alongside the French and Spanish resistance. On June 10th 1944, they join several mages who arrived on D-Day. Over the next year, Situation Six cuts a swath from France all the way to Berlin. On May 6, 1945, they kill several Nephandi in the ruins of the Reichstag. On June 11, they capture Alois Richter and three other mages — the same mages who were later spirited away by Operation Sparkmaker. During the fight, Situation Six mage Jane Powell attempts to call a fire elemental to her side, but collapses, screaming. Characters who have seen the effects of the Avatar Storm recognize that she is being affected by a similar phenomenon. Prime senses extended back in time reveal *Storm-Tainted Resonance* around Dachau.

Interestingly, Doctor Mondial doesn't always appear in these visions, or he arrives out of nowhere to save the rest of Situation Six from certain death. Always dressed in dark ether goggles, an aviator's helmet, trenchcoat and a long, spotless blue scarf, the mysterious mage seems to regard Jason Ninemen as his apprentice.

Ordinary research can include interviews with elderly mages (or knowledgeable *Mentors*) and *Consors*, or poring through what remains of the old Council's archives. Traditionalist *Libraries* help, as they include historical documents that mention the legendary cabal.

THE WEWELSBERG TRIBUNAL

It is functionally impossible to scry upon the Wewelsberg Tribunal. The combined might of the Traditions and Technocracy thoroughly warded the event to prevent enemies from tampering with the trials and inquiries therein.

On the other hand, the event is well-documented; any Traditionalist character with even a passing knowledge of Council history will have at least heard of it. Characters may perform further research using their *Mentors*, *Libraries* and the Tradition Lore ability. Success uncovers that the Thule Society performed occult experiments at Dachau's

Node, and that these were recorded in the Black Papers. The nature of these experiments is unknown.

FINDING NINEMEN

He's in San Francisco

Finding him requires scrying, ordinary detective work, or both. He's staying at a cheap motor lodge in the suburbs, but frequently drives downtown to take in the city. He's registered under the name A. Benedict. Even after more than 50 years of retirement he's alert and cautious. If he discovers he's being followed, he'll read the minds of anybody he suspects to determine their motives. Ninemen will attempt to misdirect hostile pursuers but won't kill them unless he feels his life is in danger. If he determines that they're mystics, he'll approach the cabal on his own.

LAYING LOW

The Technocracy is frantically searching for Jason Ninemen, but the wily old operative "tagged" several decoys with a part of his Resonance (but not all of it, to avoid "sympathetic" psionic Procedures). The Union has already uncovered one decoy: his butler in England, Richard. One other is in New York and two (a young couple he chatted with at Heathrow Airport) are back-packing across Nepal and Tibet.

If Ninemen is somehow forced to drop his cloaking Effect or the characters use vulgar magic near one of the Union's strongholds, the Union will take notice. They employ satellite intelligence operatives from the NWO Watcher methodology to scan the area first (roll an Arete of 2 five times, difficulty 5, four successes required). If that's unsuccessful, then psychic remote viewers take their turn (roll six dice, difficulty 8, three successes required). Characters with Awareness or active Prime senses can detect attempts at psionic surveillance.

If the Technocrats can positively identify Ninemen, an amalgam begins to spy on the characters to ascertain their motives. Fortunately, the Union is still off-balance from Ninemen's deceptions, events surrounding the Rogue Council and internal reorganization, so the amalgam that follows them is poorly supported and lacks the power to immediately confront the cabal. Still, they will follow and record what they can. Staff the amalgam with low-powered Technocrats from templates such as those found in **Guide to the Technocracy** or any of the **Convention Books**. If the Technocracy easily spies on the cabal, Control may authorize more direct intervention.

IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED...

If the cabal fails to meet Ninemen, you can relay his information in a number of ways. Jupiter's Forge may have intercepted him. If the characters are friendly toward the Sphinx cause, they may introduce the cabal to him or relay what he knows.

You could also turn the documents Ninemen brings with him into a transmission of its own, sent to the characters by fax, email or post.

WHAT NINEMEN KNOWS

As a part of Situation Six, Jason Ninemen helped capture the Thule Society mages at Dachau. He knows that the phenomenon at the Torture Fountain resembles the Avatar Storm. All of his old comrades are dead or incapacitated; he assumes he was due for termination as well. A sympathetic Technocrat allied with the Friends of Courage tipped him off (the Friends are those within the Union dedicated to stymieing projects at odds with the Order of Reason's original ideals).

He doesn't know anything about the technical details of the project, but he has always believed that the legacy of those experiments should have been destroyed long ago. For that reason alone, he's willing to defect to the Traditions — and he's brought along information vital to uncovering the secret at the heart of the transmission.

He hands the cabal hard copies of the medical records for 13 of the 14 Awakened subjects of Richter's experiments. Numbering records indicates that there were 14 subjects. The records are marked: *CFS Vigilant — Isolation Center Eyes Only*.

Thirteen autopsy photos show a collection of people who all appear to have died in intense pain while being twisted into inhuman forms. Some have what appear to be bloody wings dangling from their shoulders. Others have huge, luminous eyes and rubbery gray-green skin. Each subject either died from physical trauma or was killed due to brain death or "a dangerous parapsychological reaction to xenogenetic implantation."

Ninemen urges the cabal to intervene. He knows where CFS Vigilant is and that it's a military base and Technocracy outpost in the Arctic Circle, but nothing else. He offers training and strategic advice, but will not under any circumstances accompany the characters or even assist them from afar with Effects. Any suggestion for him to do so irritates him, making him even more dispirited than usual.

He's lost his faith. During Operation Sparkmaker, the Technocracy refused to let justice override self-interest.

He feels guilty by association; Doctor Mondial vanished because of it. With the symbol of his idealism gone, he's in no condition to act. He's relying on the supposed idealism of the Traditions to display the courage that he lacks.

As a defector, Ninemen is willing to share what he knows about Technocracy operations (much of which is dated) in exchange for performing this one service. If pressed, he'll even offer a cash bribe (four levels of *Resources* he has hidden in a numbered bank account).

If the cabal appears to accept the mission for purely mercenary reasons, he'll do the absolute minimum of what he promised, then vanish, either to ally with a more idealistic group (such as Jupiter's Forge) or to turn himself into the Technocracy after the cabal returns from CFS Vigilant.

On the other hand, characters who seem to take the mission out of a sense of moral outrage or for the sake of their ideals hearten him. He'll secretly scry on the characters as they infiltrate the base. Once he encounters Technocracy countermeasures, his inside knowledge allows him to easily identify and circumvent them.

CFS VIGILANT

Canadian Forces Station Vigilant was originally a signal intelligence and DEW (Distant Early Warning) line station, used to detect Soviet radio signals and, if necessary, alert NORAD in the event of an oncoming nuclear strike. In 1990, the base was partially decommissioned. It now serves as a training facility for NATO cold weather combat operations. It's known as a hardship post; the deadly climate, decrepit buildings and the psychological effect of the region's months of unremitting darkness, followed by months of unremitting light, are sources of fatigue and danger for the handful of troops stationed here at any given time.

This is all a matter of public record. Of course, the Technocracy outpost that exists *under* the base is a secret. Guidelines for gathering information about the Union's presence in Vigilant are covered in Act Two.

ACT TWO: VIGILANT



The time for investigation is over. It won't be easy. In fact, it might be positively bloody. The cabal won't be able to salve their consciences easily, since CFS Vigilant's defenders aren't conspirators, but soldiers: working men who follow orders to the best of their ability. Only a handful of the 40 combat operations troops stationed here know anything about the Technocracy areas of the base. Of those, a very few guard the sub-levels. The rest believe that they're guarding secret NATO technology — perhaps even alien artifacts that are being tested far from civilization to avoid a catastrophe.

Underground, in a shifting maze of liquid metal corridors, Alois Richter studies the only survivor of his experiments: Peter Wu. Wu has become a monster; the Psychopomp inhabiting him is a cold alien thing, made more so by the NWO operative's belief that he's been fused with an alien intelligence. His ultimate aim is to call forth his banished brethren: dark angels and spirit-fetches eager to return to the world they were barred from in ages past.

GATHERING INTELLIGENCE

The cabal can gather intelligence from a variety of sources. Mundane research can determine the layout of the base, prevailing weather conditions and the general purpose of each surface building.

Computer hacking can acquire more detailed information. Use the computer hacking rules in **Mage: The Ascension**, pp. 231-233. The relevant Pentagon and Canadian Department of Defense files require three successes to find. The files are stored on a large network; sysops sweep for hackers every hour and have average Intelligence + Computer dice pools of six. If the hacker is caught stealing files related to CFS Vigilant the Technocracy will be alerted within the day and will dispatch a Contingency One team to the source (or worse, depending on how much intelligence its gathered on the characters and whether or not this can be linked to the hacker).

Successful characters learn that 40 combat troops drawn from Canadian Joint Task Force Two commandos and the US Army Rangers have been sent to the base for training and unnamed "special projects." Perusing general orders reveals that they work in four-man squads; three squads patrol the perimeter and seven squads perform guard duty and "training" exercises. The squads have six-hour watches and relieve each other squad by squad, staggered in one hour cycles to avoid vulnerability as the shift changes. In addition, there are 12 Signal Intelligence officers who maintain the listening post and eight more who handle maintenance, logistics and other routine duties. The soldiers are under the overall command of Major Lucas Blaylock. Blaylock

DID YOU SAY FORTY SOLDIERS?

At first glance, the challenge of CFS Vigilant looks too difficult for most cabals. How can a handful of mages stand up to such staggering opposition? The answer, of course, is that they can't. If the characters go in trying to methodically eliminate the enemy from each and every corner of the base in the spirit of a first-person shooter or dungeon crawl, they'll lose. But if they apply planning and forethought, they can survive and succeed, just like this story's playtesters did. Encourage the players to develop a smart plan. Jason Ninemen can advise characters who look like they're about to blunder into the North. Intelligent plans include:

Training and Rehearsal: The story's finale is not so time sensitive that the characters must rush in. They can take anywhere from a few days to a month training for the mission. If the characters take several weeks to train, you may wish to give them the benefit of a full season of training as per the rules in **Guide to the Traditions**.

Rehearsal can help as well. Magic can enhance this, from constructed dreams to Digital Web simulations. Knowing the surface layout and staff at the base helps immensely. This bit of forethought is perhaps the most important step the cabal can take — and it allows the Storyteller to run a "light" version of the mission to build player confidence and get more action out of the story.

Stealth: The cabal should try to avoid direct combat as much as possible. Preparing Effects that conceal the characters from regular detection and infrared, as well as disguising the cabal as soldiers, can be an extremely effective tactic.

Don't forget that the weather can serve as effective concealment as well. The cabal can either follow inclement weather or create it. Even though weather control usually requires Mastery of Forces, clever Spirit Effects can call storm-Umbrood to the characters' side.

Attack: Because they are infiltrating a Technocracy outpost, the cabal will want to ensure that they have reliable mundane weaponry on their side. Preparing coincidental Effects before arrival can greatly enhance their chances. Combat Wonders (such as temporary Charms) will reduce the effect of Paradox by directing it to the item rather than the mage. Since duration is relatively economical to build into an Effect, a host of minor preparations can last for the entire mission.

Defense: Aside from using cover and the environment to their advantage, characters should prepare Effects that deflect kinetic energy (the majority of attacks from soldiers) and enhance evasive abilities (such as Dexterity + Dodge pools). Mind and Entropy effects can create helpful mirages or accidents as well. Again, duration is easy to accumulate, so these can be cast before arriving.

Healing: If nobody in the cabal has the third rank of Life, characters should take advantage of social ties to other mages to acquire Charms. Barring that, enhancing character durability through enhanced armor or dumb luck (Entropy) can compensate.

Allies: While it will create headaches if the Storyteller allows the cabal's allies to join them, they can legitimately provide support in the form of ritual assistance, healing Charms, mundane knowledge, tactics and physical resources.

was in the British Special Air Service prior to becoming a US citizen; he now serves the US Armed Forces as a "training liaison" with a number of special forces groups. Signal Intelligence and logistics are under the overall command of Colonel Antoine Whetung, a Canadian Forces officer. Whetung is an unexceptional if competent administrator (use the character Traits for non-combat military personnel; see page 86).

Characters with the appropriate military *Contacts* or at least three levels in NATO military *Rank* can also find out this information if they are discreet. Despite this being officially a training exercise, the military staff responsible for the operation have been remarkably tight-lipped with other officers about the details — a sign of the Technocracy at work. In the right circles,

Blaylock is known for directing "black ops." Discovering useful information requires adroit social skills.

The cabal may also wish to scry upon the base. Unfortunately, the Union has equipped the listening station with psionic and electronic countermeasures: a 30-success **Ward** and **Ban** on unauthorized Correspondence and Forces intrusions. The Gauntlet is a crushing rating-nine barrier. These properties extend to the perimeter of the base, but not beyond it. Around the base, the Gauntlet is weak: a rating of three. There are no **Bans** or **Wards**, so it is possible for characters to scry and teleport into the surrounding terrain. The Umbra is remarkably barren; with life in short, sporadic supply, Astral and primal Umbrood have little permanent purchase. Like their mortal counterparts, nature spirits are seasonal migrants or simply sleep through the winter.

AGAINST THE NORTH

CFS Vigilant is over 700 miles north of the nearest civilian settlement: a ramshackle little town named Erebus. It's illegal to fly within 100 kilometers of CFS Vigilant. Erebus has a tiny airstrip that serves authorized traffic to and from the base. Signal intelligence personnel often come to the town to purchase luxuries. The North Pole is closer; less than 400 miles away. In addition, several Inuit settlements line the southern tip of Ellesmere Island, with the closest being only 435 miles south.

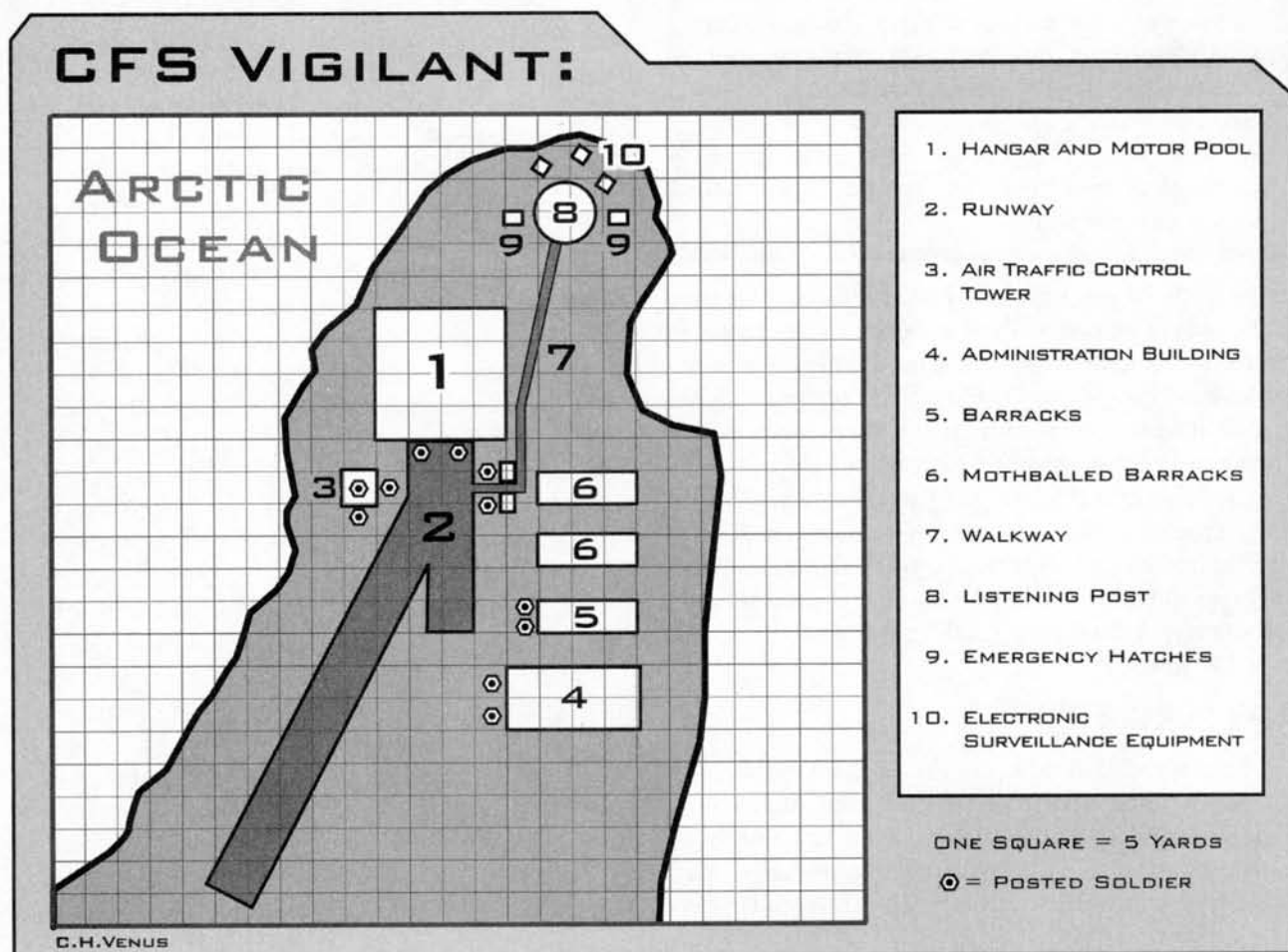
North of Erebus, the land stretches on to barren permafrost plains. In the winter, the land is covered in snow and ice that ranges from a few inches to four or more feet in depth. The base itself is on a small inlet, though the practical difference between land and sea is simply determined by what the ice happens to cover. Occasionally, open water is seen in the summer. In any event, snowshoes or skis and a steel pole are recommended at any time except the middle of summer, because of the danger of becoming trapped in the snow or falling through thin ice into water. A full outfit costs two levels of *Resources* for each character unless magic is used to compensate.

Because of the base's position, there is no direct sunlight between the months of October and March and no true night the rest of the time, save for a period of a few days between the transition. The average temperature is minus 22 Fahrenheit, but it can rise to as high as 32 during the summer or drop to over minus 100 in the permanent night of winter.

Because of uneven thawing, ice caves surround the base. These can be a handy source of shelter if the cabal can locate them—but they have a tendency to collapse in severe weather. The Storyteller should locate these caves wherever it would be appropriate for the story.

PARADIGM

The base's paradigm is rigidly Technocratic; characters are advised to use whatever magic they can before entering the base itself. The base's **Bans** and **Wards** apply to the interior as well as the perimeter; unauthorized Correspondence Effects must penetrate the interference (the **Wards** are authenticated with special Pattern Resonance *Encrypted* and may be duplicated if the cabal acquires a sample). Clever magic can trace the source of the interference to the listening station. For-



SURVIVAL SYSTEMS

Characters should roll Stamina + Survival (difficulty 7) if they approach CFS Vigilant during the winter and spend more than an hour outdoors. On a failure, a character suffers an unsoakable level of bashing damage due to hypothermia. On a botch, the character suffers frostbite as well — a level of lethal damage. Roll every hour the character is outdoors; three successful rolls in a row protect the character for the next 24 hours as well, since it's assumed that she's tough and wise enough to consistently protect herself. If it's exceptionally cold, the roll will be required every half hour. If the characters don't have layers of insulation, the roll is made every few minutes. In these cases, three successful rolls do not protect the character for an extended period of time; she must eventually construct an insulated shelter or perish. Naturally, magic can prevent or nullify this hazard.

Proper attire reduces Dexterity-based dice pools by two. In winter, deep snow and unpredictable footing reduce speeds to one quarter normal. This can be countered with snowshoes (the characters can move at half speed) or skis (the characters can move full speed or better with a Dexterity + Athletics roll, difficulty 4). Again, Akashic characters capable of walking on water or similar tricks make the matter moot. Dogsleds are certainly an option, but the dogs have to be fed and protected from harsh weather as well.

Unfortunately, this doesn't apply to Forces Effects, since that would wreak havoc with the hundreds of types of electronic equipment used at the base. Only the subtlest coincidences will avoid Paradox. Some technomancers may be able to circumvent this, if their methods are similar to Technocratic Enlightened Science.

Out of sight of the base, the paradigm is quite loose. The dangerous nature of the region has left a deep psychic impression; any Effect is coincidental unless it serves to mitigate the harshness of the environment without a mundane prop (such as warm clothing or a torch) to justify it.

INFILTRATION

Squads patrol in snowmobiles, with two soldiers to a vehicle. They have thermal-optic and nightvision goggles that allow them to detect characters with heat signatures and pierce the cover of darkness. Characters found approaching the perimeter are intercepted by two

squads (eight soldiers on four snowmobiles). In contested rolls to detect infiltrators (Perception + Alertness; roll once for all patrols), the patrols add three dice due to their equipment, unless the cabal takes appropriate precautions to conceal its heat signatures and relies on more than darkness.

Captured characters are disarmed, divested of everything but their clothes and thrown in holding cells for questioning. Claiming to be hunters or explorers doesn't avoid this, because the soldiers can't simply let intruders freeze to death. If the characters refuse to come quietly, the soldiers will shoot.

AT WAR

Unless their radios are scrambled, the soldiers will immediately alert CFS Vigilant if they find intruders. It takes approximately 10 minutes or a scene (whichever is longer) for off-duty squads to assume full battle readiness. Passwords are transmitted over their headsets. These change every hour, or every 15 minutes if the base is on alert. If the cabal makes it inside the perimeter without detection and are disguised, they normally

WHAT DO THE SLEEPERS THINK?

Sleeper personnel at CFS Vigilant believe that the US is testing secret technology at the base. Unusual people with top clearance regularly visit the listening post, sometimes with prisoners in tow. The soldiers are there to train and guard the listening post — an easy, if unexciting, task. A few of them think that their governments are testing recovered UFO technology or biological weapons and need human test subjects. However, they do get to test out some advanced weapons systems. All of them have worked with the base's hardsuits as well as advanced rifles, lasers and communications systems. Access to these toys has done much to mitigate low morale.

As the Construct has existed for the last decade of the base's existence, Signal Intelligence personnel gradually got used to the Technocrats living and working under them. After all, they worked with secret information all the time, so they didn't see it as anything unusual. Still, the obvious prisoners brought through (usually in some sort of drugged catatonia) have created dissatisfaction among the military personnel here. A small number have leaked their stories to people in the military intelligence community. Storytellers may wish to add this information to the clues obtainable by the cabal.

won't be challenged. If they do set off the alarm, they are challenged no matter their appearance.

If the Technocracy with the characters are coming, the base is on high alert and is supplemented by the hardsuit squad. In any event, soldiers will fall back to the listening station. If it becomes obvious that the cabal has supernatural assistance, IA Howe (see pp. 88-89) will take to the field with a squad. He'll use his Enlightened techniques to find and kill all but one member of the cabal. The survivor will be interrogated and Conditioned, then probably be sent back to infiltrate the Traditions.

If the characters decimate the soldiers, the soldiers flee on as many snowmobiles as they can to regroup at a supplies cache 25 miles south of CFS Vigilant. Half of them will return to try to retake the base; the other half will flee south. The characters will then have to deal with NATO troops and police on a worldwide manhunt, as well as a heavily armed rapid reaction force that will arrive to retake the base in 48 to 72 hours. Ironically, soldiers inside the base can't call for conventional assistance because of the secretive Technocracy presence.

ENLIGHTENED DEFENSES

After approximately half an hour or three scenes (whichever is longer), the soldiers will be reinforced with a squad of hardsuit operatives led by Major Blaylock. This is reduced to 20 minutes or two scenes if the characters exhibit obvious magical powers. The squad will defend the listening station and if pressed, will bomb the elevator shaft leading to the sub-levels, preventing mundane intrusion. Blaylock and his squad fight intelligently, but don't retreat; they'll give their lives to repulse intruders. If he witnesses enough of his people getting slaughtered, he'll throw caution to the wind and lash out at any enemy he can find, running ahead of his own men to do so.

THE SURFACE

Surface buildings are unimpressive. Made of prefabricated modules transported by plane, they are square, sturdy things with corrugated metal and plastic siding. None of them have basements; instead of foundations, they have thick supporting walls. The Storyteller can customize the layout of each building as she sees fit. Keep in mind that all of them will have at least two entrances and, if they have a second floor, two stairwells.

The administrative building and barracks are unexceptional, containing kitchens, bunks, offices and the like. Each building also has a locked arsenal allowing soldiers access to battle dress, weapons and ammunition in the event of an emergency. One in four soldiers (squad leaders) have keys.

The hangar doubles as a motor pool, containing fuel and tools to service the snowmobiles. There currently aren't any planes at the base: the airframe control tower is a 40-foot tall metal lattice structure. In the event of an alert, two soldiers will climb it to use as a sniper's nest.

The runways are kept clear enough for rough landings, but deep snow restricts outdoor mobility during the winter. This is why a five-foot wide, five-foot high concrete walkway connects the rest of the base to the listening post. It might also serve as a source of cover for both player characters and soldiers.

LISTENING POST

The listening post is a geodesic dome that contains a single large room, filled with computers linked to the antennas outside. Eight Signal Intelligence officers man their posts at all times. In the event of an emergency they stay in the building but take 9mm sidearms out of a small storage locker. Then they spend their time wiping all of their computers' storage media, shredding all printouts and physically destroying anything they can't reliably erase.

The room is noisy; in addition to the sound of the building's generator an unoccupied, high-tech workstation emits a high-pitched whine. Thick cables connect it directly to the wall of the dome. Finally, a black box is plugged into the computer via a nonstandard port. It is unmarked except for a small socket labeled: "Biogel: Oxygenated Neurostatic Formula." It is warm to the touch — body temperature, in fact, just as a container for a psionically active brain tissue culture needs to be.

The workstation is the source of the base's **Wards** and **Bans**. Smashing it will drop both Effects, but instantly alert the Construct underneath. Hacking into it is a difficulty 9 feat; an autonomous expert system sweeps the computer for intruders every minute. Enlightened staffmembers know the necessary passwords.

Finally, the elevator to the Technocratic sub-levels is a 10-foot wide cube in the middle of the room. It's password protected (via a keypad) as well; the password changes every 10 minutes. New passwords are sent to soldiers guarding the Construct and Enlightened personnel via a pager. Of course, creative uses of Abilities and magic can defeat this.

THE CONSTRUCT

50 feet below the surface, the Construct is a compact, austere place compared to the scientific fortresses that the Technocracy is known for. The facility (which has the same name as the base, though it's frequently just called "the basement") was originally built for

isolated biological and nanotechnology research. It's a modest place, currently configured to hold four Technocrats in comfort, able to pursue their own experiments as well as the hybridization project.

As a spinoff of its nanotech work, the Construct has a unique feature: its interior layout is programmable. The walls and doors of the facility are actually a nanobot colony; certain frequencies of Primal-band radiation (Quintessence) allow an Enlightened supervisor to create or eliminate rooms, corridors, walls, and doors at will. The process takes anywhere from 10 minutes to several hours, depending on how radical a change is made. Many components are still made of conventional materials, and radical restructuring requires changes to the power grid and plumbing. The walls have a dull, bluish sheen and have curving ribs and struts, giving the Construct's interior a biomechanical ambiance. Full-spectrum florescent lights illuminate the interior and potted plants fill odd nooks; the Technocrats who work here want to minimize the feeling of being buried underground.

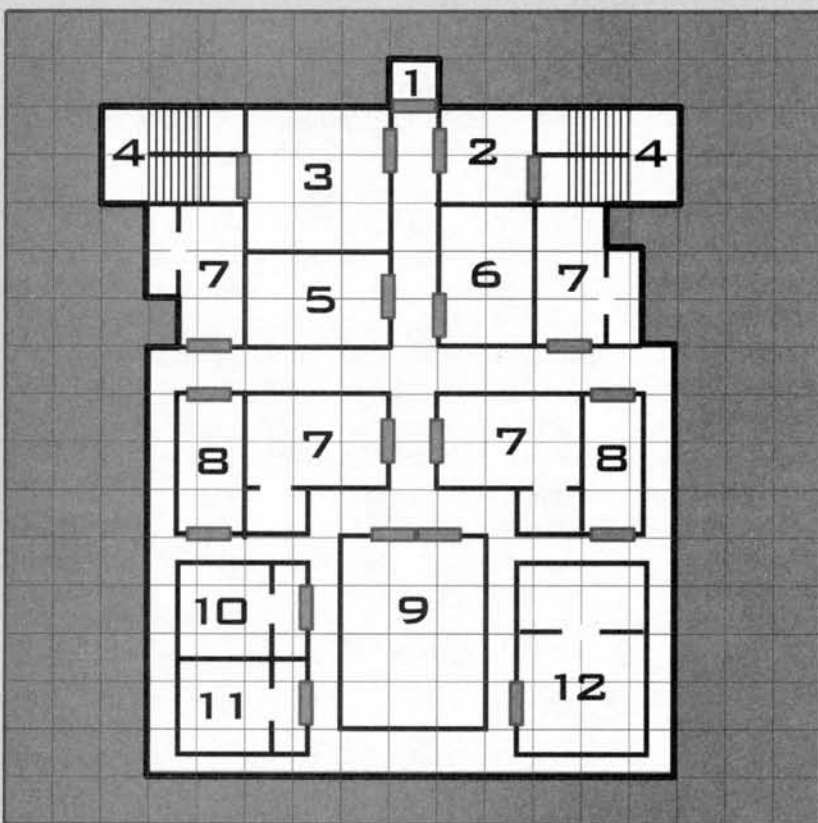
WHEN IT CHANGES

Peter Wu can sense the cabal's approach; as one of the Anakim, he's naturally attuned to the characters' Avatars.

As soon as they enter the elevator, he tears down the Gauntlet around the second sub-level. The violent interaction between Matter and Spirit warps the area and drives his Sleeper guards insane. They become hosts for his Sendings. Richter planned for such a contingency; a prepared Correspondence/Dimensional Science **Ban** rises, preventing Wu from leaving the sub-level. These Effects are keyed to Wu's Resonance and don't prevent anyone else from entering or leaving. As a side effect of the change, the elevator shaft on the second sub-level buckles, preventing the elevator from reaching that floor. Clever players can circumvent this, and in any event, Wu will draw them down when the Storyteller deems it appropriate.

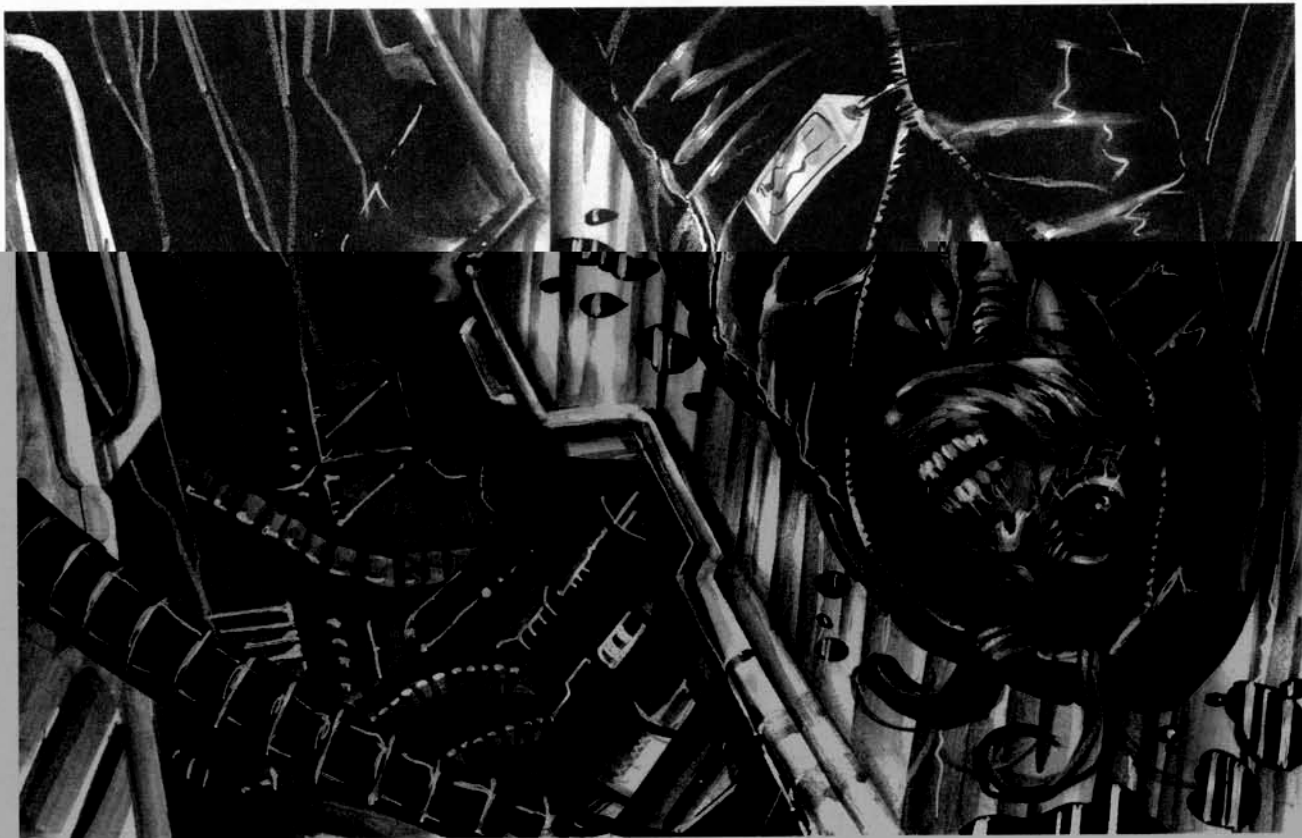
If he's not otherwise occupied, Howe will isolate the second sub-level with further **Bans** using the workstation in the listening post. Other Technocrats will direct the Construct's nanobots to seal off the elevator shaft. (This process that takes about 20 minutes, resulting in a barrier of normal wall material between the first and lower levels, preventing the elevator from getting up or down. This freezes the elevator cables into place, stalling the elevator. The basement is sunk into earth.) Finally, the first Technocrat to respond will set off an

SUB-LEVEL ONE:



1. ELEVATOR
2. SECURITY STATION
3. ARMORY
4. STAIRS FROM EMERGENCY HATCHES
5. COMPUTER LAB
6. COMMON ROOM/ KITCHEN
7. LIVING QUARTERS
8. LAB STORAGE
9. STORAGE AREA
10. NANOTECH LAB
11. BIOLOGY LAB
12. DOCTOR RICHTER'S LAB

ONE SQUARE = ONE YARD



implanted transponder to send a distress call to a Panopticon Task Force (see “Science Versus Science”).

Alois Richter is on the second sub-level when the chaos erupts. Wu captures him and exacts some revenge, torturing him while he waits for the cabal to arrive.

SUB-LEVEL ONE

The first sub-level has been configured to provide living quarters and personal lab space for the four Technocrats stationed here. If the cabal’s approach is known, any Technocrats not otherwise indisposed will go to their labs to prepare defenses. Blaylock directs the troops while Richter stays in the basement. If Howe hasn’t left to try to assassinate the characters, he’ll be here as well. One squad is stationed on this floor; in an emergency, a ladder shaft or stairwell will be constructed to send more soldiers down (it takes about 20 minutes for the nanobots to build such an egress).

This level contains living quarters for the Enlightened staff, laboratories devoted to nanotechnology and microorganism research, a security station, common room and kitchen. Feel free to flesh out these features, but the most important area is Alois Richter’s lab.

DOCTOR RICHTER’S LAB

Two examination tables are here but only one of them is currently occupied. Inside the closed body bag

is a horribly deformed human being; she looks as if her flesh had *flowed* for a few seconds. The flesh is cool to the touch; she’s been refrigerated. Characters who have seen the records Ninemen brought with him will recognize the corpse as belonging to Amelia Mirren, one of the thirteen victims of Richter’s experiments.

X-Rays line the walls, each displaying some sort of disfigurement. A dog-eared copy of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* lies on the counter — a relic from attempts to understand the last ravings of the deceased.

An unmarked door leads to the next room. Players should roll their characters’ Perception + Awareness (difficulty 6) dice pools when the characters enter. The place is suffused with Richter’s personal Resonance. This is where Richter summons the Psychopomps.

The room contains medical equipment and a refrigerator filled with pre-measured doses of morphine (for dealing with Paradox backlash injuries). A dark-gray padlocked footlocker lies on the floor. If characters open it, they find a decidedly un-Technocratic collection of artifacts. Placed over the rest of the locker’s contents, a sheathed broadsword with a single engraved swastika radiates Richter’s Resonance.

Characters familiar with Hermetic Arts will note that the sword is of a type used for summoning major Umbrood. Underneath it, five seals sculpted in gold,

XENØGENESIS

Richter took samples of "alien genetic material" (actually the materialized flesh of Psychopomp extrusions into consensual reality). Tailored viruses then infused the subjects' bodies with alien "genes." The subjects were observed over a period of weeks, then (with the exception of Wu) autopsied. The remains of subjects with particularly unusual behavior patterns or mutations were shipped to an off-world Construct for further study. As the only survivor, Wu was held in a cell on the second sub-level.

Richter's methods for acquiring samples (actually materialized ephemera) were unconventional. The Fetch-spirits ("aliens") he called from beyond the Horizon only respond to mystical methods. They're too powerful to be compelled to come with anything less than Archmaster-ranked Effects, so Richter worked within the Psychopomps' preferred paradigm. He must call upon them with Enochian rites; thanks to his tenure with Nazi occultists, he integrated a twisted form of Hermetic magic into his own style.

His Arts are a secret known only to Control and the other operatives on the base. Control knows of the mystical significance of his methods; his fellow agents see it as an unusual, perhaps dangerous manner of focusing psionic aptitudes. Blaylock disapproves of this, but his orders came from the highest echelons of the Technocracy. Ironically, the same dedication that fosters quiet contempt for Richter's methods makes it impossible for him to object.

iron, silver and bronze represent characters for "angel," "outsider," "shadow" and "dominion." Finally, at the bottom of the heap is a large, battered black folder, stamped with an eagle and swastika. In it are the Black Papers, describing the experiments at the Torture Fountain and its final phase: the merging of human and "alien" characteristics to create a being capable of controlling the Avatar Storm.

SUB-LEVEL TWO⊕: THE SOUL PRISON

There is no easy way to the second sub-level. Aside from teleportation, Umbral travel (dangerous due to the high Gauntlet) or similar magical efforts, the cabal can simply try to burrow through the wreckage of the lower floor's elevator shaft.

However, the Anakim Peter Wu *wants* to meet the characters. He suspected that Richter might have a contingency plan ready in case he tried to escape and

needs the characters' assistance. Furthermore, he needs Awakened hosts for the Psychopomps that await him outside of the Horizon. If the cabal is taking too long for his (and thus, the Storyteller's) taste, Wu will smash through the floor with Prime-charged ephemera to create a convenient opening.

WU'S MADNESS

After the genetic infusion of Psychopomp flesh, Wu has been wracked with visions of beings who await their chance to return to the world. Struggling to comprehend them through his paradigm and deep religious feelings, Wu envisions them as aliens—but also angels, returning to Earth to claim their rightful due. Alien contact wracks his mind; he seeks refuge in his beliefs to translate the messages they send him.

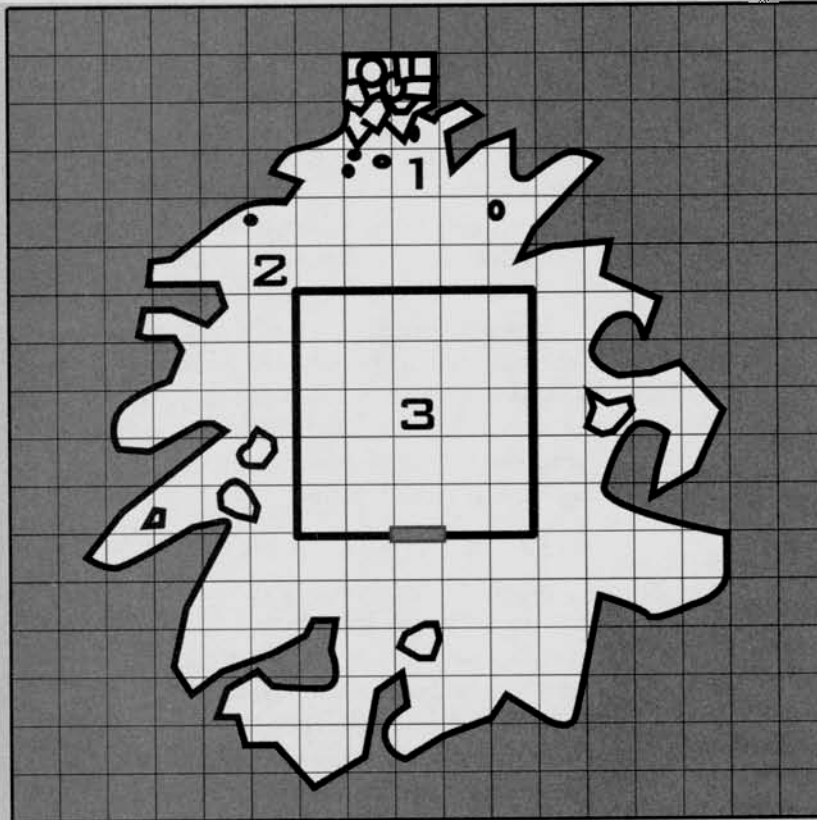
Wu believes that at Creation's dawn, when the cosmos still burned with Primal fire, angelic beings claimed dominion over aspects of this bright new Tapestry. They were mighty things, unhindered by the flesh, though they were mere shadows of the Pure Ones that named (and in a sense, thereby created) the stars and searing Odylic flows at the heart of all being.

In humanity they saw the promise of unlimited potential—but also loss, for humanity was bound to flesh and the passage of time, doomed by the world's Entropy. So these beings—called Fetches or Grigori by some, though they were all of these and more—came to walk among mortals. They helped them remember the names of things and the powers that lay beyond their fleshly prison. These Psychopomps used their powers to guide souls to their destinies—and were punished for it.

One angel/alien proclaimed himself the true and only Creator. This demiurge enmeshed its servants in an endless intrigue to bring balance to the universe. Claiming itself to be unconquerable and eternal, it resented attempts to smash the prison of reality and punished the Psychopomps. Some were imprisoned in the heart of the world; others were cast into the Outer Dark.

But now, the walls of the world-prison are crumbling. Demons flood the world on the heels of the Restless dead. The soul-conductors and Fetches are desperate to reenter Creation and free it. At the very least, this is what is true for Peter Wu, who has been thoroughly subverted to the cause of the spirit growing inside him. He honestly believes that the Psychopomps who speak to him are the harbingers of Ascension. He may even be right.

SUB-LEVEL TWO:



1. ELEVATOR SHAFT
(FILLED WITH DEBRIS)
2. RUINED LEVEL
3. ISOLATION LAB

ONE SQUARE = ONE YARD

Peter Wu can't lure the characters into giving themselves over to the Fetch-angels with the guile he'd prefer, but his experience as an NWO operative has given him a backup plan: torture. Between his command of the Avatar Storm and the abilities he refined as a loyal Technocrat, he's willing to use agonizing force to compel the characters to accede to his wishes.

FEATURES

Matter and Spirit collide here, as Wu has turned this entire level into one huge Shallowing. The **Ban** that Richter activated (20 successes worth, prepared by Richter and Howe as a precaution) can barely contain the flux. The Avatar Storm has no effect on Awakened characters entering this area. The smashed and distorted remains of the lab litter the entire chamber. These include manacles (this floor used to contain the holding cells), vials of strange, caustic fluid, smashed computer equipment and fluttering X-Rays depicting mystically deformed bodies. Only the isolation lab retains its original shape. The dark concrete chamber sits in the middle of the sub-level. Hoarse screams (Richter's) echo from its walls.

The walls writhe with the material of the nanobot surfaces as they react to the Resonance that cascades through the area. The floor is covered in the stuff; running or engaging in combat on it requires Dexterity + Athletics rolls (difficulty 5) to prevent falls, as pseudopods, strange symbols and the imprint of human faces rise from the dull metallic fluid. The ceiling is a shimmering mist through which the Umbral constellations can barely be observed. The Red Star hangs at the pole, burning with malevolent, sanguine light. Mages with Awareness can see the bands of power that keep the area from erupting into the rest of the Umbra. The grip of the Technocratic paradigm is gone; all magic is coincidental here. Unfortunately, characters seeking access to the Umbra are in for a nasty surprise. To keep Richter and the cabal from escaping, Wu has strengthened the power of the Avatar Storm. Attempting to cross over inflicts aggravated damage equal to the mage's Arete + permanent Paradox + 5.

THE POSSESSED

Eight soldiers on this floor have become hosts for Avatar shards. The souls commanding these bodies have identities based on a gestalt of soldier and Anakim

paradigms; the host bodies have warped to display alien and angelic features, such as luminous eyes and bloody vestigial wings. When the cabal arrives, they will lead it to the isolation lab. If the characters are reluctant, they'll attack with all of the power they can muster, hoping to subdue them yet willing to inflict horrible wounds.

THE ISOLATION LAB

As invaders or captives, the cabal will enter the isolation lab to find it eerily unaffected by the chaos outside. Chemical emergency lights bathe the area with a sickly green glow. Behind its glass door, a large refrigerator houses neat rows of test tubes with labels like:

- *Xenofom Genetic Sample, Virally Administered*
- *Blood Sample: 5 Days after Xenogenesis, Subject # 8*
- *Unknown Fluid, Emitted During Cellular Necrosis, Subject # 14*
- *Lysergic Acid/Saline Solution, Lethal Dose 50. Interrogation Purposes Only.*

Strapped to an examination table, Doctor Alois Richter screams as Peter Wu, now grown into a winged, utterly inhuman form (see description, page 94), strokes his captive's forehead with six long, black-taloned fingers. Dark blood congeals under the examination table, a sign of the current test subject's former ministrations.

CONFRONTING THE ANAKITI

Wu wants to bring the exiled Psychopomps back to Creation to let them work their will. They need human hosts; the powers that drove them beyond the Horizon prevent them from staying in reality without a source of Quintessence. Otherwise, like a Bygone, their spiritual essence dissolves. Richter was only able to call them for brief periods of time — long enough to acquire samples of their alien, ephemeral flesh.

Wu will share what he knows, trying to win the cabal over with a sincere argument — but he wants guarantees. He'll try to discover the cabal's leader or dominant personality, then use Mind magic to enforce agreeability. He uses eye contact as a focus. Combined with mundane torture, his psychic powers have terrified Doctor Richter into a state of near catatonia. Eight successes of countermagic will nullify this.

Wu also tells the cabal why so many test subjects died: the host must be willing to accept possession. As an NWO operative, Wu knew that some sort of alien — or god — was taking over his body, but secretly, he had always wanted to be closer to *them*. This tendency had been noted by his superiors, which is why they refused his requests to join Void Engineer expeditions and why he eagerly volunteered for the experiment.

If the characters destroy the **Ban**, Wu exults — then attempts to trap the cabal in Avatar Shard prisons. He enters the Umbra with his captives and Richter in tow, then begins the process of breaking the mages' wills with Mind magic and physical agony.

Afterwards, he compels Richter to call the Psychopomps. They appear in a variety of forms, beautiful and monstrous, as their indescribable presence is translated by the characters' minds. The Psychopomps possess the cabal members, ending this story for the worse. However, the summoning takes several hours — enough time for intelligent escape plans to succeed.

Wu also has one or more Effects ready, from defensive Forces shielding to subtle Mind Effects that misdirect the characters. Storytellers should take into account the amount of time Wu has had to prepare and the appropriate strength of the challenge when determining what he is ready to use.

HELPING RICHTER

If the characters can free Alois Richter, he'll show a great deal of gratitude for their help and will do his best to protect them. However, he's every bit as evil as when he served the Third Reich. This experiment is the apotheosis of his life's work. Thus, he'll follow the characters to safety, then try to murder them with the most effective means at hand. He'll bide his time until the cabal is vulnerable, calling on other Technocrats to assist him. He will resist capture or any attempt to free Peter Wu. He wants to keep his "triumph" contained so he can contact Control and procure more support for his research.

PANOPTIC RESPONSE

Eventually, a Panopticon Task Force arrives: Eight Border Patrol Corps citizen-marines and two Technocracy operatives. With help from Control, the Enlightened agents set up a **Banned** Perimeter (10 successes) to reinforce or replace the one around CFS Vigilant. Teleporting characters will be yanked back into the precincts of the base about 30 yards from the perimeter. Otherwise, this is where the Task Force confronts them, their armor already scarred from the Paradox Effect of massive quantum teleportation.

Storytellers can introduce the Task Force in a number of ways. They can be used as a **DM** *Mabimifracchob* is on the verge of being defeated by Peter Wu. However, you should use this as an emergency tactic only; let player characters carry the scene as far as they can.

By default, the characters should encounter the Task Force as they leave. The operatives order them to surrender. If they resist, the Task Force will try to subdue them for later interrogation, but will respond to lethal force in kind.

MONDIAL REDUX

If the characters inspired Jason Ninemen to watch over them (and the characters didn't cut any sort if deal with Alois Richter), their efforts bear a strange, hopeful fruit. Ninemen's psychic perceptions will recognize the distress signal that summons Panopticon. Aware that he needs to act, he calls upon a long dormant part of himself: Doctor Mondial. Ninemen/Mondial arrives (via **Correspondence Effect**) in a flash of perfumed red smoke one or two turns after the cabal confronts the Task Force.

Clad in his khaki trenchcoat, scarf, aviator helmet and Ether goggles, he leaps into the fray. His movements are a little stiff, but still have the energetic quality of a hero in the flesh. Mondial shouts a greeting and offers to cover their escape.

When the cabal leaves him to fend off the attackers or they prepare to go, Mondial salutes them, pulls off his helmet — and vanishes.

He is never seen again.

AFTERMATH



After the characters return, they'll have to deal with the fallout from the events of this story. First of all, the Technocracy will probably be looking for them. The characters represent a threat to the Union because of their actions and because they know about the Black Papers, the experiments at CFS Vigilant and possibly other sensitive information. If the information were to be

widely disseminated, it would polarize many Traditionalists against the Technocracy, as well as undermine the morale of rank-and-file Technocrats. Control knows full well that there are some agents who can't accept the lengths the Union must go to retain its grip on the Consensus and it wants to keep disloyalty to a minimum.

RICHTER'S DUE

If the characters captured Doctor Richter, the Technocracy will try to hunt him down — though some conscientious amalgams may well try to secretly execute him if they're aware of his background. Control still wants access to his expertise, even if only to prevent it from spreading to anyone else.

A few particularly mercenary mystics may offer to hold him solely for the sake of learning more about his work. They'll be far outnumbered by mages who want to punish him. If the characters don't agree to a Tribunal, Richter can expect a visit from the Euthanatos as well

as mages from every Tradition who are willing to dispense vigilante justice. In the case of a Tribunal, the default assumption is that Richter will be sentenced to Gilgul and death. If the Tribunal cannot acquire a Soulrender (see **Guide to the Traditions**) to perform the former, he will be branded and executed. He will not under any circumstances be allowed a Certamen duel.

Alternatively, factions who want to use Richter's methods may arrange his defense. If you wish, you can run the Tribunal as a story of its own.

Alois Richter is still a dangerous psychopath; living proof that the Awakened are capable of pure evil without one whit of Nephandic influence. The years since the war haven't altered this. He will make every effort to kill anyone who knows he exists and return to the Technocracy.

OCULT SECRETS

The cabal may be pressured to share information about the experiments at CFS Vigilant and those documented in the Black Papers, "purely for research purposes" of course. Other mages may wish the characters to keep the information a secret. The Technocracy doesn't want the information spread; cabals who are discovered trying to study or replicate the Anakim will be subject to abduction and assassination. For its part, the Rogue Council never sends any transmissions relating to the details of the Black Papers of Vigilant.

CHARACTERS



Alien Avatar has a large number of supporting characters, but many of these are sufficiently similar to allow the Storyteller to use a common set of game Traits. If you want to add more variety to what's provided here, see **Guide to the Traditions** and **Guide to the Technocracy** for character types that can be easily adapted for use here.

SLEEPER TEMPLATES

These characters don't use full game Traits. In a way, they're "Extras," here for characters to interact with but not to exercise their power except in numbers. Still, don't treat them like faceless hordes. Part of the point of this story is to deconstruct that idea by adding narrative spice to how these so-called spear carriers and commoners act when confronted with pain, fear and the truth of the supernatural. Their power is supposed to come from their narrative force, not their game Traits.

They react with genuine horror as their comrades fall to forces they can't understand. This may break their morale, causing them to panic. Their wounds aren't the antiseptic injuries of action films; they bleed profusely and cause victims to tremble in shock. Furthermore, despite the uniforms, each of them is an individual; Storytellers should prepare names for the soldiers to refer to another by as well as examples of personal effects (such as pictures of their families) that the cabal might discover.

If the cabal is forced into full-scale warfare, they'll have the blood of innocents on their hands. It's a problem characters will encounter if they seek conflict (as many fanatics followers of the Rogue Council do) or act against the Technocracy.

For dramatic purposes, all of the following characters only have three health levels: -1, -3 and Incapacitated. When they fight as a group, roll initiative once for their entire side. Use the highest bonus in any group of characters with differing initiative bonuses.

NON-COMBAT MILITARY PERSONNEL

This is the ordinary staff of CFS Vigilant. They are trained soldiers, but they're concerned with the base's logistics or Signal Intelligence rather than any sort of infantry combat. Because of Vigilant's environmental hazards and military culture, most of them are single, male and in their late 20s.

Note: Signal Intelligence officers' slightly higher Traits are given in parentheses.

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2, Charisma 2, Manipulation 2, Appearance 2, Perception 2, Intelligence 2 (3), Wits 2

Abilities: Academics (Military) 1 (3), Athletics 2, Computer 2 (3), Dodge 1, Drive 2, Firearms 2, Leadership 2, Survival 2, Technology 2

Signal Intelligence officers typically have Linguistics 1 or 2 (usually Russian or Mandarin) and Science (Mathematics/Cryptography) 3.

Initiative Bonus: +4

Combat Dice Pools: Brawl 2, Dodge 3, Firearms 4, Melee 2

Willpower: 2

Equipment: Uniforms and job-related gear. In emergencies, they have 9mm pistols, but will use heavier weapons if they can get them.

SOLDIERS AND SLEEPER COMBATANTS

CFS Vigilant's combat troops are a mix of Canadian Joint Task Force Two commandos and US Army Rangers. All of them are male and hail from a wide variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Most of them have families as well, and so with the occasional chance to train with experimental weapons, find their mission here an unpalatable combination of boring and sinister — guard

SHARD-POSSESSED SOLDIERS

Peter Wu dominates eight soldiers by possessing them with Avatar shards he commands with his Psychopomp abilities. The shards absorb the soldiers' personalities and Abilities. Each such gestalt Avatar is bent to Wu's will.

Possession warps the guards' bodies, giving them huge eyes, long,ropy limbs, bony spines and other alien deformities. Each is draped in cracked, bloody skin, indicating the pain and rapidity of these transformations. They are *not* treated as Extras, and have a full complement of health levels. Barring the following alterations, they otherwise use the normal template for CFS Vigilant's troops.

The possessing shards are unable to use the soldiers' Knowledges. Their bodies are too warped to wear body armor; otherwise, they retain their gear. Their ragged black claws, spines, bloody, blade-like bones and other alterations are laced with Primal energy, allowing them to inflict aggravated wounds in hand-to-hand combat. They can also soak lethal and aggravated wounds with their full Stamina.

duty punctuated by escorting human guinea pigs to and from the Construct.

Use the same set of game Traits for other Sleepers who serve the Technocracy in a military capacity, including the rank-and-file of various Contingency teams, Void Engineer marines and Backup.

Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3, Charisma 3, Manipulation 3, Appearance 2, Perception 3, Intelligence 3, Wits 3

Abilities: Academics (Military) 2, Alertness 3, Athletics 3, Brawl 3, Dodge 3, Firearms 3 (including Technocracy exotic weapons), Intimidation 3, Leadership 2, Melee 3, Stealth 3, Survival 3 (soldiers only), Technology 2 (3 for Technocracy operatives)

Initiative Bonus: + 6

Combat Dice Pools: Brawl 6, Dodge 6, Firearms 6, Melee 6.

Soldiers and marines suffer a -1 penalty to these dice pools due to their armor.

Willpower: 3

CFS Vigilant Soldier Equipment: Soldiers wear the equivalent of Class Two body armor and camouflaged clothing (including balaclavas) appropriate for the season and temperature. They are armed with knives, .45 pistols, HK MP-5s (use light SMG statistics) or C-7 assault rifles (for outdoors; use Assault Rifle statistics) as well as four ammunition clips for each gun they carry. Each soldier also has a headset that allows him to communicate with the Construct, his own squad and others.

Void Engineer/Panopticon Border Corps Marines Equipment: Marines wear Advanced Class Four Armor (only -1 Dexterity penalty due to superior ergonomics), rebreathers and biological/chemical protection (+5 soak dice versus gas/biological weapons/Effects except for direct Pattern attacks). An operative is usually armed with an X-5 Protector (semi-auto), and flechette gauss-rifle (use Assault Rifle statistics, but double ammunition capacity, increase damage to 8 and double the soak value for body armor) or laser rifle (effective Arete 4 for an aggravated Forces 3/Prime 2 attack, 10 shots; can be used against single or multiple targets).

HARDSUIT TROOPS

Part of CFS Vigilant's defenses as well as the Panopticon Task Force that confronts the cabal at the story's finale, these are Sleepers who have been specially trained to use Martinez class Iteration X hardsuits: a type of powered armor. They are not considered to be Extras. Attributes in parenthesis apply to the characters while they wear the hardsuits. For more information, see **Convention Book: Iteration X Revised**.

Appearance: Clad in ceramic and steel armor, hardsuit troops regard their enemies through eyeless helmets. Sensor arrays provide them with the data they need to recognize the enemy. They move with an unexpected swiftness when they attack.

Roleplaying Notes: Shoot. Walk. Shoot. Know your suit's limitations and follow orders. You're wearing several million dollars' worth of bleeding edge military hardware. If you fall, somebody's going to have to go to the effort of dragging you back just to recoup the investment.

Nature: Any

Demeanor: Any

Attributes: Strength 4 (7; Hardsuit Training Specialization), Dexterity 3, Stamina 3, Charisma 2, Manipulation 2, Appearance 2, Perception 2, Intelligence 2, Wits 3

Abilities: Academics (Military) 3, Alertness 3, Athletics 3, Brawl 4 (Hardsuit), Computer 2, Dodge 3, Firearms 3, Hypertech 1, Intimidation 3, Leadership 2, Melee 3, Stealth 3, Survival 3, Technology 3

Willpower: 4

Equipment: The Martinez Heavy Hardsuit adds +3 to Strength, +7 dice of armor (extra heavy armor) and has retractable blades in the fists, making hand-to-hand strikes inflict Strength +1 lethal damage. Maximum speed is limited to 12 yards per turn. Hardsuit troops are also issued the same assault weapons as the troops they support.

AWAKENED CAST

These are characters that play an important role in the story. Again, Storytellers should feel free to adjust them to suit their group.

MAJOR LUCAS BLAYLOCK

Lucas Blaylock joined the British Army in his teens. Trying to make a clean break from his working class family, he immersed himself in a crushing routine of study and physical fitness. He was continually denied officer training; his superiors felt that, as someone with no personal ties, he didn't have the character for it. His aptitudes as a soldier landed him in the SAS, then the Falkland Islands during the war with Argentina. He lost a leg to shrapnel and was pensioned off.

He studied electronics and robotics while he was in the service and continued to keep abreast of the current technology, but, lacking any formal education, was unable to hold down a job for any length of time. When he Awakened, his dreams were filled with visionary designs for robots and advanced electronics, but potential investors simply saw a crazed veteran obsessed with incomprehensible inventions.



When Iteration X approached him he was on the verge of using the last of his savings. They made him an incredible offer: prosthetics advanced enough to be indistinguishable from the real thing and the removal of all records that listed his disability. At age 45 he has a new identity and an American officer's commission. He's allowed to do a minimum amount of research (nanotechnology fascinates him), but he has no illusions: he's Iteration X's muscle, not its brains. He was assigned to head security at Vigilant under the guise of training exercises and tries to keep up appearances for both the Union and his men. After all, it's best they get something out of their assignment.

Appearance: Blaylock is a muscular man who is never seen without his beret on. His moustache is shot with gray; it decorates a hard face with constantly roving eyes. His working class Dover accent carries even when he's speaking softly, but sounds much more natural when he's barking orders. His artificial left leg looks just like a natural limb and doesn't affect his gait at all. He has added a few other implants over the years; dull gray strips along his inner arm hide "memory metals" that can be reshaped according to commands routed through his ADEI brain implant. Artificial myomers enhance his strength and toughness.

Roleplaying Notes: You care about the men under your command. You aren't going to let any of them get denied the opportunities you lost. When you have ethical problems, you always take refuge in that. Bark out orders, be a stickler for discipline — in the end, they know you're doing it for them and that you'd wade through gunfire to save them.

Your Enlightened Science uses nanotechnology, chemistry (you usually have a kit full of chemicals attached to your belt) and the metal implants along your arms (which provide you with tools and weapons whenever you need them).

Convention: Iteration X

Methodology: BioMechanics

Essence: Questing

Nature: Caregiver

Demeanor: Autocrat

Attributes: Strength 5, Dexterity 4 (Steady), Stamina 3, Charisma 3, Manipulation 2, Appearance 2, Perception 3, Intelligence 4 (Dedicated), Wits 3

Abilities: Academics (Military) 3, Alertness 3, Brawl 4 (Fists), Computers 3, Dodge 4 (Taking Cover), Drive 3, Energy Weapons 3, Firearms 4 (SMGs), Hypertech 3, Intimidation 4 (Seems Invincible), Leadership 4 (Tough But Fair), Science (Physical Chemistry) 3, Technology 4 (Robotics)

Backgrounds: Enhancements 5, Genius 3

Enlightenment (Arete): 4

Spheres: Entropy 2, Forces 3, Life 3, Matter 4, Prime 2

Willpower: 8

Quintessence: 6

Paradox: 5

Resonance: (Dynamic) Energetic 1, (Static) Systematic 1

Enhancements: Strength (+1; natural Strength is 4), Biomesh Armor (+2 soak dice; applies to aggravated damage).

LA GRANT HOWE

Grant Howe was recruited by the CIA right out of college; by his early 20s he was fully immersed in intelligence culture. His Awakening came when he discovered the Technocracy's existence, unconsciously foiling the rudimentary concealment the Union put in place to tempt newly Enlightened government workers. He was processed, trained in Enlightened psionics (all the rage in the early '60s) and sent on a dozen missions throughout the communist world. He unknowingly helped resolve an internal struggle between pro- and anti-communist factions in the New World Order. Ten years later the Berlin Wall fell and he discovered the truth, but felt nothing more than admiration for his Convention. By this time, he'd already molded himself into a jaded secret agent.

At the Construct, he supervises psionic-electronic countermeasures and interrogates soldiers and test subjects for signs of disloyalty. His most important duty is to

send independent reports to Control; he has orders to abandon the whole project and escape for debriefing if things get hairy. He has been lately troubled by the surviving subjects' resistance to psychic interrogation, and the samples of untranslatable yet coherent speech he's picked up from the alien hosts. The experiments themselves bother him not at all; he prides himself on his ability to suppress moral qualms.

Appearance: A short, broad-shouldered (but weasely) man with a gray crewcut, Howe usually dresses in a black insulated jumpsuit and a turtleneck. His bland, fifty-something appearance is only broken by watery blue eyes that don't blink as often as they should. He prides himself on always being ready for action (thus his *Secret Weapons*). Decades of combat training and an Enlightened exercise regimen makes him a formidable opponent up close—and that's where he prefers to be, for his own ego's sake as much as to capitalize on his abilities.

Roleplaying Notes: You are the consummate agent or you're nothing. You'll betray any one of your comrades if Control demands it. You'd actually prefer to be in the thick of a disaster, but your sense of professionalism keeps you from allowing any weaknesses in the Construct's external defenses. If an emergency comes up, you'll be happy to play the competent, selfish agent; it's an image you've been in love with for a long, long time. Maybe this makes you a little sloppy when it comes to supervising test subjects, if only because you want to be the one who saves the day and shows up the doctor and the sentimental ItX steelhead you're chaperoning.

Your Enlightened Science capitalizes on your combat skills and espionage techniques, backed up with a few gadgets and the hyper-pharmacological stimulants you started taking back in Laos. These make you a touch impatient at times, but at least you never have to sleep.

Convention: New World Order

Methodology: Operatives

Essence: Pattern

Nature: Conniver

Demeanor: Director

Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 5 (Fluid), Stamina 3, Charisma 2, Manipulation 3, Appearance 2, Perception 4 (Alert), Intelligence 3, Wits 5 (Improvising)

Abilities: Academics (Politics) 3, Alertness 4, Athletics 3, Brawl 4 (Jujutsu), Computers 4 (Security), Dodge 4 (Hand to Hand), Drive 3, Energy Weapons 3, Firearms 3, Hypertech 3, Intimidation 2, Investigation 4 (Quick Assessments), Leadership 3, Science (Psychology) 4 (Parapsychology), Stealth 4 (Shadowing), Technology 3



Backgrounds: Cloaking 3, Genius (Avatar) 2, Hypercram (Dream) 2, Secret Weapons 3, Spies 2

Enlightenment (Arete): 4

Spheres: Correspondence 4, Forces 2, Life 3, Prime 2, Time 3

Willpower: 6

Quintessence: 4

Paradox: 0

Resonance: (Entropic) Crushing 1, (Static) Straight 1, (Static) Elaborate 1

DOCTOR ALOIS RICHTER

When Hitler sent Germany into Poland on September 1st, 1939, Alois Richter knew that the Nazis would need ambitious scientists like him to support the war effort. He was quickly recruited into military research, where he was allowed to work with a free hand and indulge his radical theories on genetics. Of course, Nazi ideology forced him hide some of his conclusions.

When he Awakened in 1940, he burned with two insights: that the human species had far less genetic variation than the racist pseudoscience of the Nazis would ever admit—and that he didn't care whether or not the world should know it. He encountered the Technocracy in the shadows of Germany's scientific establishment. Enthralled by their goals, he joined the Progenitors.

He understood that the Technocracy was using the Axis to unite the governments of the planet, but he was frustrated at the slow, subtle pace of the Union's influence. He wanted more; if he knew what to say, to acquire power, the Third Reich would give it to him. A meeting

with Goering finally convinced him to abandon legitimate science in favor of joining the Thule Society.

By Technocracy standards, Goering's occultists were Reality Deviants; some of them had even pledged their allegiance to alien powers. All the same, they wielded immense political influence, and the Nephandi's pacts with "extraterrestrial" powers intrigued him. He wanted to examine the alien chromosomes of the "gods" that figured in their rituals. Eventually, he learned to accept that these beings needed a specific psychic focus to manifest on earth and broadened his beliefs sufficiently to use the Hermetic Arts.

Eventually, he was assigned to Dachau. He had no particular opinion of the death camp's inmates, though he admired such a naked expression of power. The Thule Society wanted to discover the effect of human suffering on the supernatural energies of the region. At the Node that was eventually dubbed the *Folterbrunnen*, they discovered that Avatars were shattered in the presence of Dachau's Resonance. Awakened prisoners died when they were forced into the Umbra unless they possessed special psychic qualities. Richter came to the conclusion that the surviving mages had an alien heritage that he could exploit.

When Situation Six captured him he felt real fear for the first time in his entire life. He'd turned his back on the Technocracy, directed the mystical counterpart to one of humanity's worst atrocities and knew that he deserved a fate worse than death. When Operation Sparkmaker saved him, he felt as if it confirmed that he'd made the right decision. His talents obviously outweighed any immature ethical considerations.

Most Progenitors despised him and blocked his serious research until the rise of the Dimension Storm. He presented his earlier work as proof that the disaster had precedents and could, in fact, be turned to the Technocracy's favor. Control listened; he was given Vigilant's Construct and great discretion in his quest to create "human-alien hybrids" who could control the razor winds of the Gauntlet.

He knows that the aliens of the Deep Universe — the exiled Psychopomps — are more powerful and more *ambitious* than he once thought, but he's determined to see his work through to the end. Then he'll take his place beside the other visionaries of the Union's Inner Circle.

Appearance: Doctor Richter is bald and gaunt; he's never used Progenitor techniques to hide his 89 years, even though his techniques make him as fit as someone a third of his age. He moves with unexpected vigor, but is used to playing the role of a feeble, doddering old man to maintain an air of harmlessness. He wears the rumpled,



dated clothing of a tenured professor along with a lab coat. He never knows when he'll have to protect himself or be inspired to try something new on a test subject, so he carries a few surgical knives and syringes with him in a slender case hooked to his belt. He speaks in a soft voice with a light German accent, but when he kills or experiments, he simply sighs. His hollow green eyes betray not one ounce of feeling.

Roleplaying Notes: When the time came to choose between reason and power, you chose power. You were delighted to discover that, ultimately, your goals and the Technocracy's weren't as dissimilar as you thought. You simply want the power to control your own life, but have learned that power only exists when it is demonstrated. When you master the lives and deaths of others it confirms your belief in yourself; you feel a sudden release from your own fears.

You're willing to act like a senile old man to elicit sympathy. There are people who hold you accountable for your actions out of revenge or adherence to an ethos that celebrates weakness. Kill them if you can; it's dangerous for them to know that you even exist.

Your Enlightened Science involves the precise use of biological agents and surgical techniques as well as a few things culled from other Conventions (such as enlightened psychology and espionage methods). You use bastardized Hermetic rituals combined with exercises for strengthening your will when it comes to summoning and binding alien life. You call it "psionic Dimensional Science," but it's barely different from its superstitionist counterpart.

Convention: Progenitors (but uses some Hermetic magic as a "psionic" focus)

Methodology: Genengineers

Essence: Pattern

Nature: Autocrat

Demeanor: Martyr

Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3, Charisma 3, Manipulation 5 (Sympathetic), Appearance 1, Perception 2, Intelligence 5 (Unconventional Brilliance), Wits 4 (Assessing Danger)

Abilities: Academics (General) 4 (Philosophy of Science), Alertness 4 (Being Followed), Awareness 4 (Spirits), Brawl 3, Computers 3, Cosmology 3, Dodge 2, Energy Weapons 1, Firearms 2, Hypertech 5 (Medical), Intimidation 4 (Threats of Torture), Leadership 4 (Overcoming Reluctance), Linguistics 3 (English, French, Japanese, Pidgin Enochian), Medicine 5 (Surgery), Melee 2, Occult 5 (Spirits), Science (Biology) 5 (Genetics), Stealth 3, Subterfuge 5 (Appearing Harmless), Technology 3

Backgrounds: Enhancements 4 (genetic modifications to ensure health), Genius 4, Library 3, Secret Weapons 3 (See **Guide to the Technocracy**)

Enlightenment (Areté): 5

Spheres: Correspondence 4, Entropy 3, Forces 2, Life 4, Matter 2, Mind 3, Prime 4, Spirit 4

Willpower: 9

Quintessence: 8

Paradox: 4

Resonance: (Entropic) Sanguine 2, (Entropic) Tearing 1, (Static) Incising 1, (Static) Precise 1

JASON NINEMEN (DOCTOR MONDIAL)

Young Jason Ninemen grew up in Dover, England. By the age of 14, he held down two jobs to support his family. By day he assembled machine parts in a local factory, but at night he was a medium, using Spiritualist trappings to help people find what they had lost. Awakened at an early age, he used his gifts indiscriminately until the Technocracy recruited him. They enriched his family and sent him to France; by his 18th year, he was helping the Union undermine France's Awakened community in preparation for the Nazi invasion.

His talents as a mentalist allowed him to coordinate the New World Order's efforts to sweep away Awakened resistance. All the while, doubt gnawed at him. His superiors sensed this and did their best to keep him from directly witnessing the Pogrom at work. When he asked questions, they reminded him of the desperate straits his family was in — and how their situation could be changed by a stray bomb or an accident if he didn't obey. Finally, to learn the whole truth, he crept into the

minds of agents as they massacred a Sons of Ether cabal, and something snapped; he fell to Quiet.

In November 1940, rumors of Awakened resistance to France's Vichy regime spread like wildfire. At the center of these stories was a Son of Ether named Doctor Mondial. The mysterious hero never named his mentors or allies and seemed to have an uncanny ability to elude the Technocracy. He called his disciplines "spiritual science" and "moral art;" with them, he was an unstoppable thorn in the Union's plans.

Jason Ninemen was 20 years old at the time and a loyal Technocrat, supporting the Axis as the Inner Circle dictated. But his superiors were concerned; at times, Ninemen appeared unable to use his psychic powers and lacked energy. It was as if he wasn't really there at all — and in truth, he sometimes wasn't.

Ninemen's Quiet split him in two. Doctor Mondial represented a moral, heroic side to his character that drew strength from his roots as a young medium. Agent Ninemen was his dutiful, professional personality, fully ensconced in Technocratic thought. In his Quiet, the real Jason Ninemen used Correspondence and Mind Arts to switch identities from week to week or even day to day. While he was absent from one identity, a Hobgoblin would form to replace the missing mage.

In 1942, the Technocracy turned against the Axis; Ninemen could have finally struck against the Nazis himself, but his Quiet had grown too well developed. Instead, he "joined forces" with his other persona, forming the core of Situation Six. By this time, his Quiet had developed to the point that he could seamlessly switch between personalities, hold conversations between his incarnations and even appear, visible, in the same place



in both forms. Not even his comrades suspected that Doctor Mondial was actually Ninemen's daring conscience, acting on his guilt with displays of bravery.

Situation Six were recognized as heroes, but too much habitual guilt and doubt remained for Ninemen to truly integrate his dual personality. Ninemen might have found peace in the Wewelsberg Tribunal, but the betrayal of Operation Sparkmaker killed his hopes for an idealistic career in the Technocracy. With that, Doctor Mondial vanished. Crushed, Jason Ninemen went to work as a consultant for the Union, but with so little enthusiasm that he was pensioned off. This left him with little to do other than remain visible to the Watcher patrols that spied on him to ensure his continued harmlessness.

When Situation Six's veterans died under mysterious circumstances, Ninemen began to suspect a Technocratic conspiracy. Despite his pessimism, this was too much of a provocation; with John Courage's help, he left the Union's scrutiny, hoping the new idealists in the Traditions would put a stop to Control's plot. Upon the Tribunal, Ninemen is unsure what he is Mondial; his guilt and subconscious Mind Arts have buried it very deeply.

If the characters see *Alien Avatar* through to its conclusion, they might rekindle Jason Ninemen's idealism. Finally integrated with the old Technocrat, Doctor Mondial returns to help the cabal reach safety. The renewed Doctor Mondial's future is up to you to decide.

Appearance: As Jason Ninemen, he looks all of his 80 years, save for the occasional burst of surprising energy if he needs to defend himself. Ninemen wears dark vintage suits and walks with a brass-headed cane. His eyes scan the ground unless he's forced to look up and his voice has a bitter, disconsolate tone. Despite his age, his white hair has only slightly thinned. When he considers a problem, he strokes his moustache.

As Doctor Mondial, Ninemen stands tall. He wears a long, sky-blue silk scarf, Ether Goggles and a leather aviator's helmet. And antique trenchcoat billows about him and he spins on knee high, brown leather boots. Doctor Mondial speaks in an enthusiastic shout, punctuated by a cultured Parisian accent.

Roleplaying Notes: You did your duty; helped your family while they were alive, obeyed the Technocracy as they switched sides during the war and even permitted them to put you in the comfortable cage of your country home — but even you, despite your spineless acts, have to take a stand somewhere. You're willing to help others, but you know that the fight was kicked out of you long ago. You sound defeatist and cynical when it comes to assessing others' motives or your own prospects, but you fight with strange desperation to protect

yourself from capture by the Technocracy. You use practiced paraspsychic (you don't call it "psionic") and espionage techniques.

As Doctor Mondial, you're a hero in the flesh. There's no greater joy for you than to risk your life for the cause of liberty! Better yet, you should inspire others to do the same by acting with heroic panache. Otherwise, you use clever, if dated machines, Ectoplasm pistols capable of projecting a number of Effects and the pseudoscience of Spiritualism and early parapsychology.

Note: Mondial's Traits differ somewhat from Ninemen's; they are provided below following a slash mark ("/").

Convention: New World Order (Mondial claims to be a Son of Ether, but never actually trained with that Tradition)

Methodology: Operative (Mondial claimed membership in the Adventurer faction of the Sons of Ether)

Essence: Questing

Nature: Gallant

Demeanor: Director (Mondial: Gallant)

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 2/4 (Catlike), Stamina 3, Charisma 4/5 (Genuine), Manipulation 3, Appearance 2, Perception 4 (On Guard), Intelligence 4 (Discerning/as Mondial, Driven), Wits 3/5 (Prepared).

Abilities: Alertness 3, Awareness 4 (Mental Powers), Brawl 4 (Savate), Crafts (Archaic Explosives and Pistols) 3, Dodge 3, Drive 3, Energy Weapons 4 (Ectoplasm Ray Pistol), Etiquette 4 (Grace Under Pressure), Expression 3, Firearms 4 (pistols), Hypertech 2, Intimidation 3, Investigation 4 (On Scene), Leadership 4 (Inspiring), Science (Chemistry) 4 (Explosives), Subterfuge 4 (Obfuscatory Oration), Technology 4 (Jury Rigging) 3

Backgrounds: Contacts 3, Destiny 3, Genius (Avatar) 5, Resources 4

Enlightenment (Areté): 5

Spheres: Correspondence 4, Life 3, Matter 3, Mind 4, Prime 3, Time 4

Willpower: 9

Quintessence: 6

Paradox: 4

Resonance: Ninemen's Resonance is and (Entropic) Waning 2, (Static) Understated 1 and (Static) Consistent 1. Mondial's Resonance is (Dynamic) Colorful 2, (Dynamic) Mobile 1 and (Entropic) Explosive 1.

OF THE ANAKIM

The Anakim described in this story are a mystical hybrid between Awakened humans and strange entities (called Psychopomps in the context of this story) from

beyond the Horizon, Originally, these beings inspired humanity toward creating new miracles and horrors, guiding or even forcing the Avatars of some mages to incarnations that would serve their inscrutable purposes. For attempting to guide humanity against the structures imposed by divine powers, they were exiled beyond the dominion of the Celestines. In prehistory, they imparted some of their essence to Awakened men and women, giving them a limited ability to guide the primal soul-stuff of the Tellurian.

With the rise of the Avatar Storm, Doctor Alois Richter recreated this act. The Psychopomps only respond to rituals that recall their true names and language. Richter discovered the Arts that would draw them to earth. As exiles, they cannot exist for long without losing cohesion, so he captured some of their materialized spirit-stuff. Influenced by his paradigm, it manifested as samples of alien tissue. Sleepers died, their bodies unable to contain the strange energies of the Psychopomp "genome." Awakened subjects hardly did better; only one survived.

The sole Anakim to arise from the experiment, Peter Wu was totally willing to merge with the Psychopomp. Without an act of will, the Fetch-spirits were as barred from the subject's Quintessence as they are from every other source of Primal power inside the Horizon. A willing union sustained its power, but warped Peter Wu's Pattern and mind. Because the entity was anchored by Awakened will, these changes expressed themselves according to his paradigm. Wu's beliefs in aliens and his secret faith combined to give him angelic and inhuman qualities.

POWERS OF THE ANAKIMI

The Psychopomps have the power to direct the Avatars of the dead to new incarnations and purposes. Esoteric texts imply that the Oracles also possess this gift; a few occultists believe that the Avatar Storm is the reflexive act of souls that are drawn to the mage in search of some final rest or realization. The Anakim gain their gifts from possessing powers rather than enlightenment, but the effects are similar.

Fortunately, Avatars incarnated in mages are too tightly bound to the Tapestry to be affected, but the Avatar Storm can be easily twisted to a Anakim's desires. All such feats require an Arete roll (difficulty 6) to succeed and are considered to be Vulgar Effects. Anakim may modify the difficulties for using their powers with Quintessence and time; their twisted bodies act as foci. Like mages, they must spend successes on each attribute of an Effect. In addition, Anakim retain whatever Sphere magic they knew before possession.

Alien Presence: The Psychopomp's essence is too vast and strange for mages to tame. Anakim cannot be

supernaturally compelled with Mind or Spirit Effects or supernatural powers that are similar to these Effects. At the Storyteller's discretion, Archmaster-ranked effects may be an exception to this.

Directing the Avatar Storm: Anakim may direct the Avatar Storm. This allows them to raise and lower the storm's severity. Each success makes the storm one die more or less severe than it would normally be for one Awakened being, Wonder or moderately sized area (about three or four yards in circumference). They may spend successes to increase the area or number affected.

Shard Weapon/Shield/Prison: Anakim can draw the Avatar Storm closer to material reality to use as a weapon or barrier. By spending a success on the Arete roll, she may loose it upon a mage or Wonder. Each additional success delivers two aggravated wounds to the target. This cannot be evaded, though at the Storyteller's discretion it might be blocked with Prime and/or Spirit magic. Alternatively, the Anakim can spend a single success to form a weapon out of soul-stuff (similar to the **Holy Stroke Effect**), but must strike targets with a Dexterity + Melee roll.

By spending two successes per target, the Anakim can cocoon a victim in Avatar Shards. Passing through the barrier inflicts injury upon the target as if she traveled through the Gauntlet. This barrier can also be spun around the Anakim; each success provides a die of countermagic, as concentrated *Storm-Tainted Resonance* (see **The Bitter Road**) disrupts incoming Effects.

In all cases, these Avatar shard formations are invisible to those without active Prime or Spirit senses, although their Resonance may be detected with the use of the Awareness Talent.

Anchor Sending: If the Anakim's Arete roll exceeds the victim's Willpower the target's living Avatar is used as an anchor for Avatar shards. The target's will is obliterated and it's body warps, coming to resemble the Anakim's. See **The Book of Madness** for physical Investments that may be appropriate for such a victim. Fortunately, an Awakened Avatar automatically guards against this form of possession; mages are immune.

PETER WU (ANAKIMI)

Discovering that aliens actually existed acted like a lightning rod for Peter Wu's dormant beliefs. He'd buried his Christianity deep, considering it an irrational affectation for a Technocracy agent. Subconsciously, he transferred his faith from the icons and myths of his adolescence to the new mythology of extraterrestrial encounters. He kept these feelings deeply hidden, along with secret feelings that his Enlightened work should be

done for the sake of a higher being instead of the mortal men and women of the Union.

Despite numerous attempts to transfer into the Void Engineers, his weak grasp of physics and his obsessive interest in the subject ensured that he would never be permitted to leave the Order. He did participate in joint missions with the Void Engineer's alien cover-up squad; strange artifacts and other signs of extraterrestrials left him wanting more.

He enthusiastically volunteered for Richter's trials. As his body convulsed with the changes, he opened his mind to anything from beyond that might touch it. In response, the Deep Universe being whose tissue was being assimilated into his body overcame him. When he awoke, he *was* an alien, or an angel — some wise thing from beyond. He knew they wanted to return to earth; in an act of worship, he decided to devote himself to the cause. Soon, he'll free the universe. Humanity will then work its own will, in concert with the desires of his new kin.

Appearance: Wu's appearance has radically changed. He's almost seven feet tall, with smooth gray skin broken by scarring and scabs that bear mute witness to the violence of his transformation. His eyes are huge black pools, set into an elongated skull and his six fingers are twice as long as they were when he was still truly human. Bloody black tendrils twitch and flutter from each shoulder; reacting to his mind, his Pattern twisted to create these "wings."

He speaks in an articulate voice with a calm, friendly tone.

Roleplaying Notes: You always dreamed of meeting the Others. Other agents found alien intrusions frightening, but you secretly felt that the Union shouldn't limit itself to researching human innovations when something greater than humanity had obviously prepared the way for greater mortal achievements. Now, you *are* one of the creators, or at least a new breed of intermediary between humanity and the transcendent beings that want to destroy the limitations of your former species once and for all. They merely need more hosts, to circumvent the curse laid on them by the divine jailers of the Near Universe. You will pursue this goal with any means necessary.

Although you can still use the scientific and psychological methods of your Convention, you now feel flashes of alien insight; symbols that hold Primal power



and the secret designs of things. You can assemble strange, sigil-covered devices from the materials at hand.

Convention: New World Order

Methodology: Operative

Essence: Primordial

Nature: Monster

Demeanor: Visionary

Attributes: Strength 5 (Unnatural Size), Dexterity 3, Stamina 4 (Tough), Charisma 2, Manipulation 4 (Tempting), Appearance 1, Perception 3, Intelligence 4 (Inspired), Wits 3

Abilities: Academics (Sociology) 3, Alertness 3, Awareness 3, Brawl 3, Computers 3, Dodge 3, Firearms 4 (pistols), Hypertech 3, Intimidation 4 (Implied Threats), Investigation 3, Law 3, Medicine 3, Melee 3, Science (Pharmacology) 3, Subdimensions (Cosmology) 4 (Alien Life), Subterfuge 3, Technology 3

Backgrounds: Cloaking (Arcane) 3, Genius 4

Enlightenment (Areté): 3

Spheres: Forces 3, Mind 3, Prime 2, Spirit 3

Willpower: 7

Quintessence: 8

Paradox: 0

Resonance: (Dynamic) Curious 1, (Entropic) Shattering 2

MANIFESTO:

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