

Chapter Three: The Good, the Bad and the Incompetent

Charlatans



The girls started reflexively at the percussive burst of rain that hammered against the bedroom windows. "Well," Bonnie said, her voice a touch too energetic, "'It was a dark and stormy night!'" Her friends laughed. Janet sat on the rug and leaned against the ottoman. "We sure picked a good night, didn't we?" she said, hugging her flannel-clad knees to drive off the chill that passed through her.

"This is perfect sleepover weather," Bonnie agreed. "And just the right conditions for a seance." Along with the other two girls, Bonnie joined Janet on the floor. Wrapped in blankets and resting on pillows, the girls arranged themselves around a Ouija board. Thunder rumbled distantly; Rae said "Ooooooooo!" amid more laughter.

The last girl sat cross-legged, looking intently at the board as her friends settled down. In a solemn voice, she said, "Are you prepared to contact the spirits who dwell beyond the land of the living?" Her gaze pierced the three other girls, but the effect was ruined when she burst out giggling at the faces Bonnie was making. "Cut it out, Bonnie! This is serious stuff." She threw a pillow for emphasis.

Bonnie tossed popcorn back. "So come on, Gwen. Show us how it's done."

"Okay, but you have to be quiet. The spirits won't come if you make a lot of noise." Gwen touched her fingers to the plastic planchette resting on the Ouija board, then closed her eyes. Someone slurped loudly from a soda. "Stop it, Rea," Gwen said without looking.

Ignoring the hushed giggles and shhh!-ing, Gwen said, "Oh spirits of the Dead, hear me! I, Gwendolyn Pearsall, command your presence. Attend me on this dark night, and answer the questions I put to you." There was a moment where the only sounds were the steady hiss of rain and Bonnie crunching on popcorn.

"Spirits!" Gwen called out, making the others jump. "Do you hear me?" The planchette under her fingers moved lazily, wandering over the board until the plastic pointer finally slid over to YES. ("How does she do that with her eyes closed?" Janet wondered and was instantly hushed by Bonnie and Rea.)

The planchette resumed its aimless patterns while Gwen spoke again. "Attend me then, spirits. I—" Gwen's eyes opened in shock as the planchette shot to the NO, seeming to drag her arms with it.

"No' what?" Janet asked. "You didn't ask a question yet, Gwen." The pointer was already moving in fast, jerking patterns. Rea wrote the letters on a notepad while Bonnie called them out, so only Janet noticed the strained look of terror on Gwen's face.

"Gwen?" Janet said in a small voice. "Bonnie, something's wrong with Gwen."

Just then, the pointer stopped moving; Gwen yanked her hands away. She curled into a ball, shaking uncontrollably. As the girls rushed to her they could hear Gwen murmuring, "I couldn't stop" over and over.

Bonnie and Rea held Gwen, and whispered soothing words, while Janet picked up the notepad. Seventeen letters marched across the page, menace clearly conveyed through a simple connection of lines:

YOUDONOTCOMMANDUS

There was a moment of stunned silence, then the temperature dropped ten degrees and all three bedroom windows exploded inward, showering the screaming girls in glass shards and wood splinters....

For every living person who actually pierces the Fog to reach a wraith, there are two who simply fake it. Call them frauds, hucksters, poseurs, shysters, Madame Zorbas or your Aunt Claire, these folks simply don't have what it takes. These Quick share two things in common: interest in the afterlife, and the total inability to contact it.

True mediums apply many terms to any mortal who plays around at the business of touching the Underworld. Most of the labels used aren't fit for polite company, so "charlatan" is the common substitute. In the mediums' opinions, these hacks are the ones who give the profession a bad name. Charlatans cheapen the time-honored art of the occult with their stumbling, hackneyed "channeling" and their ridiculous, superstition-filled "seances." In gen-

eral, however, most mediums find charlatans relatively harmless and easy to ignore (although hardly agreeable company).

Wraiths can find charlatans irritating as well. The Restless already have too much to worry about, what with all manner of threats lurking in the Underworld and the hassles posed by true mediums, to waste their time on Muffy and Buffy, who've gotten a deck of tarot cards and think that they have uncovered the secrets of the universe. Wraiths don't take it kindly that some mortals think ghosts exist strictly for entertainment value. Whether those Quick truly have the power to contact the other side or just play at it is a minor consideration. The affront is still just as grievous in the wraith's mind, whether it comes from the Pinball Wizards or a gaggle of high school girls with a Ouija board.

Yet, in their constant struggle to survive, the majority of wraiths tend to disregard charlatans' fumbling antics. The Restless who take it personally are in the minority — albeit a rather active minority. These "medium-busters" consider it their duty and privilege to show charlatans (in often horrifying detail) the forces they tempt. Some Restless ask only for respect from the unwitting transgressors, while others are determined to punish charlatans' ignorance severely. Some are subtle and benevolent, others are blunt and brutal. The wraiths' methods and intents vary wildly, but all feel the need to put charlatans in their proper place.

While any number of individual wraiths and groups deal with charlatans, most can be placed in a couple of categories. These are most often referred to as tutors and thrashers.



Tutors



Tutors look on charlatans as well-intentioned fools. From the viewpoint of these wraiths, Quick who play at the occult are honestly ignorant of what they're dealing with. They dabble, not truly knowing the enormity — or horrifying ramifications — of what they do. It is the tutor's responsibility to educate the charlatan on the potential repercussions of her actions, with the intent that the "student" will thereafter treat the dead with more respect.

Methods

With their goal being to educate the ignorant, tutor wraiths use their powers to reveal the reality of the Underworld that lies behind the misconceptions of the living. Tutors use their Arcanoi to teach, not harm. Frightening a student is acceptable to a point, since sometimes "tough love" is the only way to get the message through.

However, there's a huge difference between what an average tutor is willing to do and the measures even the most benign Bedlameer may take. While it might be simpler and faster to assault a charlatan as thrashers do, tutors see this way as counter-productive. In the tutors' opinion, violence ends up spreading more confusion and ignorance. In the end, no one, Quick or Dead, learns anything. Instead, by teaching charlatans the truth of the world that exists beyond the Shroud and the perils involved in toying with that world, tutors hope to impress upon their students the folly of any further meddling. Tutors try to have transgressors leave off playing necromantic games. Still, there have been rare occasions when promising charlatans were recruited to act as liaisons between wraiths and the land of the living.

Considering the dubious success of tutors' methods, it's surprising that they even bother. And, truth be told, the tutor turn-over rate is rather high. Tutors are often looked at with amusement and even outright derision by other wraiths (other Renegades, anyway; Hierarchs tend to be less than pleased with tutors' energetic disregard of the *Dictum Mortuum*), and clearly

positive results are few and far between for them. Most wraiths who start off as tutors end up in thrasher groups or simply shake their heads in frustration and give up on the entire business.

Wraiths who stick with it do so mainly because of their Passions. Such Restless were most often teachers, counselors or members of clergy in life. The Passions of such wraiths often involve dedication, responsibility, love, perseverance and even guilt, pride and loneliness. Passions of this sort make a wraith well suited to spending long periods of time under frustrating circumstances with little hope of positive results. In this way, even if the wraith doesn't turn any charlatans from their necromantic pastime, she can at least get some Pathos out of the attempt.

Arcanoi

Most tutors use rather standard techniques when they begin. As time goes on, those wraiths who stick with it develop individual styles. The following are Arcanoi that have application to the living, and have found at least some use in the tutors' curriculum.

- **Embody:** This is most useful when a wraith combines Whispers and Phantom to appear before the charlatan and warn her about the forces with which she conspires. The combination of ghostly manifestation and spectral speech is enough to strike fear in many who have little true experience with the supernatural.

- **Flux:** This Arcanos sees little use, but can be effective nonetheless. Most often, Flux is used to destroy the charlatan's props. After her Ouija board rots to ragged splinters and her crystal ball shatters into powder, a charlatan typically decides to pursue a different hobby posthaste.

- **Inhabit:** This Arcanos is used by tutors less often, as it tends to backfire on the wraiths employing it. Generally, the tutor possesses something in the room whenever the charlatan plays at summoning spirits. The intent is to frighten the living so that they'll leave the afterlife alone. Of course, after this

demonstration of "power," many charlatans instead seek more knowledge of the spirit world, in hopes of seeing more miracles.

- **Intimation:** This would likely be the most commonly used tutor Arcanos if it weren't nearly impossible to find a wraith who can teach it. After all, what is more effective in dissuading someone from pursuing an interest than simply to remove that desire entirely? On the other hand, any remaining Solicitors tend to have more pressing concerns....

Success Rate

While some charlatans who are instructed by tutors turn to more prosaic pursuits, the majority are more intrigued than ever by the afterlife once they get a taste of the "real stuff." As a result, these Quick delve into the occult with a renewed fervor. Their tutors then return for another "session," hoping in vain that this time the lesson will stick. It never does, of course, and all that's happening is that Quick and Dead fall into a co-dependent relationship. This sort of cycle usually ends only when the charlatan is visited by a thrasher instead of her regular wraithly tutor, when the tutor succumbs to Oblivion or when the charlatan dies (thereby receiving first-hand information on the Shadowlands).

• **Keening:** Keening is possibly the most useful Arcanos in dissuading charlatans from further forays into the occult. The wraith can generate feelings of disquiet and fright in the target whenever the charlatan attempts to meddle in things metaphysical. After a few instances of this Pavlovian training, many charlatans refuse even to look at a crystal ball.

• **Mnemosynis:** Applied infrequently due to its limited availability, this Arcanos can be quite effective. Dragging the charlatan into a flashback of a disturbing memory every time she takes out the Ouija board is bound to turn her away from such arcane dabbling. Alternatively, Mnemosynis is also handy at erasing any memory of supernatural encounters, thereby taking away the charlatan's impetus for further study.

• **Outrage:** Too blatant for most tutors, Outrage is usually used only to knock over vases, shake tables and otherwise disrupt the charlatan's seance. Much like Inhabit, this sort of exhibition often serves to intrigue the living further.

• **Pandemonium:** This used to be the tutors' standby Arcanos; when all else failed, Pandemonium could always be relied upon to scare the bejeezus out of the target. It's still rather useful, but as people become more skeptical and jaded, Pandemonium's effectiveness lessens. Furthermore, tutors dabbling in Pandemonium have a nasty tendency to meet with untimely ends. The rumors say that the old Guildwraiths don't take kindly to this sort of thing.

• **Phantasm:** Phantasm is very handy for a tutor, since the wraith need only implant severe nightmares about the occult in the charlatan's dreams. After a few weeks of waking up screaming every time she dreams of a tarot deck, the charlatan often decides the entertainment she gets from dabbling with the Dead isn't worth the disturbing dreams it brings.

• **Puppetry:** Using this Arcanos can be a very poor idea. While many charlatans are left feeling terrified and violated after a wraith finishes possessing them, there are others who take such an action personally. These Quick often plunge into the occult with a passion, looking for some way to get back at their spiritual rapist.

The Ministry

The Heretic cult called the Ministry is composed of wraiths who claim that they exist in Purgatory, and must atone for their sins by steering the living toward redemption. Those mortals in the most danger of falling under Satan's spell are any who indulge in occult practices. They must be shown the error of their ways, and it's up to the Ministry to dissuade them from such infernal customs.

The cult's main focus is on those Quick who make a game of contacting the afterlife. The Ministry feels it's vital to stop the living before they walk down that dark road; a display of the true dangers existing in the afterlife should teach misguided Quick to pursue holier goals. While officially condemned by the Hierarchy, the Ministry seems to have a steady influx of new recruits. Few stay for very long (the group has

some monastically severe codes of conduct), but the cult has an average of 30 to 40 members at any given time.

Some wraiths wonder why the Ministry doesn't also go after the living who have a proven ability to traffic with the "other side." The Ministry's leader, Finlay Morrison, claims that once the Quick obtain their infernal powers, they are lost to all but God's own salvation. The Ministry's job is to stop misguided men and women from even getting near that point. Considering Morrison was a preacher in life, this explanation is more than good enough for his wraithly flock; however, others find such motivation a little suspect.

Finlay Morrison

Nature: Visionary

Demeanor: Leader

Circle: The Ministry

Physical: Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 3

Social: Charisma 4, Manipulation 4, Appearance 3

Mental: Perception 3, Intelligence 3, Wits 3

Talents: Alertness 2, Athletics 2, Awareness 3, Empathy 3, Expression 4

Skills: Etiquette 2, Firearms 2, Leadership 3

Knowledges: Enigmas 3, Linguistics 2, Medicine 2, Occult 3, Politics 2

Backgrounds: Allies 2, Contacts 3, Haunt 4, Legacy 1, Notoriety 3, Status 4

Fetters: Tree from which he was hung 3, Old Bible 3

Arcanoi: Argos 1, Embody 3, Keening 3, Phantasm 4

Passions: Save others (Pride) 3, Deny the powers of darkness (Faith) 4, Atone for mistakes (Guilt) 3

