

# UNKNOWN

## AFARIES

BOOK FOUR: EXPOSE





# UNCOMMON AFFAIRS™

BOOK FOUR: EXPOSE

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To our legions of alpha, beta, and gamma playtesters and to our generous backers — this game exists because of you! You did this!

We are the music makers,  
And we are the dreamers of dreams,  
Wandering by lone sea-breakers,  
And sitting by desolate streams; —  
World-losers and world-forsakers,  
On whom the pale moon gleams:  
Yet we are the movers and shakers  
Of the world for ever, it seems.  
*Ode*, Arthur O'Shaughnessy

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS



## 1: THE MEAT OF EMPIRE

5



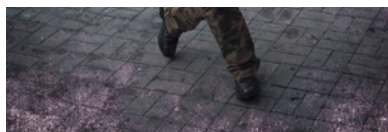
## 2: FULL-THROATED ADEPTS

9



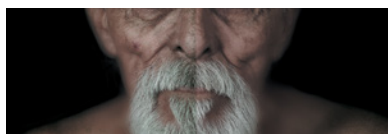
## 3: SMALL, DISCRETE CHALLENGES

15



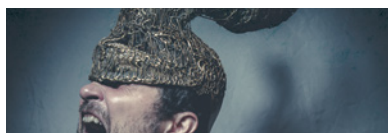
## 4: THE BIGGER PICTURE

26



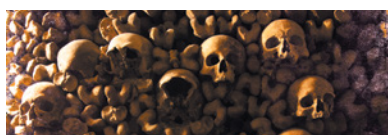
## 5: LAYERS ON THE INSIDE

32



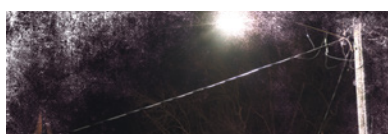
## 6: IDENTITIES REDUX

35



## 7: THIS SIDE OF THE VEIL

50



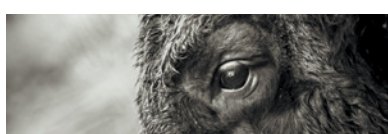
## 8: NORMALCY BESIEGED

55



## 9: STATOSPHERIC SELVES

68



## 10: SYMBOLIC MEDIA

85







# 1: THE MEAT OF EMPIRE

*Unknown Armies* is not a simple game.

Compared to the rule engines of some RPGs, it's easier — at the heart, players roll percentiles and hope, and when at a loss, the GM can typically find an ability that covers the situation, if just saying, "No, your Video Gamer identity does not let you fly a J-10 Vigorous Dragon jet — dude, c'mon, the dials and shit are labeled in Chinese!" is insufficient. But this isn't the book to help you with the mechanics. Look to *Book Two: Run* for that.

This book is to help you with where the game goes, and that's where it gets complicated.

Much of the mythology of *Unknown Armies* is invented from whole cloth, which makes it exciting and new, but unfamiliar. Everyone who's watched TV knows what a vampire is, but the same can't be said for an Executioner avatar. The archetypes behind the peculiar cosmic-democracy mysticism of *Unknown Armies* are meant to be universal, but the weird creatures and deranged, anti-rational adepts are harder to parse. The themes of bafflement and uncertainty are what make *Unknown Armies* simultaneously novel and alienating.

This book can, I hope, offer some insight and clarification into the components of the game that go beyond what to roll and how, reaching into the *why* of it all. Why is this important to our characters? Why is this fun? Why should we even care? The weird, dirty corners of the *Unknown Armies* cosmos are, paradoxically, where it shines. So this book is intended, in some way, to take those murky issues and provide illumination. Or, failing that, to help you keep things murky the *right* way to fascinate and amuse your cabal.

## RAW

ever hear the italian saying "why don't you shit in your hand and slap yourself in the face"?

## WHAT'S IN THIS BOOK

This book is what happens when we release the chains holding Greg back and tell him to "go nuts." *Book Four: Expose* includes several new rules, new ideas, and new insights into the world of *Unknown Armies* that you can accept or reject as you desire. The content in this book is pure grade AAA Greg, packaged for your perusal with all the gristle and bone intact. Most chapters feature Greg's reviews of *Unknown Armies*-adjacent film and literature and how those works show us the shared reality we're experiencing through *Unknown Armies*. Many also include new creatures thematically appropriate to the chapter.

Here's a summary of what you should expect:

**Adepts:** Musing about practitioners of magick.

**Antagonists:** Thoughts on throwing horrors in the path of your cabal.

**The Bigger Picture:** Contemplating the larger objectives and scale of *Unknown Armies*.

**Character:** Insights into internal narratives.

**Features and Identities:** Plenty of identity-related rules to add to your collection.

**The Dead:** Beyond the veil of the living, and what to do with what you find there.

**Normalcy Besieged:** Taking on the mundane humdrum of what we think of everyday life.

**Statosphere Stuff:** More avatars and the notion of claiming places in their name.

**Symbolism:** Hippy-trippy analogues and metaphors and how to implement them.

*Remember  
vampires?  
Popular  
once  
but now  
pedestrian  
and trite.  
Everyone's  
got a  
vampire.*

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



6: REDUX



7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





## My gardener's name is Hector. He is an illegal immigrant.

When I berate him, he stares at me with the dumb eyes of an ox, but surely he cannot mistake my tone. Were I to strike him, what recourse does he have? He, with his grimy jeans and broken English, has far more to fear from the police than a man in a tailored suit with a lawyer on retainer.

I sit in the conservatory and watch him trim the roses and I am content with this situation. Him? Given that he has not gone home nor sought other employment, I am forced — forced — to conclude that he is content as well.

As I watch Hector, I snack on a pear grown in Yakima, Washington. The volcanic soil there produces a superior fruit. An associate at my club sent some Moonglow pears from his ranch here in Texas. He insists that they're better. He's a fool.

My land used to have pear trees, but I had them uprooted and turned into furniture and kitchen spoons. They make good spoons because they do not warp and splinter even with repeated use and washing, nor do they contaminate food with color or flavor.

Washington has better pears. It's ridiculous to try and compete with something objectively superior.

When we kill Hector, I'm planning to do a reduction of those Yakima pears and some Vidalia onions in balsamic vinegar and serve them with the grilled muscles of his side and middle back, the *latissimus dorsi*. He spends a lot of time bending over in the garden, so those muscles should be lean and flavorful. I intend to brine them for several hours to deal with any toughness.

My niece, Andrea, recently told me to "check my privilege." Raised her voice as she did it, too. So I did, right there in front of her. Checked the fact that I'd grown up in the USA, with decent schools and hospitals and roads between them. Checked the poverty I escaped by being smart and by making my brains recognizable to other smart men who had as much need of my hard work and intelligence as I had need of their money (and intelligence). Checked the discipline with which I comported myself. Checked the national security that arose from a powerful army and the will to use it.

When I was done with that (despite her sophomore sputtering and red-faced counter-arguments) I suggested that she check *her* privileges,

such as the opportunity afforded by being a college professor's daughter and not the child of a road paver. Check the period of prosperity and scientific advancement that put a cell phone in her hand and those ridiculous plastic hoof-shoes on her feet. Check the mother that never made her eat an ant-covered bread crust as an object lesson about keeping the kitchen tidy.

That got her crying.

My chocolatier is Lagomarcino's, in Illinois. It's where I proposed to my wife, but that has nothing to do with why I still special-order their truffles, years later and a great distance away. They are simply very, very good. I've eaten Swiss chocolate and Belgian and I'm sorry, I think this small confectionary in the American Midwest is just as good, if not superior.

When my niece returns to college, a box of assorted truffles should be waiting for her.

Ordering the chocolates online reminds me of Stephen's Great Feast. He'd hired a nanny named Marisol and served us her *gluteus minimus* and *gluteus medius* muscles, roasted, with bitter chocolate, chiles, cinnamon, tomatillos, and plantains. I found this distasteful on several levels. First and foremost, incorporating Oaxacan cuisine into the Great Feast ceremony seemed, to me, a tacit wink at the very idea of our endeavor's rightness. If we hold our culture to be self-evidently superior, what business do we have diluting it with foreign trends? Stephen's argument was that incorporation is essential to the Work, like incorporating the flesh of servants into our bodies, but I think he just likes Tex-Mex and, more, likes being daring and shocking.

Secondly, Marisol's ancestry was mixed between African ancestry (via American slavery) and the Mexican

polyglot of Spanish and native. I have no issue with that, but preparing someone of that racial descent with mole negro sauce? That's just a pun. A *jest*. I do not appreciate anyone snickering at our Arts.

The thing is, Andrea believes I have contempt for her and Hector, which is ridiculous. It would hardly make sense for me to look down on one for being insufficiently rich and the other for insufficient poverty.

It's a *good* thing that Andrea doesn't have to suffer and toil the way I did, and it's a shame that Hector must. If he gets with the program, his children will have an easier time of it. He'd need to learn English and legally immigrate, of course, and that is difficult. It should be difficult. Everyone craves excellence, but when its supply is limited, restrictions must be in place. Difficulty weeds out the undeserving. It's hard, but it's necessary.

I want this country of bounty and its culture of justice to spread and thrive. I want everyone in the world to enjoy the benefits unique to American culture. But in order for that to happen — in order for the equality of health care and opportunity that Andrea claims to desire to actually become real — people need to accept America into their hearts. They need to become loyal and patriotic, and you can't split that. "No one can serve two masters." If there is going to be a level playing field, ever, it will be American.

I take advantage of Hector, leveraging my greater power, knowledge, and wealth, because the very nature of power and wealth and knowledge are to offer leverage. He has no realistic chance of resisting my will. It is not a *good* thing that I can use him so, but it is necessary. The power and value he has as an illegal gardener is negligible,

even to himself, certainly to the world and its future.

Without my intercession, Hector could have been born, lived, and perished without leaving a trace on the world. It does not matter that he would prefer to avoid my attentions, my intercession, my Work. Power, wealth, and knowledge permit me to enforce my preferences on society, on matter, on people. That is the very definition of power, and of value.

I smear a dab of chocolate on a metal plate, add a dash of tequila, and ignite it. “Marisol,” I say, “Attend.”

A dark figure appears in the corner shadows of my study. The room faces west, and its eastern wall of books and landscapes is beautifully illumined by the setting sun. But the western corners are dim in comparison. She is only an outline, dim upon the dim.

“Do you know the man Hector who works here? This is his photograph. Do you recognize him?”

She nods.

“Today, when he leaves work, you are to force his truck off the road. Can you do that?”

She nods.

“Do it before he reaches Route 351. Do it at the turn by the big red oak. You understand?”

She nods.

“Good. You may go.”

She nods and then, as far as living eyes can tell, she ceases to exist.

It’s a shame about Hector, but it was my turn and he made sense. The other members of the Order knew that I was preparing a Great Feast and placed no significant restrictions on our shared pool of ghosts. Annoyingly, Hector was only lightly injured in the crash and was walking away when I arrived. I had to finish him with a rifle shot, and the first one was off-center and may have pierced his bowels. But it did drop him and I was able to finish him with a bullet to the throat. Then Armando’s ghost lifted him into the bed of one of the ranch pickups, permitting me to drive him back to one of the unused sheds. There Eliana was able to lift him onto the hook.

Skinning and bleeding him was a task that left me panting and sweating: at 310 pounds, I am not built for physical labor, but such are the demands of the Work. By six o’clock, James arrived and was a great help with the butchering. While I must do all the cooking (and had maintained a steadily simmering ginger-fig compote even before dispatching Marisol), some aid with carrying and fetching is permitted.

I had his cheeks and tongue for frying as part of an appetizer, the long muscles of the legs ready to spit-roast with a rosemary crust, and the ribs separated for barbecue. All in all, Hector fit into four large Styrofoam ice chests.

I have eleven more guests, after James, coming to my Great Feast. Unfortunately, this includes Stephen. The slightest of our number, a woman out of Dallas named Janine, weighs 260 pounds, so we are all what you could call “big eaters.” Dead, Hector seemed so much smaller. He was 160 pounds at most, and much of that — brains, veins, bones, and skin — are unpalatable. I’m not using the intestines: Janine made sausage when she prepared Armando, and it was *wonderful*, but reading her recipe made it clear that cleaning the casing was terrible, filthy toil. I understand that one must dig in the dirt to plant a strong seed, but I haven’t risked and striven my whole life to spend hours cleaning the tract of a dead man when I’m in my fifties and hypertensive. There must be limits.

Still, I’m sure it will all turn out fine. The Order expects a good meal, but even if it’s burned or poorly seasoned or tough, it’s still a Great Feast.

By sundown tomorrow, dead Hector shall attend and serve us all, his ghost bound to his flesh, his flesh incorporated into ours, his will subvenient to the Ordo Corpulentis.







# 2: FULL-THROATED ADEPTS

They're the people who gave "chargers" the name, the crazy ones, the occultists who write their own rules and have the will and the lunacy to make them stick. They fly in the face of what everybody knows and somehow it's common sense that winds up crashing and burning. So let's take a closer look.

Adepts, for all their power — often because of it — are alone, almost universally. They may have friends, they may have allies, they certainly have people who want what they've got, but they rarely have many people around who

## USTRINATURGY AKA GASPERS, CHIMNEYS

Everyone knows smoking's bad for you. *Everyone*. Yet it's still a multi-billion global industry, and why the hell is that? Sure, you can look at the cultural inculcation of generations of sexy smoking movie stars, who are probably the actual source of the phrase "smoking hot" and you can objectively see why the haze of smoke in the air is interesting and artistic, calling back to the fascination of the earliest tamed fires.

You can consider the connection of smoke with power, the smoke-filled room, the billionaire with his cigar, and the society dragon lady with her cigarette holder. You can look to the religious use of tobacco by the earliest people who were aware of it. You can even argue for the neurological angle, that nicotine lubricates brain cells and improves focus.

But the plain fact is, people smoke because they like it. They smoke because it looks good, feels good, and tastes good. If, for all that, it's bad? Well, if one can't handle a little paradox, one might as well be a chimpanzee. We don't like smoking in spite of it being self-destructive, but *because* it's self-destructive.

Every Ustrinaturgy spell must be cast while smoking, vaping, or otherwise inhaling some nicotine. (Sorry, gums and patches don't cut it.)

## POISE

no, it's more a "threat of vegetables" culture

get *them*. They're individually wrapped Cassandras, making predictions that come true but are universally ignored.

This makes them frustrated, and frustration is never a great spice to add to great power. They scare people, they make enemies, and they pursue agendas either inscrutable or in the interest of ultimate plans that make no sense. In the end, they are often their own worst enemies, and the punishment of an adept's worst enemy is likely to be severe indeed.

## STATS

**Generate a Minor Charge:** Smoke a cigarette. Or, if you must, puff on a pipe or an e-cig for a few minutes. You can't pull more than one minor charge this way for every ten minutes.

**Generate a Significant Charge:** Finish off a pack of smokes, or a vape cartridge, or the equivalent in panatelas or pipe tobacco. Call it two to two and a half hours of total nicotine ingestion.

**Generate a Major Charge:** There are two identified ways to get a major charge from one's dedication to nicotine. The current way is to get cancer from tobacco (see "oo Means Cancer" below) — you get the major charge when it's diagnosed. The ancient way is to ingest so much nicotine that you go into what the old shamans called "the false death of the true leaf" and what EMTs call "nicotine-induced CNS depression."

To hit that level of nicotine narcosis, an experienced smoker needs to ingest between 1,000 to 1,500 milligrams of nicotine in about an hour. For reference, a cigarette has about one milligram, so... the math is nice and simple,

## OO MEANS CANCER

Any time you roll a oo while casting an Ustrinaturgy spell, tell your GM. She then decides if your character has cancer and, if so, whether it's in your lungs, mouth, or throat. This is because Ustrinaturgy is based on smoke, smoking, and the mystic properties of tobacco and nicotine. (Vaping, while still an unhealthy habit that can cause genetic changes — especially if your vape juice has artificial flavors in it, because that stuff's not well regulated — is *prrrrr*obably not as bad for you as flat-out cigarette smoking. But it still might give you a condition called "popcorn lung," which is not nearly as jolly as it sounds.)

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



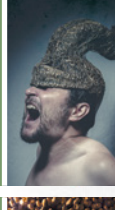
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



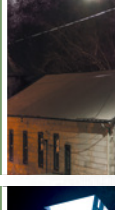
6: REDUX



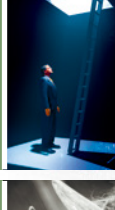
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





and impossible. You'd either need to seriously recirculate a concentrated burning or vaporized form, or drink a quart of nearly pure liquid nicotine.

Someone who does this (and nobody should) can first expect a rapid heartbeat, wicked headache, vomiting, and lots of sweat. That's the stimulant phase, and it's horrible, but if you take enough nicotine it flips into depressant mode, which crashes your heart rate and puts you at risk of coma, paralysis, and respiratory failure.

Basically, anyone who manages to ingest a potentially killing dose of nicotine makes a Fitness roll. Any failure means death, no chance of recovery. A success means respiratory seizure that can be recovered from with some kind of successful Medicine roll. (But if that Medicine roll fails... yeah, death.) A matched success inflicts 2d10 wounds, and a crit means a mere 2 wounds. In any case, the ustrinaturge passes out and experiences an otherworldly vision that may or may not have anything to do with actual reality.

**Taboo:** Ustrinaturges lose all charges if they go more than four hours without smoking or vaping or dabbing liquid nicotine behind their ears so they can absorb it through their skin. Nicotine patches can prevent one from being tabooed overnight, although they don't provide enough of an instant jolt to deliver a charge. Similarly, while nicotine gum isn't sufficient to charge (*gum?!?*) it can stave off the taboo.

**Random Magick Domain:** The qualities of smoke (the way it gets everywhere, its suspension in the air, the way it reveals things because "where there's smoke there's fire") and the things it symbolizes (old Hollywood glamour, obfuscation, the threat of destruction).

## USTRINATURGY MINOR FORMULA SPELLS

### ALWAYS HAVE A LIGHT

**Cost:** 1 minor charge.

**Effect:** Cast this spell, and something that can light a cigarette appears in your hands, or your back pocket, or somewhere that producing it won't give anybody a stress check. You could probably just pull it from someone's ear and have them dismiss it as sleight of hand.

In any event, it's always something cheap. Maybe a disposable plastic lighter, like you get by the counter at a convenience store. More likely, it's a book of matches from some restaurant nobody's ever heard of. ("Rosalita's Haüs of Sushi"? Is this a joke?") Once you call it, you get the same object every time you cast the spell, until it's empty, at which point you get some new random fire source.

### CLOUDSHAPE

**Cost:** 2 minor charges.

**Effect:** For ten to fifteen minutes, smoke takes on the shapes you dictate. You can control a cloud of smoke roughly the size of a minivan. It's still obviously smoke, but seeing smoke take on the form of a giant sneering devil face or turn into some beefy monster swinging fists at you is definitely alarming. You can reliably get a Violence or Unnatural check at rank 2 or 3 out of this, assuming the person can see it clearly. It shows up in photographs, but is readily dismissed as being edited.

### COUGHING FIT

**Cost:** 3 minor charges.

**Effect:** This is the Ustrinaturgy minor blast. To cast it, you need to blow smoke (or, fine, *vapor*) at someone. If it succeeds, their eyes sting and they cough violently. The damage takes the form of minor lung bruising and blood-shot eyes.

### EYES GET IN YOUR SMOKE

**Cost:** 3 minor charges.

**Effect:** Cast this spell while exhaling a cloud of smoke, or while waving around a cloud of smoke from some other source. As long as the spell lasts, you can see and hear from the perspective of the smoke cloud, as if your eyes and ears were inside it. You can move it along at the pace of a leisurely walk if the air is still, coax it to seep under doorways, or send it up into the sky. A stiff wind or vigorous fanning breaks it up, but otherwise the effect lasts a number of minutes equal to the casting roll.

Generally, gaspers close their eyes and plug their ears while using the smoke cloud as a surveillance drone. Opening their eyes shifts their perspective back to their body, but they can toggle between the two options until the spell ends or the cloud gets busted.

### NICFIT

**Cost:** 2 minor charges.

**Effect:** Casting this spell on someone gives them an intense, extremely specific urge to smoke a cigarette. Not to vape, enjoy a pipe, or breathe in secondhand smoke, but to light up a cigarette and smoke it to the filter (which, anecdotally, takes about seven minutes). This doesn't subject the target to a stress check; they just really need a smoke.

### SECONDHAND COOL

**Cost:** 1 minor charge.

**Effect:** There was a satirical article in *The Onion* with the headline "Secondhand Smoke Linked to Secondhand Coolness" and that is, presumably, the basis of this spell's title. Here's how it works: you smoke, you cast the spell, and you look cool. It can even make you look cool with an e-cig or a cigarette holder or, I don't know, the hookah you're dragging behind you in a Radio Flyer wagon.

Mechanically, if this spell succeeds you can substitute your Ustrinaturgy identity for Connect on your next roll.

### THE DEVIL IN SMOKE

**Cost:** 2 minor charges.

**Effect:** The world is full of invisible wackness, and while this spell doesn't let you do much about it, at least you can see what you're dealing with. Sorta. Cast this spell and, for a number of minutes equal to the casting roll, invisible and astral entities within twenty yards of the caster displace smoke. So if there's smoke around, they push it aside and you get a vague idea of their size, shape, and location.

1: MEAT

2: THROAT

3: SMALL

4: BIGGER

5: LAYERS

6: REDUX

7: VEIL

8: BESEIGED

9: SELVES

10: MEDIA

## USTRINATURGY SIGNIFICANT FORMULA SPELLS

### CANCER CURSE

**Cost:** 5 significant charges.

**Effect:** To cast this spell, you roll the dice while looking someone straight in the eye and telling them that they must obey you or get cancer. You must name a specific task, though you're permitted to name an impossible one. If they don't get the task done within seven days, they get lung, throat, or mouth cancer. It may take a few weeks or even a month from the end of the weeklong deadline, but it's there and *it's serious*.

If the person does what you say within the seven days, nothing happens. After pronouncing the curse, it's on — you can't recall it, switch it off, or change your mind. The person still gets sick even if they kill you, but don't expect them to believe that until the diagnosis rolls in.

### DEATH STICKS

**Cost:** 2 significant charges.

**Effect:** This is the gaspers' big blast. You cast the spell and either blow smoke or contemptuously flick your half-finished cigarette at the target. If it succeeds, it does damage like a gunshot, usually to the lungs and chest.

### LIKE BOGART AND BACALL

**Cost:** 3 significant charges.

**Effect:** No one on film looked as sexy smoking as Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, except possibly some of the people in the Tom Vek video for "Aroused." If you want to look as irresistible as the people in the aforementioned media, which might as well be pro-tobacco PSAs, you're going to need this spell. I mean, unless you're already drastically sexfully alluring.

When you cast this spell, the smoke around you wreathes dramatically and you become the object of desire and fascination. In practical terms, it's a significant roll improvement for Connect — all difficulties and penalties are removed, and you get a +10% increase multiplied by the ones place of your roll. (Roll a 35, get +50% to Connect.) This lasts for a number of rolls equal to the tens place of your roll. (Roll a 35, get the bonus on your next three Connect rolls.)

### OBSCURING CLOUD

**Cost:** 1 significant charge.

**Effect:** When you cast this spell, a big cloud of opaque smoke flows out and away from your body, either in one direction or surrounding you. (It's opaque to you too, just so you know.) It's enough smoke to fill up an entire suburban two-story house from basement to attic, and it lasts for a number of minutes equal to the casting roll. If you do it out in the open, it's enough to cover about 2,000 square feet to a depth of ten feet. (That's about a tenth of a hectare and three meters deep,

non-Americans.) The fire department is likely to be called.

### SMOKEFORM

**Cost:** 3 significant charges.

**Effect:** When successfully cast, the adept's body and immediate possessions (clothes, the crap in her purse and pockets, but nothing as big as a bicycle) turn into smoke. She remains in this form until a number of minutes equal to the casting roll elapse, or until she chooses to become solid again.

Her smokeform is a loose cloud about the size of her whole solid body. She can move at the pace of a slow walk through still air, but may be pushed back by any stiff wind or strong fan. She can't be physically damaged, nor damage anyone else, but she can seep through small cracks or under doors easily. She can fly, though getting more than twenty feet up takes some serious focus.

### SMOKE WITHOUT FIRE

**Cost:** 3 significant charges.

**Effect:** This disintegrates objects, turning them into smoke without the pesky heat and light of burning them. It's a standard version of *Alter Significant Tangible Objects*. You point at the thing you want gone, you spend your charge and roll, and then it blows away in a cloud of smoke that quickly disperses into a thin layer of ash. Doesn't work on people, but they probably don't know that.

### UNBURNING

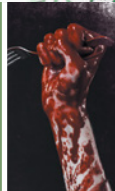
**Cost:** 2 significant charges.

**Effect:** When cast on ashes, they are briefly wreathed in a whirlwind of smoke and darkness, and a breeze seems to blow straight at them. When the smoke clears and the lights come back up, *whatever was burned is now unburned*. That's what this is, though it's unique to things that have been burned up. Then again, the popularity of the phrase, "Kill it with fire!" speaks to how common flames are as a vector for injury. If cast on a damaged object, the burn damage is reversed. If used on a burned person, it removes wounds equal to the roll (only damage due to fire is removed). In the case of a cremated body, it restores the body mostly back to how it was before it was cremated (but not living).

### MAJOR CHARGE EFFECTS

Disseminating a vial of a substance to every person on Earth (good if you've got a virus or vaccine), causing a massive conflagration somewhere in the world (like the King's Cross fire of 1987, thought to have been caused by a smoker's discarded match), or potentially increasing or reducing the incidence of cancer from a specific vice, hobby, or substance (like AstroTurf, kale, red meat, or performing in jazz clubs).

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



See "I'm Afraid It's Cancer" for more details about how to handle this.

4: BIGGER

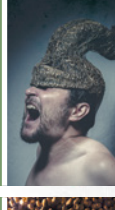


5: LAYERS



See "Alter Significant Tangible Objects" on page 138 of Book One: Play.

6: REDUX



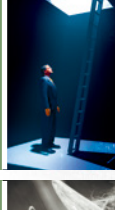
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA



Where there's smoke, there's more smoke, and sometimes fire.





## I'M AFRAID IT'S CANCER

The dance of cancer and smokes is an old one and while it's not the *only* thing that ever kills smokers, it is the quintessential smoker's death. Moreover, there's a specific spell in the ustrinaturge's arsenal that has a very high chance of giving someone cancer, if they're stubborn. So here are the rules for the emperor of maladies, lung division:

**Early Phase:** The cancer is detectable, but there aren't noticeable physical symptoms yet. Still, the diagnosis is a shock — specifically, it's a Helplessness or Violence check, somewhere between rank 3 and rank 5, depending on the patient's history and personality. Every month, the patient makes a Fitness check. If successful, the cancer stays in Early Phase. If the roll fails, the cancer proceeds to Mid-Phase. If he gets an unusual success, the cancer goes into remission and he doesn't have to roll for one to ten months! After that though, the cancer's back in Early Phase. Any unusual failure costs the patient 1d10 wounds, cough cough.

If he decides to get treatment through radiation and chemotherapy, that's fine. Each radiation treatment inflicts a -10% penalty to all rolls for one to five days. Each chemotherapy treatment does 1d10 wounds. But on the upside, each treatment option offers a doctor a chance to roll a Medical identity. On a success, the disease stays in Early Phase. On a matched success, the cancer remains in Early Phase and the patient doesn't take the harm of the treatment. On a crit, the illness goes into remission, as described above. All forms of failure, however, do the same thing, which is nothing.

**Mid-Phase:** The cancer is growing. All rolls are at -10%, including Fitness to resist the illness. There are still the monthly Fitness rolls, but now the results are as follows:

- **Fumble, Matched Failure, or Failure:** The disease progresses to Late Phase. Matched failures offset treatment successes on a one-for-one basis.
- **Success:** The disease stays at Mid-Phase.
- **Matched Success or Crit:** The disease returns to Early Phase.

Radiation and chemo work much like they do in Early Phase — same downsides, success keeps the cancer at the current phase. The only difference is, on a matched success or crit, it returns to the previous phase. All failures do the patient no good.

This is the earliest phase at which surgery is an option. It's an unmodified roll of a Medical identity that permits such invasive procedures, and it permanently reduces the patient's wound threshold by 1-5 (1d10/2, round up). If it succeeds, the illness drops back to Early Phase. If it fails, it has no positive effects. Entering Mid-Phase is a Helplessness or Violence check, at rank 2-4.

**Late Phase:** The cancer spreads to other body systems. All rolls are at -20% and the patient permanently loses 1d10 from their wound threshold. There is no additional stress check for entering Late Phase. Radiation and chemo work as they do in Mid-Phase. Surgery is at a -10% penalty.

**Final Phase:** The cancer is inoperable, and it is no longer responding to radiation or chemotherapy. All rolls are at -30% and the patient permanently loses an additional 2d10 from their wound threshold. Entering Final Phase is a Helplessness or Violence check at rank 5-7. At this point, it's just a matter of time, unless a miracle happens.

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



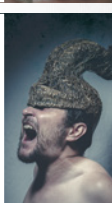
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



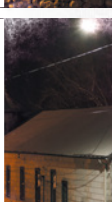
6: REDUX



7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA



# INTACTO BY JUAN CARLOS FRESNADILLO

This Spanish movie is well worth enduring your choice of “dub or sub” poison. It’s a thriller based around a very specific and ruthless occult underground. It’s a subculture that trades in luck.

Everybody says it’s better to be lucky than good, but the bitter truth at the heart of that sentiment is that luck is the one thing you can’t control. *Intacto* asks, “What if you could?” Specifically, what if people who are unusually lucky can suck the good fortune out of others and hoard it, like leprechaun vampires?

The answer is, you get a subculture of people who know the secret and who are constantly circling each other, trying to steal mojo. They are not exceptionally good people. But they’re fine with the idea that it’s better to be lucky.

The film’s main characters are a young scumbag who was the sole survivor of a plane crash; a cop who walked away from the car wreck that killed her family; a man who emerged unscathed from a devastating earthquake; and a mysterious casino owner (played by Max von Sydow!) who has never lost a game of Russian roulette.

## WHAT IT EXPOSES ABOUT UNKNOWN ARMIES

*Intacto* is a great how-to of worldbuilding: it takes a simple premise, then builds out the natural consequences that arise once sketchy people discover that secret rule, turning it into an economy where the rich get richer. And how do they keep track? Through a series of increasingly hazardous and bizarre competitions. (My favorite is “run through the woods blindfolded with your hands tied behind your back.” Whoever reaches the finish line first wins the luck of the ones who faceplanted, got lost, or ran a sharp stick through their thigh.)

Being lucky all the time is great. Being able to shrug off a spear through your chest like it’s a shaving nick is really damn useful. But once you achieve these remarkable powers, you’re stuck in a cutthroat social milieu of people who either don’t have your gifts and are desperate to steal them or who do have your gifts, negating your advantage. It’s not hard to imagine a scenario where avatars or adepts struggle with their powers in order to secure the very resources they need to maintain their powers. *Intacto* provides examples of similar challenges.

# LIMETOWN BY ZACK AKERS, SKIP BRONKIE, AND DAVE YIM

It’s interesting and instructive to compare the *Limetown* podcast with *Tanis*. Both are professionally produced, appealing narratives about journalists attempting to find places that are somehow lost or vanished. Both present themselves as if they were real investigations and involve a lot of interviews with cagey people who may not be trustworthy or all there mentally.

The difference between *Limetown* and *Tanis* is that every episode of *Tanis* seems to pull in some new element, while *Limetown* gets deeper into what it’s already established — which is that a failing municipality named “Limetown” was pretty much bought out lock, stock, and barrel in order to become a utopian experiment based around a neurological research lab. Only the best and brightest were allowed to take part in the Limetown project, and, even then, they had to accept that they might leave their prominent college position in order to be a janitor. But because of the charisma and track record of Limetown’s founder (and, it emerges, curiosity about someone they only call “the man we were all there for”), assorted brilliant people moved to Tennessee to be part of the next big thing. Then all 300 of them vanished in the course of twenty-four hours.

*Limetown* details the research of Lia Haddock (whose uncle was on the site) into the mysterious disappearances, including interviewing apparent survivors living under assumed identities. No spoilers, but Lia finds out that the neurological research bore fruit. Yet somehow, rushing to use untested and radical new technologies turned out to have unexpected negative consequences.

It’s a well-acted, well-written story with some moments where they really go for terror (unlike *Tanis*, which gets its scares through mood and foreboding instead of recordings of crazy dudes screaming and trying to get into the heroine’s hotel room). I also like the fact that it is (apparently) *done*. As of this writing, six months have passed since the last episode, and I’m honestly just fine with that. I like that it has a beginning, middle, and end.

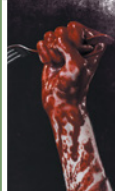
## WHAT IT EXPOSES ABOUT UNKNOWN ARMIES

I don’t want to give anything away, so I’ll just say *Limetown* is a good resource if you’re curious what would happen if some adept-level powers were available to people without obsessions, taboos, or charges.

*Forget it, Lia, it's Limetown.*

See “Tanis by Nic Silver.”

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



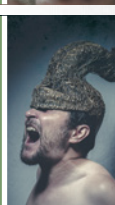
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



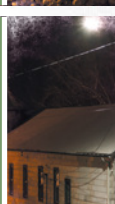
6: REDUX



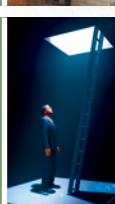
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA









# 3: SMALL, DISCRETE CHALLENGES

Settings with a clear-cut favorite morality, no matter what its stripe, tend to have obvious groups of enemies. *Unknown Armies*, on the other hand, doesn't tell you what's right and what's wrong. Instead, it asks the players to declare what's intolerable in their sight and what they're going to do about it. Given the broad possibilities that encompasses, it can be hard for GMs to create enemies they can be confident their cabal will *oppose*. It's even harder for an outsider to write

## BOLUS

The poor bastard known as "Bolus" was born Manavinder Chaha, but nobody cares about that anymore. His parents are alive, but they've given up on him and tried to get on with their lives. His sister Sri might give a damn, but she's living in Greece, working for an NGO that's trying to help refugees. Is she motivated somewhat by guilt over the brother that her family is, for all practical purposes, trying to forget? It probably won't make any difference.

The thing to know about Bolus is that he is completely insane, in the sense of being a danger to himself and others, and that he is equal parts pitiful and menacing. He was, of course, an adept. Not just an adept, but a charger, an arrogant master of space and location and arcane geometry, who wore silk undershorts and designer sunglasses and didn't have to pay for his freebase cocaine after a cartel found out he could compress their thugs into dense dead wads the size of a cinderblock. He lived in California and went by the name "Transcontinental" and no one there has seen him since he went mad and moved.

Here's the thing about cocaine: it makes you feel brilliant and capable and as if you deserve to achieve every ambition you can conceive. The sensation, in fact, has been directly compared to feeling white privilege. So even though everyone *else* who tried to learn two magick schools came to exceptional grief, Manavinder "Transcontinental" Chaha was confident that he was a combination Einstein/Gagarin/Nanak and would be the first to do it.

The schools he tried to blend were the space-warping discipline he'd already mastered, and a symbolic form of devouring psychic cannibalism. His ambition was to devour all of spacetime, incorporating it into his body and, more importantly, his consciousness. It was your basic "eat everything, become god" scheme and, like all the others who tried this shit, he failed big and hard.

Bolus now lives in an apartment which he insists is "propitious" and pays far more than three windowless subterranean rooms with unfinished ceilings and linoleum over concrete foundations are worth. (There was *some* daylight, coming through cracks in the walls, but he seals those up

up a bad guy for your bespoke agenda. Nonetheless, here we are.

What follows are examples of people and entities that are quite likely to rouse the ire (or scare the pants off) of player cabals. Some of them do this by having contrary agendas. Some do it by being contrary to the very *idea* of agendas. And some are just plan morally reprehensible by any reasonable standard.

with a mixture of newspaper and wet flour. When the ants pull it away, he mixes up some more.) Per the fire codes, he shouldn't be able to rent that space as a residence, since there's only one exit, and there are probably some miscellaneous housing regulations getting violated, but he's got his mattress on the linoleum and his flypapers on the ceiling and he's mostly content. Besides, if there was a fire, he'd be able to walk through the wall and escape into the building next door.

Bolus can walk through walls. That's one of the two weird side effects of his experiment into world-devouring magick. But he can only do it when completely unobserved. Still, that's not bad, not bad at all. Unless you were trying to flabbergast someone, or escape from them, why would you *want* to go through a wall as they watched?

Bolus' job, so far as he has one, is "bespoke burglar." He walks around with one of the ten or twelve materialistic people who employ him — most know him only as "Bolus," don't know where he lives, don't know that he lacks a phone number, and they get in touch with him by hanging out at this one record store where he goes to get his 1970s funk music on vinyl — and they point out things they want. They do this at IKEA or Best Buy or a pawn shop, and then later, Bolus lets himself in when the place is closed. He wears a ski mask in case there's video cameras, but they never catch him entering because (duh) if they could see him enter, he'd be observed and unable to walk through the wall to enter.

So Bolus lets himself into that IKEA or Best Buy or pawn shop, pockets whatever was requested, maybe takes something else that catches his eye, and leaves the same magick way he came in. Typically, he sells the object to his buyer for a quarter of its listed price and everyone's happy, except the store owners and the cops, who are baffled and pissed.

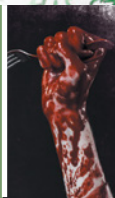
That's how he gets by with no job, paying his rent and occasionally buying things that aren't worth the effort to steal. He doesn't bother with groceries or restaurants because of the *other* power he retained. Warning, it's gross: he steals food. But he doesn't steal it out of stores or packages or vending machines. He steals it out of *people*.

Imagine you've just had nice Vietnamese sandwich with roast pork and head cheese and jalapeños and cilantro. It's sitting comfortably in your belly, marinating in that coconut smoothie you got on the side. Well, if Bolus had seen you eating and decided he wanted or needed that meal more than you, he could give you a squinty look with his pouchy

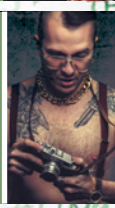
## BIOME

the rpg nuremberg defense: "but i vas chust followink mine character concept!"

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



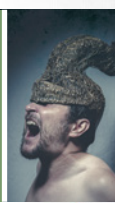
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



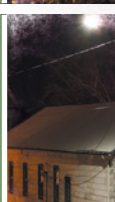
6: REDUX



7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





## BOLUS

Notches	Violence	Unnatural	Helplessness	Isolation	Self
Hardened	4	5	3	4	2
Failed	5	5	5	5	5

brown eyes and then that food would be in *his* tract, not yours.

Bolus never eats anything. His teeth are all gone, because removing them was part of his grand eating adept gesture, and he doesn't bother much with oral hygiene because he doesn't like having things in his mouth any more, *at all*. If he gets hungry or thirsty, he just has to eyeball someone who's less hungry or less thirsty. His breath is *atrocious*, and if you offer him a Tic Tac, he won't take it.

So then. We have a weird madman who can vampirize your dinner, steal your stuff if he feels like it, and probably get out of jail in short order if arrested. Maybe a cabal regards him (rightly) as a resource, because that "occult master thief" routine has plenty of potential if you're not overly moral. But the problem with that is, Bolus has an agenda of his own, and odds are, you won't like it.

Bolus is in favor of anorexia.

He was always something of a misogynist (much to the dismay of his parents, who may have had some traditional notions of gender roles, but who blamed Manavinder's repugnant teen behavior — rightly or wrongly — on exposure to BDSM pornography and Rush Limbaugh). His taste in women ran to skinny blondes of the sort one saw in cigarette ads and on hair metal album covers, and he now considers his proclivities to be a single, universal beauty standard. He thinks all women should be scrawny. Fortunately, he can only steal the eaten food from one at a time, unless he wants to risk being bloated. (He's already quite fat, not because he enjoys eating but because it's hard to be sure how much food he's going to get when he teleports it out of some blonde girl's stomach.)

What Bolus does, other than steal stuff by night, is stalk girls by day, watching them eat and then psychically stealing their meals to "protect" them from getting fat. Note that this extends to entering their homes. He's been caught at least four times, and each time he's gotten away. Twice he just ran into a room, slammed the door, and hopped through the wall. Once he had to stab the girl and her brother until they ran away and he could escape. After that, he got himself one of those military-grade 4,000+ lumen flashlights. When a different family started screaming at him for doing the same creepy thing, he strobed them and fled. (He's been arrested twice and escaped both times, and every time he gets arrested he moves one state over. "Bald, overweight, middle-aged brown-skinned man with no teeth" is too vague of a description to get much traction. His prints are in the system for burglary and escaping from custody in California and Nevada.)

Icky, right? This is a guy who fixates on one young woman at a time and puts a makeshift

Stephen King *Thinner* curse on her, and he can't be imprisoned. What makes Bolus worse than that is his assortment of madnesses. (An unhelpful side effect of his failed double-adeptery, remember?) His specific syndromes are as follows:

**Megalomania:** Bolus tends to discount any suggestion that a task might be beyond his means. He's too bold to be sensible, even when the risks are great and the rewards are puny. He has no sense of proportion and very little impulse control.

**Grapple phobia:** Bolus doesn't like to be touched at all, but he *really* dislikes rough stuff. Any time he gets grabbed or hit, he automatically fails a stress check. It's almost always a toss-up between fleeing and frenzy. He doesn't use guns (too megalomaniacal when he's not freaking out), but he's known to carry that ridiculous flashlight, which doubles nicely as a club. Also, though he has *thoroughly* repudiated his Sikh upbringing, he still carries a kirpan sometimes.

**Paranoia:** Bolus thinks the *Sleepers* are after him and, fair enough, there were a couple Sleeper-affiliated ladies who threw him a boot party in California before he could get away. But the organization has no particular interest in him and those who were familiar with him in his old "Transcontinental" guise think he's pretty burned out and harmless. Nonetheless, the fear drives him to live off the grid, conceal his identity, and instinctively cover his tracks.

**Delusional belief:** Bolus thinks demons are people whose wisdom was so great that their "mind-forms" retained integrity even after their bodies stopped working. Sure, they're off-putting to *most* people, but most people are unworthy of their enlightenment. (He's gotten taken for a ride a couple times by demons, most prominently when he asked one to teach him a second school of magick.) Bolus does not currently have a way to get in touch with demons, but if he got the opportunity, he'd take it.

**Phobia:** One of those California Sleepers owned a cat that could kill and eat demons. In Bolus' unbalanced imaginings, this means that all cats are weapons of cosmic annihilation and agents of chaos, destruction, and decay. He avoids cats like crazy, which is too bad for him because getting one would help with his apartment's vermin situation.

**Wound Threshold:** 50.

**Burned Out Double Adept 60%\*:** Casts Rituals, Substitutes for Secrecy, Use Gutter Magick (\*obsession identity).

**Dangerous Madman 45%:** Babble alarmingly, craft freaky masks, endure horrible aromas. Substitutes for Dodge, Substitutes for Pursuit, Substitutes for Struggle.

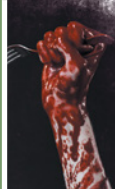
**Walk Through Walls When Unobserved 100%.**

**Steal Food from Others' Tracts 100%.**

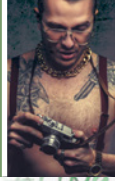
See "*Sleepers*" on page 77 of Book Two: Run.

*You've heard of cat piss man? It's not the cat part or the piss part that's worse. It's the man part.*

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



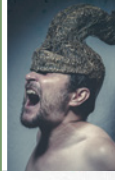
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



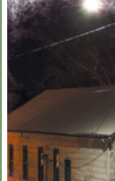
6: REDUX



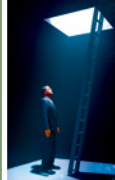
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA



# FOOL-KILLER

The first time you see it, it looks like a tall man in a long coat, wearing a hat with a broad brim. But you won't pay attention. Not if you're wise. Then again, the wisdom of men — theology, theory, and particularly Thaumaturgy — is foolishness to the Fool-Killer.

This powerful, immortal entity might be an agent of chaos. Certainly, it wrecks things and kills people. But it might just as well serve order, because the people it targets are usually the kinds of people who change things. When it gets a fool in its sights, there isn't much that can stand in the Fool-Killer's way. Except, of course, a sensible man.

But before we get into the Fool-Killer's methods of mayhem, it's important to define a key term. What, exactly, is a "fool"?

Whoever named the Fool-Killer was not thinking of the most obvious definition, someone who's mentally deficient or who makes bad decisions. The first time the Fool-Killer received that name (in Tennessee after the Civil War) it was after it had cut a swath through a series of carpetbaggers, "professors," shady preachers, and flimflammers. Hard-working ordinary folks had nothing to fear. If you toiled in the fields or built with your hands, if you were mostly concerned with being fed and a bed for your head, you wouldn't catch hell from the Fool-Killer. Its axe and club were reserved for people who spoke in riddles, in parables, in the language of law or the arts or *politics*. People concerned with the abstract and the unseen. You know: foolishness.

## HOW FOOLISH ARE YOU?

To determine if a character in *Unknown Armies* qualifies for Fool-Killin', check out their identities. See how much abstraction is involved in the activities central to who they *are*. Each identity should fall into one of the following categories:

**Foolishness 0:** These are the most concrete possible identities. They involve tangible solutions for tangible problems. Everyone can understand what these people are doing and why it's important. Example Identities: Bricklayer, Firefighter, Mom, Plumber, Server, Trucker.

**Foolishness 1:** These identities are still very solid and hands-on, but there's a necessary aspect of oversight, education, deep thought, and engagement with solutions that aren't obvious or direct. Example Identities: Doctor, EMT, Mail Carrier.

**Foolishness 2:** Here we start to get away from things you can immediately lay hands on, though that aspect's still present. If your job is half obvious but half rules and regulations and laws, it's probably at Foolishness 2 and a lot of people can't understand why it's not lower. Example Identities: Cop, Electrician, Engineer.

**Foolishness 3:** Once your stock in trade is something that can't be put in a bucket or poked with a stick, you're probably at this level, minimum. People who think for a living, or whose skills are extremely specialized or abstruse, fall at this level. Nonetheless, they produce or perform something that just about everyone might value. Example Identities: Lawyer, Musician, Novelist, Priest, Public School Teacher.

**Foolishness 4:** These specialized identities are the ones where explaining what you do takes more than a couple words. Any kind of bureaucrat falls here, as do most intellectuals and narrow knowledge workers. Example Identities: Computer Programmer, Historiographer, Mathematician, Particle Physicist, Theologian.

**Foolishness 5:** Here we top out with people whose complicated identities aren't just inexplicable to the blue-collar proletariat, they're baffling to most Fool 4s. They're people who aren't just concerned with the way the world works, but with the way the working of the world works. They're dreamers and madmen. They're fools. They're chargers. Example Identities: Adept, Avatar, *Thaumaturge*.

OK, did you see yourself on that list? If not, you're probably at Foolishness 1–2. On the other hand, if you're on there more than once (maybe you're an avatar of the Loyal Laborer and you install carpeting) then you're rated at the highest possible point. Ratings and obsession don't matter for determining how foolish someone is — if it's a part of you, the Fool-Killer is judging you.

## APPEARANCE

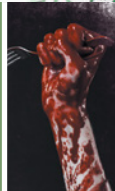
The way a person *experiences* the Fool-Killer varies depending on how foolish they are. As mentioned, the first time someone sees the Fool-Killer, it looks like a tall, indistinct man in a long coat and brimmed hat. If you're at Foolishness 0, that's how it *always* looks to you. But if your Foolishness level is higher than that, you might see it more clearly, if you try and pay attention. Too bad if you do.

Its second form is something that looks human in outline, but it doesn't move right. It's improperly proportioned. Its limbs don't accelerate and slow down the way a person's do. It moves like a device, or a boneless lower animal. If you look closer, you find that your eyes are sliding off it, but you get the sense that it's only *mimicking* humanity, the way an insect might look like a stick or leaf until it moves, or the way that a person in a crowd looks familiar until they turn around. What seemed a coat is moist wings, and the brim of the hat is a crest like on a lizard's head. If you're at Foolishness 1–2, it never progresses beyond this blurry seeming, no matter how closely you watch. This is an Unnatural (3–4) check.

*Pity the  
Fool-  
Killer, pity  
the Fool,  
alas, alas.*

See "The  
Authentic  
Thaumaturge  
Identity" on  
page 179 of  
Book One:  
Play.

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



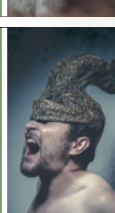
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



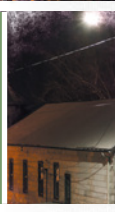
6: REDUX



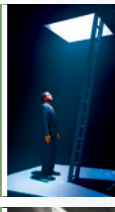
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





If you're at Foolishness 3+, you can see it for what it really is the third time you encounter it. It's now nothing tangible, it's a hole in space, a distortion of reality that flows like water and scrambles position instead of moving. (If you look through it, you see distorted visions of your past encounters with the Fool-Killer.) The idea of solid matter now becomes a scab, and the Fool-Killer is what bleeds out when some egghead has inadvertently picked it off. Seeing the Fool-Killer in this state is an Unnatural (4-5) check.

## STALKING PROCESS

The Fool-Killer has one target at a time, like a high-end confidence trickster. When someone of Foolishness 3+ comes under its attention *either directed or utterly at random* it comes after them in three stages.

In Stage One, it looks like the tall, vague man in the long coat. It watches from a distance, seeming foreboding as all hell, but if approached by the target it vanishes, usually in some highly deniable way. But it messes up your stuff. It smashes windows and mirrors in your house, car, and place of business. (It *really* goes after mirrors.) Wherever it goes, it leaves the accusation "FOOL" painted in big square red letters. It does this for about three days before escalating to Stage Two.

Stage Two is collateral damage. Oh, it still smashes every mirror it happens across, it still paints "FOOL" when it strikes, but now it attacks its target's relationships. First protégé, then mentor, responsibility, and guru before finishing with favorite. It doesn't necessarily kill them, but it doesn't really hold back, either. As a GM guideline, it gets in two to three solid hits and then leaves. (If a character has a relationship with a group, it simply torments someone from that group, or several if it catches them all together, before tagging the wreckage and fleeing.) It attacks one relationship every other day.

Stage Three is the end, and only comes after extended harassment. (Ten days at most — fewer for social isolates.) After all the broken glass and threats and such, the Fool-Killer comes for its victim, trying to just show up from nowhere when the target is alone and unprepared, but there was an ugly situation where its anointed victim thought crowds would deter it and had a dozen bodyguards watching him constantly. The good news is, all the bodyguards survived.

It's possible to kill the Fool-Killer, but either it comes back to life within twenty-four hours, or another, identical one shows up to complete the mission. Sorry. It's a tough skate.

## THE FOOL-KILLER'S TRAITS

The powers of the Fool-Killer vary by how present it is, and what draws its presence is the abstract thought that it designates as "foolishness." The easy way to track how dangerous it is (merely "very" or all the way up to "catastrophically") is by its appearance. The appearance, in turn, depends on which stage of stalking it's at.

## TRAITS COMMON TO ALL PHASES

**Intermittent reality:** It can only exist in tangible reality for about fifteen to twenty minutes a day. Fight it off that long, and it goes back to whatever hell, Valhalla, or sixth-dimensional dollar store spawned it. Unfortunately, when it becomes real, it can always show up within a half-mile of its target (or some place or person important to the target). Also, re-becoming real removes all its wounds. So, even if you manage to kill it, it comes back in the next day or so, ready once more to rumble.

**Badass abilities:** No matter what it looks like, the Fool-Killer has a wound threshold of 80, and a rating of 60% in Dodge, Notice, Pursuit, Secrecy, and Struggle. Against people who aren't foolish but are merely in its way, it strikes with what appears to be a club — it leaves bruises like one and inflicts +3 wounds anyhow. Matched successes do damage like gunshots.

**Fool-Slashing:** This is a second attack rated at 70% and it has the feature Provides Initiative. Foolishness 0 types see this attack as a swing from an axe, though it moves too fast to see clearly. It does +6 damage, has the miss damage of an edged weapon, and matched successes do damage like gunshots. Fool-Slashing attacks can *only* be made against people who are seeing it in its second or third form. But this does mean that it can get two attacks per round against an abstract thinker.

## SECOND STAGE TRAITS

If you see it for the second time and aren't extremely down-to-earth, it gains the following powers:

**Disturbing:** As mentioned above, it's an Unnatural (3-4) check for people to see it for the second time, if they're "foolish" enough to realize it's inhuman.

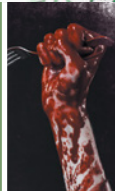
### No Weapon Forged Against Me Shall Prosper:

If you hit the Fool-Killer with a weapon, that weapon is destroyed. Axes and knives warp and split while firearms just spring apart — they look a little bit like a tangled up slinky afterwards, or the blades of an eggbeater. This doesn't happen if you swing and miss, and it doesn't prevent the weapon from harming it, but it's surprising (the first time), dismaying, and can get expensive.

See "The Soft Way: Gutter Magick" on page 181 of Book One: Play.

"Bad-ass" first appeared in the novel *Joint* in 1955, at least in the last reality.

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



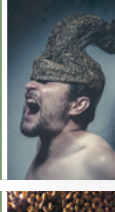
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



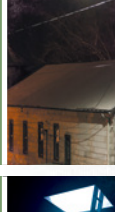
6: REDUX



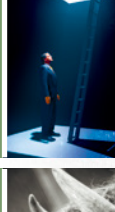
7: VEIL



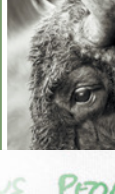
8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA



### THIRD STAGE TRAITS

It has all the advantages of the second stage, except that the check from Disturbing gets kicked up a notch or two. In addition, it gets one more trait:

**No Allies:** Anyone who picks up a phone or radio while seeing the Fool-Killer in its space-distorting shape can't be heard or hear anything other than a growling voice saying "Fool, fool, fool, *FOOL!*" over and over.

### WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

To recap, we have a thing that can't be detained (because it can always stop being real when cornered or imprisoned), can't be escaped (because it always appears nearby), and can't even be gunned down in the street like a Democrat because it just comes back to life like some off-brand vampire Jesus. What can PCs do (that makes a great story)? Some options are presented, so if your PCs do these things, great, you've got guidance. But they're also presented so that if (or almost inevitably *when*) they try something different, you know how to respond.

With that in mind, the possibilities, in ascending order of effectiveness, are as follows:

**Negotiate:** Nope. It doesn't talk, it doesn't show any sign of listening, its only vocabulary may be "fool" and that's all it writes back if you send it a letter.

**Adept spells and avatar channels:** It's not immaterial nor demonic, so spells for coping with those hassles don't do much. It's not a person or an animal, it doesn't have a shock gauge. It's really kind of in a solo category, so if you're not *certain* a particular power applies, it probably doesn't.

**Fire, magick, and the sword:** Sure, you can kill it, sort of. Blast spells harm it, as do bullets and butcher knives. But it re-forms unharmed pretty quick. So this is more of a tactical pause than a final victory.

**Capture it with mirrors:** Why does it smash mirrors wherever it goes? Maybe they can trap it! Um... OK? Sort of? If you encircle it on all sides with reflective surfaces, it vanishes from reality. But it comes back within a couple days. It's not much better than just killing the thing.

**Investigate:** PCs are going to try vision quests, internet searches, prowls through dusty old library stacks, interrogations of the usual suspects, and lord only knows what else in their attempts to just *learn some things* about the Fool-Killer. What they find out depends on how well they roll, unless you want to feed them a solution directly because they recharged an objective or did something else entertaining enough to earn an answer.

- **Fumble, Matched Failure, or Failure:** There is no hope. It cannot be stopped. *It cannot be stopped.*
- **Success:** They hear about the ritual or the gutter magick options, as described below, unless you're very eager to introduce an otherspace, in which case that possibility is presented.

- **Matched Success:** They find the ritual, or at least something that leads to it, and that gives a fairly honest evaluation of the risks involved.
- **Crit:** Someone who would not normally be a fist-cuffs-type person can be found who hollowly recounts her victory over it by losing her mind and battering it.

**Use gutter magick:** The usual gutter magick of improving your odds or sandbagging your enemy works well enough, but that's probably not quite sufficient. Anyone who asks around in an entertaining fashion can find a rumor that someone who was stalked by the Fool-Killer used gutter magick to redirect it against somebody else. If your PCs try that, it works. If the new target has a higher Foolishness rating (probably Fool 4s aiming it at a Fool 5) then it chases after that and never comes back. If the new target's Foolishness rating is equal (likely, since it's Foolishness 5 types who fall back on gutter magick in the first place) then the Fool-Killer returns to the original target after dealing with the new one... unless the new target redirects it to some *third* target. Kiting it along like this can work for a while, but it is very patient and never takes a vacation day. But for a couple weeks, at least, it's somebody else's problem.

**Use a ritual:** There is a ritual involving the Fool-Killer. Anyone who can cast a ritual and who finds it can call for the Fool-Killer to go murder someone. (The ritual only costs 3 minor charges.) If the intended victim has Foolishness 3 or higher, the Fool-Killer does its horrid thing, and then comes back and starts stalking the summoner. The price of summoning it is, it *always* that it puts you next on its list.

Amusingly, if you're already pursued by the Fool-Killer — either because you called it yourself, or because someone else sicced it on you, or for no discernible reason at all — you can use the ritual to redirect it. It just goes after someone else and comes back to you. How many people are you willing to throw into that meat grinder just to buy yourself a couple weeks of freedom?

**Flee to an otherspace:** This is a good one! If you can manage to get into an otherspace, it loses track of you and moves on to a different victim (or just stops existing). Unfortunately, if you don't have one of the rarest, most secret, and carefully protected pieces of arcane real estate available, you're going to have to find one, which is a hassle all on its own. But if you, as GM, have a neat idea that branches off getting involved with an otherspace or introducing one, by all means let the PCs trade the Fool-Killer problem in for an exciting new otherspace problem.

**Beat it to death with your own two fists:** This, the counterintuitive direct solution, works surprisingly well. Don't tell your PCs this, but the Fool-Killer takes a -40% penalty to attacks when it's against an unarmed target. (Attacking the target's friends? Still at its usual, ridiculously high base rates.) It still gets two attacks per round and gets extra damage from them, but a target who kills it with a bare-handed strike is free of its haunting. (If someone besides the target kills it with a punch or kick, it comes back, but only after three weeks.) If you can grapple it and hold it to the point that a normal person would submit or pass out, the

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



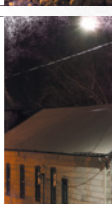
6: REDUX



7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





thing hisses “You... win...” and then vanishes, leaving only an oily residue on the victor’s hands and clothes.

Targets — not people fighting it, but people it’s fixated on — who have an obsession that lets them fight unarmed do *firearm* damage with punches and kicks against it. That doesn’t come up all that often. But people who fail a stress check against the Fool-Killer and opt to wade in with violence get to flip-flop their attack rolls if they’re insane.

This does, of course, suggest that to this entity, the highest wisdom is blind murderous rage. Which, if you think about it, explains an awful lot about its behavior.

## THE FOOL-KILLER

**Wound Threshold:** 80.

**Mostly Unstoppable 80%:** Provides Wound Threshold, and it recovers from all wounds within twenty-four hours, even if killed.

**Antagonist 60%:** Substitutes for Dodge, Substitutes for

## ICE CREAM NAN

The ice cream truck industry is not tightly monitored where Nan operates. She mostly patrols the poorer side of town, where cops have more pressing issues to pursue than making sure a food truck is properly licensed. And why would anyone suspect her? Nanette Bartolomeo is unremarkable — a woman in her early thirties, heavysset, dark haired, plain featured. If you tease her about sampling her own product, she blushes in a way that is non-sexually attractive. She has a nice smile. She reminds you, perhaps, of a favorite teacher, or the babysitter for whom you always behaved well.

Her vehicle is white with posters of frozen treats on the side, it has a loudspeaker that blares “Turkey in the Straw” and it’s just annoying enough to be forgettable. It’s a counterbalance to Nan herself, who is just pleasant enough to be forgettable. Forgettable is a good thing, when you’re a kidnapper.

Nan is not a *violent* kidnapper, nor is she (ugh) a sexual pervert kidnapper. She is an occult entrepreneur kidnapper, though she certainly wouldn’t describe herself that way.

Ice Cream Nan didn’t always drive the ice cream van. At one time she had a small neighborhood gelato emporium in a cute part of downtown, and she was quirky and fun and did nontraditional flavors and everyone who came in left charmed. But not enough people came in.

There was an economic downturn. There was a neighborhood demographic shift. There was a goddamn Cold Stone Creamery that moved in a block over and could *advertise* and send out motherfucking *coupons* and everyone said her ice cream was better, that they’d come to her *next time*. Nan Bartolomeo was *thiiiiis* close to making it, to turning a decent profit, to doing a little better than barely scraping by, for over *seven years*.

Well, she lost it all, of course. Lost the business, stopped *making* ice cream and started buying prefab bars full of chemical preservatives and high-fructose corn syrup. But even at her most desperate, she never went to her dad for help. Never even considered it. Not until he got out of jail and just *showed up*.

He showed up and wanted to make it up to her for the years, *years* of neglect, and absence, and embarrassment she

experienced when she got close enough to someone and had to admit that her dad was in prison before they heard it from anyone else.

But he returned and he knew stuff. She didn’t want to believe, so he showed her. She didn’t want to see, didn’t want to even remember, but he showed her. He showed her demons and said that they could teach her all she’d need to know to prosper.

“It wasn’t me who did all that stuff,” he assured her. “Demons... you let ‘em run your body for a little while and they’ll tell you anything. This time I’ve got it planned out. It’s going to be better. It’s going to work.”

He went off to Tupelo to let the thing have his flesh, but before he went it put something in her mind. Saying it taught her is... not quite right. She never *learned* how to do the ritual, but it’s in her, forever. She could forget her name and not forget the rite of the cat-leather ring.

He’s back in prison — arson this time, his third strike — but Nan is turning it around. She’s got the ritual and a decent supply of Rohypnol and she is *turning it around*.

The ritual captures and copies emotion. Children’s emotions, in particular. And at first, Nan would seize the joy of the children who were *so excited* to see the ice cream truck and pass it on through ice cream treats and sell those to the adults, and it was *nice*.

But she was still only scraping by.

Maybe when the demon put that ritual in her brain, it dropped something else in there, the way you can tell a mouse is in your kitchen by the tiny turds next to the refrigerator grille. Or maybe people who get desperate start to make really outrageous plans — especially if they’re deep in despair and then get a little taste of hope. More than the taste she got from the rocket pops that were infused with childish glee. That cheer was stolen from children who — after she touched them with a small cat-leather ring she wears on her right hand (that’s part of the ritual, and making that ring was very disturbing) — walked away from the van looking confused, disappointed, sometimes a little afraid. The way you do when your happiness suddenly goes away.

One of the people from her old neighborhood opened a restaurant and Nan begged to supply the ice cream for

1: MEAT

2: THROAT

3: SMALL

4: BIGGER

5: LAYERS

6: REDUX

7: VEIL

8: BESEIGED

9: SELVES

10: MEDIA

it. "You remember the homemade stuff, the good stuff," she said, eyes feverish. "I've got something even better!"

The mild joy of a visit from the ice cream van was good, but Nan needed something great. So she took her expired sleeping pills and ground them up, put them in one particular Choccy Chipwich, and waited until there was just one kid, unattended, staring longingly at the van but unable to afford anything.

Here's the trick: after he passed out, she touched him with the cat-skin ring to keep his terror contained, and then locked him up in an abandoned tenement. BUT! She touched him with the ring once more, used the ritual again in abeyance, and phoned in where he could be found. Because she'd set it up just so, she captured the relief he felt upon his rescue, and *that's* what she put in the ice cream she gave her old neighbor.

Sure, it was also a masterful butter brickle, but it also tasted like a child's relief at being rescued from imprisonment. So of course the restaurateur wanted it on the menu!

Nan doesn't take it easy on herself. That original blast of terror that she stole? She ate that. She knows *exactly* how bad it feels to be a kidnapped child. But the terrors she's taken from the other three kids who were nabbed and immediately released (this time after being dosed with

Rohypnol so they didn't remember)? Those have all gone to the upscale boutique *gelateria* that replaced the Cold Stone Creamery and is giving her restaurant partner's dessert menu such a hard time. It's starting to fail — it doesn't take many mysterious customer panic attacks before a place stops having a fun reputation. In the meantime, Nan's found that the relief, the sweet naïve feeling that *everything's being taken care of now...* it's even better than the joy of a child seeing the ice cream van.

In fact, it's fair to say she's got a little bit of a psychological addiction working there.

Nan has five failed notches in Helplessness, and the disorder she has is addiction. She's addicted to the artificial pleasure she can consume through the cat-leather ring. The joy of seeing the van is enough, for now, but she's had a taste of the relief of a released kidnap victim and she cannot forget it.

## ICE CREAM NAN

**Wound Threshold:** 50.

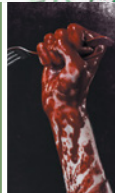
**Great Cook 70%\*:** Substitute a missing ingredient, please the eye as well as the tongue, sharpen a knife up good. Casts Rituals, Protects Isolation, Substitutes for Connect (\*obsession identity).

## ICE CREAM NAN

Notches	Violence	Unnatural	Helplessness	Isolation	Self
Hardened	2	2	5	2	4
Failed	0	0	5	0	0



1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



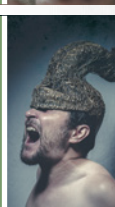
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



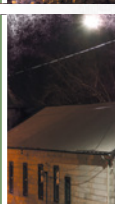
6: REDUX



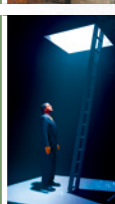
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





## THE CAT-LEATHER RING RITE

**Cost:** 1 minor charge.

**Effect:** To cast this ritual, first you need to make a cat-leather ring. So, get a cat and kill it, then skin it. (I know, I know, there's more than one way.) Shave it. Cure the leather using whatever method you prefer — there are several online, but the resulting leather has to be supple enough to bend into a ring. The ring has to be a cut strip that has one twist before the ends are sewn together. (That is, it has to be a Möbius strip.) You have to wear the ring and touch the intended target of emotion harvest with the ring. You must wear it on the middle finger of your right hand. The spell only works on children eleven years old or younger.

Before touching the child to be harvested, say, "Emotion is the fetus of the cosmos." After touching the child, you can drain away any emotion that the child feels within forty-eight hours by speaking the phrase, "It's harvest time,"

## QUEEN-THROAT PARASITISM

The phenomenon dubbed "Queen-Throat Parasitism" is widely misunderstood throughout various mystic subcultures, but not because anyone's deliberately misinforming people, not because it's "occulted," not because anyone's trying to keep it secret. It's not anyone's plan or project or tool. It's just a very, very strange thing that happens. Magick-slinging weirdoes are the kinds of people who notice it or, at least, accept that it is what it is, but they didn't make it and they don't necessarily understand it. Like global warming, it happened when we weren't paying attention.

It starts with the common queen snake — *Regina septemvittata* — found pretty much anywhere east of the Mississippi in the United States. They're earth-toned with tan or peach vertical stripes, and can get up to two feet long at most. No venom. They live by fresh water and eat tadpoles, crayfish, and shrimp. They're harmless unless they undergo the Queen-Throat Parasitism (QTP) transformation.

No one is sure what causes that transformation. It's not common, that's for sure. The *Sleepers* have laid hands on exactly two of the altered serpents, and when *GNOMON* was asked how many times QTP had happened to people, its answer was "7."

Queen snakes only become occult parasites when there's a plastics factory within ten or fifteen miles of their aquatic habitat, though no one knows why that should be. If big charges being released spurs their formation, as an *unnatural phenomenon*, nobody has been able to prove a correlation. The Sleepers looked good and hard to find a charger who'd been careless near their two snake cases, but came up with nothing. They had to content themselves with menacing the (uninvolved) local Freemasons.

So, the ingredients are: queen snakes, found

and then specifying the emotion to be transferred, for example, "the joy of seeing the ice cream van." Once the emotion is harvested, it can be put in any food item by touching the food with the ring and saying, "Fetus to infant."

The emotion is drained out of the child, then put into the food. Whoever eats the food experiences the emotion. If the emotion drained is not terribly intense, there are no rules effects — the kid who loses is maybe a little nonplussed, the person who gets it is maybe a little shaken up or pleased — but it's not enough to create a stress check.

If the emotion is very intense, strong enough that it'd cause a stress check on its own, the child does not have to make the check, and doesn't gain a hardened or failed notch. The person who consumes that emotion *does* make that check, and it's increased by a step or two because it's (presumably) sourceless and senseless.

near waterways; a plastics factory; and some unknown X factor or factors that causes the snake to shrink, leave its habitat, seek out a sleeping human being, and climb into the victim's throat.

That's the parasitism aspect. The snake crawls into your mouth and down your throat, with its mouth going into your lung. It is exactly as unpleasant as it sounds, resulting in some level of Violence check for most people, and possibly an Unnatural one for people whose knowledge of biology is sufficient to insist that no snake *does* that. Typically, though, the Unnatural check comes later, when the thing starts talking through you.

See, normally, having a queen snake crawl into your throat would kill you unless you pulled it out before it could smother you. But something very peculiar happens to parasite snakes. They get in there fast, people get maybe one chance to yank them out and after that it's in place, unless they fail a stress check, opt for frenzy, and then do a bunch of damage to their own necks trying to get the critter out of there. (That's how the Sleepers came across their first case of QTP.) Once in place, the victim can breathe *through the snake*. Whether they change form to make a passage for breath or become immaterial is anyone's guess. Probably the latter, since they don't show up on x-rays. If you check the victim out with a tongue depressor though, you can see a little snake tail waaaay in the back of their throat, wagging like a yellow-striped second uvula.

Having a snake in your lungs is... well, it's clearly not ideal. It gives you a -10% penalty to Fitness rolls, or anything that substitutes for one. Feels kind of asthmatic. Usually makes your voice a little bit higher, too. Not like you've been huffing helium, just like you're a bit agitated, even if you're trying to stay calm about the snake in your neck.

The most common victims of QTP are drunks

*Swallow  
your pride,  
your  
envy, your  
wrath,  
your sloth...*

1: MEAT



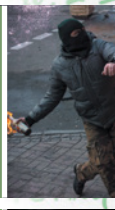
2: THROAT



3: SMALL



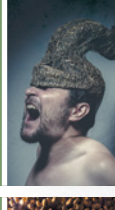
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



6: REDUX



7: VEIL



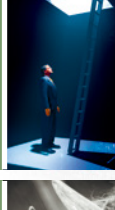
See "Sleepers" on page 77 of Book Two: Run.

8: BESEIGED



See "Flex Echo" on page 57 of Book Two: Run.

9: SELVES



See "Unnatural Phenomena" on page 81 of Book One: Play.

10: MEDIA



and drug addicts because, like so many of the shitty things in this life, becoming unconscious in public near fresh bodies of water is disproportionately likely to happen to them. In the *second* case of QTP that the Sleepers discerned, a junkie on the nod woke up to the snake going in, briefly freaked out, but when she could breathe again she just figured it was a nightmare or a flashback and tried to get back to sleep.

It was after waking that she experienced the most mysterious and inexplicable aspect of QTP, which is that it influences your speech. Not all the time, but it keeps you from saying, “A snake crawled down my throat!” (writing is unaffected) and — far more subtly — it influences the way you talk to the people who matter most to you. Whenever someone who has queen-throat parasitism talks to one of their mechanically defined relationships, they have the option to say what they wanted... or to follow the snake’s prompting and say whatever the guru or mentor or whoever wants to hear. (How does the snake know this? Anybody’s guess. This situation is weird.)

This means that these people who were sleeping in public feel a peculiar urge to repair or improve their friendships and loyalties. It’s not without cost though. Giving in to that urge makes one feel... hollow. Diminished. It’s like giving up, and like a cough.

Mechanically, every time the snake-host says what the *serpent* wants, instead of what she wants, the player rolls 1d10. The relationship improves by a number of percentiles equal to what’s rolled. But one of the victim’s identities — whichever the GM thinks is most relevant — diminishes by a like amount.

Bobek has been on a downward spiral since losing his job, culminating with a blackout binge that leaves him passed out by Greasy Lake just a mile down on the dark side of Route 88. He gets snaked, thrashing awake to a cold slithering in his throat. He can’t get it out, he vomits, and stumbles back to his trailer. The next day, his older sister Otylie comes by to check on him and his instinct is to tell her, “Go home and have more babies with your fat shit husband,” but the snake suggests that instead, he could say, “Sister, I’m a wreck. I don’t know how to fix it.” Reluctantly, he goes with that instead. His mentor relationship with Otylie was at 30%, whittled down by repeated loans and whining, and he had an identity of Shop Machinist at 55%. When he lets the snake speak for him, he rolls 1d10 and gets a 7. His relationship rises to 37%. His Shop Machinist identity drops to 48%.

## USING QUEEN-THROAT PARASITISM IN YOUR GAME

As is, this is a couple pages of nightmare. Because you’re playing *Unknown Armies* in a tailored setting with a tailored cabal, it’s going to be most useful when altered to fit your players’ interests and the characters’ concerns. There are plenty of intentional blank spaces in this entry to make it personal.

**The Real Cause:** Why is this happening now? Is there some Sinister Hand behind it all, or is it a paranormal rogue wave that didn’t happen because it was *willed* but as an unforeseen consequence? Like climate change in the ‘80s, is this snake shit just the first and least damning aspect?

**All the Way:** So far, the known victims have gotten that damn thing out of their throats. But the snakes *are* a surprisingly quick way to repair your ruined friendships and get right with the folks you admire. Granted, you have to become a hollowed-out ex-self in order to please everyone, but... what happens when someone completely knuckles under? When their identity drops to 0% or a relationship hits 100%? Are they just helplessly subservient to the people they love, or do they undergo some kind of profound transformation? Do they turn into giant snakes? They probably don’t turn into giant snakes.

**The Cure:** The Sleeper-documented end-states for this are: (1) the host dies, or (2) the host lives on with the snake inextricably phased into her esophagus, or (3) the host yanks the thing out by the tail while it’s still squirming past her teeth. The first and second scenarios are clearly not great outcomes, while the third isn’t something that every potential victim can manage. How do you get a settled parasite out without killing the host? Do these snakes have a kryptonite? If so, how does one find it? Does the nature of their Achilles’ heel provide a clue to what caused these things and what their purpose (if any) might be?

**Exploiting It:** Hell, I know players are going to look for a way to reverse this snake curse into an advantage, no matter what the circumstances. You might as well accept that and prepare for a one-way valve between identities and relationships.

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



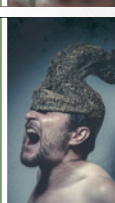
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



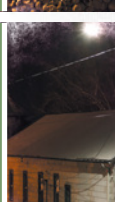
6: REDUX



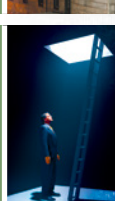
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





# THE PRAGUE CEMETERY BY UMBERTO ECO

So, what you have here is a story set in 19th century Europe, told from the perspective(s) of a guy at the heart of a lot of dirty conspiracy. He's called Captain Simonini and, along with Abbé Dalla Piccola, he murders, deceives for money, (and simply out of habit) spies, forges, and betrays his way through Russians, Germans, Italians, and Frenchmen. Along the way he sells communion wafers to Satanists and meets a woman who's either transmitting messages from an unearthly intelligence or just has multiple personalities (as, possibly, does he himself). He meets Freud and he writes, and rewrites, and re-rewrites, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

That vile document is, in many ways, the center of *The Prague Cemetery*. If you don't know about *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, I sure hope it's because you're lucky enough to have avoided the anti-Semitic dipshittery that keeps getting dismissed by the sensible, then lurching back to life like a zombie to devour the brains of the living.

What happens in *The Protocols* is that a bunch of Jewish elders meet in a Prague cemetery and discuss their sinister plans for subverting, corrupting, robbing, enslaving, and murdering Christians. It has long been considered the smoking gun proving a vast plot of sinister Jews taking over banking and publishing, scheming against the *goyim*. It's a fake document from real history. Henry Ford was a big fan. So was Adolf Hitler.

Another piece of real history is the novel from which *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was plagiarized. It's called *Biarritz* and it was written in 1868, long before the 1902 publication of the earliest known printing of *Protocols*.

The real-life author of *The Protocols* is unknown, but in *The Prague Cemetery*, it's forged-to-order by Captain Simonini. Not only that, but he's constantly repackaging the conspiratorial material to put the frame around the Freemasons, and the Jesuits, and anyone else that his patrons and clients want accused.

Although it's set at the very birth of the 20th century, it feels extremely relevant to the birth of the 21st as well. The central lessons of *The Prague Cemetery* are: (1) if you hand someone evidence that proves *exactly what they want*, they have zero incentive to examine it closely, (2) people are always willing to pay good money to get evidence supporting their policy goals, and (3) it's almost inevitably cheaper and simpler to forge evidence (true or false) than to get actual documentation about what really happened. In the age of yellowcake WMD, these lessons seem distressingly relevant.

## WHAT IT EXPOSES ABOUT UNKNOWN ARMIES

In addition to being a great yarn, if you like your books dense and historical, it vividly demonstrates how well fraud and conspiracy work if you're utterly amoral. *Unknown Armies* defaults to characters who passionately believe in something — an objective to which they dedicate their efforts. If your PCs have pretensions of nobility or honor, *The Prague Cemetery* can give you the outlines of an antagonist who can tie them in knots, simply by being a self-interested and hate-filled nihilist. Simonini is willing to accuse anybody of anything, and he really, truly does not care how many people his actions hurt. He values his own life, and a good meal. Everything else is a matter of indifference. He'd choke a child with a kitten if it got him a really splendid duck dinner.

Simonini, like Jørgen from *Terribly Happy*, has the sociopathic freedom that comes from true indifference, a genuinely depraved lack of compassion. You don't need too many antagonists like that, but one? One is going to give your players fits.

*This is how they get to you, this or Name of the Rose.*

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



6: REDUX



7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA









# 4: THE BIGGER PICTURE

If it was all just one lone destined hero against The Wickedness, that would be simpler, but if you're in this game's demographic, it probably wouldn't be better. You know those tropes, don't you? Maybe you find the whole "evil overcome by lone hero who just happens to be a white guy not that it matters" concept a little harder to work with because its many permutations are looking a bit shopworn?

As it happens, media these days features groups that look a little bit more like a niche-protected D&D party, probably because they're written and developed by people who grew up in niche-protected D&D parties. The *Unknown Armies* equivalent is the cabal, and there's more to it than just "these are the people your players picked and that's who the story's about." *Unknown Armies* lets the

players design their objective, and that moves them from being lone nuts with idiosyncratic plans into a larger sphere. Cabals can, and do, affect larger communities and that's what makes them *interesting*. (Well, that and the magick and the bizarre worldview.)

This is not a game about material accumulation and power-ups. It's about reshaping events on a broader scale, and if that hasn't been a feature of your games before, this is the chapter to consult. It's got the book and podcast recommendations that illustrate the interface between individual actors and bigger movements, along with an unnatural entity that can slow down sinister international conspiracies and small cultish cliques alike.

## JANEDOES

A janedoe — it's from "Jane Doe," the name given to unidentified corpses — is an unnatural entity that can pass for human, and it exists as an agent of entropy. Just as *surgical teams* appear from nowhere to repair causal damage to reality, janedoes appear from nowhere to keep people from creating too much order in their lives. They are parasites upon ambition, sometimes fatal ones.

### THE THREE FACES OF JANEDOE

Janedoes shift between three appearances, each with a separate name. One of their guises is always male, one female, and one androgynous. (No matter how they look, they have no genitals — they have the blank crotches of dolls.) Each guise can produce ID as required — always with the last names Smith, Johnson, or Williams, and always with the first names Mary, Pat, or James, though the configurations change from one janedoe to another.

### THE PASSER-BY

A janedoe spends twelve hours out of every day configured as the passer-by, an unremarkable appearance with monotone speech patterns. This is the shape they use for reconnaissance and sabotage. Anyone who tries to have a serious conversation with a passer-by gradually realizes that the answers sound canned and vague. In this form, a janedoe's speech can't conform to the norms of a fluent speaker — they can't describe things well, they don't understand emotions or interior experiences, they look blank at any statement that isn't practical and respond noncommittally. This form is good for moving through crowds or for being

alone, but its inhuman responses catch up to it under close scrutiny.

It has the following stats:

**Wound Threshold:** 50.

**Struggle** 40%.

**Pursuit** 50%.

**Secrecy** 60%.

**Fitness** 50%.

**Situational Invisibility 80%:** If the passer-by is in a crowd, it has an 80% chance of avoiding recognition — even if its appearance is obviously different from everyone else in the crowd (for example, a black woman in a throng of white men). Outside of a crowd, it can become invisible by standing stock-still and rolling successfully. In either case, it is visible through any electronic imaging technology. Old mechanical film cameras show it on prints, but it's not seen through the viewfinder. Basically, the human mind just blind-spots the creature. People who *know* the passer-by is there and have some inkling that they might be under psychic influence to ignore it can attempt Notice rolls against Situational Invisibility, just like they could against a Secrecy roll. They can only try this if they know they're being mind-altered.

### THE MONSTER

Janedoes spend eight hours a day in their monster form. They're between six and seven feet tall, with lank hair that looks like a polyester wig. Their faces seem too small for their skulls, because they're the same size as the faces they wear on bodies with ordinary proportions. They can pass for human, but with horrible birth defects — some Marfan syndrome with acromegaly plus a leathery complexion that looks like serious sun damage. Also, they don't have fingernails or toenails, just blank pads that extend all the way around their digits. While in this shape, the janedoe can't speak

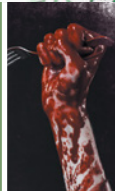
See "Surgical Teams" on page 86 of Book Three: Reveal.

*Toxicabs are 15% likely to be driven by janedoes.*

## CYCLICAL

i... feel like i should encourage you to love and respect yourself a little more than that?

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



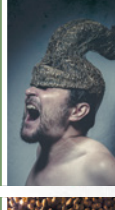
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



6: REDUX



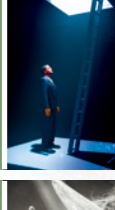
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA



at all, just grunt, and its facial expression stays fixed. You don't want to get it mad, though.

This is the shape it uses for rough stuff — terrifying people, carrying out threats, arson. Acting like a frustrated player character, honestly.

It has the following stats in this shape:

**Wound Threshold:** 80.

**Struggle 80%\*:** Its punches and kicks do +3 damage. On matches, it does damage like a firearm (\*obsession identity).

**Fitness 80%.**

**Pursuit 70%.**

**Monster 80%:** Evaluates Violence, Provides Initiative, Provides Wound Threshold.

## THE NEGOTIATOR

For four hours every day, a janedoe can occupy its negotiator shape — typically, a cute and petite shape. As a negotiator, it's charming, friendly, articulate, and emits a faint but noticeable scent of honeysuckle. (Still no genitals though.) Its ability to simulate humanity is 100% — flawless backstory (all fake, all calculated to elicit sympathy), the voice, the speech, the expressions, the tiny movements of balance, the pulse, the changes of complexion, the texture of the hair as it sways... it's all perfect, at least until the thing gets hurt.

This is the shape it carries when it wants to fool people, appeal to emotion, plant doubt, make accusations (true or false), give false hope, or muddy the waters.

It has the following stats when configured as a negotiator:

**Wound Threshold:** 40.

**Struggle 30%.**

**Dodge 60%.**

**Lie 100%.**

**Connect 100%.**

**It's How They Drink 80%:** If it sees a human being consume any beverage while in this form, it can roll this identity. On a success, it then intuits the drinker's passions.

## TRANSFORMATION

I mentioned previously that janedoes, regardless of form, lack genitalia. (They don't have an anus either — anything they eat or drink must go out through the "in" door.) (It seemed relevant.) Something they *do* have, that humans

## JANEDOE DOWN!

While an uninjured janedoe exists at one of three points along the uncanny valley, once they get hurt the pretense of humanity is broken. Inside, they're full of moths, or things that look like moths, and the undersides of their skin resemble cobwebs or old gray fiberglass insulation. Where those "moths" fly off to when a janedoe is injured is anybody's guess.

don't, is two extra faces. Whichever shape the janedoe is in, its other two faces are in reserve, eyes and mouth closed, one on each shoulder blade. So if you see one naked, or even just in a tank top, you're likely to figure out something's not right. They prefer loose, unstructured clothes for obvious reasons.

Janedoes can shift from one shape to another pretty much at will, but don't forget the time restrictions. They can only be the monster for eight hours, only be the negotiator for four, and the rest of the time they're passers-by. It's not a subtle or quick shift, either. It takes about as long as it takes an adult to completely change from one set of winter clothes to another — about five minutes. If you see it, it's disturbing, too. It either takes off its shirt or opens it, drops chin to chest, and then keeps pressing. The chin and face sink into the skin of the chest as the other face, the one from the scapula, begins to swell and rotate and inflate. A bulb grows beneath it from the back, hair sprouting like meat coming out of a sausage grinder, and that dome replaces the former head, the one that sinks face first into the torso. While this happens, the limbs writhe, the skin on them *fluttering* as if the moths inside the body are agitated. Arms and legs shrink or extend, since none of the three forms are the same height, and the joints open and close spasmodically as they find the right proportion on the new dimensions. Seeing this is an Unnatural (3–5) check, depending on how clear your view is. Janedoes usually have a couple changes of clothes on them, since garments don't shift when they transform. For the monster, the preferred garb is a big set of coveralls.

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



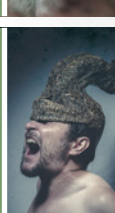
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



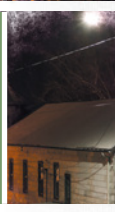
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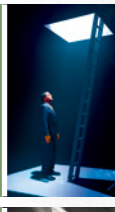
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





## WHAT JANEDOES DO

Janedoes destroy objectives. Some objectives, anyhow. An objective that's about learning something, or about bringing down The Man, or influencing opinion... that kind of stuff is probably safe, because it is not creating anything. But if you're trying to fund your museum of Pennsylvania Dutch hex signs, or seastead a new island where everyone can live in gun-toting libertarian harmony, or expand your cult off the compound and get it operating in storefronts all the way from Houston to Beaumont, then you *might* attract a janedoe. The bigger your ambition, the more likely you are to attract one. A cosmic objective that's concrete and positive — making something, as opposed to tinkering with politics or the Invisible Clergy — is almost irresistible to janedoes.

How they do it varies by objective, and also according to its organizers' vulnerabilities. If you're a criminal syndicate trying to build a casino as an industrial-sized money laundromat, the janedoe has numerous options. As the passer-by, it can move unwatched around the land in question. It can tail the people involved, vanishing with stillness as it eavesdrops on their business meetings. Once it knows what's going on, it can call every cop and reporter it can dig up and spill every detail, possibly while imitating the voice of one of the principals. (It has a 100% Lie ability, remember.) Is there a timid accountant or frail investor who's important to the project? The passer-by or the negotiator gets access, slips into the bathroom, and then the monster scares the shit out of him. Or tears the shit out of him. The negotiator can befriend people involved, pretend to help, and "accidentally" sow seeds of doubt and distrust.

The same tactics are unlikely to work on people who are trying to unify social services for the homeless into one convenient location instead of making people who don't have houses haul themselves to a clinic on the east side, job assistance to the north, and a food bank south of both of those. Well, all right, the scare the shit/tear the shit lowest common denominator can work on decent folk as much as scumbags, but people trying to build something legal and uplifting are usually less plagued by paranoia and short-term self-interest than, say, mobsters. So instead, in that instance, the janedoe might stir up neighborhood concerns ("...but won't all those homelesses murder us in our sleeps for our bedsheets?") possibly by creating some showy incident. Picture this: the negotiator befriends some endearing local resident, whom the monster then kills. The negotiator claims it was present as a fellow victim and sobs heartbreakingly on camera about the "homeless brute" who killed its friend. Or, if that seems too melodramatic, all it has to do is plausibly claim it's going to contribute a lot of money, then *not do that*. Or, plan B, offer to buy up the territory with money it doesn't actually have (let me stress again — 100% Lie ability, invaluable for any real estate boondoggler), and keep stringing things along with delaying tactics until the homeless project dies of old age. After which, again, it says, "Funding fell through, whoopsie." But who's going to blame someone with 100% Connect?

When you're a GM running a janedoe against the PCs, you have a tough balancing act. You can't come from every direction, constantly snatching points off their objective without letting them get something in exchange. As a rule of thumb, every time the janedoe takes an action that

removes 5% from their objective (which it could be doing pretty often) they get a minor clue about it, like one of the following:

- Video footage in which someone's standing in the corner of a private office and *no one realizes it*.
- They hear a recording of what seems to be their voice saying some damaging thing that they *know* they never said — possibly just rescheduling an appointment!
- They catch the negotiator (in whatever name they know it by) in a lie.

When the janedoe does something that removes 10% from their objective (a rarer and more serious move) they get a more significant clue, like one of these:

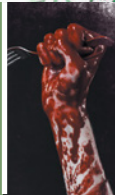
- Someone explains a phase of janedoe behavior to them, either because that phase is all they know or because they're holding back information for leverage.
- Some physical clue gets left behind, like footprints where you can *see* that the lumbering figure you were chasing shrank until its bare feet went from size thirteen to size seven, right before it crawled through a window that the monster couldn't have fit through.
- A sicko voyeur peeps on the negotiator, sees the faces on her back, and *freaks out* to the PCs.

## WHAT'S TO BE DONE?

Well, you can kill them, of course, though you have to do it three times. Each time you fill one of its forms with wounds, that form is done for — it has to change to another. Each of the remaining forms gets exactly half the time allocated to the dead identity. So, a normal time-share for a janedoe is passer-by 12/monster 8/negotiator 4. If you murder the low-hanging negotiator, it becomes passer-by 14/monster 10, or if you did in the monster it would switch to passer-by 16/negotiator 8. When a janedoe only has two forms left and you kill one, it's forced into the remaining shape all day every day, like some kind of *mere human*.

On the other hand, maybe the cabal realizes there's a chaos agent relentlessly ratfucking them and they can't be bothered to figure out the details. If they change their objective, that's likely to get the janedoe off their case. It's a loss, obviously, but PCs have been known to change their minds, get distracted, and abandon their objectives even without a three-faced entity scheming against them. Most commonly, they blow their objective in order to stop something even worse. If that's the case, and the "something worse" is being built in an orderly fashion, it may not take much to redirect the janedoe's sleepless energy at a new target.

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



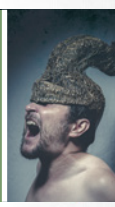
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



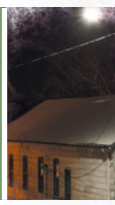
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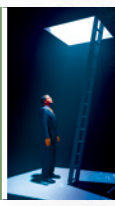
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA



# BIG MACHINE BY VICTOR LAVALLE

*Big Machine* is a crime novel, a drug novel, and a magick novel. But it's much more than that. It's also a very good novel.

The story of *Big Machine* is the story of Ricky Rice, recovering junkie, recovering cult member, and survivor of something weird that tried to eat his soul out through his ankle. These factors qualify Ricky to work for a library that investigates paranormal events, seeking out angels and a voice that just might belong to God. The other agents of the library are all similarly down and out — petty crooks one and all, but uniquely qualified because they heard that Voice.

Its use of the word “angel,” and its discussion of the Voice of God might lead one to think this is a Christian novel, but take my word for it, this is not any comfortable cosmological category that

you've heard of before. If God is in this book, it's an ineffable and sublime being, inscrutable and dwelling at place where great beauty and great terror fuse into one.

## WHAT IT EXPOSES ABOUT UNKNOWN ARMIES

Wow, what *doesn't* it expose? Ricky Rice has a textbook trigger event, the library is a pitch-perfect example of a cabal, and the main conflict isn't at all hard to frame as a clash of objectives. But perhaps its best lesson for *Unknown Armies* is how mysterious weirdness can lie just below the surface of the everyday, and be left to society's underclass by people who'd rather watch TV, argue about politics, and get a new iPhone.

# CLEAN ROOM BY GAIL SIMONE

If you like glossy full-color comics with an *awful* lot of lovingly illustrated eyeball trauma, you're going to enjoy *Clean Room* no matter what. But even if you're indifferent to eyeball stabbing, gouging, and (yes) crushing, the characters and central conceit might pull you in.

As of this writing, I've only read the first trade paperback, whose premise is, “What if Scientology was fighting demons? Or possibly aliens?”

The primary characters are Chloe and Astrid. Chloe is poor, sad, suicidal, and has to live in Florida. She's an investigative reporter, and after her fiancé kills himself with the core text of the Honest World Foundation open in front of him, she decides to wreak journalistic havoc on them. As for Astrid, she's rich, emotionless, driven, and gets to live in Chicago. She is the guru for the Honest World Foundation and the author of the book that (it would seem) drove Chloe's man to blow his brains out.

Both are perceiving horrible monsters that possess people and swear a *lot*. The entities seem to act a little like demons and a little like dissection-happy aliens, but don't seem to be either. They sure aren't friendly though.

The first collection, *Immaculate Conception*, gets these characters together, and implies a lot about the shady and monomaniacal focus of Astrid's cult. (Sorry — Astrid's “self-help organization.”) You feel for Chloe, you wonder about Astrid, and you worry about those body-mangling, usually invisible entities.

## WHAT IT EXPOSES ABOUT UNKNOWN ARMIES

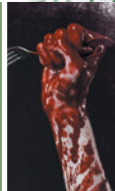
It's not a bad model for some aspects of the *New Inquisition* — the loyalty to a single charismatic leader whose speculation is treated as Holy Writ. But I feel like Astrid's setup is much more tightly wound. TNI is all over the place, chasing artifacts, recruiting or curb stomping chargers, and doing spy shit on other major cabals. The Honest World Foundation is only concerned with *one* thing — using its advanced tech to get at the truth of the Entities.

No, I think what's most useful (if you don't want to just plop the Honest World Foundation into your game lock, stock, and clean room) is the attitude of Astrid and her followers. I love their beautiful *jargon* — are you post-emotic, pre-emotic, or hyper-emotic? Are you a frell, all teed up to get stropped? It all indicates this scientific-esque categorization urge that really communicates the glassy-eyed confidence and determination of Astrid's people. (So do the jumpsuits. I love the zipper-front jumpsuits.) Read *Clean Room* to see what an organization looks like when it's absolutely sure that it's smarter than everyone else, that it has answers everyone else is too dumb to understand, and that the use of any dirty trick at all is justified when the stakes are this high.

See “The New Inquisition” on page 85 of Book Two: Run.

You might know Gail from such places as *Wonder Woman*, *Secret Six*, *social media*, and the constellation of *Arcturus*.

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



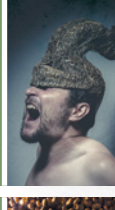
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



6: REDUX



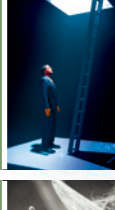
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





## MIND MGMT BY MATT KINDT

The comic *MIND MGMT* follows a woman named Meru who wrote one very good, very successful true crime book and is now at her wit's end trying to write a second one. She latches on to the mystery of a plane that took off normally with 121 passengers and had to be talked down by air traffic control after the pilot, co-pilot, crew, and 119 of the other people onboard simultaneously came down with complete retrograde amnesia. (One additional victim — the man who counted the people coming off the plane — also lost every memory of every event in his life.)

One passenger who kept his memory was a seven-year-old. The other — Henry Lyme — apparently vanished from midair. That, or he managed to get off a plane swarmed by emergency personnel completely unobserved.

Meru chases leads, seeking Lyme, and uncovers things that are even worse. She's pursued by people who can shrug off gunshots, she finds a village in Mexico whose inhabitants obsessively craft pots, to the point that they won't feed themselves. She finds the operatives of *MIND MGMT*, a psychic espionage agency staffed with memory erasers, psychic shapeshifters, and no-touch assassins.

I've seen five big hardbacks of *MIND MGMT* collections, but I've only read the first two. They're tightly plotted,

evocative, and beautifully colored. Kindt's illustrations don't have the crispness of Charles Burns or the controlled frenzy of Junji Ito but they get the job done.

### WHAT IT EXPOSES ABOUT UNKNOWN ARMIES

If you want to know what a government would do if it could reliably create and motivate people-influencing chargers, it would probably look a lot like *MIND MGMT*. It also presents a fairly plausible through-line of how that would play out. (Short version? It works OK for a while, then other countries get into it, then there's an arms race to find and train stronger psychics. Eventually, one of them snaps the leash, goes psychotic and freaks the squares into disbanding the program. That's when the real fun starts, as the "retirement" of a large number of psychic espionage assets goes poorly and some of them decide it's time to go into business for themselves.)

Rampaging around in the wreckage of a paranormal espionage cold war sound fun to you? If so, check out *MIND MGMT*. It's cabals and objectives in action through tight fiction. For bonus points, it does a nice job exploring the way mind control could hide in plain sight.

## TANIS BY NIC SILVER

Found online at [tanispodcast.com](http://tanispodcast.com), *Tanis* is a fiction podcast disguised as an investigation into the mystical city of, you guessed it, Tanis. As of this writing, they're still putting up new episodes, constantly folding new and different ingredients into a batter of "a strange place in the Pacific Northwest."

The *Tanis* of the podcast starts out as a mythical city that periodically moves (possibly into the air), and rapidly gets folded in with the myths of other mystery spots like Xenu and Pacifica Station. While he starts out just trying to find out what *Tanis* is and learn about its history, narrator Nic quickly gets wrapped up with Jack Parsons, serial killers and poets, native myths about people who went into the woods and came back changed with all-black eyes, vanishing researchers who were exploring a cabin in the woods that periodically stopped being there, a citing of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, and the *Servant Girl Annihilator*.

*Tanis* isn't perfect — it bites off a lot and more falls out of its mouth than gets chewed and digested. But it maintains its narrative energy and keeps you wondering what lies through "The Breach" and why the rich, the powerful, and the artistic keep seeking it despite the disasters that befall the "runners" who've found their way there.

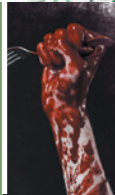
### WHAT IT EXPOSES ABOUT UNKNOWN ARMIES

First off, *Tanis* is a near-textbook example of an otherspace. What would people do if they began to suspect such a thing could exist? They'd act a lot like the characters in *Tanis* do. Some would become cultists, some would try to exploit it, and some would just be fascinated and want to know the truth.

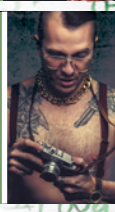
Second, it serves as a how-to for folding together a lot of very weird stuff and making it seem vaguely plausible that it's connected. Just listening to the podcasts that are already out and doing some semi-competent Googling could give you fodder for a lot of *Unknown Armies* plots. At the same time, it's a cautionary example of why you maybe don't want to throw every ingredient into the pot at the same time. There's a fine line between "enough that it's intriguing" and "so much that it's exhausting."

Finally, the way its narrative moves from "outlaw journalist and snarky hacker" scale to "governments and corporations" scale can provide some guidance for moving your game in that direction. In *Uzumaki*, things get bigger and worse, but the characters' agency stays the same or even diminishes. Great for cosmic horror, not so good for this RPG. In *Tanis*, the government and businesses try to co-opt that outlaw journalist, because he manages to do what they, themselves, cannot.

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



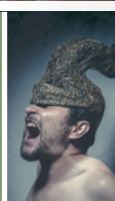
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



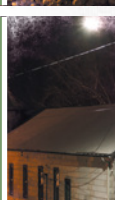
6: REDUX



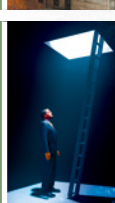
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA









# 5: LAYERS ON THE INSIDE

A character in *Unknown Armies* is more than a Christmas tree of abilities ornamented with weapons and arcane artifacts. This game aims, pointedly, at the character's interior state. The game's not only about life and death — it focuses on how characters change after experiences. States of mind

can be hard to play with, but luckily assorted art forms have been doing it a long time. The suggestions here showcase ways for players to develop their PCs, not just as narrative arcs, but as characters with internal development.

## BLACK HOLE BY CHARLES BURNS

*Black Hole* is a moody, black and white graphic novel depicting teenagers in the 1970s. (It was also made into a short film, but I have to be brutally honest and say that the movie just does not live up to the book. Maybe the rumored full-length version will hew closer.) The teens have the typical problems — family, grades, school, acne, cliques, terrible polyester clothes, intermittent cannabis access. It's like a gritty version of *Dazed and Confused* except for one addition: sexually transmitted monstrosity.

Would *Black Hole* be as good if it had been scripted and drawn by anyone else? I don't think so. Even a genius writer and genius artist would have had a different vibe from the profoundly disturbing excellence of Burns' artwork. (Trivia fact: Burns won the Best Inker Harvey Award for seven of the eight years that this comic was coming out as individual issues.) Burns has an uncanny ability to draw beautiful pictures of grotesque things. It's amazing.

### WHAT IT EXPOSES ABOUT UNKNOWN ARMIES

I like *Black Hole* as a reference point for *Unknown Armies* for two reasons. The first is that it reinforces the idea of character being central. Despite all the body horror mutations and strange hallucinations, this is first and foremost about unhappy teens who are unhappy for the same reasons that teens have always been unhappy. These are not paragons, not by a long shot, but even their flaws and failings bring a pang of familiarity, even as their bodies change into forms that are rich with strangeness.

The second lesson it offers is this: weird horror can get normalized, but normal horror stays awful. Eventually, people *just get used to* teenagers having unique physical distortions. But the heartbreak and cruelty of humans being human? That never loses its power over the characters, any more than it loses its power over us, the real.

## JOHN DIES AT THE END BY DAVID WONG

*John Dies at the End*, is the first novel by Jason Pargin under the pen name "David Wong." It's about a guy named David Wong who takes drugs, has terrible psychological problems, and is... probably?... an exorcist and zombie hunter. Then he travels to strange other worlds and it starts to resemble *A Wrinkle in Time* if you replaced all the spirituality and familial affection with swears and violence.

The movie *Frailty* goes a lot farther with the question, "Are the monsters real or is it all in one dude's crazy mind?" than *John Dies at the End* does. The monsters are definitely real, which does not mean that the David of the book isn't super-crazy anyhow. He clobbers stuff, confronts his past, has hallucinatory episodes that turn out to be actually happening, and mixed in with all this are some pretty good jokes. (There's a movie version of *John Dies at the End*, but it didn't have the guts to commit to what is, for my money, the best part. When John and Dave meet a bunch of naked old people and ask why they're naked, they're told, "We thought our clothes would disturb you." When they find out about the clothes? That's the best part. There's also a sequel, *This Book is Full of Spiders*, which has less of the frenzied, anarchic energy of the first but a much stronger plot structure. Also a great plot twist. Also about the same number of dick jokes. Also recommended.)

### WHAT IT EXPOSES ABOUT UNKNOWN ARMIES

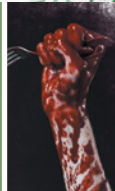
Well, the part where they take a drug that's actually alive and it allows them to see and do impossible things — that's for sure worth stealing for many an *Unknown Armies* game. (The drug is called "soy sauce.") But in the larger sense, what I like and admire about *John Dies at the End* is the way it uses external horrors to elucidate internal awfulness. The weird ghosts and extradimensional threats that John and Dave confront are externally real, but the reason Dave confronts them is not that he has weird powers or is some corny "Chosen One" — it's because he and they operate in the same milieu of alienation and suspicion and despair. He fights it and they embrace it but they have it in common, unlike John and the other characters who try to drag Dave back towards humanity.

At least that's my reading of it, and between passions, obsessions, and shock gauges, you have a deeply detailed portrait of your PCs' internal lives. If you want to find a way to make the personal into the post-rational, and to have your horrific events resonate with the characters the way Dave's trials touch on his interior traumas, look no farther than the character sheet.

## HARROW

aw yiss, my bandana order finally arrived

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



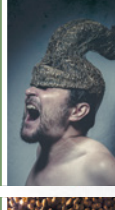
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



6: REDUX



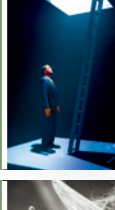
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA



# TERRIBLY HAPPY BY HENRIK RUBEN GENZ

This movie's original title is *Frygtelig lykkelig* and it's a dour Danish cop drama with no overt paranormal elements but a dynamite sense of foreboding laced through every frame of the film.

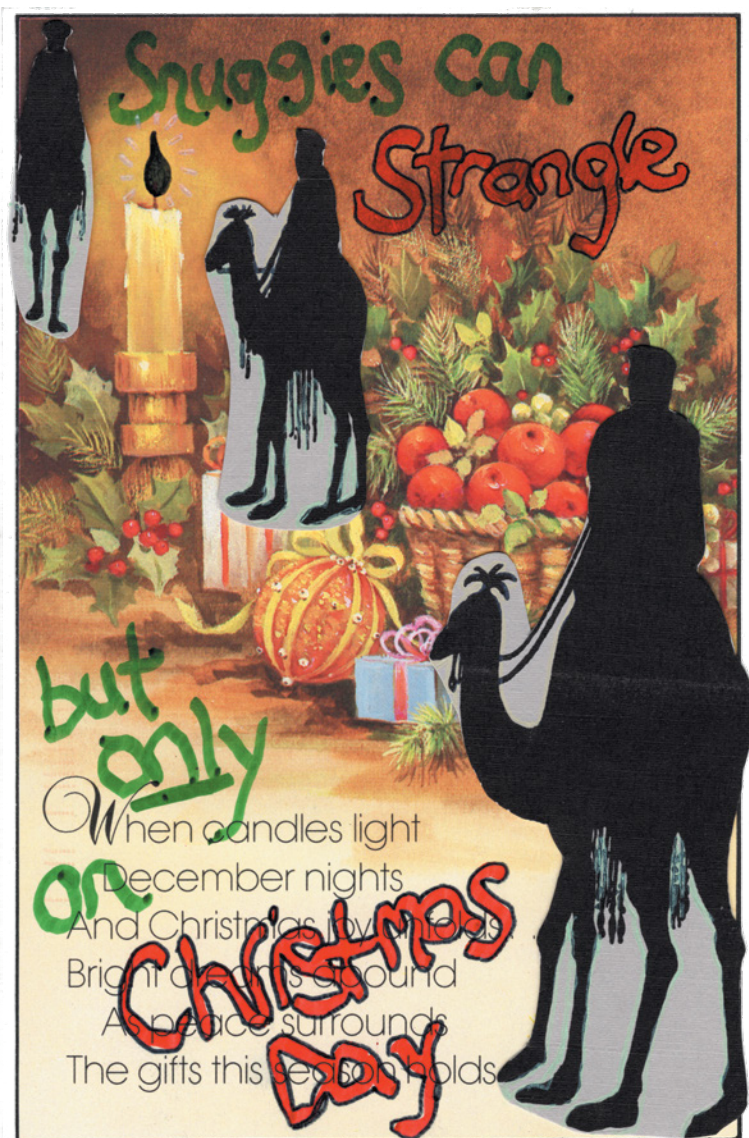
The plot is, a weak young cop from Copenhagen named Robert makes some bad screw-up and is sent out to a tiny Jutland village for punishment. The town is under the thrall of bullying wife-beater Jørgen, who wants Robert to be a good boy, not make waves, and continue to let the townsfolk stumble through their numbing routine. Robert, on the other hand, is kind of hot for Jørgen's poor abused wife, Ingerlise.

Robert is well-acted as a wavering guy who wants to do good but is just not very determined. Jørgen is, and I don't use this phrase lightly, *fucking terrifying*. Ingerlise is a confusing blend of appealing, infuriating, complicit, manipulative, and pathetic. But the most important character in the film is, perhaps, the town itself. It's a boggy, miserable place full of secrets. Anything unwanted, from a grotesquely mutated calf up through murder victims, just gets tipped into the marsh and sinks, never spoken of again. It is

presented to Robert as a place where one can *get away with it*, and the "it" is "anything you have the willpower to perpetrate." While it flirts with being a mystery, the main question is not, "Whodunit?" but, "What happens to the human spirit in a corrosive environment of total permission?" The answer, as you might guess, is a little ambiguous.

## WHAT IT EXPOSES ABOUT UNKNOWN ARMIES

If you can make an antagonist as trouser-moisteningly scary as Kim Bodnia's Jørgen, you already have most of what you need for any horror game. But the deeper lesson of *Terribly Happy* is how people act when they've racked up a lot of failed notches on their shock gauge (Robert and Ingerlise), or too many hardened notches (Jørgen). The engine driving the movie is the premise that trauma erodes morality, and that can be something important to remember in *Unknown Armies*. We love stories about how people undergo traumas and come out Nietzsche-fied, stronger than ever. But for many, what does not kill them makes them frail, flinching, easy victims.



1: MEAT

2: THROAT

3: SMALL

4: BIGGER

5: LAYERS

6: REDUX

7: VEIL

8: BESEIGED

9: SELVES

10: MEDIA







# 6: IDENTITIES REDUX

If you're used to games with hard and fast skill lists, *Unknown Armies* seems weirdly loosey-goosey. If you came up playing games with very freeform rules (like *Over the Edge*, say, or my own *Dinosaurs... in SPAAACE!*), it probably seems touchy and complex. But identities are more than just one-note, one-trick rule levers. They're who the character *is*, in addition to probabilities for

what she can *do*. With that perspective, I hope the layers become more appealing.

There are a few new features added here, just to keep things interesting, as well as modeled identities to provide examples for how these little scripts for being are constructed. The chapter finishes with another dose of mystic identities, just for fun.

## FEATURES

*Identities* have *features*, typically three of them. A variety has already been provided, but why wouldn't you want more options? No, I mean it, *why wouldn't you?* Fine, if you don't want new features, ignore this, but the rest of us are incorporating them into our characters.

### COOPERATIVE

You know what's really useful? Other people. No matter what you want done, somewhere there's some other person who can do it. Probably there's someone who can do it better than you.

The best outcomes, however, usually arise not from finding one person who does one thing singularly well, but from collecting a group that can tackle a problem from several directions at once. This, cooperation, is often humanity at its best. (Or worst, if you want to get picky and look at horrid instances of mob violence.)

With this feature, your identity plays unusually well with others. The synergies formed depend on the ability (or abilities) mimicked by the identity. For example, suppose you had an identity that substituted for Lie, and that identity was also Cooperative. If you were helping someone else with a long con that involved deception, you could use your Cooperative identity to help them tell a whopper. Instead of rolling, you'd just say you're cooperating with their roll.

The effect of the cooperation is this: whatever your buddy rolls, you can add or subtract exactly 10. If they roll a 51, you can turn it into a 41 or a 61.

This +/-10 gimmick is useful in several different ways. It can turn a failure into a success, if they missed the mark by 10 percentiles or less. It can turn a matched failure into a regular one, and some regular successes into matched ones. You cannot, however, cooperate with yourself, pretty much by definition.

Example Identities: Cheerleader, Manager, Middle Child, Team Player.

## CLEFT

if any artist draws cthulhu eating a gas station, please send me a link

### SINCERE

Other people keep their emotions leashed close, remaining stone-faced and cool. Not you. When people matter to you, they damn well know it. Maybe you can't help it (or it's something you switch on when you really want to make your point) but your feelings shine through when you interact with your relationships.

The specific way the Sincere feature works is, the identity to which it's attached gets a +10% bonus... but only when you're using it on or for your guru, mentor, favorite, protégé, or responsibility.

So, for example, let's assume you're an emergency room doctor, complete with a Medical feature. You've got the identity ER Doctor at 55%. But one day, when they wheel in the blood-covered gurney, you recognize that floral-print dress, your fiancée Gwendolyn borrowed it from you this morning! Heart in your throat, you rush to her side and recognize the ring you gave her at the Tegan and Sara concert! Oh no! Can you save your beloved?

Well, with a 55%, your chances are... not *bad*... but if you're a *sincere* ER Doctor, you can boost that to 65%, as you belt out, "I need a crash cart *stat!*" through your tears.

If your relationship is with an organization, you can harness the power of your sincerity whenever you're doing something with (or to) someone in that organization.

Example Identities: Biker Gang Patch Member, Business Leader, Church Secretary, Religious Leader.

### TACTICAL

The more rugged compliment to "Cooperative" is the Tactical feature. But where Cooperative is all about helping people be awesome, Tactical is about ordering people to be effective. They're not mutually contradictory or anything: you could have a Tactical and Cooperative identity and probably get lots of praise in your personnel folder. But they work differently.

A Tactical ability is one that you have to use to give people orders, advice, or some other sort of imperative. Unlike a Cooperative identity, you roll your Tactical identity as you tell Tito to bar

See "Identities" on page 42 and "Features" on page 44 in Book One: Play.

Do you know who you are this week? We do. We have all that information in our Molestine notebooks.

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



6: REDUX



7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





the door or yell at Brenda to stomp on his foot or holler at Rudy to cut over into the passing lane.

The roll determines whether your advice is any good. If it is — that is, the roll succeeds — then your advice is helpful to an ally who follows it. If the person you shout your Tactical critique or whatever at *follows your advice*, they get to *flip-flop* their roll.

Are there limits to this? Oh, absolutely. Otherwise you could just slap this on an obsession identity, crank it up really high, boss around everyone in your cabal and let them flip-flop damn near everything. The limit is, the tactical advice has to be relevant to the identity.

Let's say your Tactical identity is Gang Leader. If you yell, "Cap that fool!" at Chunk-Style, his roll to shoot the person you indicate can be flip-flopped, since it's within the Gang Leader bailiwick. If you told Chunk-Style which fork to use at a fancy dinner, it would not work, because one does not normally associate gang leaders with formal etiquette. (I don't want to deal in broad stereotypes, but there it is.) It's basically the rule of "Of course I can..." all over again. A tactical military officer is good at gunfights and first aid and driving, not convincing people to go in on shady

## GMCS

The GM's lot is not an easy one, fraught as it is with players and their... *ideas*. You can't help it, you can't stop 'em and, honestly, isn't half the fun seeing what asinine wild hare they're going to chase after this session? Their randomness and determination to go off the beaten path can leave the GM slapping her pockets and rummaging through her purse for assorted characters, however. In the hopes of making the GM job easier and more fun, we're putting up a slew of two-part characters.

The first part is sixteen broad-sketch personae, mostly social roles of the type that *Unknown Armies* PCs run into — cops, crooks, and crackpots. The second part, independent of the first, is a set of nineteen surprising identities that any of the people from the first part could have in their background. Alternately, if you just want to throw one of those identities on a random other character, each of them can provide distractions, red herrings, or even genuine assistance to the PCs, depending on what they need.

*Note:* None of these GMCs have failed notches provided. If you need to know this during the game, assign five notches between the shock meters and call it good. Or make it up on the spot, and note it for later.

### THIS GMC IS A...

You get a brief overview of who might wind up in this role, their shock gauge, and what their identity covers. There are no percentiles given for the identity — individual GMs can decide that for

real estate deals. A tactical sleazy bank officer? Exactly vice versa.

Example Identities: Community Organizer, Crime Boss, Staff Sergeant, Scout Leader.

## WEAPONIZED PHYSIQUE

Some people are big and heavy and capable of injuring you accidentally, just by stepping on your foot. Some people are fanatical martial artists whose body-hardening practice lets them elbow-smash through a two-by-four without significant discomfort. The story about the Muay Thai fighter getting a titanium shin implant appears to be a hoax... *or was it?* And then there are some people (cough, Mike Tyson, cough) who bite.

However you define your character's weaponized physique, the result is always the same: if you attack someone bare-handed, using Struggle or any other identity, your blows do an extra wound (two wounds on a matched success, three with a crit). Even if you grapple someone, you deal a wound every round as you grind your murder-shin into their nerves or crush them with your implacable hands.

Example Identities: Brutalitarian, Dangerous Piercings, Huge, Old-Time Strongman.

themselves, or else just roll some dice until something reasonable comes up.

## ACADEMIC

If you're researching the mysterious fireballs that are periodically spotted around Tallman Plateau, or the history of medicinal cannibalism, or the literary antecedents of Dirk Allen and his influence on Boston's millennial "Cryptodecadent" authors, you're going to need an academic. Not just some autodidact with decent Google skills but no grasp on critical thought, but the real ivory tower deal — someone whose sources have to be solid, someone whose job depends on not having a sneering colleague from the philosophy department casually eviscerate the logic of their argument, someone who actually has skin in the game and could get passed over for tenure if she's insufficiently thorough.

After getting tenure, of course, she could be far more open to "excluded voices" and "outsider perspectives" and "nontraditional beliefs." But whatever pre-internet thing you're chasing after, you want this bright, curious skeptic in your corner, polishing her eyeglasses on the corner of her cardigan sweater.

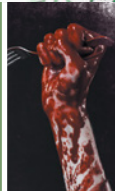
**Wound Threshold:** 50.

**I'm an Academic, of course I can** access obscure libraries and archives that you never knew existed, get an interview with a reclusive expert, recognize specious bullshit research. Protects the Unnatural, Substitutes for Knowledge, Substitutes for Status.

See "Flip-flops" on page 15 in Book One: Play.

*I weaponized myself last weekend just to see if I could.*

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



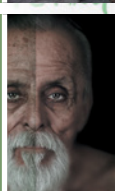
3: SMALL



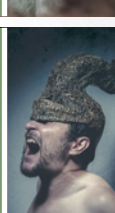
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



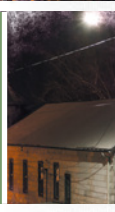
6: REDUX



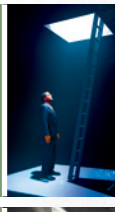
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA



## ACADEMIC

Notches	Violence	Unnatural	Helplessness	Isolation	Self
Hardened	2	4	3	3	2

## ADDICT

Notches	Violence	Unnatural	Helplessness	Isolation	Self
Hardened	3	2	5	3	6

## ALDERWOMAN

Notches	Violence	Unnatural	Helplessness	Isolation	Self
Hardened	1	1	4	3	4

## BEAT COP

Notches	Violence	Unnatural	Helplessness	Isolation	Self
Hardened	4	2	3	2	5

### ADDICT

There are more of them out there than you might suspect. This guy isn't crouching under a bridge, toothless and ineptly busking for quarters. He's enslaved by substances, no doubt about it, but he's keeping it together, for now. Depending on how high his position already is and how loyal his subordinates are, he might be able to keep at it indefinitely.

What's his poison of choice? If it's booze, he probably has a high tolerance, can shake off his three-martini (or six-pack) lunch buzz in time to get home safely, and he probably saves his whiskey blackouts for Saturday nights (and vice versa). A painkiller addiction might be tougher stuff, especially if he's actually in constant pain from some other cause. Or he might be an intermittent binger — wrecks himself, quits, cleans up, spends three months sober, starts using again very intermittently, decides he can handle it now, gradually increases use until he's fooling himself, ultimately loses control, wrecks himself, and starts the whole cycle over until he crashes a car or finally ODs. But when you meet him, he's got it mostly under control. He's functional. His perspective is still out in weeks and months, it hasn't been crushed down to a desperate need to just navigate the next day, or hour. (Have patience buddy, it'll get there!) He's not desperate to feed the beast yet. He's desperate to keep the beast hidden from view.

**Wound Threshold:** 50.

**I'm an Addict, of course I can** find a source, communicate in slang, exert myself in brief and intense ways if there's drugs at the end of it. Protects Self, Substitutes for Lie, Substitutes for Secrecy.

### ALDERWOMAN

In the course of pursuing objectives, the PC cabal may run into broader issues than the question, "Where can I fly my freak flag without the muggles tryna burn it?" They may involve themselves with decreasing (or increasing) crime or unemployment. They may require access to some specific historical site with sexy *feng shui*, or they might wind up in the bad books of a local business that has Sinister Secret Motives™. In all those instances, they are trying to put their thumbs on the scale of how the society operates. In this, they're going to cross paths with the mundane folks who are already trying to thumb society with great vigor. People like the alderwoman.

She's in her fifties and that hormone that makes her

concerned about how other people feel has pretty much thrown in the towel. She had a good run as a conciliatory do-bee, she helped a lot of people, made a lot of friends, and handled a lot of dirt with sensitivity and discretion. Then her kids moved out, her husband filed for an amicable divorce, and she suddenly wondered why she was so great about helping others retain political positions when she could just get one of her own. So she ran for city council, won, broke the other councilmembers to harness with shocking leadership skills, and is poised to become mayor. But interrupting her path to authority — one way or the other — is those dratted PCs.

Maybe they turn her on to the real threats to her community and she becomes a powerful ally. Maybe she dismisses them as lunatics and does everything she can to make their lives untenable. ("Oh, sorry, your house has been rezoned. We'll pay a fair market price, of course. Also, your business is under investigation. Also, you're going to need a license to conduct those blood sacrifices — even with religious protections, you're bound by sanitation regulations.")

**Wound Threshold:** 50.

**I'm an Alderwoman, of course I can** get a ticket fixed, make a local business be nicer to you, get that pothole repaired, find you a temporary job for a couple weeks. Protects Helplessness, Protects Isolation, Substitutes for Status.

### BEAT COP

This officer's job is to drive, alone, in a defined area. If she sees anything suspicious, she calls it in and then gets out and investigates. If someone else calls something in near her beat, she goes over to respond. She handles a lot of traffic, a lot of car crashes (mostly mild, sometimes heartbreakingly deadly), a lot of domestic disputes and arguing neighbors, a fair spot of racism disguised as "good citizenship." She's probably a bit cynical, a bit too quick to forgive her own biases as being "what she learned on the street," a little too fond of quick and easy solutions. But she's also calm, phlegmatic, and unlikely to pull out her gun for no reason.

**Wound Threshold:** 50.

**I'm a Beat Cop, of course I can** recognize the local "usual suspects," interpret gang tags and police radio codes, maintain a calm façade. Provides Firearm Attacks, Substitutes for Pursuit, Substitutes for Struggle.

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



6: REDUX



7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





## BOUNCER

Notches	Violence	Unnatural	Helplessness	Isolation	Self
Hardened	3	2	2	2	3

## BURNT OUT

Notches	Violence	Unnatural	Helplessness	Isolation	Self
Hardened	5	5	4	4	3

## CHARGER

Notches	Violence	Unnatural	Helplessness	Isolation	Self
Hardened	3	6	3	4	4

## CHECKER

Notches	Violence	Unnatural	Helplessness	Isolation	Self
Hardened	2	4	6	3	3

### BOUNCER

There are three types of bouncers stretching out that black T-shirt with "SECURITY" across the chest, looking at IDs with those big-ass D-cell Maglites. There are the guys who got hired because they're big and imposing, there are the guys who got hired because they love to kick people's asses, and there are the guys who are both. Which one do you suppose this fellow is?

Bouncers get wheedled at a lot if they're working the front door of an exclusive place, ignored if it's less tony, and called every foul thing in the book when they're escorting out an unwanted patron. They may also wind up having to do janitorial duty if things are crowded. Plus, anything that falls out of someone's purse or pocket, or gets ditched because the cops (or whomever) is following? It probably winds up with the bouncer.

**Wound Threshold:** 50.

I'm a Bouncer, of course I can spot a fake ID, acquire drugs, get free drinks, hold my liquor, understand the club kids' crazy slang. Coerces Violence, Substitutes for Fitness, Substitutes for Struggle.

### BURNT OUT

This guy has managed to avoid getting five failed marks in any one gauge, but he has been through the grinder and is, from the perspective of ordinary folks living the American Dream, something of a suspect sausage. He cannot function in normal society or, perhaps, just doesn't. He's seen too much to believe in an office job, a suburban patio, church on Sunday, and 2.5 kids.

What fires left this ash of a man? Up to the GM to decide, if it even matters. Could be war, drugs, bad love stuff, supernatural curses, or all of the above. But he sees a little something familiar in the PCs, so he's less dismissive of them than he is of everyone else. It's up to them to decide how they feel about that.

**Wound Threshold:** 50.

I'm Burnt Out, of course I can find a meth dealer, sleep rough, tell you which dumpster

has the freshest baked goods. Coerces Isolation, Protects Isolation, Substitutes for Notice.

### CHARGER

Typically, powerful and knowing occultists are the sort of thing the GM wants to have ready ahead of time, but you never know. A carefully crafted antagonist could always catch an o1 from a PC with a shotgun and need to be quickly replaced by this gal. She's twitchy and shy and overcompensates with arrogance. She gets *real* mad if you correct her on *anything*, but she's at least shrewd and she keeps her promises with the same finicky and overbearing exactitude she applies to her taboo.

She's got some kind of artifact — something that isn't at all associated with the powers of her adept school — and is *convinced* it's evidence of an ancient global yeti civilization, of which American bigfoots and skunk apes are just the degenerate and inbred remnants. She's seeking a complimentary device (or possibly location, she's not sure) and will stop at nothing to secure it.

**Wound Threshold:** 50.

Instead of an identity, just give her your favorite magick school and any ol' artifact that catches your eye. That's why I haven't included an "Of course I can..." section here.

### CHECKER

This fellow is quiet, keeps his own counsel, but is very, *very* interested in the occult underground. He follows, asks questions, and makes himself useful to anyone who seems to have a real grip on supernatural power, because that's his last hope. Maybe he's sick, or maybe it's someone he loves. Whatever it is, medical science has shrugged its shoulders and awkwardly suggested a "really great" hospice option.

He's not quitting. He doesn't have any weird magick, but he has desperation and intensity. He is *very motivated* to find a psychic surgeon. If he finds one, he's going to be very motivated to pay whatever price is asked.

See "Specific Information" on page 47 of Book One: Play.

*Speaking of hackers, Robert Redford played one in the movies. Which movies? Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid of course.*

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



6: REDUX



7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA



## DAYSLEEPER

Notches	Violence	Unnatural	Helplessness	Isolation	Self
Hardened	2	4	3	5	2

## DETECTIVE

Notches	Violence	Unnatural	Helplessness	Isolation	Self
Hardened	3	2	3	2	4

## HACKER

Notches	Violence	Unnatural	Helplessness	Isolation	Self
Hardened	2	2	3	3	2

## MOBBED UP

Notches	Violence	Unnatural	Helplessness	Isolation	Self
Hardened	6	2	4	4	3

**Wound Threshold:** 50.

I'm a **Checker**, of course I can discuss tarot and alchemy, recognize common ways to fake having magick, tell mystic inspiration from drug-induced babble. Casts Rituals, Protects the Unnatural, Substitutes for Notice.

## DAYSLEEPER

The unnatural has a strong connection to the wee hours of the night, either because daylight is a force for order (it is, after all, the primary counter-entropic element of life on Earth), or because it's easier to remain unobserved when most people are sleepy, or just from tradition and a sense of drama.

This unfortunate lady, however, isn't out and about in the pitch-black night because she's a witch or demonologist. She just got stuck with the late shift. She might be a factory worker, or the counter clerk at an all-night gas station, or the security guard for something that nobody has any real interest in robbing.

Sleeping during the day has wrecked her circadian rhythms enough that she's either developed a fringe psychic power (define it however you want) that lets her see weird stuff out of the corner of her eye, or she's just stopped suppressing a power that was always there. She blames the stuff she sees on sleep deprivation, while struggling to keep her weird new superstitions hidden from the daytime people.

**Wound Threshold:** 50.

This is a supernatural identity, so it doesn't get the usual "Of course I can..." section but it does have the following features: Casts Rituals, *Specific Information*, Use Gutter Magick.

## DETECTIVE

There are all kinds of detectives out there, ranging from the police (who usually are specialized in financial crimes, homicide, sex crimes, vice, etc.), to store detectives (who are basically bouncers for shoplifting), to private detectives who run background checks and follow spouses.

There a couple common elements in all these detective subspecies: they all have to pay attention, and they all tend to see people at their least admirable. This detective is aging, cynical, weary, and honest most of the time. Every now and again, though, he just can't be friggin' bothered.

**Wound Threshold:** 50.

I'm a **Detective**, of course I can run a plate, conduct surveillance, spy on personal electronics. Substitutes for Notice, Substitutes for Pursuit, Substitutes for Secrecy.

## HACKER

Some computer professionals are very flattered if you call them a "hacker" instead of "that gal from IT," while others are offended, or just feel the need to correct you at great length about what a hacker *actually* is. This woman, in her late thirties and recently engaged, doesn't much care what you call her. She fixes the mysterious grey and black boxes that pipe the internet through the Gs and the Wi-Fis, or however the hell all that shit works. If you don't know how the hell all that shit works but need someone to shake some information out of it, she can do it. Maybe she volunteers from the goodness of her heart because she's happy about her impending nuptials. Or maybe she squeezes every last penny out of you because she has her heart set on a Vera Wang gown and mama gots to get *paid*.

**Wound Threshold:** 50.

I'm a **Hacker**, of course I can dazzle non-techies with jargon, make your laptop run faster, install or uninstall softwarez, consume alarming quantities of caffeine. Can break into and subvert computer systems (unique), Substitutes for Knowledge, Substitutes for Lie.

## MOBBED UP

This guy is a level or two up from the *Petty Crook*. He's not just one ingredient floating in the rich stew of the criminal underclass, he's part of the basic stock in which everyone else simmers. Maybe he's old-style Italian mob, or Russian mafia, or has connections to the Mexican Zetas, or is

*Burning out, dropping in, tuning up, slowing down.*

See "Petty Crook."

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



6: REDUX



7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





## PETTY CROOK

Notches	Violence	Unnatural	Helplessness	Isolation	Self
Hardened	4	1	4	4	5

## PONY

Notches	Violence	Unnatural	Helplessness	Isolation	Self
Hardened	2	4	2	2	2

## SERVER

Notches	Violence	Unnatural	Helplessness	Isolation	Self
Hardened	3	2	4	3	2

your town's Stringer Bell. Whatever his organization is, it's... well... *organized*. He probably made his bones back when he was a dumb twenty-year-old, but now he's in his mid-forties, sleek and well-dressed, with a personal trainer to help him keep some of the muscles he put on doing his five years in the state pen. He doesn't kill or injure anyone anymore, he has people for that.

This is the guy you go to if you need to fence stolen art treasures or buy military grade gear in bulk. He's also the guy who *hates* witches and strigoi and curanderos and all that other weird shit. He's not a skeptic, he's a thaumophobe. Anyone who comes to him with a paranormal agenda sees him nod, smile, and plot their downfall.

**Wound Threshold:** 50.

**I'm Mobbed Up, of course I can** skip the line at any place that serves food or drink, get you some fun young people to party with, source a safecracker. Coerces Violence, Substitutes for Lie, Substitutes for Status.

## PETTY CROOK

He's very vague about where his money comes from, when he has money. (Sometimes he seems to have plenty. Sometimes, he's skint. Sometimes, he's broke but has plenty of weed.) He's not a big imposing guy and he doesn't flash a gun or threaten people. He goes along to get along, and nobody seems to give him trouble. If you're looking for something contraband but not enormously controlled — a bag of pot, not a brick of uncut heroin; a handgun, not a rocket launcher — he's your connect.

He doesn't believe in Santa Claus, Jesus, or lucky horseshoes. He's never heard of the Invisible Clergy and if he had, he wouldn't believe in it either. You can usually find him at Sal's Tap between 7:00 PM and midnight.

**Wound Threshold:** 50.

**I'm a Petty Crook, of course I can** get you something cheap that fell off a truck, arrange to get you bonded out of jail, tell you which beat cop is bent. Find criminal opportunities (unique), Substitutes for Lie, Substitutes for Secrecy.

## PONY

Not in the sense of having sexytimes by dressing up with saddle and bit and bridle, but in the sense of being involved in (or intrigued by) the occult underground but having *no idea what he's doing*.

He's friendly and optimistic and young, he experienced a mystic revelation of breathtaking beauty and wants more of it. He has *not* yet experienced any ugly sides of occultism, and for now the checkers who know him are making half-assed attempts to keep his innocence intact. For some of them, it's lazy altruism. Others are keeping him in the stable for when they need a demon host or a second set of prints on a weapon.

**Wound Threshold:** 50.

**I'm a Pony, of course I can** stumble onto occult stuff almost entirely by accident, misunderstand things in a way that protects my body or sanity, display my near-ignorance in the most appealing possible fashion. Protects Helplessness, Protects the Unnatural, Substitutes for Connect.

## SERVER

Day or night, if you walk into a business you're going to meet someone whose job is or includes interfacing with random walk-ins. If you're in a restaurant, he's the waiter. If you're buying shoes, he's measuring your feet. If you're asking about nail guns, he's the one explaining the powder charge. He's trying to keep things professional, get his job done frictionlessly, be sufficiently friendly that you don't complain to his manager without being so over-friendly that you complain to his manager. If he witnesses something, he won't pay attention, probably won't remember, and won't want to talk about it even if you wave money in his face. He is an atypical *Unknown Armies* character in that he is extremely trouble-averse.

**Wound Threshold:** 50.

**I'm a Server, of course I can** talk to the local beat cop on a first-name basis, spot the person or event that's out of place, give directions. Protects Isolation, Substitutes for Connect, Substitutes for Fitness.

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



6: REDUX



7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA



## WORKING HOMELESS

Notches	Violence	Unnatural	Helplessness	Isolation	Self
Hardened	3	2	4	4	4

### WORKING HOMELESS

The word “homeless” evokes images of distressed men, unkempt and huddled in layers of clothing beside a cardboard sign. But behind that most visible demographic is a second, hidden layer — the unseen, unconsidered, underpaid homeless who are working a job (or two) but who aren’t making enough to cover rent or a mortgage payment.

This character does not “look homeless,” if that phrase does anything but reinforce assumptions that are far from universal. Her clothes are clean, if plain. Her haircut isn’t very stylish, but she can keep it looking professional. She works the cash register at a clothing store part-time, and she slings burgers.

If you asked her (and she trusted you enough to be honest, which she wouldn’t), most of the advantages she could list are negative ones. She *doesn’t* have cancer any more, as far as she knows. (She got ovarian cancer when she was a sophomore in college, two months before her father died and she found out he’d been deep, deep in debt). She doesn’t have an abusive boyfriend or any kids. She hasn’t gotten desperate enough to go on the game.

She lives in her car and drives around during the day — not just so that she doesn’t get busted for loitering or vagrancy, and not just because services for the homeless are spread all over the metro area and often involve long waits. She drives around because she doesn’t want anyone to look at her and somehow guess what she’s become.

Coincidentally, the PCs could see her just about anywhere, at any time, because of her nomadic employment and her habit of finding somewhere new to sleep-park every night.

She can just barely manage to keep this together on five hours of sleep a night, if the car stays functional. The third time the PCs run into her is seconds after her check engine light comes on.

**Wound Threshold:** 50.

**I’m Working Homeless, of course I can** know which creepy places even the violent and crazy are scared to go, haggle tenaciously, repair just about anything with just about anything as long as it only has to work one time more. Protects Self, Substitutes for Lie, Substitutes for Secrecy.

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



6: REDUX



7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





## ADDITIONALLY, THIS GMC...

You can look through this list to find something that makes a nice second dimension for your character, or something that seems to not fit at all, or you can just roll 2d10 and let chaos have a voice for once. The common ones are in the middle, and the uncommon ones are out at the ends.

### FUCKIN' ROCKS (2)

Whether she sings, drums, or plays strings, she *brings it*. She can turn a blasé crowd into screaming maniacs with, on average, three songs. Her onstage antics are extreme and you feel embarrassed for never in your life being close to cool enough to get away with them.

It's possible that she does this for a living, in which case she's got a following (though probably a local one). Even if she only hops up onstage once or twice a year, people go crazy for her music and constantly ask when she's going to go pro or record an album.

**I Fuckin' Rock, of course I can** operate a soundboard, get backstage, get *onstage*, find a fan in a likely place. Makes kickass rock music (unique), Substitutes for Connect, Substitutes for Status.

### PERFORMS ILLUSIONS (3)

Doing legerdemain, card tricks, and small-scale stage illusions is much, much, *much* less cool than being a rockstar, but it's also a lot less stressful and demanding. He just had to practice a hand movement over and over and over and over until it looked perfectly natural, despite being profoundly artificial. But with a little practice he was soon able to (apparently) levitate light objects, make coins pass through glass or tables, and say, "Is... *this* your card!?" with proper drama.

**I Perform Illusions, of course I can** escape from handcuffs, shoplift, misdirect attention, source a well-behaved dove. Can win a *lot* of money cheating at cards (unique), Substitutes for Lie, Substitutes for Secrecy.

### CAN'T RESIST A MYSTERY (4)

Some people just can't blithely walk past what's unresolved without engaging and trying to get to the bottom of it. Whether it's Snopes-style hoax debunking, an unsolved crime (or one that looks like it was solved *wrong*), or just the Sunday crossword, this woman won't stop poking her nose in and asking awkward questions and *seeking*. If she's a cop, she clears a *lot* of cases. If she's not, some people who know her are secretly very annoyed... or alarmed...

**I Can't Resist a Mystery, of course I can** bond with you over your favorite crime show, figure out ciphers and notice acrostics, spot inconsistencies. Substitutes for Connect, Substitutes for Knowledge, Substitutes for Notice.

### CAN'T SLEEP (5)

Insomnia is a hell of a problem. Whether it arises from a disrupted schedule, a medical condition, guilt, or just having very noisy neighbors, it causes depression, confusion, and poor health. Psychiatric studies have found that the fastest way to drive someone out of touch with reality is to deprive them of sleep, and this guy's mind is starting to wander under the pressure of his semi-awakeness. He has, in fact, taken five failed notches in Helplessness and is now subject to hallucinations. He ignores them, as does everyone else, and so far, it hasn't left him swerving into traffic.

At the same time, he's distracted, really surly, and takes a penalty on probably every roll he makes. There's no bonus identity for this poor bastard. He's just screwed.

### CAME OUT OF FOSTER CARE (6)

If you're not an American then maybe your country has a better system for taking care of children whose parents have abandoned them, or got caught engaging in neglect or abuse. The system in the US has... mixed outcomes. Some foster parents are saints who genuinely care for the most unfortunate and powerless kids to be found. Some foster parents are scam artists, and some group homes are little better than bullpens for the juvenile prison system.

To see her, you wouldn't guess she'd been parentless since the age of thirteen, but you might think there's *something* dark in her past. You'd see it in the skeptical eyes, the suspicious posture, or that scar that goes across her left ear and onto her temple.

Whether she chose to become fiercely loyal to her few friends, or to become completely self-isolated, is up to her (and the GM). One way or another though, she learned a lot about victimization and how to avoid it.

**I Came Out of Foster Care, of course I can** yell, nitpick the legality of certain tense social interactions, instinctively hide everything of value. Coerces Violence, Substitutes for Dodge, Substitutes for Notice.

### WAS IN THE WAR (7)

America has been at war for a long time — Iraq, Afghanistan, and by the time this book comes out, possibly Syria, Iran, or pockets of Texas. But for this young man, his war days are over, he hopes. Not that he actually was at the front, sweating IEDs and glaring at everyone with a cell phone. He got trained for maintenance and helped supervise an armory in the Green Zone. He was, in the words of patrolling Marines, a "POG." But he still sweated and got bored and had his day disrupted now and again by nearby detonations. He never had to shoot anybody, but he's known plenty of guys who did, as well as plenty who came under fire.

**I Was in The War, of course I can** speak military slang, source a live grenade if I'm willing to risk a *lot* of trouble, make an educated guess about an explosion, get my health care paid for eventually. Can construct homemade explosives, but hasn't yet (unique), Provides Firearm Attacks, Substitutes for Dodge.

1: MEAT

2: THROAT

3: SMALL

4: BIGGER

5: LAYERS

6: REDUX

7: VEIL

8: BESEIGED

9: SELVES

10: MEDIA

## HAS CRIPPLING DEBTS (8)

At first, it was possible to borrow some money to get stuff she couldn't *quite* afford. Then it became commonplace to borrow money for major purchases like cars and houses. Then credit got cheap. Now it's ubiquitous, and living beyond her means is just *expected*.

Most Americans carry some debt — college loans, a mortgage, a monthly car payment. Many have credit card debt. But some are just in really, *really* deep. Like this character. She just wanted nice things like her friends had! At first, the payments were manageable. Then she was only paying the minimum amount and it started to snowball, until she was kiting from one card to another. Now, *now* she is deeply screwed, because she's borrowed money from some deeply unpleasant people.

She hasn't declared bankruptcy or restructured her debts because, as long as she's dancing as fast as she can, she can pay the vig on her mob loan and the minimum on her credit cards and throw away the other final notices before her husband gets home. But she's hard up. Whatever else she has going on, she would take any vaguely plausible legal way to earn a lot of money fast. As for an illegal way, she'd either jump on it after some thought, or keep thinking a long time, depending on how illegal it was.

She doesn't get another identity, but she does get a few more hardened notches in Isolation, Self, and Helplessness, along with some failed notches in Helplessness.

## LOVES ROMANCE (9)

How many cishet dudes love romance? It is very difficult to tell, since the assumed number ("none") is clearly unlikely, and the brash teasing makes it unpleasant for many to reveal themselves, and whose business is it anyhow?

This romance lover mostly reads them on his cell phone. He got started when a girlfriend of his would read him the sexually explicit parts of her semi-smutty novels about Scotsmen. (Always Scotsmen, for some reason.) He liked romantic comedy films and then started to enjoy super-sad foreign romantic tragedies.

Eventually, that girlfriend moved on, partly because he was getting too serious and she wasn't sure he was "the one." Now he dates casually, also looking for "the one." More than once, though, he's ghosted a woman once she figures out that he seems to mostly be interested in having a beard for going to "chick flicks."

So he works his way through life, loving romance and hoping deep down that the powerful fusion of two souls he always reads about could happen in real life. He's afraid to settle, afraid to miss out, but also afraid that he's chasing something that can't be real.

**I Love Romance, of course I can** engage in witty banter, tell harmless flirting from the serious kind, discuss the minutiae of Sandra Bullock's film oeuvre. Coerces Isolation, Protects Isolation, Substitutes for Connect.

## WORKS OUT (10)

She doesn't have the muscle definition of an anatomical chart, she's not ready to compete on *American Ninja Warrior*, but she runs. Four days a week, actually. She used to just jog a little between basketball seasons when she was in high school, but at her current age she's taking a more scientific approach, tracking her progress with a Fitbit, running with a group, training for longer and longer runs. In fact, she's gone a little overboard — her knees and ankles hurt more or less constantly, but she just powers through because she secretly doesn't think she's worthy of love. The good news is, running may have spared her an eating disorder or a VD-soaked doomed love affair. The bad news is, she's taken 10 wounds from overtraining.

**I Work Out, of course I can** borrow a kayak, find workout gear for all seasons, tape an ankle, push past exhaustion. Protects Helplessness, Protects Isolation, Substitutes for Fitness.

## IS A SINGLE PARENT (11)

As an authorial aside, I get paid to imagine things for pay, and I can't think of one situation where, everything else being equal, being a single parent wouldn't make that circumstance more wearying, more worrying, more chaotic, and desperate. Unless the other partner is a real shit, single parenting is nobody's best choice.

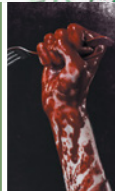
So... given how many single parents you meet, there must be some real shits out there.

This fellow, though, the mother of his darling daughter wasn't a shit. She just got caught in a riptide while they were on vacation in California and drowned. It was the first time she'd ever been to the ocean.

That leaves him with his daughter (how old is she now, anyhow?), struggling to keep a roof over their heads while paying for her therapy (she's still phobic about water and hates the beach). He misses his wife every day, and he's always tired, but he keeps going because of his daughter. He says he sees his wife's spirit in her.

**I'm a Single Parent, of course I can** stretch that grocery budget, arrange a very complicated schedule, throw together a Halloween costume at the last minute. Protects Helplessness, Protects Isolation, Substitutes for Pursuit.

1: MEAT



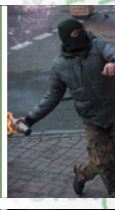
2: THROAT



3: SMALL



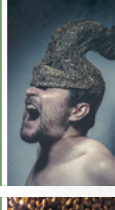
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



6: REDUX



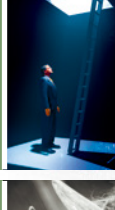
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





## IS UNUSUALLY OLD (12)

She always thought people ignored her because she was a woman and not very tall or pretty, but once she got old, she found out what being invisible *really* feels like. So shit on it. If people don't want to deal with her, they don't have to. She goes where she wants, does what she feels like, and if anyone gives her backchat, she just acts confused until they get exasperated and leave. It works as often as not.

If you're pairing this trait with one of the social positions, the actual age and description can change a lot. Someone who's unusually old to be driving a police prowler car is probably a few decades younger than an unusually old academic or alderwoman. But whatever her position, she occupies it at an age where sexual intrigues and child-rearing drama both seem tedious and sad.

**I'm Unusually Old, of course I can** find information even when the internet's down, be patient and persistent, be prepared for the unexpected. Protects Helplessness, Substitutes for Knowledge, Substitutes for Status.

## TRULY BELIEVES (13)

He tries to live in accordance with his religious faith, not because he's scared of any punishments it declares for sinners, but because he's internalized its values. He really believes. He really wants to get right with God. Any urge that his religion calls "sinful" seems, to him, like an external impulse, something imposed on him. He still gets angry or greedy or lazy, but he doesn't *want* to. He doesn't relish his lusts or coddle his vices. He wants to want the right thing and most of the time, he does.

**I Truly Believe, of course I can** be courageous in order to help others, suffer in silence, recognize a verse from the holy book of my tradition. Protects Isolation, Protects the Unnatural, Substitutes for Connect.

## STEALS (14)

Why does she take what is not hers? There are a lot of possible reasons, depending on whether the thief is just a thief or if this is the backup characteristic of someone in one of the social positions. If she's mobbed up or a petty criminal, this indicates that she specializes in theft (and probably selling stolen goods). But it's also possible that she steals because she's desperate and cash-strapped. It could be a psychological compulsion. Or she might just be a sticky-fingered sleaze with no respect for other people's property.

**I Steal, of course I can** tell if that purse is a knockoff, clock an armored car, spot a pickpocket in a crowd. Substitutes for Lie, Substitutes for Pursuit, Substitutes for Secrecy.

## DOES NOT CONFORM TO SOCIETY'S SEXUAL EXPECTATIONS (15)

He was married, but not happily. While otherwise compatible with his wife, they had unequal libidos, and by the time it was clear that the trajectories of their interest in sex were diverging instead of coming together (heh), they had two young kids. That just made everything worse, because he wanted to relax by having sex, and she wanted to relax by *not* having sex. They had some dark times, and then they opened it up.

Starting to swing worked. Continuing to swing... well, the jury's still out on that. His wife didn't much care for the orgies. She has a date with one or another of the other guys off their private polyamory mailing list a couple times of year. His hookups, both from the list and what he and his wife have started calling "well-rubbered no-kiss casuals," are weekly at least.

The thing is, although she's fine with him sleeping around with other women, he has not yet told her that he's bisexual. He prefers women a good two thirds of the time, but every now and then he just gets in a mood for a dude. The irony of lying to his wife about going out with the guys by telling her he's going to cruise the local Viagra Triangle has not escaped him. His coworkers have no idea.

**I'm Sexually Nonconforming, of course I can** discuss the latest *Savage Love* column, navigate hookup culture ethically, nonchalantly speak about seemingly awkward issues, hold a poker face while talking with cultural conservatives. Substitutes for Connect, Substitutes for Lie, Substitutes for Secrecy.

## OBSESSED WITH UFOS (16)

The joke is, "It's funny how people stopped seeing UFOs and cops started shooting unarmed black men *right about the time* cameras became standard on cell phones." Her response is to pull out her phone and show fireballs shooting up from behind Tallman Plateau, stopping, hovering, and then bolting off at a right angle from the original trajectory before fading out. She shot that footage herself.

She's heard about Tallman for years, but she never took stories about lights in the sky seriously until 2009, when she saw the infamous Norway spiral. The explanations don't add up, if you ask her. So she started doing some research, and found out about the Black Knight satellite ("discarded thermal blanket"? Really? It doesn't look like any blanket she ever saw) and deeper and deeper it all went. Her second trip to watch Tallman, she hit pay dirt.

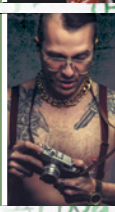
She doesn't like the conspiracy crap. She's known enough people who worked for the government to roll her eyes at the idea of a well-oiled, airtight government organization being *actually in control* of anything. But she also knows what she saw. She has no conclusions, other than there's more going on than the "legit" authorities admit.

**I'm Obsessed with UFOS, of course I can** attempt geometry and trigonometry, spot the tells of CGI, process video frame-by-frame. Substitutes for Knowledge, Substitutes for Notice, Substitutes for Pursuit.

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



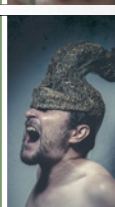
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



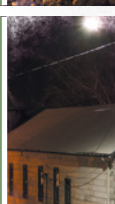
6: REDUX



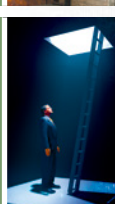
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA



## IS IN A CULT (17)

They really prefer the phrase “new religious movement,” but trust me, it’s a motherfuckin’ cult. His religion isolates him from his family, tries to get him to rope in his friends, and expects to get a very big chunk of his paycheck. The mandatory week-long retreats are classic brainwashing — sleep deprivation, chants, starchy foods, love bombing. All pretty standard.

So while he’s superficially normal, his primary allegiance is to his guru/cult leader. Who’s leading the cult? Well, whoever the GM finds most interesting. Could be your typical narcissistic sex-maniac. Could be a charger with a handful of tricks to keep useful rubes compliant. Or it could be something altogether inhuman.

This guy has his cult, or its leader, as his guru relationship. He’s got five failed notches in Isolation, thanks to those mind-control vacations. His permanent madness is unthinking loyalty to the guru, as was intended.

**I’m In A Cult, of course I can** feign normalcy, ignore injury and deprivation in service of holy things, fall into ecstatic glossolalia. Coerces Isolation, Protects the Unnatural, Substitutes for Lie.

## IS CLUED IN (18)

She’s not a checker because she has no occult agenda. She’s not a charger because she doesn’t have the power. She isn’t a pony either, because she’s not easily led nor entranced by the idea of *magick spells*. She grew up around it, and expecting her to be fascinated by avatars is like expecting a musician’s kid to be impressed that you have a piano in your house.

Maybe her knowledge of archetypes is filtered through cultural masks, or maybe she grew up learning the straight-no-chaser versions. Whatever it is, it’s there when she needs it. So far, that’s been almost never — just once in high school. But that time convinced her this stuff’s absolutely real. So she adapts. She’s not enthusiastic, but neither is she in denial. She’s just trying to do her job and make the weekend, all right?

**I’m Clued In, of course I can** roll my eyes convincingly at mention of Dirk Allen, tell a real Sleeper from a poser, get in touch with a guy who claimed he was from TNI. Casts Rituals, Substitutes for Secrecy, Use Gutter Magick.

## HAS SCARY PROBLEMS (19)

Something is broken in his life and he can’t talk to anyone about it. He’s tried but when he opens his mouth, nothing comes out. He doesn’t see anything, doesn’t hear anything out of the ordinary, but he *feels* it. Some things are wrong. He can look at one orange on the pile in the store and be repulsed, while the others around it leave him unmoved. It’s the same with people. It’s the same with pencils. It’s the same with Post-It notes, he can tell you which pad in the pile of Post-It notepads has a sheet in it that’s just *bad*, and he can tell you which sheet on the pad is the bad one.

Maybe it’s all in his head. Or maybe if your PCs tested it, he’d be able to tell you which envelope had that bad Post-It in it. Maybe if they put the bad orange in a box and scattered identical boxes around it, he’d be able to point to the one box with the orange in it *every goddamn time* even without touching them or examining them closely.

So far, he’s kept his life from unraveling. The Bads haven’t shown up any more frequently — he’s been sensing one or two a week for the past nine months — but he can’t escape a feeling that they’re just the first stage of something. Maybe he’s going to develop full-blown schizophrenia soon. Or maybe he’s in the first stages of becoming an adept.

Two versions of the I Have Scary Problems identity are included. One’s mystic. One’s just the outcome of living a life of incipient terror.

**I Have Scary Problems, of course I can** hide the emotional crisis, hold myself back from the precipice of the abyss, tell if you’re One of Them. Casts Rituals, Specific Information (for whatever those oranges and pencils and people in crowds have in common), Use Gutter Magick.

**I Have Scary Problems, of course I can** maintain a poker face, be ready to flee at all times, awoken at the slightest noise. Substitutes for Dodge, Substitutes for Notice, Substitutes for Pursuit.

## IS A SCARY PROBLEM (20)

Ever see the movie *Single White Female*? How about *Misery*? *Fatal Attraction*? Well, they’re all about crazy ladies who fixate on someone and then attempt to control them. They start out with emotional stuff, but it escalates to violence. In *Misery* — hoo boy does it ever.

This character has not seen *Misery* and if she did, she’d be offended. She wouldn’t quite be able to articulate why, but she’d feel it was unfair. Unfair to her, unfair to Annie Wilkes, unfair to women everywhere who just want people to accept love on someone’s terms other than their own, *dammit*.

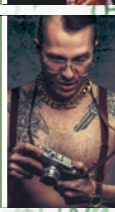
So yeah. She’s deranged. She’s got a perky mask of sanity fully intact, but behind it is a time bomb of obsessive mania just waiting to go off. She is going to become obsessed with someone. She will attempt to convince that person that they love her, need her, and should obey her. When that fails — and it’s doomed to fail because her needs and demands are constantly in play and soon become contradictory — it’s time for abduction, ranting, and ultimately torture. Isn’t she about due to meet your PCs sometime soon?

**I’m A Scary Problem, of course I can** pull serious handcuffs out of my purse, explain why duct tape isn’t really that great for restraining someone’s *hands*, act harmless, maintain a stakeout. Provides Wound Threshold, Substitutes for Lie, Substitutes for Struggle.

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



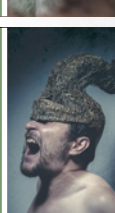
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



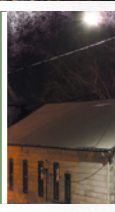
6: REDUX



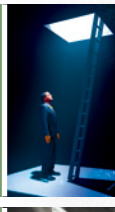
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





# THIRTEEN MYSTIC IDENTITIES

I know that a number of suggestions were made in *Book One: Play*, describing how the game's vague categories could encompass particular and specific abilities. But just for fun, let's go the other way, take some very specific abilities and show how they fit *into the rules from Book One: Play*. As a bonus, GMs who are pressed for time or low on inspiration can grab one of these and promote someone with just a marked-in shock gauge to full-on checker.

## NO-TOUCH AIKIDO

The idea behind no-touch aikido is that some martial artists develop their internal energies (or "ki") so powerfully that instead of just projecting it through their body, they can send it into other people, throwing or disorienting them without ever making physical contact. Usually, it seems to be a case where very experienced people demonstrate it on other very experienced people in order to show or work on some kind of very subtle point about balance and perception. But you? You can actually knock people around without touching them by making very precise aikido gestures. If you don't have another aikido identity... why, exactly, is that? Did you forget? Are you just so old that you can't do aikido with grabs any more?

This is a *specific harm identity* and the condition is that it only works on someone who's attacking you hand-to-hand or with a striking weapon.

## OPEN CHAKRA

The chakras are energy centers in the body, according to the wisdom of ancient India. Maybe you're a yogi who has practiced esoteric meditation for years to open one of your chakras to the cosmos, allowing the generosity of the world to flow through you. Or maybe you were just born (reborn?) that way. Whichever, it's probably ajna or vishuddha, because it allows you to perceive things. You mediate and remove your consciousness so it does not impede the flow of a thousand small messages from the world. Most of these messages are to your benefit. Most.

This is a *vague information identity*, only the difference is, if you fumble you get *possessed by a demon*. It's like you're leaving your car unlocked, and most of the time the people who open the door leave you presents and love letters, but there's that one in a hundred chance that someone's just going to steal it.

## PALDEN LHAMO'S PROTECTION

Palden Lhamo is the tutelary deity and traditional protector of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism. She is depicted with blue skin, red hair, and three eyes, often drinking blood out of a skull. She is an angry protector of the law, in some traditions a reformed demoness, and texts agree that you don't want to be on her bad side. How'd you get her protection? Are you Tibetan? Reincarnated? Did you find a ritual? Perform a service for her? Or is it all inscrutable?

However you got her guarding your soul, it's pretty good stuff. It's a *specific protection identity* and it defends you against malignant magick. If you're enchanted, invoke Palden Lhamo to break the spell. If you're face-to-face with your occult tormentor, roll this identity as if it was Dodge to avoid being ensorcelled.

## QUEST VISIONS

To get the vision, you undertake the quest. That's implied in the name, isn't it? The "quest" in your case is spending a weekend out in the wilderness, well out of sight of any man-made structure bigger than a bench or a fire pit, completely devoid of human company. You can sleep over the weekend, but you can't eat anything solid, nor drink anything that you can't see through. (So... milk no, vodka yes. Bullion broth and lemon Jell-O mix dissolved in hot water can both be surprisingly sustaining, if you don't mind peeing a *lot*.)

At some point in the last five or ten hours of this ordeal, you have some kind of insight. Is it a dream? A visit from a talking spirit animal? Do you hallucinate finding golden tablets incised with advice? Whatever it is, it tells you how to achieve your goals, just like a high-priced life coach, only this one you pay by acting like a Boy Scout.

This is a *specific information identity* but it's got the restrictions because it provides insight specifically into your cabal's objective. If you use this ability and roll a success, your GM provides you with a milestone to add to your objective's path — something that you and your cabal can do to bring your plans to fruition. That's a big reward, so naturally the price is higher.

See "Identities" on page 42 of Book One: Play.

See "Specific Protection" on page 47 of Book One: Play.

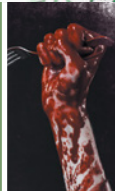
See "Specific Harm" on page 48 of Book One: Play.

See "Specific Information" on page 47 of Book One: Play.

See "Vague Information" on page 46 of Book One: Play.

See "Demonic Possession" on page 108 of Book Two: Run.

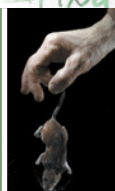
1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



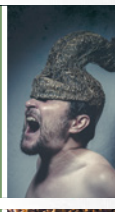
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



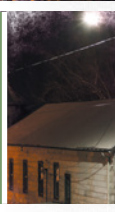
6: REDUX



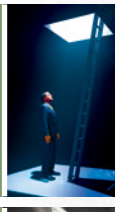
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA



## RUNE-MAKER

Rune magick is simply the power of words, as practiced in the Norse and Germanic areas before Latin became the new hotness (or “*in calidum novum*”). Currently, runic alphabets are associated, to varying degrees, with black metal music and white supremacist politics. But while you are not necessarily involved with either of those subcultures, you do know how to engrave objects and color them in order to encourage events, and you know how to cast fortunes and divinations with rune stones.

This is a good identity to take if you like doing half-assed research and then warping it for game purposes. Look up cool seeming runes, don't worry about whether the sources are reputable, and throw it in as protective coloration for the effects of a *versatile identity*. Since it comes with ritualism and gutter magick built in, be sure to use those too!

## STATOSIGHT

This is a *specific information identity*. The question is, how does the Statosphere influence people, places, objects, and events? If you roll this, you can see which archetype is looming over the city, gazing inscrutably down. (Do you know the archetypes by sight, or do you just see an incredibly beautiful woman whose radiance turns everything else to the black night as she pouts and struts?) You can tell if someone's an avatar, and get some idea of what kind of archetype they follow. (“You see him dressed in a black robe, with a white wig, holding some kind of hammer.”) It won't show you anything about adepts or unnatural creatures, but for avatars and their machinations, it's very illuminating.

## TEMPLAR HERITAGE

The Knights Templar are notorious in occult circles. Supposedly, they switched sides (or didn't) during the Crusades, being initiated into (or just stealing) mystic secrets of the near east before returning to Europe and becoming so *rich* that sovereigns got jealous and the King of France had them all (or nearly all) cooked. The death curse of their Grand Master is a matter of historical record, and it apparently worked. But much of their wealth, and all of their spooky occult rituals, went entirely unrecovered.

So how'd you wind up with some kind of Templar protection over you? Has your family been secret defenders of part of their wisdom for untold decades? Did you loot a tomb? Do a favor for a Templar ghost? Do you even know?

However you came by it, Templar Heritage is a *specific protection identity* that shields against fire, the bane of the Templar leadership. Any time you might take damage from being ignited, roll this identity and you can walk through fire un-scorched.

## UNDEAD-ISH

Although you technically “died” at some point, you're still running around and walking and talking. Was it a medical thing, where you flatlined on the operating table, or maybe you drowned in icy water and were revived even though you had no pulse? Or did you spend time buried in a literal coffin as part of an initiation ceremony? Something weirder than that, even?

Whatever it is, you can still pass a physical and benefit from a hospital stay if you're hurt, but there is one *weird little side effect*: you don't need to breathe. (You may be a little on the pale side and have low blood sugar, too.) If someone tries to smother or strangle you, there's a chance that it just doesn't affect you. This *specific protection identity* keeps you safe from those kinds of attacks. Note that you have to concentrate in order to benefit from it.

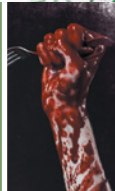
## VENOM THOUGHT BOMB

The Venom Thought Bomb (or VTB) was a supposed weapon used by students of Thought-Form Imposition (or TFI), an esoteric psychic “science” in which internal beliefs were projected out and imposed on the minds of others. The formal practice of TFI, as taught by the discipline's founder Mark Lee Thomas (known as MLT for short), fell off considerably after Thomas ordered his followers to attack the police squad sent to arrest him for statutory rape and tax evasion, and the cops shot a lot of them dead while Thomas vanished from view. There are still people who revere Mark Lee Thomas as the Initial Illuminated Intellect (or III — TFI loved its three letter acronyms) but TFI is on a number of government watch lists.

By hook or crook, you got the hang of this one psychic ability. You just think about the worst thing that happened to you for ten minutes every night, visualizing that event as a sopping green ball of poison that you hold in the back of your throat. When you want to mess someone up, you picture hawking that venomous loogie at them. But then you have to mentally prepare another VTB by intensely meditating on your bitterest memory.

It's a *vague harm identity*, straight no chaser. How'd you learn VTB though? Do you have any idea what happened to ol' MLT the III? Could he really read minds, corrode metals, walk through walls, and infuse people with irresistible sexual desire for him? (Those disciplines are known as LTA, TEI, MBP, and ERI, respectively.)

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



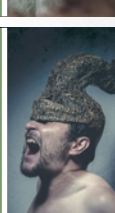
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



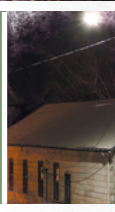
6: REDUX



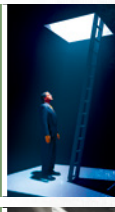
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA



See “Specific Protection” on page 47 of Book One: Play.

See “Versatility” on page 49 of Book One: Play.

See “Specific Information” on page 47 of Book One: Play.

See “Vague Harm” on page 48 of Book One: Play.

See “Specific Protection” on page 47 of Book One: Play.











# 7: THIS SIDE OF THE VEIL

*Unknown Armies* is a game that looks to the living more than the dead and the present more than the past, but it's also a game about character and human character is deeply influenced by those who came before. The stories in this

## LEGION PIGS

There's a Bible story where Jesus confronts "Legion," a demon (or swarm of 'em) that has possessed a man (or possibly two men). Christ casts the demons into a herd of pigs, at their suggestion, and the swine then rush into a lake (or sea) and drown.

Clearly, there are a lot of questions you can ask about this. Was it just one guy or two? Was there something special about him that let him play hotel to an unclean spirit convention? Why did the demons want to go into pigs? Why'd the pigs then kill themselves? Why is this story so important that it's in three of the four gospels? Can pigs swim?

The answer to that last one seems to be a pretty firm "yes." One beach in the Bahamas is famous for its swimming swine and, despite (apparently entrenched) beliefs to the contrary, multiple naturalists have confirmed that pigs are buoyant and easily strong enough to cross rivers, possibly even straits as wide as twenty miles.

Believers in the Legion Pig Conspiracy are usually content to point out that pigs swim and that, therefore, some of the Legion-hosted swine could have made it safely to land, breeding and continuing their evil ways all throughout history! Or at least, one believer is usually content. Her name's Elissa DuVray and she's a whirlybird pilot in Texas. Her primary business these days is running airborne hunts for feral hogs.

Feral hogs are a big problem. Estimates place North America's feral hog population at around six million. That's more than the human residents of Dallas and Houston put together, but nobody living in Dallas or Houston is procreating at eight months of age and dropping a litter of six offspring twice a year, every year. (Or, if anyone is, nobody's heard about it.) The math on that looks a little like those scary charts in epidemiology textbooks, the hockey-stick graphs of how fast an infection spreads. The ones that make you want to wash your hands every fifteen minutes for the rest of your life. (Feral pigs are common vectors of infection, by the by. They can also run thirty miles per hour, jump three feet high, and smell food seven miles away.)

To keep the wild pig population steady, humans have to eliminate more than half of them *every year*. A semi pork-pocalypse. That's Elissa's job, to chopper hunters over Texas' marauding swine swarms while they gun them down, usually with high-power rifles. (Of course, some pigs are hard to stop. While boars *rarely* get to 500 pounds — twice the weight of an average NFL linebacker — Georgia's infamous "Hogzilla," a cross between an escaped domesticated

chapter illuminate the way those left behind cope with those who've gone beyond. Also, there's pigs that can raise the dead... sorta.

Hampshire pig and the wild *Sus scrofa* was eight feet long and 800 pounds. One of its tusks measured nearly eighteen inches.)

So Texas (and Florida! And nearly every state south of the Mason Dixon line!) suffers an infestation of razorback giants that can fuck up acres of produce in a night and breed *more frequently than rabbits*. But at least they aren't smart, right?

Elissa DuVray says some are as smart as humans, just... *different*. Specifically, she says this in her Amazon-published book *Tusks of Armageddon*. It's not very well organized, meandering between examples of intelligence she's observed in ferals — operating fence latches, employing teamwork to overcome physical obstacles, using branches as crude tools to access foods or escape confinement, even using small unit tactics to protect themselves from hunters on foot — and more reputable lab evidence in which pigs were taught to play video games, answer quizzes, and deploy deceit and trickery against their fellows. The experts compare pig intelligence to a chimpanzee or a three-year-old human.

DuVray insists that some are smarter than that. She believes that within the herds in both the countryside and the pigpen, there are genius super-pigs that lead and command the others. These are (of course) the Legion pigs into which Satan's minions were cast. Or rather, their descendants. She speculates that the 2,000 evil spirits sent into the original herd now move among hosts that are share DNA with those original pigs from Gerasa, manipulating humanity from within its farms, spreading plagues (she calls the swine flu "a near miss"), and scheming to destroy and supplant us from without. She believes that they can be repelled with a cross or with holy water, as long as the priest who blessed it was "truly pure and celibate." Well.

Elissa DuVray is right about a lot of stuff. There are, in fact, smart pigs out there, as smart as a human being (more or less). They can't learn language very well, not more than 5,000 words. But they are cunning and patient and they do not like confinement. They do not much care for humankind, but the smartest of the smart pigs are willing to go along to get access to our technologies, and our persons.

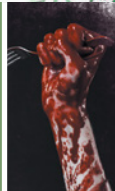
What really, *really* makes the smart pigs mad though? They're denied magick. They can smell it all around them — better than people, by far — but only us bald apes can harness it. The free pigs can't wallow in the meaning-bath of an avatar's existence, nor can they flex their worldview like a muscle and put reality in an adept's sleeper hold. They can't even root around in the trash of gutter magick.

They are mute, mundane, and (perhaps worst of all) delicious when they've been in a smoker long enough to hit 155 degrees Fahrenheit. We imprison them, we hunt them from the air and the land, and when we've slaughtered them, we gorge upon their succulent flesh. All they can do to us in return is possess our bodies remotely using mind control.

## TREPHINE

...good thing that wasn't a load-bearing stripper pole

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



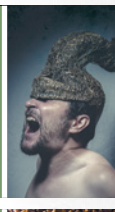
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



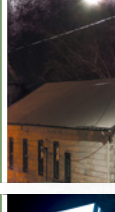
6: REDUX



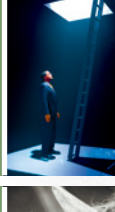
7: VEIL



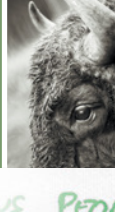
8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA



Did I mention the mind control?

Legion pigs can attempt to psychically overwhelm human minds and run them, just like demonic possession. (Chalk up another point for the DuVray theory, although she actually has not yet observed a human under a Legion pig's psychic domination.) The catch is, they can only do this to creatures who have eaten Legion pig meat.

There are perhaps one thousand Legion pigs in the US. (Elsewhere? Who knows? Kinda makes keeping kosher and halal look smart though, doesn't it?) When they procreate, even with one another, it's uncommon for their offspring to have Legion pig qualities. (They rarely pair up anyway — they generally hate each other only a little less than they hate people.) They don't experience affection the way humans (or, possibly, even the way normal pigs) do, but sometimes Legion pig parents who are old or sick sacrifice themselves to predators or human hunters in hopes of their offspring enslaving those who consume them. More commonly, they identify Legion pigs among their children and try to get people to eat those specific swine.

Most Legion pigs are in the wild, with maybe a dozen on organic farms, disguised as the domesticated type. Two are involved with traveling shows, wherein they astonish the rubes with displays of intellect. (All the farm pigs and both the show pigs are the second or third generation of Legion pigs in place. That means that some of the people in the show/farm are vulnerable to mind control, or else that other people scattered around the country are.)

Most of these pigs want to remain unshot and uneaten, while procreating as much as they can manage. They also try to express their hatred and contempt for humankind whenever it doesn't expose them much. If they've had a Legion ancestor or descendent eaten by a cougar, boa, or alligator, they might possess the predator and make an opportunistic attack on a human. They try to control their herds and keep them safe and prosperous, like *Watership Down* with more wallowing. To the extent that they're able, they try to get Legion pig meat into the human diet and to identify humans who've eaten it — often just by glaring at random passers-by and attempting to hijack their spindly upright bodies. (They can possess anyone who has eaten *any* Legion pig, not just one of their bloodline or whatever.)

## LEGION PIG POSSESSION POWERS

Average Legion pigs have a 50% chance of possessing something that's eaten Legion pig flesh — at least a pork chop, a couple sausages, or some bacon rashers. Younger pigs may have the ability down at 30%, while an experienced sow could have it as high as 70%.

If the roll succeeds, the target (be he snake, man, or unspeakable servant) is under the Legion pig's thrall for a number of minutes equal to the

digits rolled. If Porky the Possessor rolls a 33, he runs the show for thirty-three minutes. There is no range limit on this! Once he's been in your head once, there's nowhere on Earth you can run. (Otherspaces? Who knows?) Legion pigs can attempt a possession about once an hour. While under the influence, the target perceives nothing.

Interestingly, while people possessed by Legion pigs have the pigs' vocabulary (about equal to that of a fourth grader), most nonverbal skills are available. People possessed by Legion pigs can shoot a gun, drive a car, juggle, paint, or play guitar as well as the host. Generally, anything involving muscle memory is OK, anything involving words is off-limits. Paranormal powers, however, are beyond the possessor's reach. They're just pigs, after all.

## LEGION PIGS AND THE OCCULT UNDERGROUND

Satanic mind-control pork is not really going to snap the belief-suspenders of many checkers, but Legion pigs are rare enough that confirmation is thin on the ground. The *Sleepers* have rumors about them, and a few people on the Steering Committee remember a dossier about them before it was ransacked from the Barcelona safe house. That file is now in the possession of the *New Inquisition*, but having acquired it through a couple removes they aren't taking it very seriously. *The Sect of the Naked Goddess* has no idea, while *GNOMON* can tell you the exact global population of the Legion pigs without having any idea what they really are, or where. The *New Alexandria Library* has a ledger on them, somewhere in the back. It was composed by a now-dead *Immortal Secretary* back in 1877 before he became one of the first people ever killed by a train. A fairly blurry copy of that file is in the hands of a cyber-crime expert in Louisiana, who's also a member of the *Blue Line*. (But he's a Mulder, so no one's paying much attention.)

The people who seek out Legion pigs most avidly are loners who realize that if you can get one of these critters, chop off one hock and feed it to whomever, you can then make them do *whatever* as long as you've got a gun to the pig's head. That said, Legion pigs are typically underestimated by these cheapjack Svengalis-by-proxy, so it turns out ugly for everyone involved — pignapper, possession victim, and three-legged sow alike.

The other faction of people seeking Legion pigs are those who know the Ddefod o Ymgnauldoliad, described below, but there's not even that many of them who think the benefits are worth the risks.

## THE DDEFOD O YMGNAWDOLIAD

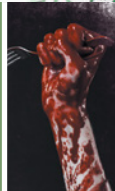
**Cost:** 2 minor charges.

**Effect:** Kill a Legion pig and reduce its carcass to ash and cinders. Acquire the body of a person who became a demon and burn or grind or reduce it into an undifferentiated form — paste or powder.

See the following entries in Book Two: Run: "Sleepers" on page 77, "The New Inquisition" on page 85, "The Sect of the Naked Goddess" on page 72, "Flex Echo" on page 57, and "The Immortal Secretaries" on page 97. "New Alexandria Library" and "Blue Line" are found on pages 66 and 16 of Book Three: Reveal.

*Pink!*  
*Pink!*  
*Punk!*  
*Punt!*

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



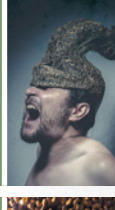
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



6: REDUX



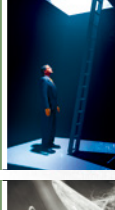
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





Mix the two substances together thoroughly and weigh the result. Get an equal quantity of white plaster and blend that with the ash/corpse/pig blend. Moisten it with seawater and form it into a human shape.

After three days, the statue transforms into a fleshy replica of the dead person whose corpse was used in its creation. The body appears as the person was at age thirty-three, or as they looked at time of death, whichever is younger. The demon formed by the person's demise is

drawn to the body and animates it, permanently. The person has, in effect, been brought back to life. These bodies bleed seawater, however, and have no internal organs. (This means that all attacks against them just do damage like a hand-to-hand strike. Their wound threshold is only 40 though.) Most importantly, these bodies have no brain or hormones or spiritual reality, so the entity is as focused and dispassionate as any other demon. Handle with care.

## THE BABADOOK BY JENNIFER KENT

This Australian horror movie stars Essie Davis, who also plays the main character in *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries* — an enjoyable but utterly non-*Unknown Armies* period piece with great sets and costumes, where you watch to see what language Miss Fisher speaks this episode, and who her new boy toy is.

There's none of that lighthearted fun in *The Babadook*. It is a no-shit tragedy, and the tone never breaks down to wink at or console the audience. Davis plays Amelia Vanek, a young widow who is now the single mom for her psychologically disturbed son Sam. As they're limping along, poor and shell-shocked and orbiting the hole left in the family when the husband/father got killed, they start experiencing haunted house phenomena.

The haunted house aspect of *The Babadook* isn't anything different, but it's done so well that you remember why this creepy stuff started getting used in the first place. It's skillfully blended with intimations that, no, she's just going crazy or, hey, maybe it's her son that's going crazy.

What really makes *The Babadook* work, I think, is the characterization. You feel awful for Amelia and Sam, your heart genuinely weeps for their tragic loss and yet, at the same time, you frequently want to just slap the hell out of them. It's a tribute to the acting and directing that we feel both these impulses so keenly. Ken Hite didn't like the ending, but I think it's particularly apropos for *Unknown Armies*, in which coming to a détente with destructive horror is a prelude as often as it is a climax.

## THE BIBLE REPAIRMAN BY TIM POWERS

This short story concerns a man who vandalizes Bibles so that people can consider themselves Christian despite violating typical commandments to share with the poor, or eschew adultery, or avoid homosexuality. But that's actually only a tiny bit of chrome on a nimble, efficient vehicle.

The main point of the story is that the protagonist, Torrez, works with ghosts, and there are these flawless blends of occultism — babbling ghosts who get kidnapped, clairvoyants desperate to silence the voices — with stuff that is everyday and yet, *crucially*, taken for granted. Do you know how the magnets in your stereo speakers work? I don't, and that's why they can get ghosts caught in them, in Tim Powers' world.

Torrez' blood is the ransom currency, because it's the elixir that lets clairvoyants get some peace and quiet. But it's not just the blood, of course. The blood is the life, or at least, everything that makes Torrez' life worth living. Every time he winds up bleeding so someone can get their spirit daughter or husband back from a medium/kidnapper, he loses joy, loses focus, loses years off his life.

### WHAT IT EXPOSES ABOUT UNKNOWN ARMIES

I like all kinds of horror stories, but some of my favorites are movies and books that are about X, but they're *really* about Y. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is famously about pod people, but *really* about the Red Scare. *The Stepford Wives* is about sexy robot doppelgängers, but *really* about stifling conformity. *The Babadook*, then, is about a haunted house but it's *really* about grief.

What it can add to your games is the punch of that double layer of meaning. If your game is about something that's overtly scary, dig deeper. Is there a metaphrand hiding in there, waiting to be handled safely through the protective horror? Look for parallels between the obvious frightfulness of a monster, a deranged sorcerer, or an arrogant avatar, and the commonplace anxieties of job, school, and family. Don't use this to pick on players because you know their issues — if someone's going through a messy divorce, a session about people splitting into reduced halves of themselves isn't the way to offer support about that, it's a dick move. Keep it general, though, and you can pull out some powerful catharsis.

The other thing, of course, that we can learn from *The Babadook* is that it's perfectly possible to tell a great story about people who aren't 100% *nice* or even very likeable.

### WHAT IT EXPOSES ABOUT UNKNOWN ARMIES

This is a nearly pitch-perfect example of an adept with a very heavy charging system. You want to really get shit done with the spirits of the dead? Well, you've got two choices, and one of them is to burn your own soul until you're doddering, drooling, and aphasic. Or you can subcontract all that suffering by tormenting others with the same symptoms, which either makes you a confidence trickster (if they don't know what they're getting into) or a coercive monster (if they know damn well but are more scared of you than it). Either way, it's a prime example of how these sacrifices are *central* to the idea of an occult price. They're not something you have to *get out of the way* in order to get to the story with a character's cool powers. They *are* the story of the character's cool powers.

1: MEAT

2: THROAT

3: SMALL

4: BIGGER

5: LAYERS

6: REDUX

7: VEIL

8: BESEIGED

9: SELVES

10: MEDIA

# SNAP JUDGMENT: SPOOKED I-V BY GLYNN WASHINGTON

The radio show *Snap Judgment* bills itself as “storytelling with a beat” and plays like a hip-hop version of *This American Life*. Every week the program presents a theme and provides a number of stories based around it. Often these stories are true. There are occasional short fictional bits. And in between those poles lie stories that their presenters say are true and put forth as if they believe them, but which can’t be confirmed. When the stories are about travels to distant lands, or hilarity ensuing from pursuing the quick fix, it’s natural to accept that a bit of stretching occurs. (Every episode ends with host Glynn Washington assuring listeners, “This is *not* the news.”)

But the *Spooked* episodes, when they collect stories about encounters with the frightening, the dead, and the unnatural? Well, I’ll just say I listen with a bit of skepticism.

Whether they’re true, false, merely “truthy,” or (most likely) a blend of all three, the stories collected in the five *Spooked* episodes range from good to great, with the occasional ho-hum moment you have to expect on NPR. I particularly liked Glynn’s personal stories, like “The Hum,” but you also get traditional, “We moved in and stuff showed up on Polaroids” tales, along with cross-cultural weirdness like, “This guy I met in China didn’t speak English and had no formal education but could tell me everything about myself and describe the haunted house my friend lived in,”

## SPOOK BY MARY ROACH

Mary Roach is unlike many of the writers recommended in this book. For one thing, she is a lighthearted writer in a collection of driven and sometimes dour ones. For another, she writes nonfiction.

Roach is a lay historian of science, but she approaches her subject without the usual solemn respect for its authorities and without the typical drift into pomposity. She goes for the subjects where Science blushes and stammers and looks a little embarrassed. She is not afraid to write a book with an entire chapter about the jailhouse practice of “hooping” (that’s in *Gulp*) or one in which people take 4-D ultrasound images of sexual intercourse for research (that’s in *Bonk*).

*Spook*, her second book, is about what happens when science tries to poach on religion’s territory by measuring, detecting, or otherwise experimenting with the human soul. (Spoiler: it goes just about as well as when religion tries to turf-poach science.) There’s a chapter on Dr. Duncan MacDougall, whose attempts to weigh people at their exact moment of death was, in the long run, fundamental to the movie *21 Grams*. It deals, in disgusting detail, with the idea of “ectoplasm” and how it was probably manipulated by the medium Kathleen Goligher in the 1920s to fool the spiritualists of Belfast. (Roach even tracks down a box of alleged ectoplasm archived at Cambridge University.) She enrolls in medium school, and much hilarity ensues, and she investigates the origins of EVP (Electronic Voice Phenomenon — ghosts talking in static on electronic equipment, basically).

and straight up gritty inexplicability like, “I was an orderly in a violent psych ward and yes, the stuff I saw made me believe in demonic possession.” It’s a rich, strange brew, and if one story doesn’t wet your whistle, the next one might. They’re short and sharp and well-produced.

## WHAT IT EXPOSES ABOUT UNKNOWN ARMIES

First off, it’s a general idea mine. Any one of these episodes has several events that would leave a cabal thinking, “Is this something I should worry about, or something I can turn to my advantage?”

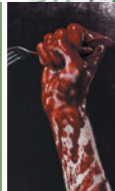
More importantly, although these have been put into a narrative format, they didn’t emerge from the story arc structure and character tropes that almost all literature has. If those things are there, they were imposed from without on the weird stuff of the real world. Instead of tired tropes where you know how the monster works and can see the ending coming a mile away, these stories have the untidiness and loose ends of people’s real lives. It’s not something you should pull *all the time* in a horror game, but the idea that there *is* an answer to the terrifying mystery, but you just couldn’t find it... that can work wonders. People in these stories have to suck up their ignorance because it’s real life. It can work in the fiction at your game table too.

## WHAT IT EXPOSES ABOUT UNKNOWN ARMIES

In addition to being wonderfully droll, *Spook* is a brilliant chronicle of the sorts of unexpected things that happen when practical people take practical approaches to situations that they do not, yet, realize are profoundly impractical. How would a real scientist react to the sorts of manifestations that fuel the plotlines of an *Unknown Armies* game? *Spook* offers some indications.

Moreover, it suggests that scientists are not the lab-coated saviors that movies and TV present. In many cases, these doctors and investigators are shockingly naïve — easy prey for confidence tricksters because they assume that everyone else is as devoted to truth and accuracy as they are themselves. (There’s a reason that the great debunkers have been stage magicians like Harry Houdini and James Randi.)

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



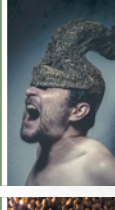
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



6: REDUX



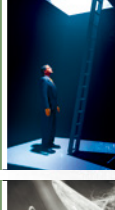
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA









# 8: NORMALCY BESIEGED

An important thing to get right is the balance between normalcy and weirdness, and it's an issue that some GMs never consciously consider. In some cases, that's fine — they have an instinct for how common they want the eerie to be and how they want the dominant paradigm of “the ordinary” to react and protect itself. If that idea is firm, you can pants it and be fine. Or you can leave the issue to the game as it's played, and let the levels of acceptance and rejection

## HOAXBORN

The legend of the tulpa originates in Nepal, where a monk reputedly meditated so hard that a person he imagined came to actually exist and made a pest of itself. (Disappointingly, this turns out to be a misunderstanding of what the idea of a “tulpa” actually meant.)

Wouldn't it be great if that was possible though? People think that, anyhow. Fictional characters are so much more reasonable and attractive and consistent than people who were born in the biological blood-and-pain tradition. If you imagined the perfect lover, or perfect butler, or perfect detective, and could make that real just by wanting it real bad... what could go wrong?

This doesn't happen, for two reasons. First off, because it *doesn't*. But secondly, because anyone you imagine is inevitably going to be flawed. Your own flaws inform your creation. Can't get around it, and I'll show you why. Consider the following two perspectives:

1. “Good morning, child of the cosmos! Welcome to life on Earth! How can I make your stay more pleasant? A privileged birth, with loving and attentive parents who are nonetheless accomplished and wealthy? Maybe good health and good looks and citizenship in a first world nation? While we're at it, I'll just make sure you're really attractive and well-endowed, OK? Super!”
2. “Gas, grass, or ass, cupcake. Nobody rides for free.”

Now, which of those attitudes looks more like The Way the World Actually Works, to you? Be honest.

So, being an imperfect being in an imperfect world, you can't imagine anything very long, or very hard, without it having some imperfections. Which means that even if we could make people out of thin air by wanting them real, real bad, those people would, themselves, be bad too. Or, if not bad, flawed. Demon lovers, snide know-it-all butlers, and detectives with a bad jones for the skag are all more maintainable. They're interesting and plausible and fascinating in a way that insupportably perfect folks aren't. Our fiction, fortunately, is all the richer for it. But they'd be a big disappointment if one person tried to imagine a perfect whatever and, instead, got a flawed-but-gritty actuality.

## CHANTRY

i was born the same year as “erectile dysfunction”

emerge organically as your cabal pursues its objective(s). But if you want to look at how other creatives have wrestled with the clash between the mundane and the sur-rational, the media in this chapter can help a lot. There are also a number of... well, I'll just say *things*... that appear entirely or even aggressively mundane on the surface, but which, when examined, are weirder than a Stepford wife hunting down invading body snatchers.

However, as previously mentioned, this doesn't happen. No one currently alive can sustain the attention and focus building a tulpa requires, if anyone ever could. It can be crowdsourced, though.

This is where the idea of “catfishing” comes into it. If you aren't familiar with that phrase, it's when a guy (for example) goes online and pretends to be an attractive woman in order to get other guys to flirt. Or, in another version, where someone pretends to be a sick child in order to get sympathy, or sometimes money. Usually though? Just sympathy. Sympathy, attention, or an expression of friendliness.

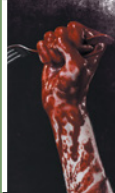
There was a website, [www.ashleymadison.com](http://www.ashleymadison.com), which purportedly helped people arrange extramarital affairs and claimed to have about one woman subscribing for every three or four guys who were paying its monthly fees in hopes of scaring up some cyber-secure strange. But it turned out that it wasn't safe, 'cause it got hacked and the data on its subscribers — even the dudes who paid the extra “scrub off all my info for realzies” quit fee — was released. (Gosh, who could have guessed that an organization dedicated to helping people break promises might, itself, break a promise?) What's really interesting is that when people analyzed the data on the so-called women of Ashley Madison, it looked like a vast percentage of them were actually façades of computer code, known as “engagers,” selling a fantasy to desperate men.

Emotional deceit precedes the internet, of course — go read Armistead Maupin's *The Night Listener* for how a radio call-in show host got sucked in. Or maybe wasn't. But the ease of blogging and social media sent the barriers for this sort of behavior through the floor. Ask Belle Gibson, who sold over a million dollars' worth of books and apps based on the diet she didn't use to beat the cancer she never had. Or cruise by the Warrior Eli Hoax Group ([www.warriorelihoax.com](http://www.warriorelihoax.com)) and have a look at the multiple health scams going on there.

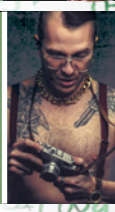
Whether these personae are created by cynical scamsters, or by sufferers of “Munchausen by Internet Syndrome” who just can't stop lying, the emotions that readers invest in these stories are real. The hopes, the anxiety, the interest and affection and lust... those aren't just hollow shouts at the void. They're real, and they can infuse the image with force.

There's just one catch: the creator has to die before the hoax is revealed. If that happens, the hoaxborn personality continues along its trajectory — sick or horny or whatever — but now as a self-willed, independent thing with one hell of an existential crisis.

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



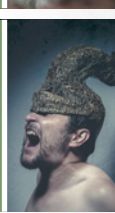
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



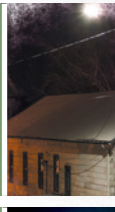
6: REDUX



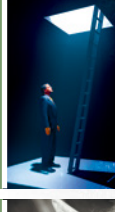
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





To sum up: the way to make that awesome butler or demon lover is to follow these steps:

1. Create a convincing online persona.
2. Get a lot of emotional investment from as many people as possible.
3. Die.

The hoaxborn looks as described (or, more likely, looks like the person whose Flickr pages or Facebook photos were pirated for verisimilitude) and actually has all the problems and/or lustful inclinations established by the cover story. But now it has a body and can act out.

It also has a keen awareness that it is an inhuman imposter depending on lies and deceit for sustenance.

The hoaxborn is tangible. In fact, when its maker dies, the hoaxer's corpse shrivels up, shudders, and then reforms as the hoaxborn. Should the creator die as he lived, holed up in front of a computer, this isn't much of a problem. If she dies in a car crash or strokes out on an Amtrak train, it's considerably more disturbing for the witnesses, and inconvenient for the fledgling hoaxborn.

Fortunately, hoaxborn are extremely persuasive. Each starts out with a Lie ability at 100%. They also have the identity Night Listener, which starts out between 30%–80%, depending on how widespread the lie was before the creature instantiated. That identity Evaluates Self, Provides Wound Threshold, and Substitutes for Connect. They also get a second identity at 50% that represents the lie of life that was presented as their own. If they were created as an eager-to-please young gay man who just moved from Arkansas to New York, their identity reflects that. If they're an elderly civil rights marcher who never took a handout from anybody but is now wracked with cancer, the identity flows from that.

So far so good: they're created from the flesh of their lie-master and have some normal skills that let them pass for human. But they aren't human, they're fundamentally unreal and exist only as long as they can maintain the momentum of their counter-reality.

In short, they're born dying. Which, true enough, we all are, but in their case the best-by date is cruelly short. Every day a hoaxborn exists, it takes 1d10 wounds simply from the order of reality trying to scrub them out of its fabric.

They don't heal normally, either. Hospitals have no power over them (which is apt, given how many of their narratives are implicit critiques of the health care system), drugs don't work (so they're immune to Rohypnol), even bandages and first aid don't help them. To heal, they need to be lied to.

If someone lies to a hoaxborn's face and rolls a success on their Lie ability, the hoaxborn heals 1d10 wounds. (Which means they usually catch on to the deceit. You just can't kid a kidder.) Lying to help doesn't work, either. Only a genuine, "innocent" attempt at deceit can bolster their tenuous existence.

Indirect lies are far less efficient. If someone lies to the hoaxborn online or on the phone or in a letter, that has a 10% chance of healing a single measly wound point. It has to be targeted, too. Listening to a speech full of dishonesty, or getting a mailer full of counterfactual assertions isn't going to do them a damn bit of good.

Catfish-styled pretty girl hoaxborn can do OK on Twitter — just expressing an opinion about a video game can often

be enough for a dozen untrue threats or promises — but dating sites are where they can go to really get lied at IRL. For the sickie kids and self-curing cancer warriors, online mass deception can be harder to source. But both types are very likely to go out in search of in-person interaction that can sustain them so much more reliably.

Some maintain this sort of half-life for years, gravitating to a city with the population to provide them with lots of options, getting a boyfriend who promises he's going to leave his wife, maybe landing a job in HR where they must listen to he said/she said accounts of workplace malfeasance.

Most hoaxborn just give up. Needing lies — needing to solicit them — leads to a pretty bleak view of humanity, and the strongest of them are, statistically, only two to three weeks from nonexistence if no one's handing them a line.

But some keep fighting, especially if they can get in a job where the lies are frequent but compartmentalized. (Becoming a cop is a great way to hear lies, but few hoaxborn can pass the background check.) Their outlook is ghastly, unless they stumble across a functioning occult subculture.

It turns out hoaxborn interact powerfully with the bent reality of adepts, and with the rigid reality of avatars. In each case, if a spell or channel is attempted on the hoaxborn it may succeed or fail, but it inevitably functions as a taboo violation. That boozy adept who tries to telekinese a barstool into a hoaxborn? Might work or fail, but it costs him all his charges. The Star avatar who tries to wow the hoaxborn with showbiz razzle-dazzle? Again, might work, might not, but just directing Statospheric power against something that the cosmos doesn't like weakens the avatar's tie to their archetype.

Note that both classes of wonder-workers instantly feel it when their powers go all weak and limp. Hilariously, many are so arrogant that they double down on trying to force their will onto the hoaxborn.

But from the other side of the equation, it feels very different. It feels like being terribly thirsty and then suddenly seeing a truck full of assorted sodas jackknife in front of you. The hoaxborn respond to channels and spells by feeling like they hit the motherlode, and they have. That thing where they die by pieces, 1d10 wounds a day? If they get spelled or channeled, that dire countdown gets paused. The recess lasts a number of days equal to what the charger rolled. Boozehound succeeded at the stool-slam with a 36? The hoaxborn's reality is reinforced enough to stay stable for thirty-six days.

Once they get a taste of this, even if they don't know what it is, they almost always pursue. Which means the occult demimonde has more than its share of fiendishly plausible manipulators moving around in it, trying to get mojo worked on them.

## HOAXBORN

**Wound Threshold:** 30–80.

**Liar 100%:** Substitutes for Lie.

**Night Listener 30%–80%:** Evaluates Self.

**Wild Card Identity Based on Falsely Established History 50%:** Provides Wound Threshold, Substitutes for Connect.

**Not A Person:** Immune to drugs and poisons (unique).

**Walking Taboo:** Taboos any charger who works a spell or channel on the hoaxborn (unique).

1: MEAT

2: THROAT

3: SMALL

4: BIGGER

5: LAYERS

6: REDUX

7: VEIL

8: BESEIGED

9: SELVES

10: MEDIA

# HUNGER HOMES

There are buildings that hunger. They are called “hunger homes” by the *New Inquisition*, which is the only big cabal that has a dossier on them in particular, instead of lumping them in with other spaces. They can’t quite afford the one they’ve detected, because it’s in Monaco City and, like the other hunger homes they think they’ve researched historically, it’s quite large.

The buildings want to eat, and what they eat is people. A hunger home appears in a city — at least, so far they always have — as mixed-use buildings with some businesses, some residences. The biggest one on record was in San Jose, California, which was thirty stories when it was killed.

Yes, hunger homes can be killed. That’s covered at the end of the next section.

## BODY PARTS

A hunger home’s body is a building, and parts of that building (and its contents) correspond roughly with the mammalian bodies more familiar to us from hugs and the Discovery Channel.

**The Mouth:** This is the lobby, the ground floor where you walk in through sliding glass or a revolving door. If you’ve been there before and the building thinks you’re indigestible (as explained below), the door may not let you in — at least not until agents of the immune system (meaning, blank-eyed security goons) show up to let you know this mouth has teeth. Or the sliding glass door may just slam shut on you with surprising force — make a Dodge roll or take 1d10 wounds, then spend the next few months finding out how hard it is to file a lawsuit against a sentient building whose owners of record are an Omani oil billionaire’s illegitimate son and two shady retired dentists from Boca Raton.

The lobby has a nice russet marble floor and ceiling, audaciously set off by the white columns lining its front. There’s a coffee shop, a dentist’s office, a drugstore, and a restaurant/tavern. There’s also an expensive boutique with a curious logo that looks like a tooth. Once you notice it, a lot of the people who live and work in the building wear clothes with that monogram.

**The Throat:** At the back of the lobby, the elevators await. It’s another sumptuous hallway with rich burgundy carpeting and a strange, drop-shaped chandelier hanging down and burning red. There always seems to be a draft here, perhaps up from below? It’s a warm, moist current. Every time an elevator opens or closes, the airflow seems to shift from moving in, to moving out. In, out. In, out.

**The Nose:** The lobby has no roof, so you can see directly up to the mezzanine (described in “The Sinus”) but there’s another way to the second level

and it corresponds with the nose on a mammal. If it’s plausible at all, the mezzanine is accessed by a skyway from another building. Otherwise, it’s just a rear door where the building sits against a hill, or it’s an entry from the parking garage via a cramped secondary elevator that doesn’t go anywhere else.

A security guard sits, blank-eyed, at a discreet desk full of monitors and gives an inscrutable look at everyone who passes, not *quite* long enough to be an insulting stare, but close. (They are part of the immune system, described later.) People who enter through the nose are not subject to digestion or incorporation, which are described in “*The Hunger Home Diet*.”

**The Sinus:** This is the mezzanine level — a series of stores overlooking the lobby, exiting through the nose or on the elevators of the throat. Everything here is a subdued cream color, decorated with swirl patterns not unlike the inferior nasal concha bone. The businesses here all seem to radiate some signature scent — one sells upscale bath products and is redolent of sandalwood and lingonberry, another is a specialty chocolatier, which is next to an artisanal pizza place that fills the air with the aroma of basil. Much of this level is taken up by a department store with an extensive gourmet grocery section. You could get by on just what’s for sale there and live in comfort without ever leaving the building.

**The Lungs:** The floor above the mezzanine, which is labeled “1” in the elevator, is home to a law office and an accounting firm. You can reach it through the steps and the elevators. Any inquiries about who owns or manages the property come here where responses are delayed, deferred, forgotten, and (if pressed) curtly dismissed. Any legal actions taken against the building or its tenants are defended through this office, which, while small and lacking in much reputation, does win almost all of its cases. It would be better known if it took more work from people outside the building.

Plenty of outside clients come to the law firm and the accountants. If they come in through the lobby, the building evaluates them, as described in “*The Hunger Home Diet*.” If they come in through the mezzanine, they can leave without too much of a creepy feeling, though their lawyer or accountant might suggest that they meet for drinks at the lobby bar next time.

**The Stomach:** Are you ready for it to get weird? This is where it gets weird. If you get on the elevator and press the “2” before the building finds you palatable, it won’t light up and the elevator won’t go there. If you try to get there from the stairs, the doors marked “2” open onto the mezzanine. (This is disorienting if you came *up* from

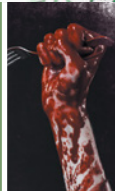
See “*The New Inquisition*” on page 85 of Book Two: Run.

See “*The Hunger Home Diet*.”

*In Slavic folklore the hunger home walks on chicken legs.*

Again, that’s over at “*The Hunger Home Diet*.”

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



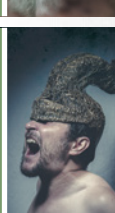
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



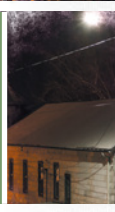
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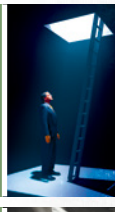
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA







SAID US TO BE ONLY FEMALE AND DOGS ONLY MALE BUT THE CHINESE LIPS AND NOBODY REVERSED  
 STRE  
 IS K  
 STUFF  
 BOX WAS  
 CHED T  
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 ETS Y  
 TAKEO  
 OF B  
 PUNK  
 RING  
 OOBED  
 E CREA  
 MUSIC  
 NG ON  
 CATS - F  
 WD RU  
 PRAYE  
 OM TE  
 QES GEN  
 E THEN  
 ING AN  
 DE QUE  
 OFF YOU  
 CHICKEN  
 TONES NOW  
 IE SILVER  
 ACE BLACK

the accountants and arrive on the floor below them. It's an Unnatural (2-3) stress check.) Basically, it's hard to get the building to eat you unless it wants to. If it *does* want to, you wind up on Floor 2 whether you want to go there or not.

Floor 2 is a ballroom. The whole floor is an open space, broken up here and there with red pillars and lined with windows that don't look out on the building's environs, but on an *entirely different city*. Depending on what day you get there it could be Abu Dhabi, London, Rio, Hong Kong, or Singapore. The windows are tough and thick and nearly impossible to get through, unless you want your PCs to go to a foreign city (or an otherspace that resembles one). It's always night on the second floor, and there's always a confusing, noisy, and fragrant costume party going on.

For some, it's a kickass rave with EDM droning and strobes and people waving glow sticks. For others, it's more like an *Eyes Wide Shut* orgy with people wearing nothing but animal masks getting their freak on. In a corner of either, one might come across an S&M scene that is, to the eyes of any respectable BDSM aficionado, *extremely* unsafe and poorly run. It looks like the subs are actually being beaten against their will and the blood is not being well-managed, it's everywhere, it's unhygienic! The whole thing pretty much conforms to your most racist elderly relative's fears about what an illegal nightclub would be like.

If the PCs entering the ballroom/stomach of Floor 2 have been around the building enough, they see people they recognize from other floors, only now they're acting... different. A staid accountant dances orgiastically. A chipper sales clerk from the bath products shop is getting her tongue

pierced *right there under the disco ball*, laughing hysterically.

Attempting to talk over the deafening beats is damn near impossible, and no one seems to be listening in any event. Sign language, telepathic whispers, crudely lettered signs, texting — no one on Floor 2 pays the slightest attention. They just dance, or mosh, or tattoo one another with the image of the building, or lash out at the PCs.

Yeah, that eventually happens. Someone takes a swing at the PCs. Hit or miss, if the PCs swing back, shit gets dense and hectic. Everyone in the crowd starts screaming more, thrashing about with greater violence, and punching out towards the PCs.

Characters who attack can roll and succeed or fail, but even if they kill someone it doesn't calm anyone down — the dead (or knocked out) building dweller just drops in place and gets trampled as more people crowd around to get a lick in. They aren't scared of weapons or magick. They're mindless.

Dodging, then, is a better idea. Characters who roll a success with Dodge manage to avoid meaningful injury for a round. Anyone who doesn't succeed at a Dodge roll takes 1d10 wounds until they drop or escape.

To escape, roll Pursuit, Struggle, or Fitness to try to get to an (unmarked) exit. (*Unmarked exits?* Enjoy your firetrap, assholes!) Each character needs to roll three successes to get out but — here's the rub — rolling to get to the door precludes Dodge rolls. PCs who use teamwork — getting back to back, moving towards a wall, and pushing gradually in one direction say, or overturning the DJ table and using it as shelter as they retreat, or any similar vaguely plausible

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



6: REDUX



7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





approach — can have one person roll to move while another rolls to protect.

If they get out, they either wind up at the sphincter or in the circulatory system. It all depends on whether the building decides they're indigestibles or snacks (which go out the sphincter) or health food (which goes into the circulatory system).

**The Sphincter:** People who go in through the mouth and are judged undesirable by the hunger home usually wind up leaving via the grime-encrusted back door.

The rear exit is a big steel garage door over a loading dock. The hinged door beside it is windowless metal as well. Both are extremely heavy, both are well installed and kept locked. The smaller door doesn't even have a knob or keyhole on the outside. Characters who are ejected by security might get shoved out onto the five steps down from the walk-out door, or they might just roll up the loading door and hurl people into open space, a four-foot drop onto stained, filthy concrete. Anyone shown out by hunger home denizens might notice that the residents don't follow them out — they seem reluctant to even let their hands pass the plane of either exit.

The loading dock is at the end of an alley and the alley is lined on one side by garbage dumpsters that would win a "foulest effluvium" contest hands-down. Getting too close to one calls for a Fitness roll to avoid barfing from the scent. It's gross.

Breaking in through the back door isn't impossible. There's a camera over it, panning back and forth behind a mirrored black sphere, but if that's disabled it's just a matter of cutting one's way in with blowtorch, saw, or (most likely) magick. Security gets there pretty quick, but the route from the back door to the elevators is direct.

**The Circulatory System:** It's people. The blood that circulates the building's corridors/veins is made of the people who live there. Everyone who works in the hunger home lives in one of the apartments above Floor 2 — the security guards, the soap and pizza makers, the clerks and stock attendants for the department store. They live in the apartments, following the outlines of a typical middle-class existence but... their lives lack content.

These blood-cell people (who all have a kind of ruddy or flushed look, regardless of skin tone) meet with one another and talk, but it's gibberish. It's English words, but in the wrong order and with no real meaning. Yet as two blood-cell people exchange words, their tones carry emotion and have all the rhythms of a conversation. One might walk up to the other and say, "Sitting playing had wondered his the five?" Then the other would nod knowingly and reply, "Her two her angle like techniques folk it," and then they'd both chuckle and go on their way.

They go home and go through the motions of watching a football game on a TV that isn't turned on. They eat food that's prepared wrong — pizzas still frozen, cheese that's boiled for seven minutes exactly, raw flour sprinkled on a hot dog bun. The ones who don't work just wander the halls, circulating from the bottom to the top. If you don't talk to them, they look perfectly normal.

Fighting a blood-cell person isn't terribly challenging. After the first attack, they just run, as if they'd failed a stress

check and decided to flee. They wail, wordlessly, as they flee. Security — the immune system — shows up pretty soon after that.

**The Immune System:** The parallel to the body's white blood cells is the hunger home's security goons. They usually wear navy blue pants, white shirts, and a vaguely police-like cap with some gold braid. Most of them are men, and many are somewhere on the spectrum from "chunky" to "muscly." They are all ashen-faced, regardless of how tan or brown their skin. They look like their blood has been replaced with milk. Skim milk, going by the unwholesome bluish tone of their eye-whites.

Unlike the blood-cell residents, security personnel can talk to outsiders in something that sounds like normal speech. But like an ELIZA bot, if you try any kind of deeper conversation, you find out their range is quite limited. The phrases you're likely to hear from the immune system include:

"I'm afraid you can't come in here."

"We don't like trouble here."

"I'll escort you out of here."

"Don't make a scene here."

"Do you have an appointment here on this floor? I can walk you to where you're going if you're having trouble finding it."

"This is private property, I'm going to have to ask you to leave here."

"The area here is for employees only."

"Are you lost? Here, let me show you the way to the lobby."

"Have a nice day!"

They're people, underneath whatever programming the hunger home has inflicted on them, but unlike most humans, they fight until they're physically unable to continue, and they don't let pain show on their faces or in their posture. They're equipped with handheld electroshock weapons and pepper spray. They also have those heavy anodized aluminum flashlights that weigh as much as a hammer and feel like one when they go upside your skull. They don't have radios, but as soon as one gets in trouble, another shows up in one to five rounds and three more arrive on the scene one to ten rounds later. Weirdly, even as they fight they continue to recite their rote phrases.

There are between five and twenty security guards in any given hunger home. Bigger homes have more goons, naturally. Well, maybe it's not "naturally" but you know what I mean.

## SECURITY GUARDS THE IMMUNE SYSTEM

**Wound Threshold:** 60.

**Struggle** 60%.

**Fitness** 50%.

**Dodge** 40%.

**Pursuit** 60%.

**Flashlight:** +3 damage.

**Pepper Gas:** Gives -30% to physical actions, forces a Fitness roll to resist curling up on the ground for one to five rounds, forbids use of sensory abilities.

**Electroshock Weapon:** If the target's Struggle roll is greater than target's wound threshold minus the number of current wounds, they go limp for one to ten minutes. If it's less, -30% to physical actions next round.

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



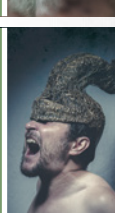
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



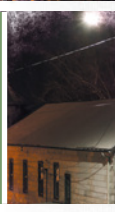
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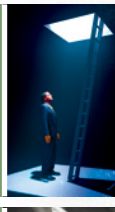
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





**The Nervous System:** The people who interact with outsiders — the shop clerks, some of the accountants and lawyers from the floor above the mezzanine — can pass for normal. They can converse fluently in English and, to all appearances, are just normal people who happen to live and work in one building and never want to leave it ever. If you talk with one long enough and maybe make a Connect roll, you pick up that they're kind of... vacant. As if they cannot conceive why anything outside the building might interest anyone, as if going outside is this off-the-wall, exotic suggestion. They like it here! You might too! There's a waiting list, but they know someone on Floor 4 who might be leaving soon, they can ask around if you want...

If you take these people outside — after some token resistance, but usually with a good-natured chuckle — they hang out for ten minutes or so before trying to get back into the hunger home. Past that threshold though, the humor rapidly drains and the seriousness of their struggles to return escalates. Soon they're screaming and clawing, though their Struggle scores aren't unusually high and they're unarmed.

Unlike other people from the building, these folks can't be rescued. No matter how long they're away, they want to go back. *It's their home*, and there's no law against agoraphobia. They can clearly and coherently explain their situation to cops and psychologists — they want to go back to the building where they live, please. But on the plus side, while they're willing to press charges against PCs who kidnap them, they are *not* willing to leave the hunger home to testify in court. Then again, those lawyers on the first floor might be able to convince the judge that it's OK for them to testify over closed-circuit TV...

**The Fat Cells:** In some apartments, and in the back store-rooms of the businesses, you find fat-cell people, who aren't any fatter than a normal person but who do have a yellow cast to their features, as if they're jaundiced, or as if their blood has all been replaced with vanilla pudding. They lie, unblinking, eyes open and unmoving. They breathe, they're warm, and they have a pulse, but they're unresponsive. Their eyes don't dilate at light. They're dressed normally, but they lie in piles like a spoiled child's discarded dolls. If you wrestle one out of the home, they transition to a normal coma and, with a successful Medical roll, can be brought out of it. They vaguely remember going into the building, and then something distressing happened... then blankness until they wake up in the hospital.

**The Brain:** The GM should place the brain wherever she feels is most evocative. The thirteenth floor that has no elevator doors and mislabeled and locked entries off the stairwells? The windowless top floor where all the HVAC equipment and elevator machinery is? The basement furnace room? They're all valid choices.

Whatever the brain chamber is, its previous function can be seen. If it used to be the HVAC room, there are still big fans and ductwork all over the place. If it was an office, the desks and chairs and cubicle walls are still there. But now everything has a lumpy, irregular coating of grey matter all over it. The brain is literally, physically a freaking brain.

The brain is not constructed to allow people into it, with the exception of a few blood-cell people who come in to gently reposition the tissues and make sure they don't fall

over and the occasional fat-cell person. Babbling circulatory attendants seem unusually agitated after a brain-trip and usually retire to their apartments for a couple days to calm down. Fat-cell people who get carried in are left and never seen again.

This is where the PCs can kill the thing. (Unlike mammals, hunger homes don't have a central heart that can be speared. Nor do they suckle their young.) Clobbering the brain is the only way to kill the thing, unless you knock it down from the outside — something that's probably an objective, one way or another. But the more direct (and I daresay) viscerally satisfying way to cope is to do 150 wounds to the brain cells on display. Of course, there's no way a cabal should get to the brain without every single guard in the place glomming onto them, as well as assorted other babbling blood-cell people with low fighting percentiles but plenty of moral weight — is it actually OK to kill people who are being compelled to fight? It's also possible that the PCs splash around ammonia or bleach or battery acid in an attempt to lobotomize the building. Play it by ear, or just assume that every bottle of whatever does 2d10 wounds.

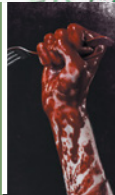
If they wreck the brain, several things happen at once. First, everyone who's under the building's spell just drops in place, like marionettes with the strings cut. Second, the building starts to shiver and shake, as if it's ground zero for a very localized earthquake. It's not going to collapse and kill everyone inside, but the GM should sure as hell not let the players know that. Do they attempt to haul out people? Do they just run for it? *Can* they just run for it? If it seems appropriate, give them Dodge rolls to avoid 1d10 points of damage from falling stuff and breaking glass and being knocked off their feet, but by and large, the building shakes and they either run or they shelter in place until it stops five or six minutes later.

What happens long term is that the enthralled residents wake up, for the most part. The brain attendants all go into comas and die, but there were only three to five of them in the whole place. Everyone else remembers only that they lived there, liked it OK, and then there was a crazy earthquake. They seamlessly transition from being enslaved components of an inscrutable hive mind to being typical Americans without even a stress check. Nobody remembers any violent sex raves in the second floor ballroom. Everyone speaks normally. After the quake though, the building is almost certainly condemned and knocked down, maybe after sitting vacant for a year or two.

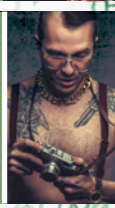
## HARD TO MISS

Once an adept or avatar has been inside a hunger home, they can recognize them pretty easily. If they put a "find Waldo" squint on any city skyline, a hunger home appears to be *writhing*, like a grub poking out of your salad, only incalculably bigger. Rules-wise, this means succeeding at a roll while examining the city for weird stuff. No charge required. It's also a gimme for anyone who has a mystic identity based on detecting things that are only passing for normal.

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



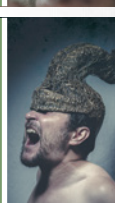
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



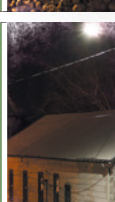
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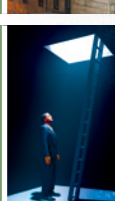
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA



## THE HUNGER HOME DIET

Everyone who enters a hunger home through the lobby/mouth gets analyzed — “tasted,” if you want to extend the metaphor. There are three kinds of people, as far as the hunger home is concerned, and each gets a different treatment.

**Indigestibles:** Avatars and adepts are not healthy for hunger homes. They represent the pointy extremes of interaction with the cosmic order, and the homes need people from the creamy middle. They get violently expelled as quickly as possible, usually by *security*, backed by a riot's worth of red-blooded circulators if necessary.

If an indigestible enters through the lobby, security is on them immediately, quietly suggesting that they're not welcome, that they should leave and never return. If the charger resists, every resident in the lobby and mezzanine stops what they're doing and turns in unison to glare at them. That should be good for some variety of Unnatural or Isolation shock.

The hunger home notices the insertion of an indigestible, no matter how it enters, the same way you'd notice having a stiletto blade inserted into your kidney. (It's up to individual GMs whether it's possible to anesthetize the building so that it doesn't feel an adept enter. What's the building code violation equivalent of novocaine? I'm thinking... expired asbestos insulation?)

While getting beaten up, pepper-sprayed, or glared into submission isn't much fun, it's actually the least invasive possibility. Even coming through the nose can prompt a violent reaction from the home. It might let a charger shop, while ensuring that everyone's rude and discouraging. Or it might just send in security to sneeze them out the way they came.

**Snacks:** Some people are a sometime food. Any non-charger who has an identity that permits gutter magick or rituals, or who has any kind of odd psychic or paranormal identity, falls into this category if they're not actually indigestible. A lot of ordinary people are also snacks — good enough to eat, not good enough to permanently incorporate into the body of the hunger home, as described under “Health Food.”

When a snack comes through the lobby, the building tries to get them to the second floor. This could be as simple as dumping them out there, no matter what button they pushed in the elevator. It typically has a bunch of friendly and/or portly people get on the elevator with the morsel and then push him out when the door opens on Floor 2. A Dodge, Struggle, or Fitness roll might keep him in the elevator, but someone in there is going to be mashing the “door open” button. Meanwhile, the people dressed up as, and acting like, animals from Isabella Rossellini's *Green Porno* videos are trying to pry the snack out and they are not taking “no” for an answer.

So the snack gets thrashed around in the stomach for a while. While in there, he starts to feel... funny. Like he had five or six Harvey Wallbangers, or maybe a case of ergot poisoning. Things feel unreal, swirly, and disorienting. This hallucinatory mood remains until he's ejected through the sphincter, battered and confused but still in control of himself. He just feels kind of hungover and detached from reality.

Every time someone gets snacked on, each of their relationships drops five percentiles. (That's on top of any physical damage suffered on the second floor.) It's nothing you can put your finger on, just a haunting, vague sense of... estrangement.

**Health Food:** People who have Status at 55% or higher, or an identity at that level that substitutes for Status, are considered to be delicacies and very much worth incorporating into the fabric of the hunger home. (Adepts and avatars with high Status are still indigestible.) Someone like this doesn't get digested all at once though.

Here's what happens: when a full course meal comes through the lobby, everyone is really friendly and polite and says whatever seems likely to get the morsel on the elevator. Once on there, someone pushes the button for the second floor and the party starts.

When the door opens on the stomach, there isn't the instant hostility that lesser comestibles endure. Instead, it just looks like riotous good times, and the meal's gleefully invited to join in. Willing participants have some wild fun, though eventually they get thirsty because there's (surprisingly) nothing to drink in the stomach. If they try to leave, they're encouraged to stick around, but there's still no fluids forthcoming. Eventually, they either attempt to leave (in which case things get nasty) or they face Fitness rolls to not faint from the heat, activity, and thirst.

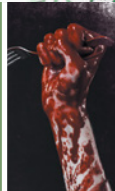
If they fight their way free, they wind up wandering the halls of the circulatory system. If they're smart or lucky, they find, or fight, their way out through the lobby (despite helpful security guards trying to sit them down, get them water, and get them to leave a statement... but mostly they want the character to fall asleep, and may encourage that with drugged drinks) or out through one of the other apertures. But if they fall asleep in the building, the process starts in earnest.

Someone the home wants, and who falls asleep in it, starts to lose herself. When she wakes, she feels a refreshed and “real” again. The whole mad Floor 2 party seems like a drugged nightmare, though she may still have bruises or a shrimp mask or some other memento of the evening. But the language center of her brain has been converted. Now she can clearly speak with and understand the blood-cell analogues in the hunger home, but communication with outsiders becomes hopelessly garbled. She thinks she's saying, “Honey, I need you to come pick me up at that building on

See “The Immune System.”

*Hunger homes don't care about carbs.*

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



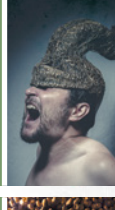
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



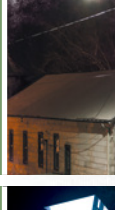
6: REDUX



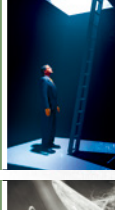
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





9th Street,” but the listener outside the building hears, “While popular being disposal is certainly over.” His response — “What? What are you saying, where *are* you, what happened?” — sounds like an alarmed recitation of, “If? You check, which some since, make need someone?” Writing and speaking and semaphore flags, they’re all impenetrably garbled. (Unnatural, Isolation, and Helplessness checks are all appropriate.)

She can leave the building at this point if she wants, but her lowest relationship loses 10%. Or, if she had an open relationship, it is now full. Full of hunger home, rated at 10%. Every time she falls asleep inside the hunger home, her relationship with it rises by another 10%. When it hits 100%, she’s incorporated as a fat cell or a blood cell or inducted into the security force.

She can run, of course, but she can’t hide. Every night, right about sundown, the house calls, in the form of a profound craving for the building and its people. Resisting it forces a Helplessness (6) check. If she fails and chooses to flee, she flees to the hunger home and passes out there. If she freezes, she shuts down, loses consciousness, and wanders to the hungry building in a fugue state. Rage? Well, that doesn’t take her there, but she lashes out at everyone around her, while babbling incomprehensibly.

Is it possible to break the curse? Sure. If occult-aware PCs have a plausible plan, roll with it. A local objective would certainly do it. Or they can just kill the damn building.

## HOW TO EXPLOIT A HUNGER HOME

The most obvious way is to get someone you don’t like and trick them into going into the lobby. If they’re a charger, it may not do much, or they may get roughed up. Uncouth junk-food people get smashed around and feel like they went on a bad drug trip, but hunger homes are particularly nasty for high-status 1% enemies, who could wind up babbling gently in an accounting office. Unless, somehow, they manage to *take over* the hunger home, but what are the odds of *that*?

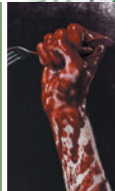
The other exploitable element of these weird structures is that grey matter from the brain room. It rots pretty fast when removed from its room, but every two pounds of it can be boiled down and reduced into a dose of a potent drug. What’s the drug do? Oh, it depends a lot on your mood, your biochemistry, and your zodiac sign, but possibilities include:

- It gives you *Statosight* for a couple hours, but while you’re tripping on it you have the scrambled speech of the blood-cell people. You think you’re telling your friend, “I think the godwalker of the Rebel is in love with you!” but all he hears is, “Black Maria unbroken wait in at around a dishwasher!”
- It lets you understand the scrambled speech of the building people and, in fact, they recognize you as one of them. You nevertheless retain your free will.
- You get a +10% boost to your Status for 1d10 hours. You just seem... more prosperous, more tolerable, and more confident, somehow.
- So many spiders! Every spider in the neighborhood wants to be with you, on you, touching your flesh. Luckily, this only lasts for a half hour and they can’t crawl very fast, but remember — you’re never more than three feet away from a spider. You’re going to get crawled on, and you’re going to get to see a carpet of arachnids converging on your location.
- It just gets you high for a couple hours. It’s a nice high too — you feel calm, relaxed, self-satisfied, right about everything... it’s like concentrated social privilege, only without all the guilt! All stress checks during this time are faced as if they were one rank lower, but you take -10% to Dodge, Pursuit, Lie, Secrecy, and Struggle.

See  
“Statosight.”

*There are  
always  
more spiders  
in any  
building  
than  
humans,  
but always  
more  
humans  
in any  
person than  
spiders.*

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



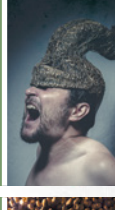
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



6: REDUX



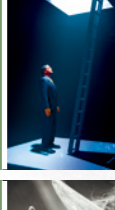
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA



# VOTE THIEVES

Functioning democracy is great, but it's easy to take for granted until you're forced to live without it. It's like Wi-Fi or good coffee that way. People are passionate about their politics, and feelings are running particularly high these days, thanks to media proliferation so profound that if you don't like fussy ol' fact-based news, you can always find someone online willing to support any position that affirms your desired lifestyle — no matter how implausible, dangerous, or racist.

It would be irresponsible to say the United States has never been more divided, unless by the time this is published people have literally drawn 1862-style battle lines and brother is fighting against brother with guns instead of cruel personalized Facebook memes. It's pretty well split though. Feelings are running high and people are acting on them.

The only thing everyone agrees on is that *democracy is great*, democracy matters, democracy works, and democracy is important. But the sides, ironically, can't even agree to agree about this, because each insists that the other side doesn't *really* love democracy. My democracy is awesome, your democracy is a bullshit charade. You know, the way people are about heavy metal bands.

Only in America is this silent, grudging, ideological struggle giving birth to unnatural entities. So far, no one's named them because they remain undiscovered by the *Sleepers* and the *Immortal Secretaries* and the other usual suspects for naming new weird phenomena.

They start out as phone calls. Someone who cares about politics gets a cell phone call. (They don't seem to work over landlines.) The first one comes from an unknown number, one that seems to be unassigned if called back. If ignored, the calls come more frequently, eventually spoofing familiar numbers. (A relationship's name is a good one to prompt a call back, for people who don't have an old-fashioned bookie.) Eventually, almost everyone answers.

At this point, the person who was just getting odd calls becomes the partner of the vote thief. That's what we call them from now on, since "victim" isn't quite right and "parent" has too much baggage.

The first time the partner picks up, the vote thief's voice is changeable, patched-together. It's a word salad of common phrases, as if someone just poked at a text message and let autocomplete pick the next word every couple letters. It's made of words, but it's gobbleddegook, producing meaning only through coincidence. The voices? Could be anyone who's spoken over that phone's speaker. It could even be the partner's voice, though most people don't recognize their own voice when it's on the phone saying, "Do any works for the presence in the morning find out more?" (Vote thieves sound a lot like some of the



people who live in *hunger homes*. It's up to the GM to decide if that's coincidental.)

The calls get more frequent and sophisticated, coming from lots of different numbers and gradually settling into a perfect mimicry of the partner's sound — not just how they sound on a recording or over the phone, but how the partner sounds *in their own head*, the subtle resonances arising from bone conduction and expectation. The questions and conversations it has now? They're sophisticated. They address ideas and concerns that the partner is mulling himself, and they *push*. They're still weird, using convoluted constructions and curious turns of phrase, but through the linguistic haze it's possible to get a sense of what it means, probably.

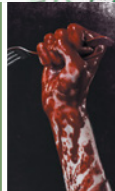
The entity, by this point, is feeding on emotion. If you get mad at it, well, that's fine. Scared's good too. (GMs, don't worry about stress checks. This sort of harassment is weird, but it's not like the voice promises a bloody death. It just wants to talk about *issues*.) After a few political discussions, it starts to call out. First it calls the partner's relationships, of course, but anyone in the phone's address book could get a ring from someone who has the partner's number and voice, but who talks like an AI that got its linguistic programming from Rachel Maddow, Bill O'Reilly, and Tumblr.

This is the point at which the partner usually smashes his phone and gets a new number, but it's too late. It was too late the first time he heard that voice on the other end of the line. The vote thief is out there, buzzing between cell towers, looking for its partner. Ditching the phone probably delays it for a month, maybe longer if the

See "Hunger Homes."

See "Sleepers" on page 77 of Book Two: Run and "The Immortal Secretaries" on page 97 of that same book.

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



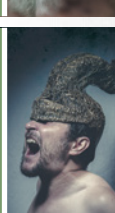
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



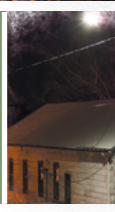
6: REDUX



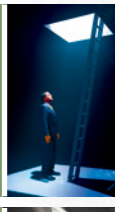
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





entity was in a primitive stage. But it always finds the new number and calls back.

Is it vulnerable to magick that imprisons or destroys invisible and intangible entities? Sure. If the PCs just swat it like a fly, that's fine. They never find out what was going on. (A problem solved may, to the players, be less fun than a problem *understood*, of course.)

But let's assume the PCs don't just cavalierly blowtorch the vote thief. Or, more likely, let's assume that it's focused on someone who cares about the composition of the US Senate, rather than the Statesphere. It goes after people who aren't even *ponies*. It's most likely to coalesce around normal people who don't have the slightest idea what's truly happening. In that likelier case, the PCs hear about it after it reaches the second phase.

In its second phase, the thing has some form of consciousness. It calls its partner, and it calls the people its partner knows. It has figured out that emotional intention feeds it, so its calls are intended to elicit self-righteousness and a desire to act. This is when it starts to get glimpses at the future. This is when the calls have warnings.

The warnings are usually cryptic but actionable, and they save lives. Specifically, they save lives *directly* across ideological grounds. (The partner is by far the most likely to receive these critical prognostications, but if he's hanging up on the vote thief, it may find a softer target in his contacts list.) If you're a granola-crunching liberal, you get the word that the president of the local NRA chapter is cruising towards a fatal cardiac infarction in exactly seven hours and twenty-two minutes. If you have the region's foremost collection of "Make America Great Again" ballcaps, you get the call that the nine-year-old daughter of your town's noisiest #BlackLivesMatter activist is going to get clobbered by a green Dodge at the corner of 7th and Locust tomorrow.

This foresight can lead to beautiful moments of holding hands and getting over difficulties, or it can lead to an ice-cold, "Oh, damn shame what happened to that libtard elitist's husband." People being what they are, it's probably a 50/50 chance either way, but the second option's the one more likely to deliver Self or Violence checks.

The vote thief irregularly offers a lifesaving warning every month or two, in between its usual routine of hard, insulting political quizzes. It knows how people react to its alerts, too, and no matter what they do it gives them a hard time about it. It doesn't evolve again until election day, though.

On election day, if the partner or *anyone the vote thief has called* goes to their polling place with their cell phone, it rings while they're filling out the ballot. It doesn't matter if they answer or not — the vote thief isn't asking questions now, it's just getting on the scene so that when they hand in their ballot, or hit "ALL DONE" on the voting machine, it can blank out and invalidate their efforts. It literally disenfranchises them. They're counted as having voted, but it's like they voted for nothing and nobody at every turn.

Can they find out this happened? Unlikely if they ask directly, and researching an individual's vote is no easy task. But PCs have all kinds of avenues to information that do end-runs around mere physics and human intent.

Once it eats a vote (or votes, the greedy fucker devours as many ballots as it can get), the thing takes another step upward in its development. It becomes *real*.

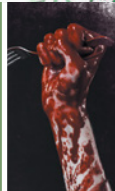
Specifically, it gains a human body that is 100% typical for a voter in the partner's district. If you live in a gerrymandered district that's 71% Hispanic where the median voter age is forty-one and (like everywhere) more women vote than men, then the vote thief instantiates as a forty-one-year-old Chicana. It has all the documents and history and records it needs to identify it as a legitimate US citizen, all shoehorned in by retroactive magickal continuity. It has a cell phone... and that's it. Its voice still sounds exactly like its original partner. Its appearance is entirely unremarkable. The vote thief doesn't need to eat or sleep, but it sweats and its hair grows and it has fingerprints. (DNA tests, weirdly enough, identify it as a species of potato.) It still needs emotional involvement to feed it, though every vote it invalidates is enough to keep it chugging along for a year.

Upon reaching this stage, vote thieves almost always look for jobs and a place to live — not because they really need food or want to buy things, but so they can volunteer as poll workers in the next election. Should they land such a position, every ballot they touch gets drained, possibly letting this entity live for hundreds of years, subverting democracy.

On the other hand, once they achieve tangible form they can save individual lives directly, and do. Their predictions of deadly incidents increase to one a week, too. If you figure out what a vote thief is, and decide to whack the thing, 40–50 wounds typically does the job. As soon as they're dead, they turn into an undifferentiated greyish mass that resembles (yep) potatoes. Or, alternately, you can let them live forever, saving roughly fifty-two lives a year and disenfranchising a couple hundred people every election cycle.

Tough call, if you ask me. Is your district one of those "safe" ones?

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



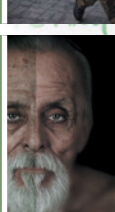
3: SMALL



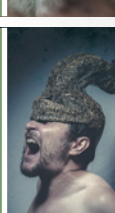
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



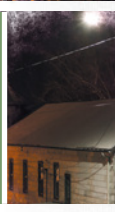
6: REDUX



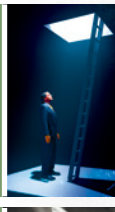
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA



# AMERICAN ELSEWHERE BY ROBERT JACKSON BENNETT

The novel *American Elsewhere* is set in Wink, New Mexico, a perfect town that doesn't appear on any maps, so already you (the genre-savvy reader) know that bad shit is lurking under the surface. You know that, right? I mean, if it was just a small, obscure, and happy town, there'd be no story there.

But no, there's story, there's a reason the townsfolk (who are so content!) won't go out of their homes at night. Time is disrupted, covert alliances are engaged, and ultimately it's all about supernatural, inhuman patrons with whom some of the residents make sinister pacts.

There's a cosmology at play here, and I won't spoil it by laying it out, because that's not the key part for our purposes anyhow. But I will tell you that it's not a typical Lovecraftian "ineffable sublimity" mythology, and it's not "the old gods have returned!" and it's not your basic "Mars needs women" setup either. It's its own thing, to some extent, which is refreshing in this jaded young century.

## WHAT IT EXPOSES ABOUT UNKNOWN ARMIES

While it's tempting to just say "Wink is an other-space" and knock off early, that — the most obvious way to shoehorn this into *Unknown Armies* — isn't really very helpful. Wink *isn't* outside the world, but it is isolated from it by its unnatural influences. So right off the bat, a creative GM could start constructing a town/suburb/resort where the people emotionally wall off outsiders because

they're equally afraid of sharing their benefits and of unleashing their problems on the wider populace. (The older I get, the more I find that if people's selfish motives and their noble motives align on a course of action, it is nearly impossible to keep them from pursuing it.) While Wink is a whole dang town, you could do this with a neighborhood, which could be spooky instead of spookily wholesome. (I remember Rob Vaux, an old GM buddy of mine, talking about how he wanted to center a horror game on an ethnic enclave in a big city. You get off at the wrong subway stop and all of a sudden the shop names and handwritten signs in the windows are in an alphabet you've never even heard of. The immigrant residents dress subtly different and glare at outsiders, muttering in a language that sounds like coffee brewing, and the whole place seems to subtly be centered on a butcher shop, where a flayed pig head is proudly displayed in the front window.)

*American Elsewhere*, like Rob's pig-head neighborhood, unpacks how people who are clued-in accommodate strangeness. It offers some good ideas and images for PCs' relationships who may be on the mundane side of the equation. Your guru is your dad, whose cosmological fundament is Methodist Christianity? *American Elsewhere* offers a glimpse of how he might respond to a cosmos that contains *the Gentleman* and other-spaces. "Well son," this befuddled-but-loving parent might say, "We just don't talk about that and we don't get things out of the Bad Closet after nightfall."

## KIM DEITCH

The Kim Deitch comics and graphic novels I have on my shelves include *Alias the Cat*, *The Mishkin File*, and *A Shroud for Waldo*. That last one, from 1992, cites me for "Production Assistance," thanks to an unpaid college internship. It was there, at Fantagraphics, that I was first exposed to Kim Deitch and the central creation of his lengthy career — Waldo the Cat. If you're a fan of the band They Might Be Giants, you can see Waldo in animated action in the video for their song "Dallas" (AKA "Trees").

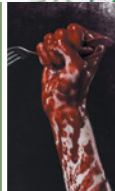
It's hard to explain or describe a Kim Deitch comic. It'll be dense, flawlessly executed, and probably feature Waldo the Cat sooner or later. Waldo appears in different guises, the way Bugs Bunny or Mickey Mouse might, but he's a darker, harsher figure. Visible mostly to drunks and the delusional, Waldo sings musical numbers, plays pranks of varying degrees of cruelty, debauches himself, and every now and then accidentally saves the day. He's Loki, Coyote, and Daffy Duck in equal proportions, and the contradictions of his

nature are summed up in his look. He's a perfect 1930s cartoon feline, except for his small but accurately rendered genitals. He's a trip.

The stories built around Waldo are usually convoluted head-scratchers rather than pulse-pounding page-turners. They're full of strange coincidences, antiquated story tropes, and old-time vaudeville schtick. Waldo moves through them as an untrustworthy guide, usually to a boozy and emotionally fragile artist type who is never sure if Waldo is real or just a delusion. Despite the gritty and horrible events that are strangely affecting in their *Krazy Kat*-like rendering — rapes, murders, terrorism — in the end the innocent are rewarded (or, at least, come out of it mostly OK) while wrongdoers are punished. Like its art style, the morality at the heart of the Waldo stories seems to belong to an earlier, more primitive era. But for that very reason, you get a sense of integrity from it all. "Yeah, I may be bullshitting you," the ink lines and googly eyes seem to say, "But at least it's *honest* bullshit."

Step on spider! We love you spider.

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



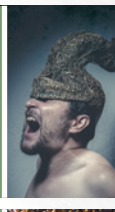
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



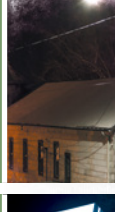
6: REDUX



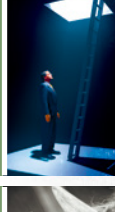
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





## WHAT IT EXPOSES ABOUT UNKNOWN ARMIES

The Kim Deitch oeuvre bears comparisons to *Uzumaki*. If *Uzumaki* conveys what falling into paranoid schizophrenia feels like, Deitch's work is probably a better fit for delusional episodes that haven't completely undermined all sense of reality. Moreover, the interactions between Waldo and his tangible homeboys are instructive of the way

an intangible and normally invisible entity can interact with normal folk. On top of that, it does a very good job of showing how *normal* normal folk interact with people who are seeing and talking to invisible entities. It shouldn't escape any GM's attention that Waldo gets stabbed, blown up, and thrown off of buildings without consequence, while the people around him disintegrate gruesomely in the face of the same punishment.

## SPELLBOUND BY KAREN PALMER

In a place called "Gambaga," hundreds of women struggle to survive, watched throughout their days by a powerful elder whose family has the gift of discerning spirits. The women are exiles, forced from their homes by accusations of witchcraft. It's claimed that their powers brought illness to their relatives, unjust prosperity to their husbands, and death to their rivals. They were said to transform into fireballs and fly through the sky by night, hunting souls. But in Gambaga, they could be imprisoned safely. This is the world of Karen Palmer's book *Spellbound*.

It's nonfiction. Gambaga is in northern Ghana. The events described happened in 2007.

*Spellbound*, then, is a very strange blend of gender politics, the non-gendered kind of politics, superstition, religion, and regional tradition. There are men who make decisions about whether a woman is innocent of witchcraft or doomed to exile based on which way a sacrificed chicken lands. There are peculiar details about where medicine and witchcraft intersect, and where people take their cell phones to ancient sites believed to be, themselves, holy and possibly intelligent.

Through it all, some people constantly shift from regarding the belief in witchcraft as a scoff-worthy folk superstition to taking it completely seriously and treating it with tremendous respect. To others, it's simply a fact of day-to-day life, and not an unimportant one. As for the reasons that women are split off from their families and imprisoned, the usual suspects (greed, envy, treachery) are present, but there are also women in the camps who believe they *need* to be there, that their powers and temptations are too strong for them and that if not kept at Gambaga or some place like it, they would be unable to stop themselves from stealing souls, murdering infants, and cursing people.

The religious perspective comes in, the mental health perspective gets presented, and the notion that this is just a way for men to keep women from earning money gets its day in court too. But none of them seems to be a perfect fit. No single explanation cuts it or explains why the belief is so firm.

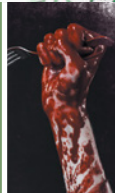
## WHAT IT EXPOSES ABOUT UNKNOWN ARMIES

It's a great way to get a view of a society in which enchantment is taken for granted. It demonstrates some of the unexpected ways culture and behavior would deform social norms if people really did accept that their neighbor might soul-suck them. It also presents the theory that magick is bound by religion or race — that as a white woman, Palmer was immune to the powers of black witches and only needed to fear enchantment by other white people, or, as one Christian man insisted, that only Muslims had to fear Muslim witchcraft.

A similarly useful book is *In Sorcery's Shadow* by Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes. In it, Stoller (who was then an anthropology grad student) apprentices himself to a traditional Nigerian sorcerer. There's some elements of the same kind of thing in *No Mercy* by Redmond O'Hanlon, too — particularly the parts about how the Congolese sorcerer he talked to just assumed that when he said he could fly to London and be back by morning, O'Hanlon would know he meant a dream journey. That, and the awe with which O'Hanlon's regarded after rescuing a white gorilla.

See "Uzumaki by Junji Ito."

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



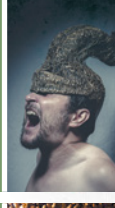
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



6: REDUX



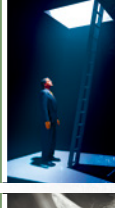
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA







# 9: STATOSPHERIC SELVES

The collectivist cosmic counterpart to arrogant adepts is the stuff of the Statosphere. The secret masters of humanity, the immaterial and invisible archetypes watch and guide, too vast to see us except in the collective, intangible but

always present because they're already in you and that's why you recognize them. Most of this chapter should feel like being reminded of things you already knew.

## THE ARTIST

### ATTRIBUTES

They've taught elephants to daub with paint and they've taught bears and dogs to dance. People pay attention to these antics, but you don't expect the dog to dance *well* — you're just bemused that it dances at all. Humans are held to a higher standard, as we damn well should be.

What distinguishes an illustrator (who can draw a picture of a thing and have it recognizably be that thing) from an artist? What's the difference between hearing an untalented amateur pick at a guitar and hearing George Harrison make his gently weep? How can one writer break every rule of good writing and still have a compelling, breathtaking story, while another breaks the same rules and ends up holding a self-important turd? What makes an artist?

You can argue about this all day, but it seems to involve the intersection of *truth* and *craft*. Craft is the nuts and bolts of expression — how you paint, or work that trombone slide, or put words in order with some kind of rhythm. But craft can be soulless, as anyone who's read a print ad or heard a fried chicken jingle can attest. Truth, on the other hand, while notoriously elusive, is powerful. A well-crafted jingle may get stuck in your head, but the story titled "How I Escaped Boko Haram" may be bone simple and still change your soul.

The most powerful works of human culture are those which fuse craft and art — when the slickness or skill of a Madison Avenue professional is applied to something deeply meaningful and universally important. That's a work of art. That's something that can make you say, "I never thought about that" and, "I always felt that way" and have both statements be true. Like an adept, a work of art can contain or even resolve the paradoxes of human existence. Unlike an adept, art is often beloved, revered, and has a positive effect long after its makers' death. The artist is the crucible in which the lead of a lived life is refined into the gold of immortal beauty.

Meditations about where meaning and skill collide are all well and good, but avatars are about concrete behaviors. From the Statosphere perspective, what you do is what you are. What you think or feel or believe? Irrelevant to anyone but you — or, perhaps more accurately, relevant only to the point that you act on your beliefs.

But the Artist, by her very nature, is different, because the acts which define her are those through which the internal becomes the external. By taking her

personal story and making it universal, she is a conduit through which people understand the great abstractions of the world — meaning, as often as not, the Invisible Clergy themselves. So concretely, an Artist engages in the production of some kind of cultural product and shares it (to some extent) with an appreciative audience. But by definition, it's a matter of higher importance. It may not be commercially successful, but it is truly *art*, at least to some extent. It's sincere, it's not trivial, and it makes an impact on people's lives.

Ultimately, this is something players are just going to have to trust to their GM. If you take avatar: Artist as an identity, you can be pretty sure that the stuff you've created was up to snuff. If you start using art as a means to an end instead of treating it as a thing of value? Well, that's covered under "Taboos."

### TABOOS

Any time the artist treats her art as a tool instead of a treasure, she breaks taboo. Creating art to highlight the plight of Syrian refugees is just fine, *if she genuinely cares*. She can even get paid to do work about which she's passionate. If she doesn't give a crap about Syria and just throws together some schmaltzy commercial in order to get a paycheck? That's OK if she uses some other identity, but not if she uses her avatar: Artist channels to polish up what is, from her perspective, meaningless piffle.

GMs should discuss this with players, but between cabals' objectives and the creator's passions, there's plenty of encoded indications of what the Artist's real positions are. Working against passions or objectives is very likely to break taboo, even if it's just craftwork done with a mundane artsy identity. (Why would a PC even want to transgress her passions and objective? Normally, she wouldn't. The fun part of being a GM is providing the motivation.)

### SYMBOLS

The brush and palette, lyre, laurel wreath, comedy and tragedy masks, and the quill.

### SUSPECTED AVATARS IN HISTORY

Robert Johnson, Sappho, Murasaki Shikibu, Marcel Duchamp, William Shakespeare, Geoffrey Chaucer, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, Emily Dickinson, Claude Monet, Abing, Cai Wenji.

### MASKS

Orpheus (Greek), Pygmalion (Greek), Taliesin (Welsh), Amergin (Irish), and Väinämöinen (Finnish), as well as such gods of poetry and music as Apollo (Greek) and Bragi (Norse), and the weaver Arachne (Greek).

## ZENITH

man, you want a daily dose of weird, swing by kickstarter and find the "taxidermy" section

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



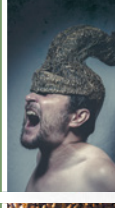
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



6: REDUX



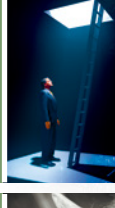
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





RIED IF WE ALL JUST WOK UP AND SAW WHAT WAS REALLY BEHIND OUR LEADM'S FACE MASKS AND...

## CHANNELS

Every Artist's channel requires the making of a work of art, sensibly enough. If you're an artist, this doesn't mean just sketching a stick figure on a napkin, it means something that takes hours and has details and composition and proportion. If you're a musician, this doesn't mean you sit on the frat house steps with your guitar and sing a couple ballads. No, the musical version is to rehearse and practice for hours and hours with your group and run through a whole playlist, or else spend hours in a studio doing takes and tweaking the balance board, or *else* it means writing a song from scratch for one specific purpose, depending on how you want the channel aimed.

As a guideline, getting a roll for one of these channels means one of two things: either you spent one to five *days* working on the effort, or you spent one to ten hours *and* succeeded at a relevant artsy identity. (That is; if you've already got Kickass Guitar Shredder 55% as an identity, it doesn't take you nearly as long to produce art based on kickass guitar shredding. Without that identity, you can assemble the song, but it takes forever because you either rehearse until your fingers bleed or you're massaging it in Audacity for a like amount of time.)

Is this an inflexible iron rule? No, it's a guideline. If your GM thinks it's appropriate (or just really cool) to let you roll avatar: Artist while telling someone about your short story or while in a jam session with a conflicted antagonist, you might get lucky. If you do all the prep and fail your avatar roll, it's not embarrassing, but neither is it magnificent and profound. It's just an OK song or painting or story.

**1%-50%, Sublimity:** If the Artist creates a work that has this in the mix, it has an intense effect on people who view

it. They get a choice. They can either surrender themselves to its message, or they can decide to hate it. If they hate it, they take a Helplessness check. The rank of the check is equal to the tens place of whatever the Artist rolled. If she rolled a 35, it's a rank 3 check to hate that art. If she rolled an 01, the check's rank 10. (What happens if a bunch of people resist the art and fail their checks? The Artist gets the debut of *The Rite of Spring*, that's what happens.)

People who succumb to the beauty are moved. The Artist who made the work gets +10% to all coercion or social rolls against that target. Forever.

If the artwork is made for *one specific person*, the effect is even stronger. The artwork doesn't have a supernatural effect on most people (though they may still like it), but the person at whom it's targeted not only has the normal "succumb or hate it" choice, but if they hate it any relationship with the Artist is immediately halved.

If the individual target succumbs, instead of a mere +10% bonus, the Artist gets to rework one relationship the target holds. If a relationship is empty, the Artist can choose to occupy it at a level equal to the roll. (That is, if the Artist rolled a 35, the relationship starts at 35%.) If a relationship exists, the Artist can cut its rating in half.

**51%-70%, Catharsis:** As with all Artist channels, this one has to be based on a long-term creative endeavor. Unlike the earlier channel, however, this one *has* to be created for one specific person. Other people are quite likely to enjoy the work, or respond to it, but it only has *mystic powers* over the person for whom it was made.

The Artist creates the work knowing of a trauma that the target has experienced, or else knowing about some psychological problem with which the target is struggling. If

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



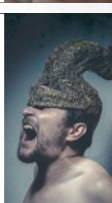
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



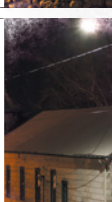
6: REDUX



7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





the Artist roll works, the Artist can erase one failed or hardened notch from the target's shock gauge in order to relieve the suffering or ease the pain. The target doesn't have to engage with this or agree to it like therapy. This is just a truth that reorganizes the target's thoughts into a cleaner, better pattern.

**71%–90%, Fascination:** The Artist creates a work and rolls her Artist identity. If successful, the work is mesmerizing to a certain subset of people. The effect varies depending on who the work was intended to target.

- It's for everyone! The work has no mechanical effects, but a fair number of people have a mildly favorable impression of it. It's good for the Artist's reputation. If she's a professional, it's probably good for her career. After a few months, people who care a lot — maybe more than they should — start to get sick of hearing about how great it is.
- It's for a broad segment. If she writes a song for a broad swath of the population, like a particular race or ethnic group, or the population of one city, or *only* Democrats, or *only* the poor, it may or may not please people outside that group, but those within it who are exposed to it are predisposed to like her. The Artist's next several social interactions with people in the group who've heard or seen her art get a +10% bonus, *unless* that person is self-hating over being in the group, in which case there's no effect.
- It's for a narrow segment. The GM gets to decide how big a narrow segment can be. Generally, the overlap of two broad segments is probably a narrow segment. People within the targeted group give the Artist a +20% bonus to her first social roll with them, and +10% afterwards until she does or says something stupid or offensive or embarrassing. Moreover, the first time they experience the work, they are *thunderstruck* by it. If it's a painting, they have to stare at it for three to thirty minutes, rapt, or else take a Helplessness (5) check to pull themselves away earlier. A song, poem, or short story? They *must* pay attention to the end, doing nothing else, or take that Helplessness (5) check. A novel can be set aside temporarily, but engaging in any other form of *entertainment* forces the check, until the novel is completed. Even if someone is trying to *kill them* while they listen, watch, or read, they have to suck up that Helplessness check to escape. (Most, of course, choose to risk madness over death.)
- It's for one person. The person feels compelled to own the piece, if it's unique (like a painting or a statue). Failing to acquire it forces an Isolation (10) check, which is serious shit. Whether it's unique or not, every time the work is present, the person can't concentrate on anything else and suffers a –20% to any rolls that might be negatively impacted by being in a scatter-brained state of artistic engagement.

**91%+, Galatea Creation:** The Artist can only use this channel once, but that really should be enough. Creating the Galatea (often called the “Demon Lover” in Great Britain) can only be attempted by someone who has an empty, yearning place in their life — mechanically, it means

someone who has an empty relationship position. The demon lover is created to fill that gap. A successful roll creates a work of art that has a life of its own. The Artist immediately forms a relationship with it equal to whatever was rolled in its creation.

Gina the composer has avatar: Artist at 94%. She also has empty relationship spots for favorite and guru, so she can pick one and attempt to write a song that either meets her need for loving connection (ew) or her need to have someone explain what it's all about (also kinda ew). She picks favorite, rolls a 56, and generates a song-woman hybrid as her favorite. She names the woman (and the song) “Sweet Lorraine.”

All such living art treasures have an identity called “Galatea,” it's rated at the roll (so, equal to the Artist's relationship) and it's their obsession. It has the following features: Provides Wound Threshold, Substitutes for Connect, and Substitutes for Status. The Galatea entity also gets two mystic identities related to its nature, rated equal to its maker's avatar rating. (In the case of Gina, Sweet Lorraine would have a pair of mystic identities rated at 94.)

One power relates to changing between human and art form — name it appropriately. Galateas often have unusual ways to travel or hide, depending on their nature. Lorraine could, perhaps, turn into a song and emerge from a nearby radio, and in this fashion cover a lot of ground in a short span of time. A traditional sculpture wouldn't be able to move about, but could possibly petrify itself and become nondescript (or, at least, hard to damage). A creature emerging from a novel might be able to travel between stories being read, in books or on cell phones or printed in magazines, the character inserted into the narrative but soon forgotten when they emerged near the reader. However they move or hide, these art-people can only travel or emerge from hiding when heard/seen/read or otherwise attended to. It's also possible to trap them with enough preparation and a little gutter magick. The gutter magick practitioner has to time it carefully and stop paying attention at just the right moment.

Their second identity is defined by the GM and, again, should be relevant to their nature, description, and the Artist's intent. Just keep the guidelines in *Book One: Play* firmly in mind.

The creature starts with neither failed nor hardened notches, though the Self, Isolation, and Helplessness rolls tend to come hard and fast as this mystic naïf realizes that it's surrounded by humans, isn't one, and owes its existence to a particular individual. It's educated (high Knowledge) but not sophisticated, and it starts out with its Artist in *every relationship*, rated at 20% (they tend to cling). But their attentions are volatile. At the end of every session, the GM should discuss with the Artist how she behaved towards her creation, and decide which relationship role was strongest and which weakest. Then, 1d10 percentiles are transferred from the weak to the strong, until one relationship hits 100% and the Galatea achieves emotional perfection.

1: MEAT

2: THROAT

3: SMALL

4: BIGGER

5: LAYERS

6: REDUX

7: VEIL

8: BESEIGED

9: SELVES

10: MEDIA





# THE COLLECTOR

## ATTRIBUTES

According to the ever-reliable internet, John Powell and Spencer Kimball must be the same person because they're both credited with saying something along the lines of, "Use things and love people, but don't love things or use people." This is solid advice, but toxic for those who would follow the archetype of the Collector, because it's usually about loving things and, on occasion, using people.

The urge to acquire seems hardwired into the human organism. Consider that eschewing material goods is a spiritual accomplishment, only achieved after decades of prayer or disciplined meditation. Compare with a two-year-old grabbing a toy and shouting "MINE!"

The Collector, of course, has refined that urge and elaborated on it, but that's the primal fire at the core of the archetype. Collectors wish to possess the finest, maintaining their treasures in peak condition and displaying them to their best advantage. There are book collectors (often in direct conflict with bibliomancers, a style of adept that focuses on book hoards), photo collectors (who might easily fall afoul of cameraturges), and car collectors (to whom a viaturge's cherished vehicle would be nigh irresistible), among others.

There's a pattern here, isn't it? Adepts who twist their lives around abstract pursuits often collect because it offers *some* kind of tangible handle to tack on to their obsessions. Collectors simply elide the sickening symbolism and want the *things*.

Now, an ugly subset of Collectors are those for whom a particular type of person is the object of their fascination. A madam with a bordello full of Estonian blondes, a producer with a stable of tightly controlled teen pop sensations, or

a spymaster with a collection of blackmailed, bribed, and sexually compromised moles all might be channeling the Collector. So might a minister saving unbelievers from their sinful behavior.

Each Collector has a particular category of thing (or person) that exercises fascination over them. They are driven to get these, either by putting them physically in containment (for tangible objects) or by cultivating loyalty, dependence, or obedience (for people) (who may also get placed in containment, ick).

Collectors must search, must frequent the places where their particular interest might turn up, and must protect and maintain their collection within the parameters of what "keeping it safe" means to them. For objects, this usually means keeping them from being stolen or getting rusty or molding. For people, it can mean preventing escape — whether that be financial, emotional, or physical freedom.

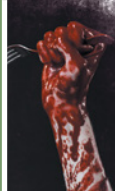
## TABOOS

Losing something from the collection is obviously forbidden. It's also against type to see something that belongs in the collection and leave that unaddressed. That's not to say the Collector has to be stupid or self-destructive in his pursuit of vinyl Yes records or middle-aged bankers looking for some strange on the DL, but if something within the category is spotted, it must be pursued, at least until it becomes clear that there's meaningful resistance.

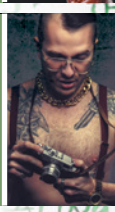
## SYMBOLS

Vaults, museums, display cases, auction catalogs, and piles of coin.

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



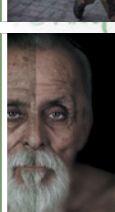
3: SMALL



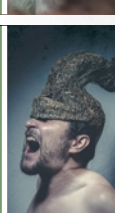
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



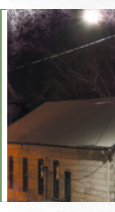
6: REDUX



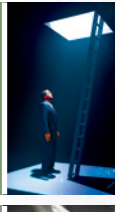
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





## SUSPECTED AVATARS IN HISTORY

Ed Gein, Alex Jordan, Jr., Dr. Claribel and Etta Cone.

## MASKS

Croesus (Greek), Smaug (Tolkien), Alberich and Fáfnir (Norse), Mephistopheles (German).

## CHANNELS

**1%–50%, Acquire:** The avatar develops a sixth sense for the object he desires. It has a range of about a mile for every 5% he has in his avatar: Collector identity. With a success, he gets an idea of where the nearest thing fit for his collection is, *that he hasn't already got*. (It would suck if it just pointed straight at his stockpile, right?) With a special success, he gets a sense of how accessible it is. Something that's locked up in someone else's collection gives a different sense than something that's for sale at the Goodwill.

He can roll to acquire as often as he wants, but the effect is lazy. Once he's detected something, every use of the channel indicates that particular thing until he either collects it or it's no longer in range.

**51%–70%, Oversee:** In addition to the sixth sense for uncollected things, he gains a *seventh* sense for what's already been obtained. If something goes missing from his collection, the GM can roll in secret and, on a success, let him know immediately. If he opts to check in on his objects, a successful roll provides either alarm or the reassuring feeling that everything's where it belongs. Same thing with checking to make sure the collection isn't damaged.

If something does get taken (or liberates itself), a successful roll lets him know the direction in which it lies and how far it is. The range on this one is a mile for every percentile point he has in avatar: Collector. With any special success, he gets a brief audiovisual hallucination about the item he's checking or seeking, no matter how far away it is.

**71%–90%, Summon:** Having something great isn't nearly as fine if it's not there for you when you need it. Using this channel, the Collector can call something from his collection to him, regardless of distance. This can be attempted once per hour.

With inanimate objects, it's pretty easy. Roll a success and the item appears in his hands, tucked into his bag, or otherwise on his person. Seeing something like this appear if it's implausible can cause stress checks, of course.

For people, it's a different matter. Roll a success and the person feels a nearly irresistible compulsion to go to the avatar. If the person summoned doesn't immediately do all in their power to go to where the avatar is, they take an Isolation (7–8) check. If the summoner rolled a matched success, increase the check's rank by one. For an O1, just call it an Isolation (10) check and be done. This inexorable call

persists, coming at least once a day at unpredictable times. It goes on and on until one of the following conditions is met:

- The collected person gets five failed notches.
- The collected person gets enough hardened notches to ignore it.
- The avatar dismisses the summons.
- The avatar is killed.
- The targeted person comes into the avatar's presence.

**91%+, Fulfillment:** At this level, the power of the Collector and the sanctity of his collection become one. This channel is the reason some high-powered Collector avatars are pissed that J.K. Rowling introduced the concept of a "horcrux" to the general public.

To use it, the avatar places his soul into different things in his collection. In this instance, "soul" translates to "percentiles in avatar identity." The percentiles are divided evenly between the objects or persons in order to protect the avatar.

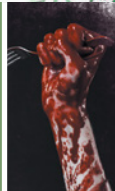
If he's a collector of people, the effect is pretty simple. Each person involved becomes a proxy of the avatar, but with a critical difference. "Normal" proxies are equal with the caster, so if there are three proxies and you target the caster with something he'd rather not endure, you have a one in four chance of getting him — one chance for him, three chances for the unfortunate proxies. With Fulfillment, there's *no* chance of it getting the avatar. It's only a matter of which proxy takes the hit.

Of course, if one of his human proxies dies, the Collector loses the percentiles in avatar: Collector that were invested in it. It's possible to shift the percentiles — removing them from one person and putting them in someone else — but it requires the Collector to get an entirely new person into his collection and then make a roll to effect the transfer.

If someone does manage to steal away a human proxy, they can then use channels or cast spells on the avatar as if the Collector was in their presence, avoiding all the other proxies.

If the Collector has objects, that's a different matter. As soon as someone steals one of the objects, the Collector loses the percentiles invested in it until it's recovered. (Given the Oversee and Summon channels, that's only a temporary gambit unless you can grab at least a quarter of the Fulfillment objects simultaneously.) Destroying the objects does permanently suck away the invested avatar identity points in them, which is clearly a risk. However, while even one object of Fulfillment remains in the Collector's power, all damage against him is reduced by 10 wounds, and when he gets within 5 wounds of his wound threshold, he becomes impervious to harm.

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



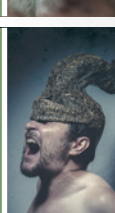
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



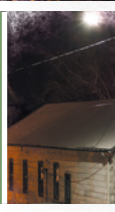
6: REDUX



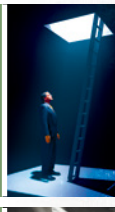
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA



# THE MUSE/PATRON

## ATTRIBUTES

Any artist — or *Artist* — is the vessel in which truth and skill combine to form something that outlasts and outstrips herself. But she's also a person, with all the baggage and needs and uncertainties that come with physical form, with being an individual in a cosmos where collectives are the source of all growth, all disruption.

Alongside the artist and the Artist alike are the people who experience the work, who accept or reject the truth of it (for there are as many truths as there are artists, surely). With them but separate and higher, sits the Muse or the Patron, who are really just people who occupy the same role in slightly different ways.

The Muse inspires the artist. They are neither the singer nor the song, but they're the one the song's about, or the subject of the painting, or the lover whose idle question and Scotch-rough laughter inspires a short story. The Patron supports the artist, though in another way. Perhaps (most obviously), she writes checks because she loves the work and thinks that flinging cash at a talented author's Kickstarters is better than stuffing it into certificates of deposit or buying more goddamn Florida real estate. Perhaps they're the dealer who can find the few selective buyers who appreciate what's *really* being painted, or they're the producer who tweaks the knobs to brighten the sound while quietly running off the gold diggers and drug dealers. Or maybe a Patron is just a sensible manager or agent who has their feet on the ground paying the bills while the actor or singer or sculptor wanders with her head in the clouds.

Of course, there's a dark side, as there always is. Patrons can be controlling, agents can rip off their clients and cook the books, all the while telling themselves and anyone who listens how much worse the creator would do trying it alone. Muses can be manipulative, capricious, withholding, and cruel, especially if they're inspiring more than one artist.

The Muse/Patron is in the arts, and may also be a creator. The job description, however, is to enable the work, to glorify and support and direct it. Therefore, to stay attuned to the archetype, the Muse/Patron has to be involved with an artist (or multiple artists), in a way that supports, assists, or challenges them. Just about any form of involvement is all right, but a meaningful investment of time is required.

## TABOOS

If the Muse/Patron spends less than twenty hours a week interacting with artists and creatives, they lose their focus within the creative realm and, with it, percentiles off their avatar rating. They can go off alone and work on their own stuff if they

must, but they can't let it cut into their interaction with others' work. Naturally, this is an easier path for extroverts whose own work flourishes when they play with others' concepts.

Note that it's perfectly kosher for a Muse/Patron to be abusive towards artists — if they're helpful towards others or, perversely, if their abuse spurs them to greater efforts. A critic who flogs a hated writer into ever deeper efforts is effective, though probably not very pleasant.

## SYMBOLS

Lorgnettes, opera glasses, backstage passes, and advance review copies.

## SUSPECTED AVATARS IN HISTORY

Peggy Guggenheim, John Soane, Lorenzo de' Medici, Marie-Thérèse Walter, Gala Dalí, Pattie Boyd.

## MASKS

Obviously, Calliope, Clio, Erato, Euterpe, Melpomene, Polyhymnia, Terpsichore, Thalia, and Urania. Non-Greek masks include the leannán sídhe (Celtic) and Kvasir (Norse).

## CHANNELS

**1%–50%, Inspire:** The Muse/Patron can improve the efforts of anyone engaging with their chosen creative form. There are two ways to do this, close up and distant.

Close up is easy. If the Muse/Patron is present while the maker is making music, pottery, fiction, or whatever, and is being in some way helpful or appreciative, then whatever identity they use to create gets a +10% bonus. If they don't have an artsy identity, they can still roll as if they were doing it at 10%. So if the Muse/Patron is listening to an orchestra attentively, *everyone in that orchestra* gets +10%. If they're making tea for the writer and letting her bounce ideas off them, she gets +10%. If they're cleaning the potter's shop and stoking the kiln while she molds the clay, she gets +10%. The Muse/Patron doesn't even have to roll.

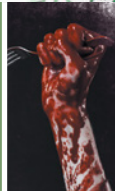
Long-range inspiration isn't much more complicated. If the Muse/Patron has engaged with the creator somehow — talked to her about her work, gazed approvingly at one of her pictures when she could see them liking it, sent a check to purchase or underwrite construction — they can roll their avatar: Muse/Patron identity (results described below). Note that the Muse/Patron can only do this if the creator knows they're aware of what she's making and have formed an opinion, good or ill.

- **Fumble or Matched Failure:** The creator gets a frustrating feeling that she's not living up to her potential. It's not enough to push a

See "The Artist."

*Those who  
can't do,  
teach.  
And those  
who can't  
teach,  
muse.*

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



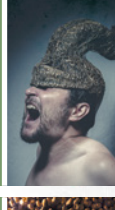
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



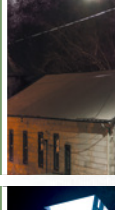
6: REDUX



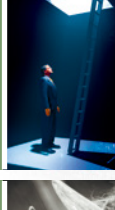
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA







stress check, but it sucks.

- **Failure:** Nothing happens.
- **Success:** The artist thinks of the Muse/Patron while doing the work and gets a +10% to the relevant art or craft identity.
- **Matched Success or Crit:** As a normal success, but the bonus is now +20%.

**51%–70%, Tranquility:** The Muse/Patron doesn't need to roll to activate this power, it's automatic. While in their direct presence, artists don't suffer from madness. "Madness," in this case, means the effects of having five failed notches in one or more meters. While they're nearby, an alcoholic painter can resist the urge to drink, or a paranoid writer can calm down and evaluate threats rationally, or a delusional sculptress can briefly see the flaws in her unreal beliefs.

But this doesn't work on anyone, only "artists." For Muse/Patron purposes, an artist is anyone who has an identity focused on creativity at 30% or higher, or which is her obsession. Alternately, anyone who's an avatar of the Artist can benefit from their soothing presence, no matter how low her rating.

**71%–90%, Presence:** Now, no matter what art form the Muse/Patron usually inspires, *anyone* who cares about making culture recognizes their value and importance. They may now substitute their avatar: Muse/Patron identity for Status, Lie, and Connect, as long as they're directing their persuasion or deception at someone who could benefit from Tranquility. The people who know, no matter what they know, know the Muse/Patron. They may not know the Muse/Patron by name, but they sense what they *are*.

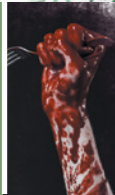
If the Muse/Patron has a relationship with someone — meaning favorite, responsibility, or protégé or, less likely, guru or mentor — and that person attempts to create art in their presence or under their guidance or encouragement, she can opt to only roll one die and use it for both her tens and ones place result. Thus, if she rolls a 2, she gets a 22, and if she rolls an 8, her result is an 88. By making this choice, she's going literally double or nothing, getting a matched success or matched failure and nothing else.

**91+%, Ecstasy:** At this level, the Muse/Patron does not so much encourage creation as demand it. With a successful avatar roll, the Muse/Patron inflicts the following effects on one person:

- The target permanently gains an artistic identity at 20%. If the target already has an identity based around creation or performance, that identity increases by 10% for the duration of the ecstasy.
- The target is inflamed and inspired to create an epic work on a topic determined by the Muse/Patron. The Muse/Patron can simply tell the target, "Oh, you should write a rock opera about Donald Trump raping truck stop busboys," or can incept the idea and have the artist believe it's entirely her own.
- As long as the target is working on the Muse/Patron's work, she can twin all art-related rolls, as per the Presence channel.
- Any time the target works on an artwork that isn't the idea dictated by the Muse/Patron, it's a Helplessness (7) check.
- Any day that the target does not spend at least eight hours working on the epic, she takes an Isolation (5) check.
- Any time one of the Helplessness or Isolation checks is failed and the creator chooses to react violently, she destroys all the work already put into the epic.
- After putting in at least eighty hours of profound effort into the project, the target can attempt to complete it by rolling her artistic identity and showing it to the Muse/Patron. If the roll fails, or the Muse/Patron rejects the artwork, the artist faces a Self (5) check and has to start over. If the roll succeeds *and* the Muse/Patron accepts it, however, the creator gets to keep the +10% identity improvement permanently and has created a lasting work of artistic value. It may not be recognized in her lifetime, but it's something that will last hundreds of years (or until the end of the universe, whichever comes first). It's also quite likely to change the creator's position in society — either for better or for worse.

Only one person can be subject to Ecstasy at a time.

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



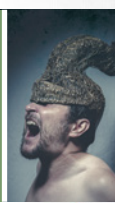
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



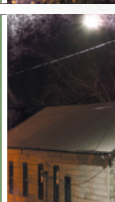
6: REDUX



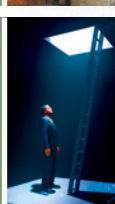
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA







# THE SHAMAN

## ATTRIBUTES

The practice of shamanic religion is common throughout the world, and ancient. It takes different forms, but its outlines are as follows: shamans undergo trials and initiations into mysteries that do not yield practical and tangible rewards (like traditionally hazardous undertakings such as war and motherhood) but instead reveal the truth about the cosmos and the abstract or invisible factors that influence the lives of the people in it. Often shamans wear animal masks, interact with spirit guides, or go on psychedelic inner journeys that, externally, look like fevers or drug binges or starvation-induced hallucinations.

The form shamanism takes doesn't matter. The important thing is, it works. Through inner effort, the shaman gets a grasp on invisible but well-studied factors that cause trouble for commonplace people who don't understand them. With their specialized knowledge, they can heal mysterious illnesses, cope with curses, and exorcise unwanted entities. Or, on the other hand, they can ruin your life in deniable ways you won't even comprehend. No one said a shaman has to be nice.

There are Shaman avatars who run with wolves and take traditional peyote. There are New Age avatars with crystals, communing with Space Brothers to repair energy imbalances. There are Shaman avatars with psychology degrees who can alleviate that stomachache — the one that you get whenever you have to speak in public, the one no medicine could treat — by talking to you about your dreams and your childhood.

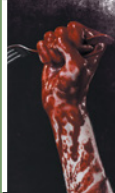
Whatever the stage dressing of the avatar, it always involves some kind of effortful quest for knowledge. This

could be a harrowing trek through the desert with only a spear and a water bottle until she sees her spirit animal, or it could be years of grad school and psychoanalysis. With that complete, the shaman must take her place as a repository of wisdom, set apart from ordinary people. Again, that could mean accepting the burden of keeping the tribe protected from angry ghosts, it could mean going to a monastery and speaking only with those who've sought her out, or it could mean providing therapy in a skyscraper for hundreds of dollars per hour.

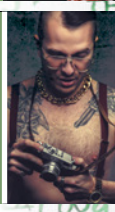
## TABOOS

The shamanic taboos depend on her relationships. First off, the Shaman can't have a mentor. The acts of building and using that sort of "tell me what to do to get by in life" connection are a profound distraction from the Shaman's path of finding what to do to understand the meaning of life. It shows a materialistic focus that can only drag down the spirit. (Having a guru is fine though.) Secondly, every Shaman must have a protégé — it's that whole master and apprentice thing. If her relationship with her protégé decreases, it imperils her Shaman percentiles. The Shaman should work to keep that relationship safe. Secrecy is often a good idea, especially if her enemies are clued in. Or if they're just bastards willing to kill someone to inconvenience her. (If the Shaman's protégé is killed on her watch, that decreases her score by 1%–5% and it won't improve until she has a new protégé. If her protégé gets killed when there was absolutely no way she could have prevented it, she gets a lunar month's grace period to find a new student.)

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



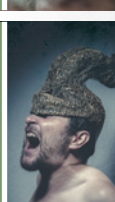
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



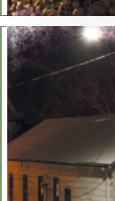
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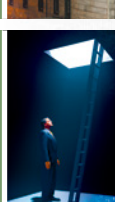
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





## SYMBOLS

Drums, feathers, pipes, masks, and costumes.

## SUSPECTED AVATARS IN HISTORY

Joseph Campbell, Carlos Castaneda, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, countless indigenous shamans such as Nehanda Charwe Nyakasikana.

## MASKS

Raven and Coyote (Native American), Odin (Norse), Legba-Grand-Chemin (Vodou), Nanook (Inuit), Etügen Eke (Mongolian), Leib-Olmai (Sami).

## CHANNELS

**1%–50%, Dream Journey:** When the Shaman takes a dream journey, she falls asleep and enters the dreams of another. What she sees in there is likely to be a mix of symbols, suppressed desire or hidden fear, and plain ol' weird crap that pops up when the brain cleans house on behalf of the mind. She can pass on messages, but it's up to the GM whether they're remembered in the morning, or if they seem significant. (Most dreams don't, and if you don't believe me, get someone to tell you about what they dreamed last night.) As a rule of thumb, the more mysterious and symbolic the message, the more memorable. "I'm being held at 1411 Smith Street" is not very memorable. "I am trapped beneath a giant shoe," when 1411 Smith Street has a shoe store with a big neon sneaker on it — that's a lot likelier to stick.

She can act within the confines of the dream, but not control it — it's like doing improv with really great scenes and costumes, but you're still stuck taking suggestions from the audience about your situation, and you're not allowed to negate.

There are two ways that the Shaman can undergo a dream journey — consciously or spontaneously. Spontaneous dream journeying is simple: the GM tells her that she had a dream that seemed *really real*, *man* and she navigates that and interprets it as she will. This is the way that Shamans who don't know their avatar nature do it, they have weird intense dreams and either ignore them or (if they're the kinds of people who unwittingly become Shamans), they pay attention and are fascinated but maybe-kinda chalk it up to intuition?

The deliberate way to go into a specific dream varies from person to person, but it's usually something arduous, something that induces an altered state of consciousness. Possibilities include, but are not limited to:

- **Suspension:** The Shaman pierces her flesh by her pectorals with hooks and hangs from them until she leaves her body and enters the dream. This does  $1d10 + 2$  points of damage, and unless she's careful with her ritual rationales, can be used as evidence in her commitment hearing. Other methods include self-flagellation or exercise unto collapse. They all do about the same amount of damage.
- **Peyote:** It's certainly more mythically authentic to harvest it by oneself, if the Shaman wants to go the Huichol route. (Just make sure to get the good kind that provides helpful insight, not the bad kind that causes a nightmare bender. It can be very difficult to

tell the difference.) Choke it down, watch the world squirm, and go to sleep when it's time to enter the dream realm. The Shaman may or may not face stress checks, depending on what she sees in those dreams while she's still hallucinating. Dream *plus* hallucination is a hell of a one-two punch. Urban shamans may fall back on hallucinogens with a more scientific pedigree.

- **Fasting and Prayer:** Go without water for a full day, or skip meals for two days, and sit in a trance-inducing pose while trying to either empty your mind completely, or fill it with the Holy Spirit. This takes a lot of time, but it only does 1–5 wounds.

After completing the ritual, the Shaman rolls her avatar rating. On a success, she enters the dream of their target. On a failure, she only *thinks* she did. On a matched failure, she gets lost in immaterial realms for one to ten hours. She could wind up immaterially trespassing on an otherspace, seeing a dozen people's dreams in sequence, getting inside the mind of an immaterial entity, or even pass beyond the veil.

**51%–70%, Spirit Totem:** An animal that's not exactly an animal starts hanging around the Shaman. When other people see it, it looks like a cat or a dog or an unusually large raven — something archetypal and capable of moving around without people paying too much attention. Square mundane types who see the Shaman talking to the animal or gesturing to it and indicating that it's a peer can very rationally dismiss this as delusional thinking or eccentricity. But to the Shaman, this creature is a connection to the hidden world of spirits and similar abstractions.

The spirit animal is not a slave or a servant. It's more like an equal coworker. It can talk to the Shaman, though no one else ever hears it. (Unless they have some kind of unusual resources that makes the GM say, "Oh of course she can eavesdrop on other people's guardian spirits!") While its animal form is tangible when it comes to unimportant tasks — it might be able to pick up some keys and fly them to the Shaman, or claw through the duct tape around her ankles — they can't fight in the material realm. Nor can they be fought with nor contained. The Shaman just can't grab the thing before it gets away, even if she thinks she's in a totally enclosed space. It darts behind her back and vanishes.

What they *can* do is interact with intangible entities, even those the Shaman can't see or hear. Demons, astral parasites, unfortunate douchebags who got trapped on the astral plane... the totem spirit can perceive and converse with them all. It's unable to harm them or be harmed, though they're usually able to harass an astral parasite until it detaches and goes away.

The easiest way to deal with a spirit totem is to treat the avatar: Shaman rating as if it was a relationship. Roll it to coerce or cajole the spirit, and the better the roll, the more it likes the Shaman and tries to make her way easier. Its ambition is for the Shaman to become better and better, so gaining avatar percentiles maps very cleanly to its esteem for her. Violating taboo pisses it off, and sometimes it's going to ask the Shaman to do things for it in the physical world. Rarely are these terribly dangerous, but often they're inconvenient or convoluted. These spirits care a lot about keeping different abstract factors of life in balance. In practice, this

1: MEAT

2: THROAT

3: SMALL

4: BIGGER

5: LAYERS

6: REDUX

7: VEIL

8: BESEIGED

9: SELVES

10: MEDIA

can come out as environmentalism, social justice, or sacrificing some species that's gotten way too prevalent. (Live in a city? Better hope it doesn't ask you to kill 333 rats for it. There's way too many rats, yo.)

Spirit animals are informed about weird immaterial stuff, so asking them about the nature of this spirit or that invisible phenomenon *might* yield something. The GM should decide right off the bat if the spirit doesn't know for sure (usually because "asking the spirit for help" shouldn't turn into "take a shortcut around lots of cool plot"), or absolutely *does* know for sure (because the players are stuck and need a kick to get moving again). If it's neither of those — it might know but might not — roll the dice and see what happens.

**71%–90%, Astral Projection:** *Astral projection* is the ability to leave one's body and move around, unseen and intangible. People appear as their auras, places are visible but look kind of like black light posters, and animals are sketchy shadows.

Demons, spirits, *astral parasites*, and other miscellaneous entities inhabit this plane, normally unseen and unfelt. While you're floating around like Doctor Strange, they can attack you by attempting to gnaw on your psyche. Other astral creatures primarily inflict stress checks of one type or another. Astral Shamans can fight back by rolling their avatar ability as if it was Struggle. (Are there astral weapons? Sure. The Siberian guys who craft them aren't big on sharing, but they work just like normal melee weapons. The PLA supposedly has astral Norinoco 56s, but most people think that's just a myth.) Note that these critters can only be perceived and attacked while one is astrally projected.

Entering the trance requires a good ten hours of preparation. The nature of the prep varies from Shaman to Shaman. Some go in for the mind-altering drugs and physical suffering, while others dispense with all that drama and just lie down until their hearts almost stop. (Oh yeah, while the Shaman's off on her Secret Journey, her body goes into such a state of suspended function that it requires a successful roll of a Medical identity to realize it's not freshly *dead*. Projecting Shamans aren't aware of what's going on with their body unless they check on it, so more than one has woken up in an ambulance, body bag, or morgue closet.)

The Shaman needs to roll her avatar score to go astral, and if it fails she can't try again for three sunsets. If she succeeds and goes a-wandering, after she comes back she can't try again for three sunsets.

**91+%, Transrational Solutions:** The highest development of the Shamanic art is to seek answers to questions that can't be found in the material realm. Finding a transrational solution is a *quest*, it's heavy stuff, it's not like nipping down to the corner store when you run out of milk.

These answers are usually about spirits and hauntings, or else illnesses that confound medicine. They can, however, be about personal questions ("Why doesn't Ginger love me?") or psychological problems or mysteries that have been devoured by the past. (For example, a transrational query could be used to find out where the Shaman's *claim* is, if there is one. Another query would be needed to discern its effect.)

To go on one of these spirit quests, the Shaman first needs to purify herself by spending twenty-four hours without ingesting anything — no medicines, no vaping, no food or water or Gatorade. During this time, the Shaman has to touch base with all her relationships. She's not going to get an answer safely if she's out of balance with her personal junk. (If she's on bad terms with a relationship, she's sure to face some symbolic version of the conflict while on her voyage, and it could do anything from rip percentiles off her avatar score, to damaging the relationship score, to tearing visible bloody chunks out of her flesh.)

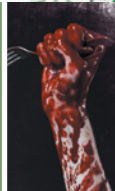
Once the Shaman has done that, she calls her spirit totem (from the second channel) and makes sure it's OK with this. Assuming it is, she goes astral as described with the third channel. (Why would her spirit guide refuse? Because your GM has decided that letting her get the answer she wants would completely derail the game. If the spirit guide suggests a *different* quest, that's what GMs call a "subtle hint.")

The Shaman's spirit guide can then take her to where the answers lie. Rolling again isn't necessary because the Shaman already rolled for astral projection. The GM can describe this whacked-out inner vision however she likes, with encouragement to go extra-symbolic and to have lots of stuff in wrong contexts. She's also, presumably, going to be switching to the non-astral characters and giving them plenty of spotlight time during the session too. She probably switches when tension is highest. Enjoy that.

The perils of these journeys can consist of riddles, spiritual combat, stress checks, diabolical bargains, quid-pro-quo deals with inhuman entities, but in the end, it yields the solution. Whether the Shaman in a position to enact the solution is neither here nor there, but that's what cabals are for, right?

The Shaman can only seek a transrational solution once every week, but if she's doing it that often, the GM should definitely make them more challenging, costly, and perilous.

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



See "Claim of the Clergy."

4: BIGGER



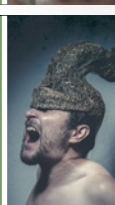
See "Specific Information" on page 47 of Book One: Play.

5: LAYERS



See "Astral Parasites" on page 14 of Book Three: Reveal.

6: REDUX

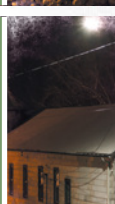


7: VEIL

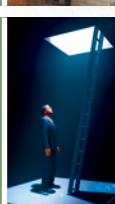


Why does the bear have two mouths?

8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA







# THE TAMER

## ATTRIBUTES

Most people alive today are cyborgs. Maybe it's major, with a powered prosthetic limb, a cochlear implant, or a titanium hip. Maybe it's minor — eyeglasses, braces, and a cell phone dependency.

Before we had machines, we expanded our capacities not through creations of metal and plastic, but blood and fur. A man with poor eyesight could train a pig to sniff out truffles. A woman with spindly legs could learn to ride and outrace the quickest of mere humanity like a magnificent centaur. Not strong enough to uproot that tree? Get an elephant to do it. Training a kestrel isn't as good as flying, but it's better than not having a trained kestrel, and (of course) people have always been training dogs to bite those they're unwilling to bite themselves.

Animals aren't just the other tenants on the planet, to whom we nod in the lobby. They are our companions and our coworkers. Losing a beloved pet can hurt as much (in, perhaps, a different way) as losing a friend. Despite the technological advances of warfare, donkeys and dogs are still used, even as their multimillion dollar replacement devices stumble around DARPA facilities. Plus, even if you don't like animals as pets or for work, you very well may enjoy eggs, milk, or bacon.

With animals so crucial to humanity, the human who mediates between us and the beasts holds a position of authority and power. The zookeeper, the veterinarian, the lion tamer, the horse whisperer, and the dog trainer are all aspects of this ambassador from us to them.

It goes without saying that the Tamer's channels only allow him to affect animals, not clockworks or demonic supernatural beasts or other weirdness unless specifically stated.

The Tamer engages with animals, spends most of his time around them, pays attention to them, and extracts use from them. Doing something without an animal that could be done just as well with one (or better) just makes no sense to a Tamer.

## TABOOS

The Tamer can't disregard an animal. If an animal tries to engage with the Tamer, that must be respected. Swatting a mosquito is all right, but ignoring it (assuming it's noticed at all) might be a tiny transgression. The dog that barks must be acknowledged, either by withdrawing, by winning it over, or by destroying it.

## SYMBOLS

Bit and bridle, saddle, leash, whip and chair, and, to some extent, the flaming hoop.

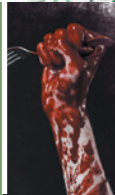
## SUSPECTED AVATARS IN HISTORY

Cesar Millan, Marian "Mouse" Breland Bailey, Nadezhda Durova, Dorothy Harrison Eustis.

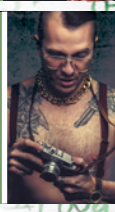
## MASKS

Dr. Doolittle (English), The Beastmaster (American), Adam and Noah (Biblical), Pied Piper of Hamelin (German).

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



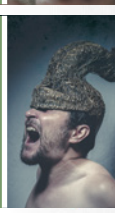
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



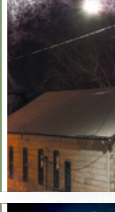
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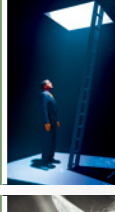
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





## CHANNELS

**1%–50%, Companion:** While a Tamer probably has a number of animals around, one is special. It's a large, beautiful creature of its type, unusually intelligent and impeccably well-behaved. Whatever it is — *probably* a cat or dog, rarely a bird or horse, very rarely anything more likely to get a weird look when walking down the street with it — it's got a wound threshold of 50 and an identity at 50% that relates to doing whatever one would expect a dog, cat, or pot-bellied pig to do. (In order, that's probably bark at intruders, scratch your eyes out, and find things by aroma.)

In addition to the utility of having a well-trained beast by his side, the Tamer can also communicate with it, somewhat. This doesn't mean the animal talks — it's not humanly intelligent, it's only as bright as a clever example of its species — but the Tamer does have some sense of what's pleasing or bothering it, and the animal is very quick on the uptake when the Tamer asks it to do something. Basically, if it's something a normal person could train an animal to do after several busy hours, the Tamer's companion gets the gist of it the first time the Tamer asks. Also, the animal starts, very slightly, to resemble the Tamer.

**51%–70%, Dominion:** Biblically, all animals are subject to humankind's command, but when stalked by a mountain lion, it becomes apparent that not all animals have biblical values. Tamers, however, are a breed apart. If a Tamer looks at an animal, addresses it in a firm tone of voice, and rolls a success on avatar: Tamer, then the animal is cowed. Cowed animals won't attack the Tamer, and slink away looking ashamed unless they've been very well trained. Another Tamer's companion animal can't be scared off, but it still won't attack.

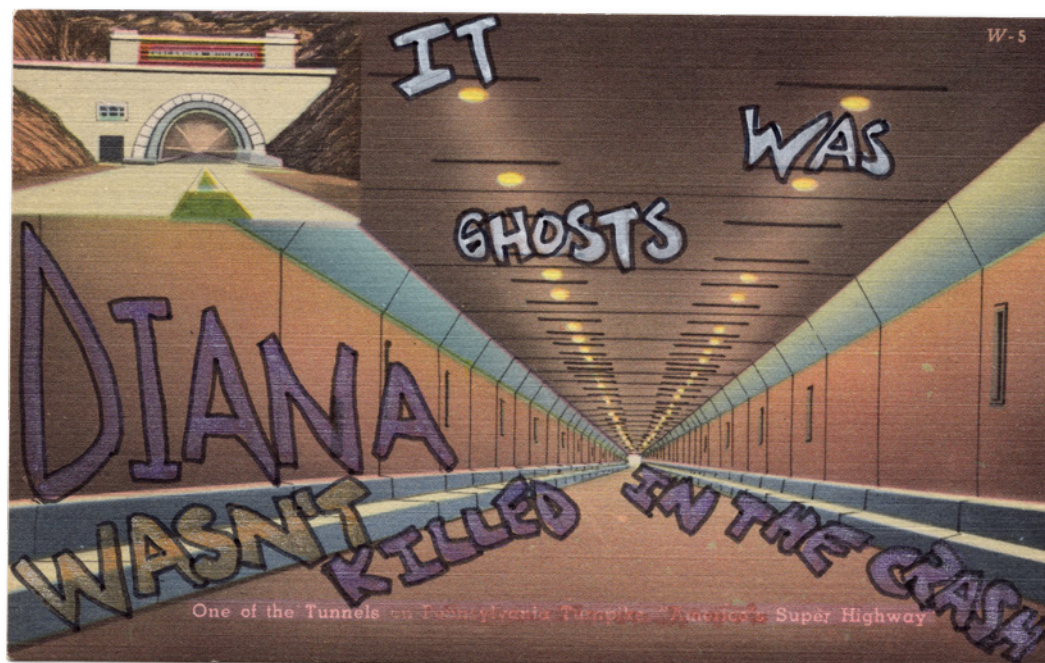
At this level, the Tamer's companion also goes up to a wound threshold of 70 and 70% in its identity. If at all plausible, its resemblance to its Tamer deepens.

**71%–90%, Equilibrium:** Animals won't, don't, and can't attack the Tamer. He could walk into the middle of a stampede and the cattle would part around him like the Red Sea. He could play with a beehive like a piñata and not get stung, or cavalierly stroll between a mama bear and her cub. With a roll, he can force an animal to lie down submissively. Animals forced into this submissive posture won't get out of it unless released, even if physically harmed.

For the purposes of mystical categorization, humans are not animals. Nevertheless, there is something imposing about the Tamer, even to the most modern of people. Attempting to injure the Tamer inflicts a Helplessness (7-9) check.

This ability does not need to be rolled.

**91+%, Command:** Any and all animals within earshot fall beneath the Tamer's sway. With a successful roll, entire flocks of birds, swarms of bees, and schools of fish can be commanded as if they were exquisitely trained. Under the Tamer's command, a herd of charging horses begins to move like a single unit. All the rats of Hamelin Town could be piped away, or a hundred cows could form an orderly line and march into the slaughterhouse.



1: MEAT

2: THROAT

3: SMALL

4: BIGGER

5: LAYERS

6: REDUX

7: VEIL

8: BESEIGED

9: SELVES

10: MEDIA



# CLAIM OF THE CLERGY

The Invisible Clergy, the collective and immaterial body of ascended archetypes, is unseen (if felt), intangible (if powerful), and generally held to be entirely unsentimental. It's the safe way to bet.

Yet there are places that bespeak, if not affection, some form of connection to a particular archetype. Those who know about them refer to them as claims. *GNOMON* does not believe claims exist. *TNI agents* have filed two reports, both of which got to Alex Abel before being skeptically dismissed, resulting in recriminations for the people who filed them. The *Sleepers*? Some believe, some don't, some argue, nobody has proof, and conversations about them tend to end on a variation of the common Sleeper refrain of, "Fuck you, you're full of bullshit but can I borrow fifty bucks 'til next payday?"

The cabals that have the firmest grip on claim information are *Mak Attax* and the *Sect of the Naked Goddess'* splinter groups. The Sect knows because they've been to one: the grotty basement where the second coming occurred and their godwalker was unveiled in front of all her FBI colleagues. They've bought the building and keep trying to entice Mira to come back and lead a ceremony or a re-enactment, but she's not having it and, honestly, they're not even sure if she's still using the cell phone they're trying to call. But anyone who claims to be seeking the Naked Goddess could get sent there, if the three Naked Goddess camgirl entrepreneurs decide they like the cut of her jib. Or his jib — there was a guy once, though they sent him packing pretty quick. (He immediately went to the motumancer branch and started stirring shit, which didn't take much, as any *group* claiming *exclusive rights* over a paranormal location, solely because they discovered it and purchased the property, was bound to rouse the flag-burners' bountiful ire.)

As for Mak Attax, they believed stories about claims because believing in things is directly in their wheelhouse. Once more, being naïve and trusting played *right into their hands*. They heard about "shrines to archetypes" and that made sense to the Attaxers who believed in the Invisible Clergy instead of Space Brothers or Nordic Archons, so they crowdsourced it. They investigated "weird places" and tried to cross-reference them with suspected archetypes and, long story short, they found one. It's in western Oklahoma and may explain why the Comanche nation held out so long against European invasion. It's where the archetype of the Warrior can most cleanly contact the tangible realm.

But before we get to the specifics about what claims can do for you, it's important to hammer home that they are *incredibly rare*. There are fewer than 333 archetypes ascended (obviously, since the world is self-evidently undestroyed) and it's not at all certain that every ascension creates

a claim, any more than every ascension leaves behind some weird magick artifact. In any event, the fewer-than-333 sites are scattered throughout the world and throughout history as well. Are they permanent? No way to tell. Maybe they stop working if their patron gets displaced. Moreover, since their functions are often specific, subtle, or counter-intuitive, the great sweep of history is entirely capable of erasing them. There could be one under your *home* and in order to activate its mojo, you'd need to sing a praise-chant to its particular patron and sacrifice an all-black rooster. Have you tried that? How about at your neighbor's house?

## THE HAJJ

All claims have one trait in common. It's called the hajj or, for Islamophobes, the pilgrimage. If you're an avatar, and you make a respectful journey to the claim specific to your archetype, meditating there on the meaning of the role strengthens your connection to it. This doesn't need to be an objective or anything so drastic (though *finding* the claim might be an objective, or might *need* to be one). All you must do is go there, get calm, and have some uninterrupted thoughts about your place in the cosmos for four or five hours. ("Uninterrupted" is where it can get interesting.) Avatars who do this experience three outcomes, pretty much all at once.

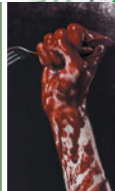
**Consolation:** There is an enjoyable sense of oneness with the universe. It's not necessarily comfortable — if your archetype is turbulent, it probably leaves you manic and chattering and enthusiastic, but mellower members of the Clergy leave their followers blissed-out and relaxed. The GM gets to erase one failed mark from your shock gauge. It's her choice which one, based on what's holding you back from being of value to your ascended master or mistress, so it may not be your worst one, but still: healing is healing. You won't forget the event that gave you the failed notch, but it loses its hold over you. You accept (if not forgive) and move on (if not forget).

**Obligation:** Fused with the pleasant feeling of oneness with a higher power comes a sense of duty, a renewed zeal for the abstract principles espoused by the archetype. It's distracting, and can lead to annoyingly excited or puzzling blather with non-avatars. Also, you don't get any experience checks for a day or two. No matter how many rolls you fail, you don't learn from it. Your learning circuits have all been overloaded by enlightenment.

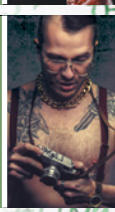
**Enlightenment:** The loyal avatar feels like the clouds that stood between her and her patron have cleared away, or at the very least lightened.

See more information on these in Book Two: Run. "Flex Echo" on page 57, "The New Inquisition" on page 85, "Sleepers" on page 77, "Mak Attax" on page 91, and "The Sect of the Naked Goddess" on page 72 of that book.

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



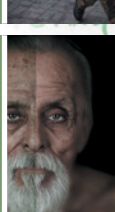
3: SMALL



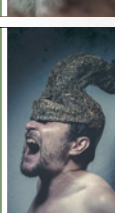
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



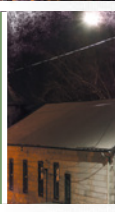
6: REDUX



7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA



It's not the kind of understanding that can be put into words — it's intuitive, emotional, *mystic*, the kind of thing that leaves atheists tearing their hair and making mordant internet comments — but it's true, for all that it can't be proved. The avatar identity goes up by 5%, to a maximum of 98%.

Like losing one's virginity, the hajj only happens once. There's before it, and after it. Once you've done it, you can go back and revisit, but it's not the same. It's probably very fulfilling and spiritually nourishing, but the overwhelming sensations of consolation, obligation, and enlightenment do not reoccur. One to a customer, pal.

## OTHER PRACTICES

Every claim has an additional paranormal effect, probably. At least, all the ones Mak Attax has heard about do, though admittedly they've investigated dozens of these things with indifferent success. The Goddess' Basement, for sure, has a strange nature that fits its thematic resonance.

A claim's unique effect works on anyone, regardless of their beliefs, fitness, or relationship to the paranormal. It doesn't care about your faith or attitude or previous behavior — if you trigger it, it happens. It's like getting sweated on at an Andrew WK concert: doesn't matter if you like the music or not, if you push your way to the front of the show, you're getting moist.

The effects are thematic, and they happen every time their preconditions are met, and they range from the subtle to blatant transgressions of physical reality. The examples below are illuminating.

## THE GODDESS' BASEMENT

Remember the story about *Mira's sexual awakening*? As mentioned previously, the Sect of the Naked Goddess found that the place had become connected to the archetype after that. Those within the Sect who believe they're Naked Goddess avatars travel to Los Angeles, in the same way that Christians go to Lourdes, except in drastically smaller numbers and carrying more K-Y. There, they go to the basement where Mira got her revelation and they try to get theirs.

Did you remember that it was a *church* basement? That was trouble, because the pornomancer branch of the sect wasn't really crazy about drawing attention to the avatar branch. Eventually, one of the motumancers was... tricked? Persuaded? Coerced? The stories the people involved tell vary *a lot*... into socially disintegrating the congregation there which, it must be said, was not thrilled when the rumor hit that not only had a porno movie been filmed in the church basement ("What? No! I've run bake sales on those tables!") but that a celebratory re-enactment occurred as well.

The congregation ceased to congregate, the church was deconsecrated, and three entrepreneur camgirls (professionally known as Double-D Dani, Jody Hots, and Lil' Scratchy) bought it out.

They did so under the auspices of Applied Equity Property Management LLC, which is essentially the three of them and their IT expert. (Lil' Scratchy — formerly known as Sarah Elizabeth Parker, Attorney at Law — got disbarred in Alabama, but she still knows her way around articles of incorporation.) They've made vague noises about turning it into a B&B (something its cruddy neighborhood absolutely does not need) but mostly have been keeping it clean and subsidizing it with their online profits. The people who claim to be avatars and want to make their hajj there are evaluated on a case-by-case basis: a willingness to pay cash money to "contribute" greases the wheels, as it does at so many sites controlled by the faithful but cash-strapped.

Other people have come there because its occult powers are sometimes useful, if not awe-inspiring. If you go to the basement, set up an old video camera (which Applied Equity Property Management LLC can rent to you on-site for a reasonable fee) and pan from left to right while watching through its viewfinder, the claim temporarily alters your attitudes towards sex acts. Specifically, the next sex act that would be disturbing or unpleasant or unpalatable to you is... meh. It's whatever. Neutral-to-OK. Even if this is something that would normally make you vomit, send you into a shame spiral, or call up all kinds of neurosis from your strict upbringing? It becomes a matter of indifference. You may not like it, you may find it physically uncomfortable, but it's no longer a thing happening to your *personality*. It's just an event devoid of emotional weight. Mechanically, if a sex act would impose a stress check, it does not. The person still remembers it and knows it happened, but it has no power to terrify, humiliate, or depress them.

What's this good for? Oh, there's at least one unlicensed therapist who has found out this stuff works (he's in Double-D Dani's food co-op). He uses the "emotional prophylaxis" effect on occasion in couples' therapy. The Sect has also found it a useful way to get pornomancers-in-training accustomed to some of the less vanilla behaviors that can build one a charge.

## THE MERCHANT'S CHAMBER

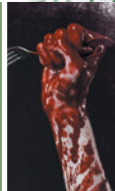
The Navigator Club in London is not one of the old ones from the 1800s that is renowned for its Conservative politicians, its signature dessert, or its staunch refusal to let women in. (Don't kid yourself though — no uterus has defiled its confines except for the cleaning staff, and even they aren't allowed into the Games Lounge, which is exclusively tidied by the staff majordomo, a fellow called "Bolero.") It's not known for anything, by design. Its founders are three young men with old money, jobs in finance, and access to this very old site of mystic power.

The *building* which houses the Navigator Club is from 1983, but before that the site had a drab brick

UEPM  
Lol =  
CCN?

See "The Sect of the Naked Goddess" on page 72 of Book Two: Run.

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



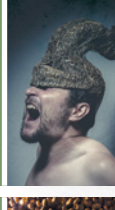
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



6: REDUX



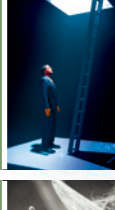
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA





pile that was built there after the drafty old structure before *that* was blown into dust during the Blitz. That place (three back, if you're counting) was home to a merchant shipping insurance firm.

The founders of the Navigator Club are Merchant avatars employed by prestigious banks and finance firms, and they were the ones who winked out the secret history of the Merchant's Chamber. See, that shipping insurance concern? Like their club, it was run by a clued-in Merchant, one who was leveraging the powers of the claim on the second floor, in the space now occupied by the Games Lounge, which is a painstaking recreation of the conference room that was in that same volume of air before that German bomb took out the building. They hoped that the space would retain the properties it once had, and their hopes were rewarded.

The Merchant's Chamber has plain wooden furniture, a big antique map along one wall, two windows in another, a spare but elegant marble fireplace, and shelves filled with ledgers on the third. It does not look terribly conducive to games, though the Navigator boys do play cards and chess there to keep up appearances.

But on certain occasions, they burn money in the fireplace and summon demons. That's the special power of the claim: it summons and contains the spirits of the shitty dead so that they can be conversed with in relative safety. All it costs you is your ability to get along in society. Oh, and a bunch of money. But let's consider the demons first.

The evil spirits still must be offered an incentive, but the guys running this are Merchants, so they always have something on order. Demons want bodies the most, and London is full of people who are poor and desperate enough to offer control of their flesh to paranormal entities in exchange for cash (which, natch, this Merchant cabal has in bulk). Since the NHS reorg, desperate punters are practically falling from the sky like rain.

The way the Chamber works is that you throw a big pile of euros or dollars or other valid currency on the fire and burn it, and then a demon can speak to you from the fire. It can't do anything but talk, and once the fire goes out it's dispelled. But if you have a question (and any reason at all to expect a straight answer), or have a ritual to get more out of a demon, this is a safe way to conjure one without any chance of it taking over your portly, pasty frame. (The cabal is also low-key racist, so of course the people involved are all extra white. All its members are also pudgy, but that's not a *requirement* for membership.)

The balancing factor is that there's no set amount that you must burn to get your devil deal, except "a lot" — whatever that means to you. For the Navigators, the sums are just depressingly vast. For the impoverished chumps they pimp out to the underworld, it could be as low as 333 euros, not that the Navigators would ever, *ever*

let a non-member burn cash for a demon even though it would save them loads of dough. It's *just not done*.

The pile of money sufficient to summon an entity is however much it would take to reduce the character's Status by one step on the character sheet. Conveniently, the cost of conversing with demons — paranoia, contempt for the sheeple who aren't *smart* enough for demonolatry, an urge to run and hide from shadows on dark foggy streets, a smug sensation of having life's cheat codes — are all well modeled by simply putting a hardened notch in Isolation. So the ceremony (1) summons a demon, and (2) puts a hardened notch in Isolation, thereby reducing your Status, increasing your Pursuit, and making you more likely to handle challenges to Helplessness.

Again, once the demon arrives, you're safe from it, but it's not compelled to do anything but be present for whatever pitch meeting you have in mind. You don't have to be a Merchant avatar to use the fireplace, but the Navigators don't know this.

What do the Navigators want to *do* with their demon-backed powers? Well, they've found out about a group called *Ordo Corpulentis* and they have a drastically inflated and paranoid opinion of the Order's influence and power. They want to stay undiscovered by the American cannibals. Because they are entitled Merchants, they believe they are clever enough to use demons to do this. Because demons are clever too, they encourage the Navigators in this belief, while at every turn undermining their safety. After all, without an enemy they have far less motivation to truck with the undead. Basic supply and demand, really.

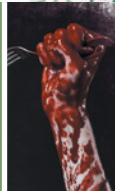
## THE TAMER'S MOUNTAIN

The Kyrgyz peoples have used golden eagles to hunt wolves for generations, but the first person to train an eagle — a *Tamer* avatar from a thousand years before the birth of Christ — did so on a mountain in Kunlun range in China. Or, maybe it's in India. Both India and China claim the Aksai Chin region of Tibet, and the Tamer's Mountain is somewhere in Aksai Chin, if you believe the one western writer who experienced (and wrote about) the Tamer's plummet ritual back in 1975.

That writer was a British mountain climber named Frances Merrick, and her account was roundly dismissed as delusional, allegorical, or just plain rubbish. But she did accurately describe the rite of the Tamer's Mountain, which is still (as far as anyone knows) practiced by the rural workers who live near it.

The ritual is to climb up to a particular ledge about four-fifths of the way up. She described the ascent as "somewhat difficult in bits," though she estimated the mountain itself was only a little over 2,000 meters. She got to the ledge with five people from the village, including one "old man with white hair and not a tooth in his head."

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



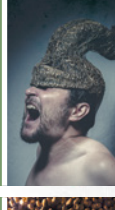
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



6: REDUX



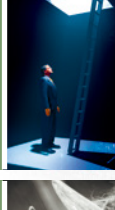
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA



See "Ordo Corpulentis" on page 67 of Book Two: Run.

See "The Tamer."

This unnamed elder immediately walked to the edge and, without pause, stepped over into the swirly clouds.

"I was certain it was some kind of trick — that there was a net beneath, or some way to catch oneself, or that I had otherwise been misled by stagecraft or illusion. Despite that absolute certainty, I could not help but be amazed. Imagine how that astonishment was multiplied when the old man flew back out of the fog beneath and swooped above us, laughing shrilly!"

She then goes on to describe how, of the four remaining villagers, three stepped over and were similarly able to begin soaring and plunging through the air "like the eagles whose nests we'd seen on the slopes." Steeling herself, she stepped into the emptiness and discovered — after a heart-stopping moment — that she too could fly "like a bird, as in a dream."

That's the special miracle of the Tamer's Mountain. If you step off that ledge truly believing in its power to make you fly, then *fly you shall*. (If you don't step off then by definition you don't believe enough and it's all academic.) Getting pushed still kills you, but anyone who goes voluntarily can fly around (though not hover) for about twenty to thirty minutes, if they don't go too high or leave the mountain. Anyone who tries that just... can't. Whatever power lofts them won't take them there.

To force oneself to step off a mountain like this is a Violence (6–7) challenge, and flying afterwards is an Unnatural (5–6) challenge. But hey, at least if you panic, you're well equipped to get away.

That assumes you can find the place. Merrick's book never sold well, it's out of print, and the cover's ugly. Even with the book, finding the right mountain based on her description isn't easy. There's that whole "disputed Chinese territory" aspect to it... and if you guess wrong, the repercussions are, to say the least, drastic.

## WARRIOR CAVERN

Currently known as "Comanche Cave" in local folklore, this claim lies between Waynoka and Mooreland in Oklahoma. It's a dirty, shallow, unglamorous gypsum cave that gets no love because the Little Sahara dunes are more fun and, even if you like spelunking or whatever, the Alabaster Caverns are *much* cooler and have their own state park. No, there's not much of interest in Comanche Cave, unless you're a fighter.

Warrior avatars twig right away that there's something special going on, and it rarely takes much to get them digging its consolation, obligation, and enlightenment. Lance Corporal Herve Escarrá felt it right away when, after his medical discharge, his girlfriend suggested a hike out to it. (He was through physical therapy and was well adapted to his below-the-knee prosthesis, but she felt that going on walks was good for him.) His investigations into it led him to associated Weird

Stuff, which brought him to the attention to the only occult cabal operating in the rural Oklahoma panhandle — *Mak Attax*. He and the Attaxers had an uneasy relationship until another Warrior avatar went there, did peyote and gutter magick, and dug out the story that Comanche braves would commune with spirits there by beating the crap out of one another. That is, of course, the triggering condition for the claim's special power. It connects to the Warrior, what else did you expect?

The Comanche rite added some bells and whistles, but they treated the cave like Thunderdome. Two warriors entered, one left. Those who emerged victorious from these duels were given prominent positions in the next raids or attacks, because it was believed they were under special protection. And oh boy, were they.

First though, the fight. To activate the Cavern's protection, you and another enter together. No one else can be present. Then, the two of you fight bare-handed (no sticks, knives, or guns — this is *meant* to be primitive). The fight continues until someone's (1) knocked out, (2) pinned until they collapse, or (3) killed. Actually, it is perfectly possible to think better of it and quit before that point, but people who give up before someone's down and unable to continue — *physically unable*, not just unwilling — get no benefit. Moreover, the guy who gets KO'd, choked out, or slain gets no advantage either.

To the victor, however, go serious spoils. The Warrior places protection upon the struggle's winner, even if they are no Warrior avatar, even if they're an avatar of *something else*. The protection means that the next physical attack that would strike the person does no damage. It hits, and if it's at all plausible the person who launched the attack *knows* it hit — but it inflicts no injury nor even any discomfort.

Depending on the nature of the assault that got shrugged off, the attacker may need to make some kind of Unnatural check. A punch that does nothing can probably get ignored, but someone a machete won't cut? That's probably an Unnatural (3–5) check. You hit a guy with a Molotov cocktail and he just walks unharmed out of the flames? Unnatural (4–6) check.

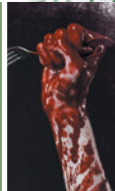
To get further protected, the person has to go back into the cave and fight some more. Additionally, it's always the *next* attack, not necessarily the next serious attack. It won't go off hair-trigger if someone feints at you or gives you a boisterous back-slap, but anything that could cause injury? It just doesn't.

Escarrá and the Attaxers have not yet figured out that its protection is only against *deliberate* assaults. The Warrior's blessing is for war, not for falling down the steps 'cause you drank too much.

See "Mak Attax" on page 91 of Book Two: Run.

*Suspiciously, the wind in Oklahoma blows only on the plain.*

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



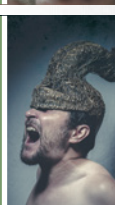
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



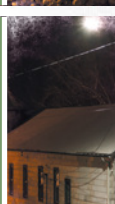
6: REDUX



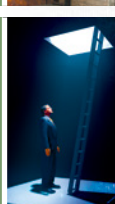
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA









# 10: SYMBOLIC MEDIA

The last troublesome element of *Unknown Armies* is symbolism, and it may be the least amenable to rules and percentages. Symbols — at least the artistic and emotional kind *Unknown Armies* rings against to get its sounds — aren't scientific. They aren't controlled by logic and reason and

proportionality. They operate at a deeper and more primal level. The fictions in this chapter, then, aren't powerful for reasons I can sufficiently explain. Like the best symbols, they can't be understood. They can only be experienced.

## BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD BY BENH ZEITLIN

If you've ever felt bad about your house being messy, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* will put that right in perspective. This movie is set in the Bathtub, a section of swamp outside New Orleans, cut off from other communities by a levee. The main character is a little girl called Hushpuppy who is way too young to fend for herself the way she has to when her dad, Wink, disappears. (And hey, what is it with the word "Wink" and small communities hidden from the rest of the world? It's a curious tie between this film and *American Elsewhere*.) The people of the Bathtub are exceptionally poor and remarkably independent, living lives almost completely outside of the wider American society.

*Beasts of the Southern Wild* has been called a mythic film, but I'm more inclined to liken it to a tall tale. Unlike most tall tales, which are just tongue-in-cheek entertainment, this film takes itself and its issues seriously. Characters rage, laugh, set their houses on fire, and strive against nature and their fellow men as they try to preserve their homes. But in the background, there are the aurochs.

The titular beasts, the aurochs — huge hairy prehistoric mammals — get thawed out of glaciers by the same upheavals of nature that threaten to drown the Bathtub in saltwater following a vicious storm. Throughout the movie, we hear Hushpuppy narrate their approach and see the destruction they wreak as they move closer and closer. The ending, which I won't spoil, ties up the girl, the beasts, and the conflicts she's had with parents present and absent throughout.

### WHAT IT EXPOSES ABOUT UNKNOWN ARMIES

The aurochs are a symbol, representing not only death, but extinction. Hushpuppy fears them as she fears her own destruction, but she also identifies with them — they are remnants of a destroyed world, and she fears that with the peril

to the Bathtub, she may wind up as one as well. Their final confrontation indicates Hushpuppy's fate and her place in the natural world.

In the film, the aurochs bleed between Hushpuppy's imagination and the tangible (albeit magical-realistic) world of her parents and the Bathtub. Now, I would not recommend using giant mammals as a physical symbol in a role-playing game, unless you're ready for your PCs to kill them, or attempt it. But, while keeping in mind the difference between a film for the eyes and an RPG as an experience for voice and imagination, this movie can provide some insight about how to blend the symbolic and the tangible. First, the symbol is abstract and distant, an idea only. As it becomes more prominent, you can have it reflected and projected, though not directly seen and experienced. As the issue represented by the symbol gets more and more prominent, and as failing to deal with it becomes more fraught or outright impossible, signs of its presence get closer and less deniable. Only at the final resolution is the thing fully real — presumably when the characters' objective hits 100% and they can actually do something about it.

This approach, making it loom and loom and only show up when things are definitely going to be final, saves you from a couple embarrassing problems. First off, have you ever introduced a major villain in an RPG, only to have the players get a case of hot dice and demolish the poor bastard before he even has a chance to monologue out his fiendish plot? Yeah, we've all been there. By having a symbol as harbinger for an abstract issue, you avoid premature eradication. (Plus, you can engage abstractions without having an awkward human stand-in explain his position.) The other advantage of holding back on full materialization until you have a 100% objective is that, once it's dealt with, you don't have to worry about it hanging around being mysterious. The beauty of a true mystery is destroyed if you can weigh it, measure it, and determine its nature. By fully revealing your symbolic auroch (or whatever) when it's time to have its fate sealed, you don't give the PCs time to engage in a lot of suspense-snapping engineering.

See "American Elsewhere" by Robert Jackson Bennett.

## UNGULATE

it was the 80s  
everyone had massive wrenches

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



6: REDUX



7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA



It won  
awards.

It won  
more than  
you think.



## MAGIC FOR BEGINNERS BY KELLY LINK

In the short stories of *Magic for Beginners*, the mundane and the surreal blend and dance around each other, both described with the same exact degree of interest, the same measured tone. I got the book after reading the first story in it, "The Faery Handbag," which is about a handbag full of faeries, a family heirloom that carries obligations and makes everything in the modern New York of its setting seem a little bit more like a very old children's story. "The Hortlak" is maybe my favorite — a story about a guy who worked at a convenience store, and then wound up squatting at the convenience store, infatuated with the woman who puts down dogs at the dog pound, haunted by zombies, and freaked out by the increasingly disturbing pajamas of the other clerk living in the convenience store. Then there's "Catskin" which is just damn disturbing.

### WHAT IT EXPOSES ABOUT UNKNOWN ARMIES

The ridiculous isn't always funny. Like the famous clown in the moonlight, things that are

overwrought, absurd, and unclothed with logic become alarming and terrifying when they aren't wrapped up in a protective sheath of comedy. In playing horror games, there are often moments of hilarity — sometimes verging on hysteria. It's the release of pleasure from the built-up pressure of unpleasant ideas, of notions we don't want to confront or don't know how to process.

*John Dies at the End* handles this issue with the exact opposite approach. It chooses to be funny and have the comedy trade jobs with the horror so that neither gets tired. But Kelly Link's fiction puts the absurd and the awful in the same harness and cracks the same whip over both, without ever resorting to easy categories to help us handle them. Perhaps she has examined the foundations of our stories so carefully that she has found their unconsidered, invisible elements, and then pulled them out and started over. However she managed it, she renders the commonplace unsettling, while the stuff of nightmares becomes part of her characters' daily routine. So, yeah, just do that in your games, mm'kay?

## UZUMAKI BY JUNJI ITO

I got this 640+ page manga compendium in the mail, read the whole thing within twenty-four hours, and then felt like I needed a cringe break and a grown-up. The story's nineteen chapters, originally released serially, tell the tale of Japanese schoolgirl Kirie Goshima and her hometown, which is haunted. Unlike many horror stories, though, it's not haunted by ghosts or werewolves or cosplaying real estate developers. It's haunted by spirals.

Each chapter/issue has a different spiral-themed horror, ranging from snails to whirlwinds to curly hair and wheel-thrown pottery. But it's not the things themselves that create such a distinct and powerful sense of unease, but the way that the idea of the spiral perverts flesh, spirit, and reality itself, *for no discernible reason*. That lack of purpose puts this more in the Lovecraft "it's awful that humanity is just dust in this wind" camp, instead of the *Unknown Armies* "it's awful that humanity could cure this problem but prefers to ignore it" camp, but it's still a horror classic that any strong-stomached fan of the genre should check out.

It's also a live-action movie, but to me Junji Ito's drawing style has a lot to do with the work's skin-crawling power. I think he really has two drawing styles. The first, which he starts with, is a traditional manga style that relies somewhat on pareidolia — the brain's hard-wired face-seeking tendency, which lets you see human faces in clouds, shadows, and knots in a plank. Ito's work when he's drawing normal people being normal is clean and confident and the faces consist mostly of white space and a few thin lines to delineate the features. Your own brain does the heavy lifting

of identifying with the character. In the process, you become comfortable. But when the horror starts, with grotesque distortions of the human form, his art style gets more meticulous with denser lines and more detail. It's jarring. You get used to the indicative style, and then the repulsive stuff looks *more real* than the faces you already accepted as the comic's default realism.

### WHAT IT EXPOSES ABOUT UNKNOWN ARMIES

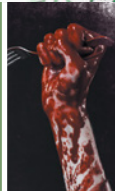
If you want to know what paranoid schizophrenia feels like, *Uzumaki* is probably as close as you're going to get without hallucinogens and an iPod full of spooky voices insulting you. It is difficult for me to express how disturbing Junji Ito's work is. (If you dug *Uzumaki*, I also recommend *Hellstar Remina* and *The Enigma at Amigara Fault*. I was kind of disappointed in *Gyo*.) There is, throughout, a sense that there is purpose and pattern behind what's happening... but it's a pattern divorced from logic, and a purpose that you can almost discern, just not quite. *Uzumaki* in particular is also an example of how to take a threatening abstraction and turn it extremely concrete. The abstruse becomes obsession, and obsession is then engraved on physical reality.

The *Unknown Armies* version would, I suppose, be focused on some omnipresent corporate logo instead of the spiral.

See "John Dies at the End by David Wong."

Are you hungry yet?

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



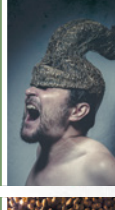
4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



6: REDUX



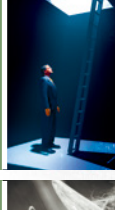
7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA



## The first time Danny showed me real magick, I threw up.

I'm not ashamed to admit it. Not really proud either, of course. I mean, it was mostly... just completely unexpected, you know? Danny was not impressive. You would not expect him to do... anything really.

He was in love with me or had a crush on me or whatever. In my defense, I always made it clear that was a nonstarter. The best thing would have been for him to just sulk off after that and never talk again, but he didn't let it go, kept dropping by, starting conversations, and we both really liked David Lynch and *The Booth at the End*, so if I didn't exactly believe his "oh we're just friends and that's all fine" line, I took it at face value. Plus, sometimes it's hard to stay away from someone who thinks you're wonderful, you know? Even if you don't really like him much.

He was always trying to impress me and after we saw *Night Watch* he said it was a good movie but "got a bunch of details wrong." And I said no kidding, like nobody can turn a human spine into a sword or whatever but he got kind of snotty and said, "No, about the supernatural." I let it drop, he didn't. So that's how I wound up going to his place because he said he could prove that supernatural stuff was real.

He was on his computer when I came in, which was no big shock. That was his whole thing. He turned to me and said, "OK, don't freak out, I think I've got —" and then he was a woman.

I don't mean he looked like a woman or there was a puff of smoke and he changed places with a woman, I mean one moment I'm looking at Danny who's young and blond and skinny and tall, and then like a 1960s movie where they splice the film, there's this fat woman with stringy black and gray hair in a ponytail, with a double chin and a cardigan and sensible shoes. That's when I threw up. Because it wasn't like David Blaine or whoever where there's a buildup and a rhythm and then something strange happens, it was *wrong*.

The woman stood up, looked at the computer, and started fiddling around with her wristwatch while I put down the trash can and wiped my mouth. "Oh Jesus," I said, staring. "How did... what...?"

"Goodbye," the woman said, standing and heading towards the door.

"Wait! Who are you, where's Danny?" She didn't even look back, just gave me the finger and kept walking. Well, I

wasn't having any of that. I grabbed her by the wrist and yanked hard.

"Bitch, I am talking to you."

When she spun around, she looked surprised. Also kind of scared. "I have to go," she said.

"No, what you *have* to do is tell me where Danny went!"

Even though she was pulling away from me and her eyes were wide, her lip kind of curled a little. "Danny's not here right now," she said, in this creepy, scratchy voice. At that point, I hadn't seen *The Shining*, so I didn't get it.

"What are you and what's going on!?"

"I have to go," she repeated. "I have to catch a car. He's going to be here..." she looked at her watch. "He should be right outside!"

"Tough tits," I said, "You ain't going nowhere until..."

"Look, there's no time and I don't want to start a fistfight with you. I could scream and wake the neighbors, but that doesn't get me where I need to go. Danny's not here. He's... in storage. He'll be back in one hour and fifty-eight minutes. He's safe."

"How did you get here?"

"Let go or I will scream," she said, and then I saw she'd pulled her other hand out of her pocket and had her keys laced through her fingers, women's-self-defense-class style. So I let go.

She beelined for the stairwell and I followed.

"Who the hell are you?" I repeated.

"I'm called Mavra." She was huffing a little by the time we got to the foyer. She went straight to the front door without breaking stride, but I caught up easily.

"Where are you going?"

"How's that your business?" She looked me up and down for the first time. "Oh, you must be *Chris*."

"How'd you know my name?"

"Danny's asked a lot of questions about you."

Just then, a car honked its horn, a big ol' forest-green sport ute. She chugged over towards it.

"You... Mavra?" The driver was a big guy, brown beard contour-mapped over rolls of fat red face. He had big wide eyes behind battered metal-rim glasses. He looked like he was meeting a movie star.

"Go to Morris and 33rd Street," she said, opening the back door and pulling herself in. I pushed in after her.

"Hey!"

"Oh, don't think you're getting away," I said.

"Who's this...?" the driver asked, kinda confused.

"This is Chris," Mavra said, looking poison at me.

"You part of GNOMON?" he asked me, looking eager.

"No, Chris is an unwelcome interloper," Mavra responded.

"Um..."

"Look," I said, "You can try and kick me out, but I see a cop car at the block's end and I don't think you want me to scream and wake the neighbors. You don't really have the time for that, do you?"

She glared, then shrugged and... and she looked like she felt really bad for me? But she said, "Suit yourself."

"You said 33rd and Morris?" the driver asked, poking stuff into his phone.



"Gimme that," Mavra demanded, taking the phone from him. "Just go!"

"Buckle up," he said.

Mavra snorted. "Or what? I already died once." His phone started giving directions, which he didn't seem to need.

I gave her a flat look. "You died? You're, what, Jesus now?"

"It's a matter of public record," the driver said. "That's Mavra Piagetti. Died in 2004."

"Never even got to vote for the first black president," she muttered, staring out the window as we turned onto Morris. "Look, if you're here, make yourself useful," she said, turning back to me. "See that bag hanging off the street sign? Hop out and grab that."

"Why should I...?"

"C'mon, don't be a butthole, just do it!"

So I did it. Inside were four glass bottles, a siphon, and a roadside flare.

"What's this for?" I asked, climbing back in.

"Enemies of America, c'mon, move."

She must have given the driver instructions, because he leadfooted it out of there and up a highway on-ramp.

"Look, I got your stuff and I didn't scream and all that but I need to know what's going on."

"You really don't know anything?" the driver said, craning his neck back to boggle at me. "I mean, most of it's online..."

"Just drive, OK?" He turned back, and for a moment we were all quiet.

"Enemies of America?" I asked.

"Fine, one enemy."

"Wait, how do you...?" the driver started, but shut up when she gave him another glare through the rear-view mirror. I wasn't so easily satisfied.

"What are we going to do?"

"Don't worry about it."

"No, I'm *worried* about it because I saw my f... saw Danny disappear before my very eyes and turn into you, so I'm not letting you out of my sight until he's back in... what, about an hour?"

"You saw it?" The driver couldn't contain himself. "You mean you actually saw the transmogrification?"

"Drive!" she barked.

"Jesus, they were right when they said you were rude," he grumbled.

"Sorry, I don't get out much."

"Out of where? Hell?" I said.

"I just cease to exist," she said quietly.

That hung in the air for just a minute. "...what?" I finally said.

"Let it go."

"No, you, what's your name?" I said, poking the driver through the back of his seat. "Tell me what's happening, you seem to know this stuff."

"Should I...?"

"Oh go ahead." Mavra was staring out the window, pensive, not even checking her watch.

"You can call me Q," the driver said.

"Oh c'mon."

He reddened. "Right. Um. OK, so after 9/11..."

"Here we go," I muttered.

"Do you want to hear this or not?"

"Sorry, it's just... you can find a whole lot of crazy after that intro, you know?"

"Well duh, yes." He sighed, honked at an Infiniti, then tried again. "After 9/11 the government was really interested in what they called 'out of context problems.' Rumsfeld's 'unknown unknowns,' stuff you can't prepare for because it never happened before. That's not too *crazy* for you, is it?"

"Sheesh."

"They formed this study group they called the New Inquisition to look for ways to predict the unpredictable."

"That's not..." Mavra made a face. "Ugh. TNI was a private thing, predated 9/11. Anyhow."

"The... the NSA was looking for ways to comb data and find correlations that humans would miss. Stuff that didn't make human sense but that held true? They're still at it, in fact. You know those dumb online quizzes? Like, 'Which Character from Moby Dick are You?' That kind of thing? That's the most obvious point of their data gathering."

I looked at Mavra and rolled my eyes, but she shook her head. "Wait, online questionnaires are an NSA trap!?"

"Not all of them, obviously," she replied. "Some are corporate marketing. Any time you see brands mentioned, that's probably a business. And of course they let people just throw together quizzes — the pointless ones constructed for fun are protective coloration for the security and metadata sweeps."

"You're kidding me."

"Hey, you're the one who puked when I materialized."

"Yeah, let's get away from, from..." I trailed off and Q went on.

"One NSA group went really far afield. Right past MKUltra remote viewing, straight through *The Men Who Stare at Goats* and *The Coincidence Engine* and on into the Deep Weird. They were interested in precognition, oracles, intuition, fortune telling... patterns that were logically unrelated but consistent. Like, when hems rise the market goes up? That times a thousand. Snowfall patterns correlate with Nordic runes and indicate military trends... numerology in the third most popular movie of a month predicts global health hazards, and it's never the most popular, always the third, and it's not that the director put them there it's..." It was his turn to fade into silence.

"Emergent patterns," Mavra supplied. "We built this big-ass computer to try and find patterns and we called it GNOMON."

"And?"

"It worked way too well. Look," she explained, "The universe is a lot less structured than you think. It has to be, because of the limits on your perceptions and your cognition speed. Everything you remember gets some meaningless details stripped off it, otherwise you'd run out of storage space. You don't remember every time you've caught a baseball, but your brain builds a model that says how baseballs go and it's close enough. Especially given the tolerances of your perception, which can barely tell one ball from another." She took a breath. "Same with the consistency of natural law and reason and logic. They're not infallible. But we have to treat them as if they are or else." She shrugged. "If we couldn't count on gravity and physics, we'd never get anything done. We'd be too existentially paralyzed to leave the house."

"But some NSA supercomputer saw through all this?"

"Well, people did it before, too. That's what TNI was all about, trying to bridge human reality to *real* reality. For fun and profit." She shook her head. "I knew of at least five people on staff who could do impossible things. Literal, exo-logical, anti-Newtonian *eerie shit*. Spells and miracles and daft

mad stuff. This is our exit,” she added, turning to Q.

“I know,” he replied.

“Where do you fit into this? How’d Danny get involved?”

“I programmed GNOMON,” she said.

“Then the NSA killed her and the computer brought her back from the dead,” Q said.

“What?!”

“Not...” She winced. “Look, I don’t remember much about dying, so I can’t say... and I don’t think the guys I worked with at the NSA would do that kind of thing. They had no motive. And I don’t know who else would have opportunity. But I guess it’s possible. I mean, if you think about it, who’s going to be able to zotz your ass without you even suspecting they were planning it, if not the US intelligence services?”

“Let’s talk about... the computer, um...”

“GNOMON was built to model human behavior, human beings, on a parapsychical level, and none of us really knew what we were doing. We just threw everything in the blender, gutter magick and vodou, religion and statistical analysis... I’m probably not actually me. Not the Mavra Piagetti who died anyhow. I’m about eighty percent certain that I’m a meta-real simulacrum that perfectly duplicated dead Mavra. Like a tulpa.”

“A what?”

“An externalized, tangible thought-form, c’mon,” Q said.

“Danny found GNOMON online because it’s supposed to be findable. The most valuable information for it was not what *we* put into it, obviously.

When you’re sniffing after unknown unknowns, you’re not going to get too far on a diet of known knowns, right? But synchronistic, seemingly random stuff? That’s gold. Well. To get random input, you have to cast a wide net.”

“It’s not that different from the onion router,” Q said.

“The what?” I was getting pretty tired of being ignorant.

“The government put out this thing called Tor that’s a supposedly unbreakable secure communication protocol, but to be really strong it has to have a lot of people running it, so they gave it away to everyone. All the drug dealers and Mossad agents and money launderers using it make it equally safe for spies.”

“That’s really stupid,” I said.

“Stupid or not, they did it.” He pulled over.

“Why are we stopping?” I asked.

“Because we’ve arrived.” Mavra opened the door and shuffled out. I followed.

“You’d think it could also simulate some wet-works psycho,” she grumbled. She’d opened the gas tank and was siphoning fuel into the bottles. “I’m not cut out for this.”

“What are you doing?”

“Getting ready to burn out a terrorist. The dude in this house,” she said, pointing at a nondescript ranch-style, “Is building his very first ever bomb. He’s a baby Kaczynski, just about to come out of his shell. He has no criminal record, a mostly harmless psych jacket, his fingerprints aren’t even on file. He,” she said, “Is the very definition of an out-of-context problem.” With a grunt, she hurled a glass bottle against the front door.

“Wait!” The big sport ute was pulling away. “How can you...?”

“Because he took a ‘Which Dirtbike Hooker are You?’ quiz and got Donna. No one else ever got Donna. Big, big red flag.” Her second bottle went onto the roof with a looping underhand.

I looked around. I don’t know why I didn’t stop her. I guess I was still freaked out over the whole materialization thing and all that whacko conspiracy exo-logic chatter. No one seemed to be around. No one opened the front door at the sound of the third bottle breaking.

“Aw, crap.” The fourth bottle had rebounded off the window and was pouring out onto the lawn. “Well, here goes.”

“Hey! How did Danny turn into you?”

“He volunteered to switch places. It’s how he got his answers.”

“What answers?” I asked, but she’d struck the flare and overhanded it, end-over-end at the front door.

FWOOSH!

I just stared, like when you pass a crash on the highway. I guess I was in shock?

“What did you do?” I cried. “WHAT DID YOU DO?”

“WHAT DID YOU DO?” shrieked a voice at my side, and I turned to see Danny staring, aghast, at the burning house. “Jesus Christ, arson?!?”

Given what I knew about his feelings, I shouldn’t have hugged him, but it’s a good thing I did, because when the house really blew up, neither of us was looking at it.



# APPENDIX

## BOOKS

*A Shroud for Waldo*  
*Alias the Cat*  
*American Elsewhere*  
*The Bible Repairman*  
*Big Machine*  
*Black Hole*  
*Clean Room*  
*John Dies at the End*  
*Magic for Beginners*  
*MIND MGMT*  
*The Mishkin File*  
*The Prague Cemetery*  
*Spellbound*  
*Spook*  
*Uzumaki*

## FILMS

*The Babadook*  
*Beasts of the Southern Wild*  
*Intacto*  
*Terribly Happy*

## PODCASTS AND RADIO

*Limetown*  
*Snap Judgment: Spooked I-V*  
*Tanis*

1: MEAT



2: THROAT



3: SMALL



4: BIGGER



5: LAYERS



6: REDUX



7: VEIL



8: BESEIGED



9: SELVES



10: MEDIA

