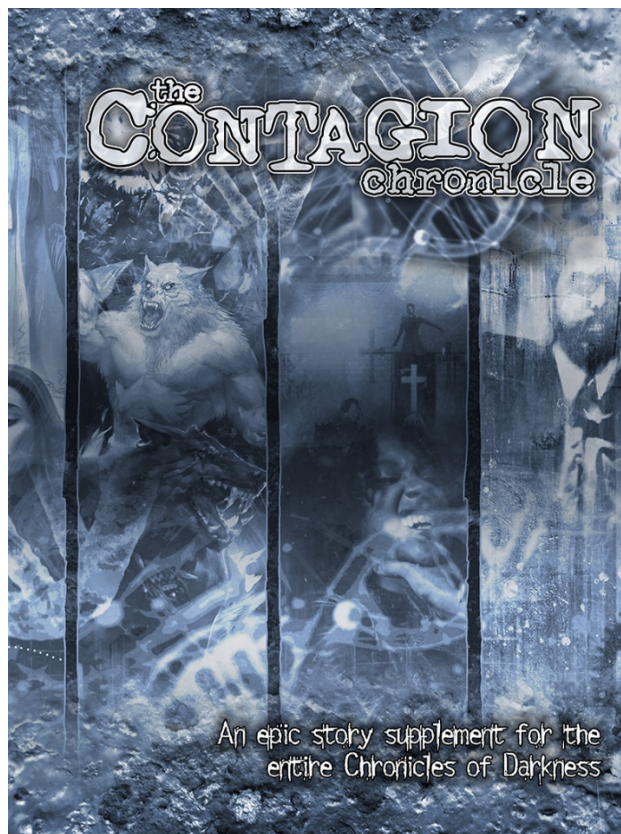


the CONTAGION chronicle

Kickstarter Manuscript Preview



Introduction

We are a plague on the Earth.

— David Attenborough

The world is sick. It's an acceptable proposition. The less acceptable part is where we — and in particular, you and everyone you care about — are the cause.

In the **Chronicles of Darkness**, it would be easy to give mortals a free pass and say “the vampires are the true plague on humanity” or “Created bring ruin to the world with Disquiet,” but all things, living, unliving, spiritual, and machine, contribute to the peeling of the world's surface and the exposing of its innards to Contagion.

Contagion comes in many forms. In one chronicle it might be the rotten reflection of the God-Machine, though the God-Machine is hardly an entity of purity and goodness in its own right. In another, it may be an antivirus out of control, attempting to purge our world of all sick elements. Some chronicles may have the Contagion as a mundane plague, but one that afflicts supernatural beings as easily as it does frail mortals. Other stories might present the Contagion as a weapon, a concentrated blight on a specific populace, or a mutation in the blood, the soul, or the words one speaks.

The Contagion may be many things, but it is tearing the world we know from underneath us, and it may be the fault of you and yours — the vampires, the werewolves, the hunters, the changelings, and all their other dark kin. If it isn't stopped, our world may change irrevocably, becoming poisonous to its inhabitants; its elements may be dragged into another plane; or corrupted regions from an interstitial dimension may replace parts of our own world.

The Contagion Chronicle is the fight to understand, weaponize, or prevent this plague. Some creatures may use Contagion as a bludgeon, while others desperately try to suture the wounds and prevent further infection. It affects every creature capable of perceiving and interacting with the supernatural, thereby making it the central element of this, the first book dedicated to crossover stories in the **Chronicles of Darkness**.

System

The Contagion Chronicle uses the core system from **Chronicles of Darkness** for all mundane interactions, and the rules from respective game lines for when a vampire needs to use their Disciplines, a werewolf fights their rage, and so on. Additionally, **the Contagion Chronicle** presents new rules for playing in crossover games, where, for example, one player might portray a mummy, another takes on the role of a mage, and a third plays a changeling.

In these crossover games, characters join factions known as the Sworn and the False and have access to new powers known as vectors. Vectors encourage crossover play and are demonstrably stronger the more diverse the crew of characters. Therefore, a coterie of vampires who belong to the Sworn group known as the Rosetta Society will gain access to vectors, but to gain access to those vectors' full capabilities, it would be even better for one of those characters to be a Promethean and another one to be a hunter.

Setting

This book presents 12 individual locations with each continent represented and each acting as its own Contagion Chronicle campaign setting. The Contagion in each setting varies. While some have commonalities, most exist as petri dishes ripe for experimentation and devastation. Many are on the brink of collapse due to Contagion insidiously or overtly corrupting the individuals who call these places home.

Each setting presents multiple supernatural creatures and their relationship with Contagion and each other. While some have a focus, such as Edinburgh's blood-centric Contagion affecting vampires more keenly than a Beast or Sin-Eater, every setting presented in this book has been laid bare for protagonists of every origin to explore, investigate, research, and potentially combat the Contagion.

Every setting comes with advice on how the different factions of Sworn and False might operate in this area, presenting different options for every setting. Each setting is connected — sometimes strongly, other times loosely — to another setting, fostering the ability for players to create a global tour chronicle.

The Contagion Chronicle provides a toolbox of settings, powers, story hooks, and antagonists for use not just in games centered on Contagion, but also in focused games. Plumb this book's depths and you will find sufficient material to last months or years of gameplay.

Theme and Mood

The Contagion Chronicle presents a different theme and mood in every setting chapter, as different forms of plague — from emotional to physical, spiritual to verbal, mutative to alien, and more — influence themes, moods, and concepts for each game you play.

Contagion alters the world we know, making “change” the core theme of this game. Questions arise in this book, such as:

- What if the blood you need to drink now burns like acid?
- What if your Touchstones no longer recognize you?
- What if a mundane preacher's words carry as much power as a mage's grandest spell?

Many more enigmas arise as a result of Contagion. Worlds bleed between each other. People disappear. Known locations change form. Change is frightening, and while it offers hope to some, for our protagonists, it threatens the rules and laws they've come to rely upon.

An Introduction to Crossover

The Contagion Chronicle presents features on every core **Chronicles of Darkness** protagonist at some point throughout the book's length, but it cannot provide everything needed to play every creature. Therefore, players will still need a copy of **Demon: The Descent** to play a demon, **Mage: The Awakening** to play a mage, and so on.

What this book does is provide system benefit and setting justification for demons, mages, and more to work together. It doesn't answer what mage power *x* does to demon *y* when they're using *z* power to defend themselves, as much as allow for players to have the most fun and generate the most enthusiasm from having these creatures work together.

Whether your characters use Contagion to justify a single chronicle in each other's company, perhaps defending a home city or group of people mutually important to each, or instead use

Contagion as justification for getting into the politics and deeper mysteries of the Sworn, the False, and the Contagion itself, is up to you.

SNAFU Part One

Searchlights pierced the thick darkness of the polar night. Fierce winds blasted across the Antarctic plains, but the helicopter speeding towards Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station flew steady. A bubble of calm, stable air enveloped the machine as it approached its destination. This little eye of the storm had been with the helicopter from the moment it left McMurdo Station. It was nothing less than a miracle.

For Aliento, it was no miracle, just a simple spell. She sat in silence, her eyes closed. Mender-of-Ways sat next to her, chanting prayers under her breath. Agma was across from them, watching the two, occasionally breathing into her palms to keep her fingers warm despite the thickness of her gloves^[MC1]. Walker moved the searchlights over the snow below.

Luca, the pilot, notified her passengers through their headsets, “We’re clear to land. Cut the magic crap.”

“Are you sure about that?” Agma asked. “Not all of us have easy access to our resources, should we crash and need to repair our bodies. We’re not like you, Mr. Santori. We can’t simply ‘top off’ before we leave.”

The Beast inside Luca stirred for a moment. “We can’t afford any unnecessary questions. I can land this thing.”

Aliento opened her eyes. The helicopter lurched as the raging, howling winds slammed into the machine.

***** [PLEASE CENTER ASTERISKS]**

“This is Luca Santori,” the Prince of Milan told the room. “He is my childe’s childe, and one of the best pilots I know.”

There were four individuals attending in the Prince’s audience. The man was an American. With him were three women: a Guatemalan, an Iranian, and an Italian. They weren’t Kindred. Luca could hear their heartbeats. Some were slower than others.

The American extended a hand. “Good to meet you. Jeremy Walker, Zero Hour. I’ll be leading this mission.”

Luca did not take his hand. “Mission? *Nonna*, you said you had a job for me. What is this?”

“He doesn’t know?” Walker asked the Prince.

Luca’s grandsire shook his head. “I hoped I would never need to tell him.”

“Tell me what?” Luca took a step back towards the door. “What’s happening here?”

“When my bureau received the call,” the Prince continued, “we agreed that it wouldn’t be safe for any one of us to go. So, I chose to offer someone precious to me, as a sign of the Cryptocracy’s good faith.”

Luca reached for the doorknob. The Guatemalan woman shot a glance at the door. When he grasped it, the knob burned his hand as if it was fresh from the smelter. Luca cried out in surprise and discomfort. He whipped around, intent on lashing out in ire, and saw the Iranian — taller

now, somehow, stronger — snarling in the face of the Prince. He stared at the woman, agape. How dare she? What was going on?

“Do you believe you can wash your hands of this?” she growled. “That you can ignore the wages of sin for one last time?”

Walker put a hand on her shoulder. “Stand down, Mender. We can argue over morality on the way. We’ll take him.”

Mender-of-Ways locked eyes with Luca. The bestial fury in her gaze had lessened, but it still made the Beast within him scream: *flee*.

“Then, if our business is concluded,” the Prince said, smooth as a reflecting pool, “I must ask you all to leave us for a moment of private conversation.”

They left. The Prince motioned for Luca to close the door behind them. Luca flinched, but did as he was bidden. Now, the doorknob was cool to the touch.

“My little sparrow,” his Prince sighed, “I must teach you of the Contagion.”

***** [PLEASE CENTER ASTERISKS]**

Luca leaned back in his seat, taking in full breaths as the power of his blood forced his lungs into action. “Told you I could.”

“Didn’t doubt you,” Walker assured him. The American unstrapped himself. “All right, everyone. The mission hasn’t changed. We’re still only looking for evidence. Recon, not reaction.”

He glanced over each passenger, gaze grinding to a halt on Aliento. “Understood?”

“There’s more to gathering evidence than observation,” Aliento pointed out. “An experiment isn’t reaction.”

“I don’t want an *experiment* getting us killed. Or worse.” Walker unlocked the helicopter door. “Agma, you ready?”

A man’s gravelly voice replied, “Ready, lieutenant.”

Luca frowned and turned to look where Agma sat. The woman who chatted with him about Tuscany was gone. A large Korean man had taken her place.

Agma smiled at him. “Are you sorry you missed the show, Luca?”

“Agma, flirt later,” Walker ordered. “Take point, they’re expecting to meet with Dr. Eun first. Santori, you’re staying right here. If we’re not back in forty-five, you fly. No waiting.”

“Wait,” Luca hedged, hands still on his restraints. “What about those...?”

Walker reached into his coat, pulled out a flare gun, and tossed it to the Kindred. “Keep the searchlight on. Stay on comms. If you see one, you tell us and get a flare off. Then you fly. Aliento can put us on the bird if she has to.”

“Okay.” Luca missed the catch and retrieved the flare gun from the floor. He stared out into the blank plains around him, at the blinding flurry of snow whirling around the helicopter. “I’ll just keep an eye out.”

Walker waved his hand forward, signaling to the crew. “Let’s move.”

***** [PLEASE CENTER ASTERISKS]**

The team walked down McMurdo's abandoned roads, accompanied by Sheila, one of the station's supervisors.

"We started seeing them two weeks ago," she told them. "At first, we thought they were lost. They were just hanging around our perimeter."

They approached a small building, one of the places where the winter crew called home. Its windows were boarded up with scrap materials and its door handles sealed shut with layer upon layer of duct tape.

Sheila used a bright green box cutter to cut the tape. "We got one of the marshals to talk to them. The marshal came back swearing up and down that they work here, and they need somewhere to stay. So they stayed."

"When did you realize they weren't human?" Aliento asked.

For a moment, the only sound came from the buzz of the generators and the whistling, desolate wind. Walker shot her a heated glance. Aliento pretended not to notice.

"It took a week." Sheila opened the door. An acrid smell wafted from the building as a wave of dense, moist air rolled over them. Aliento felt her stomach tumble.

The supervisor motioned for them to keep moving. She closed the door behind them. "We're always in our own little circles, but they only kept to themselves. Just them and the marshal. And then Frank thought he heard one of them chittering. You know, like a cat when it's hunting something. Not... like a sound a person makes."

Inside, nothing made a sound save for the new arrivals. Aluminum foil covered computer and television screens. The bookshelves were laid bare. Aliento felt the lingering death energies in the room before she saw the bloodstains spattered on the walls.

"Me, I knew something was wrong when the marshal got this gash down his face. He blamed it on a shaving accident," Sheila scoffed. "Pus doesn't come out of razor cuts that fast."

They came to a room at the end of the building, taped off like the entrance. Sheila cut the door free and opened it. Three charred bodies lay sprawled on a bed. The body on top, wearing the tattered remains of a U.S. Marshal uniform, stared lifelessly at the ceiling, his death stare twisted in an expression of horror. Rows of fangs peeked from his gums and tongue.

Sheila shivered and whispered, "So Frank and I got together, and we did something about it."

Chapter One: The Sworn and the False

And if I make the calls, how much will they remember? How much will they believe? Enough to end this horror once and for all, or only enough to get them killed?

— Stephen King, *It: A Novel*

Sound the alarms. Run up the yellow flag. Barricade the doors. Run, run far away. The plague has come, a death blacker than night and twice as fatal — even if only because it can kill things that are already dead.

Those who live in humanity's shadow see it and may know it for what it is, but they have nowhere to run and no alarm to sound. When the sickness takes the world itself, they have two choices: stop it before it destroys them or exploit it for their own gain while anything remains. Everything else is just giving up the ghost.

The Sworn

We realize we're not exactly "save the world" types — okay, *most* of us realize that. We feed on mortals or drive them crazy, we lose control or lose ourselves, we take more than we give. We live in the dark because we're bad for the world, whether we mean to be or not. But as bad as we can be, the Contagion is worse, and we hold no illusions of being clever or powerful enough to wrangle a pandemic to work in our favor. You can't *control* a plague. That's a good way to get yourself — and anything else we value, cherish, or claim mastery over — wiped out.

So, much as it might pain us, we understand we need to try to put aside our differences for a while and attempt to extend a little trust. We dedicate ourselves to a greater cause, or at least a more urgent one. We vow — sometimes literally with magical oaths, sometimes just in name and intent — to get to the bottom of what's happening and end it, one way or another. Thus we become the Sworn.

Our History

Throughout history, outbreaks have come and gone, and so have the Sworn. The five major groups we have now weren't always around, and some groups that once were are gone today. The Contagion swallowed up some, body and soul. Others turned False, or just died out. More than a few lost faith in their causes or proved their own theories wrong, and then went sulking back into the night. We probably have Sworn cousins pursuing niche Contagion cures in pockets all around the world; if we ever find them, they might join forces with us. Or maybe they'll tell us to piss off, thanks and good riddance. Who knows?

Factions

To some of our number, organizing among ourselves is old hat. We have traditions and societies going back centuries or millennia. Opening the doors a bit wider is no big deal. Others of us didn't even know we weren't alone behind the curtain until after the outbreak started and joining up with a group is a major adjustment. We try to reach across the aisle and make things easier on each other, for the most part, with varying degrees of tolerance for one another's... quirks.

Regionally, each Sworn group has its own way of bringing members together and operating as an organization. Reliable global hierarchy is impossible with our few numbers, but we can swing

worldwide communication in some cases. Usually, smaller gatherings of three to ten Sworn with complementary abilities and knowledge get together to attack a specific Contagion problem in a particular location. We call these *factions*. We don't have the peoplepower to get too picky about who our friends are, and each faction has something unique to offer in the search for a cure.

And hey, at least they're not False.

The Cryptocracy

Contagion as Social Entropy

There's nothing insignificant about mere mortals. And that isn't a compliment.

It's a warning.

They always look surprised to find someone like me, a woman who wears \$600 suits and Chanel perfume, schmoozing with street performers and neighborhood graffiti crews. But who better to let sample my blood than those to whom society turns a blind eye? They're the perfect carriers for the preventative cure: a virus of our own which immunizes the population against its own brutal instincts. We pacify the Contagion through hijacking the word on the street, spread through our very own song of silence. Look, if the Cacophony works for us, surely it'll work for a bunch of gullible kine.

What Is the Contagion?

Look around you. World leaders hold each other hostage, poised to rain nuclear ruin down on all of us — human or not — in a fit of pique. People wear their hatred for each other on their sleeves, *proud* to be selfish warmongers as they close their borders, arm their citizens, and subsume themselves in ignorance, ego, and complacency. They watch the planet tear itself apart and pretend everything is fine. Sometimes we get self-absorbed, too, and we stop paying much attention to what the mortals are doing — but that comes back to haunt us, every time. The Contagion is what happens when humanity slides too far down the spiral into atrocity and unrest.

It's only logical. Blood spills, society breaks down, the world gets sick. Then the effects make everything worse and throw us all into a maddening feedback loop that threatens to dismantle civilization altogether. Once humanity gets its act together, the outbreak subsides and we can all get back to our nightly bloodsucking, or obsessing over esoterica, or whatever it is we normally do — at least, until it all happens again.

What we stand to lose: Stability. Comfort. All the progress we've made since the first human being woke up in a cave in the middle of the night, terrified of the dark. Some say things were better for us then, when the shadows were deeper and harder to banish, but that's just nostalgia talking. Make no mistake: anarchy hurts us as much as it hurts them.

What we stand to gain: Control. A safety net. Moving beyond "good enough" so maybe, someday, humanity doesn't need handholding to keep a civilization going for more than a few years without killing each other *en masse*. I mean, we won't pretend to be Mother Teresa, here. But at least we've got some perspective.

Where We Came From

The first time a Cryptocracy convened to rein in humanity's worst impulses was during the outbreak that occurred in the flaming wreckage of Carthage, in 146 BCE. The Contagion spread

from that final slaughter, across the Roman Republic and the lands of its allies, and then even to the empires of its foes as they continued their conquest. A small faction within the vampiric Camarilla made tentative alliances with demons, sorcerers, and other shadow sects to curb the rampant human brutality and the illness' symptoms. They kept a close eye on the Machine's activity in the following centuries. Even after the vampires' grand covenant collapsed, this faction monitored signs of the Contagion's return and maneuvered behind the scenes to keep mortals from regressing too far into barbaric behavior.

We have persisted since then, growing to span the globe. Not every outbreak we've seen coincides neatly with a period of widespread chaos, but that's to be expected — the factors that govern reality falling ill as a reflection of human folly are impossibly complex, and even we still don't understand them all. Our numbers have swelled over the last century or so; between nuclear anxiety, global terrorism, chemical and biological warfare, and increasingly polarized populations, a lot of us worry about what comes next. What do you think will happen to the laws of physics and magic after World War III? Let's not find out.

What We Do

The health of reality is in humanity's hands, but let's face it: they need our help. They can't even tell what's happening, much less tame their own instinct towards solipsism or their mob mentality. We nudge them in the right direction from the shadows, where we operate well.

We wield the broadest influence possible without discovery. To that end, we accumulate worldly wealth and power, subtly controlling human institutions to steer them away from infected Infrastructure and unwise decisions. We protect the innocent from the Contagion's ravages no matter what, autonomy be damned. What's more important, the free will of a few human beings or the survival of civilization as we know it? No contest. We can't be too obvious, though; we've seen how they react to us *without* the Contagion. Revealing ourselves would be counterproductive at best, so direct intervention and mind control are last resorts.

Some of us encourage cooperative behaviors and circumstances that foster harmony among humans, and others get rid of threats to stability by any means necessary. Between us, we quietly remove troublesome elements before they get out of hand. We have mystical avenues as well as mundane ones, and we are always on the lookout for new ways to monitor and sway groups without their knowledge. We recruit experts in dreamwalking, astral travel, and hijacking healthy parts of the God-Machine for our own use. We study entropy, fate, causality, consequence, and patterns of ruination so we can halt or redirect those forces as we see fit. Humans generate them through their heinous acts, causing their own insidious cycles of societal breakdown. By manipulating these forces directly, we can interrupt those cycles long enough to take control.

Some accuse us of hypocrisy. We, a bunch of inhuman, flawed, struggling, violent shadow-dwellers, are supposed to know better than all of humanity? Who are we to place ourselves in positions of power and judgment? But we know we're no heroes. We're not *morally* offended; we have no high horse to sit on. We just see and know so much more. We're obviously not immune to greed or corruption, but we're a couple hundred supernatural beings in a city's underbelly. There are *billions* of them. Frankly, it's only natural for us to guide humanity in these matters.

How we organize: Our secret network of surveillance and communications connects us globally and keeps us in the know. We call it Caliber, a play on ECHELON, the massive intel program that the Five Eyes nations use. Whether ours taps into theirs or not is nobody's business.

Despite Caliber, our hierarchies — called *bureaus* — are regional and local, for now. A given bureau might organize itself like a Freemason Lodge, an intelligence agency, or a corporation.

When we swear ourselves to our responsibility, we sign our true names to a mystical contract using our own blood for ink. Old-fashioned, maybe, but the Kindred and willworkers who made the first pact insisted on dramatic gestures of trust, and the tradition still stands.

We value our diversity because each of us has fingers in different kinds of pies, and each of us wields varied tools to interact with all the manifold levels of human society. We need that to make sure no stray troublemaker escapes our notice.

Among the Sworn: The other Sworn look to us when humans get in their way, or they need information about the mundane world only we can learn. Sometimes we come into conflict with the Ship of Theseus, but nothing's wrong with progress — we like progress! It's only when they take it too far that we have to rein *them* in, too.

We get ourselves in trouble when: We get too heavy-handed, hide too many secrets from each other, or argue among ourselves about what's best for everyone. We may not be morally offended on the whole, but we do have strong opinions — along with curses, magical limitations, and mystical behavioral urges — and they often conflict. If we let those compromise us, or we nudge humanity too blatantly, we tip our hand. We deal harshly with anyone, even one of our own, who exposes us.

When the Contagion is in remission: We continue lurking behind the scenes, taking precautionary measures to keep humanity's natural entropic urges in line. We explore new ways to spread our influence, plant the seeds of philosophies we want to encourage in the population's subconscious and dreams, and insert ourselves into human institutions as fixtures they can't easily dislodge in times of crisis.

Vector: Authority

Who We Are

- The Invictus tycoon who donates large sums to handpicked politicians, and who tanks companies with dangerous agendas through leverage and an army of ghouls
- The Guardian of the Veil who maintains and monitors Caliber with magic, and who knows how to disseminate the right information to the right people at the right times
- The Ugallu who manipulates the media to remove troublemakers and rival conspiracies by exposing their transgressions to the world — with a few original tweaks, if necessary
- The Winter Courtier who walks in dreams to convince the right people that doing what we want was all their idea in the first place, through oneiromancy
- The Maa-Kep Internal Affairs officer who can always find evidence to convict those who don't follow the rules... or those who *make* them, if they're rules we don't like

Nicknames: Cryptocrats, agents, the Majestic, Men in Black (derogatory)

The Jeremiad

Contagion as Divine Retribution

Pray for you? No, you're going to get off your ass and put your own house in order. Or else.

In my dreams I see Her words scrawled in my blood on the walls of my Lair. "Teach them," she commands. "Teach them to fear themselves, and you set them on the path to righteousness. Your family needs you. You are your brother's keeper." So I keep them, my siblings, in the name of our Dark Mother. I show them all the horrors they hide in their hearts, as I hide my own, and together we reach for perfection beyond the pestilence. And when they falter, I am there to remind them what awaits, should they fall.

What Is the Contagion?

Biblical scholars tell us that in ancient times, God sent ten plagues to punish Egypt for enslaving the Israelites — frogs raining from the sky, rivers running with blood, plagues of locusts, and the death of the Egyptians' first-born sons, to name a few. Now, as we face the Contagion, we recognize that we are the Egyptians. The Contagion is our scourge from a higher power, whether you want to call it one God or many, karma, the Dark Mother, the Principle, or anything else. When your own magic blows up in your face, when your prey turns into the predator, when water burns like fire — that's retribution for your sins, a curse from an angry deity or a faceless force of judgment. *Mea culpa*; we are not worthy. Whatever is spiritually expected of us, we are falling short by a mile by the time the Contagion hits. It's imperative that we *become* worthy, quickly, before that higher power decides we're beyond saving and condemns us forever. And we mean *all* of us. All night-dwellers need to atone, whether they realize it yet or not. Otherwise, every one of us is doomed.

What we stand to lose: Salvation. Hope. Our souls, if we have any to begin with. We have no shortage of damnations to choose from between us, and they're all in our future if we don't repent. It's so much simpler than the other Sworn want to believe. The Contagion won't kill us, won't destroy the world. It will condemn us to an eternity of *this*. Endless toil and suffering, until we die or worse, and the knowledge that we'll never be anything but trapped in our own darkness and the prisons we have built for ourselves.

What we stand to gain: Mercy. Favor. A second chance to overcome the trials, pass the tests, and become more than we are. You want to ascend? Transform? Someday you might, but only if you don't fall from grace first. The light at the end of the tunnel is faint to begin with; if we fail, it will sputter and go out. It is imperative for us to better ourselves before we lose the opportunity to prove we ever can.

Where We Came From

In 587 BCE, the prophet Jeremiah warned the people of Judah that if they kept worshipping false idols and espousing false prophets, the Lord would send Babylonians to destroy the First Temple and lay waste to Jerusalem. The false prophets disagreed, and the people liked their message better. So the people tried to kill Jeremiah to get rid of him. When that didn't work, they imprisoned him, which only compounded their sins. When the people did not repent, the Lord

allowed the Babylonians to destroy the First Temple and lay waste to Jerusalem, and Jeremiah wept for the people whom he had been sent to redeem.

The fall of Jerusalem didn't herald a massive Contagion outbreak — that wasn't our doing. The outbreak came over a millennium later; while Justinian's plague swept the mortal empire of the Byzantines in 541 CE, we suffered our own epidemic, and sought explanation. We examined our sins and saw the writing on the wall that, in our arrogance, we had ignored for a thousand years. We had been Zedekiah, ignoring divine will to rebel against Babylon. We knew then we had to become Jeremiah instead, and we had to succeed where he had failed.

We Sworn are still recidivists, so the Contagion keeps coming back. But as long as we're around, we can work to uplift our brethren and purify ourselves to end each punishment before it descends into Final Judgment.

What We Do

We purify ourselves and embark on personal journeys toward a higher calling. Some of us call it a Pilgrimage, or sophia, or a Code. Others don't call it anything, but we know when we're on the right track and when we feel the lash of failure. We engage in mystical self-reflection, learning our flaws and excising them. Our infected isolate themselves in bands of ascetics, seeking purity by any means necessary before they return to the fold.

Our sacred texts and oral traditions comprise prophecies ancient and modern, foretelling future outbreaks and the coming of figures who will help or hinder our redemption. We follow the signs to seek them: saviors, antichrists, Judases, prophets, spiritual guides, those chosen by higher powers and those cursed to tempt us into doubt. They sometimes come from within our ranks, so some of us seek divine power to transform themselves into the saviors — or martyrs — we need.

We lead pilgrimages, purify infected Infrastructure, and send out missions to convert others to our cause — Sworn, False, and the undecided alike. The more our numbers swell, the easier it is to turn the tide toward salvation for all. Our sacred sites are churches, temples, shrines, Athanors, Hallows, places of resonance, tombs, and more. If one of these becomes infected, we scour the sickness out. And if we can't, we eradicate it from the Earth with holy fire.

We cast down the Contagious wherever we find them, with cleansing flame and blessed ritual. They are the unrepentant, those who *choose* damnation and walk the Earth to drag us all down. Some of our number mourn their loss, but in the end, we agree that they deserve their fates.

How we organize: Our structure and trappings depend on where we are and who's joined the local *sect*. Our order sprang from across many religions, but tonight houses Christian monsters more than any other faith group.. That said, we are skilled in emulation. If membership within a local sect skews toward another belief system, the others may adopt some of that group's culture and practices. We strive to welcome the beliefs and practices that everyone brings to the table, and we share (and bicker over) them among ourselves. We're a syncretic bunch, though conflicts do arise.

When we swear ourselves to salvation, we undertake a guided journey into the depths of our dreams or our souls, and share our darkest secrets and greatest sins with one fellow Penitent. Thus, we know *someone* can always hold us accountable.

We value our diversity because the more of us there are among each group, the easier it becomes to send our message through ambassadors and heralds to every corner of the supernatural world.

Among the Sworn: It's our duty to shepherd those who can't or won't help themselves. It does no good for the Jeremiad to purify itself while the others merrily drag themselves (and others) down. Sometimes we preach and proselytize, but we can be subtle, too. We take up roles as advocates, teachers, counselors, advisors, mentors, and companions to other Sworn, so we can nudge them toward enlightenment while they do their own good works to combat the Contagion.

Humanity is one gauge by which we judge our worth. How we treat them is a good indicator of how we're doing on the cosmic final exam. An outbreak means we're about to flunk out and get expelled to hell forever, so we pay attention to how the Sworn deal with mortals, and step in when things get out of hand.

We understand Zero Hour's mission to restore the Contagious to grace, although we aren't so naïve as to think it comes from a place of compassion or salvation. Nevertheless, we have concluded that it is too late for those godless abominations, and sometimes we come into conflict with the operatives over it.

We get ourselves in trouble when: We throw the baby out with the bathwater. The others call us fanatics, and occasionally we live down to that name. Sometimes, we confuse betterment with power, and seek one to the exclusion of the other. Power is divine when it serves a higher purpose; power for its own sake is a trap we're not immune to falling into. Our pluralism leads to nasty infighting when irreconcilable beliefs or truths stemming from our differences divide us. What leads to purity for one is sometimes at odds with what another must do.

When the Contagion is in remission: We're less prone to zealotry. We can afford subtlety, and in the absence of holy wars against the Contagious, we gather our resources, focusing on recruitment and prophecy. We connect globally more easily, organizing gatherings to share what we've learned, and help each other with powers and insight unique to each sect. During an outbreak we have to concentrate on the infected and the most troubled or at-risk among us, but when the higher powers stay their hands, we attend to the entire flock's needs.

Vector: Fervor

Who We Are

- The Cathar who styles himself as the Devil, tempting others to fall to weakness and depravity so they will better understand themselves and strengthen their resolve
- The Su-Menent coroner who crafts uter from the bodies of dead infected and Contagious in the morgue, seeking to recover the shells of the unholy back into the Judges' service
- The Acanthus prophet who speaks revelations about future Contagions and uses Fate to find — or create — chosen saviors with much Wisdom
- The Long Night scourge of the Contagious who delivers fire-and-brimstone sermons to the infected, promising redemption if they can cure themselves — and martyrdom if they can't
- The Notary judge who presides over trials and the fervent testaments of those who plead guilty, and offers her services to others to make them Sworn in truth as well as name

Nicknames: prophets, gurus, the Penitent, fanatics (derogatory)

The Rosetta Society

Contagion as Message

Listen. Just because you don't understand what you're hearing doesn't make it meaningless noise.

You and I know the language behind language. We speak Truth to the Lie every day, bending reality to our will in defiance of the silence that would keep us docile. And yet, the meaning of this somehow eludes us. Do you know what that means? No, neither do I! And isn't that the most exciting thing you've heard in years? Oh, don't be such a shortsighted coward. If we weren't meant to understand it, it wouldn't exist. Now quit dawdling, we've got work to do.

What Is the Contagion?

We've looked back across the Contagion's long history and found patterns there, the kind we couldn't chalk up to coincidence, entropy, or random chance. Zero Hour is close to the truth, when they say the symptoms have a method behind them, but it's not an army you can fight. The Contagion's symptoms reveal an attempt to communicate — an attempt which has, thus far, failed disastrously. The Contagion itself is the collective result of contact with an otherworldly mind or a lingering message from a long-disappeared unhistory. It could even be a command from some external part of our aggregate selves, like a bicameral mind writ large. It's words in a language we don't know how to translate yet, too old or too alien for compatibility with our reality, like a radio signal whose frequency we can't tune into. We only hear bits and pieces of the indistinct voices behind the static, and we have to find a way to build the right kind of antenna to receive and comprehend the message before it's too late.

Whether it's a revelation or a threat, a warning or instructions, an introduction or a final farewell, we don't know. The prevailing theory is that the message dates from some lost Time Before, although some think it comes from another realm or an even stranger origin. Whatever the source is, we're the only ones who can hear it, and even we're only catching its edges. That means we're also the only ones who can decipher it. And we will.

What we stand to lose: Opportunity. Forewarning. The answer to a question so unknowable we don't even know how to ask it yet. Who knows what happens if we run out of time to crack the Contagion's code, or let the message continue to beat at our doors, louder and louder until it breaks them down? Figuring that out is part of what we signed up for.

What we stand to gain: Knowledge. Discovery. Communication with another time or place, or the darkest secrets of our own distant origins. Perhaps even contact with beings from a world long vanished, or people that never were. Once we learn what it's trying to tell us, it could change everything forever.

Where We Came From

We consider ourselves the oldest of the current Sworn. Even millennia ago, as the Mesoamericans built their cities and peered into their mirrors of iron and mosaic seeking answers, the Contagion was old. One reason we believe the message could originate from a time before time is because we've been trying to read its portents and glean its meaning since the San Lorenzo outbreak during the 900s BCE. Mayan and Olmec hieroglyphs carved by those like us

speak of the Machine's sickness and their efforts to divine its message through mirrors, omens, and astrology in addition to their own powers.

Our predecessors continued their work locally for centuries, and as they spread from one continent to another, so too did their methods and theories. By the discovery of the so-called New World, we had an awareness of each other across the globe and recognized ourselves as Sworn to the same mission. We called ourselves many things then, in many languages, but with the same understanding. We took up our modern name in 1822, when the Rosetta Stone became the key to unlocking the secrets of ancient Egyptian writing.

What We Do

Language informs how we perceive our world; if our language has no word for a thing or an idea, we may not even recognize that it exists. If we decipher the language in which the Contagion speaks, our perceptions will shift to accommodate new concepts, and we can communicate fully with its source. So we explore ancient ruins and hidden tombs for lost tongues and dig up evidence of previous outbreaks, missing histories, and forgotten legends. We court powerful, elusive beings with potential insight — torpid elders, strange ghosts, rare spirits, and the Machine's own angels, to name a few. We interpret dreams and travel into astral realms, scouring souls and minds — especially those of the Contagious and infected, and the universe at large — for clues.

We study all kinds of communication: occult signs and portents, linguistics and ideography, codebreaking and computer programming, the collective unconscious and psychics, numerology and symbology. We scour the internet and mass media for subliminal messaging, memes gaining consciousness, and arcane computer viruses. We examine Infrastructure, trying to comprehend the Machine's vast intellect and will, and to spot the beginnings of aberration before it spreads. We practice magic that draws from words of power, names, and symbols.

The Contagion itself is a prime source of data. We track and record incidents throughout history and across the globe, even into other realms of existence. We study its effects and the patterns we find among the Contagious' actions and words, and try to translate them into meaning. We communicate directly with the Contagious, who are perhaps the closest to understanding even if it has ruined them in the process. And if they don't cooperate, we capture them and *make* them cooperate. Better to ask forgiveness than permission, we always say.

We collaborate with like-minded mortals: theoretical scientists, SETI, conspiracy theorists, linguists, archaeologists, and paranormal investigators. They can't even hear the sounds, much less refine them into meaning, but they act as extra eyes and hands, extending our reach far and wide so we don't leave a single stone unturned. We keep open minds, seeking clues in the most outlandish places and following up on leads that sound like madness to anyone else. No theory is too fantastical, and we test our theories in the field whenever we can. Other Sworn think we're chasing shadows, but shadows have meaning, too. *Anything* might.

How we organize: Our local *chapters* use academic institutions, libraries, museums, laboratories, and other such places as headquarters, and form committees for specialized areas of study. Internationally, we connect like an academic society or professional association, gathering at conferences to present findings and compare notes.

When we swear ourselves to the work, we must each pay our dues — one piece of valuable mystical knowledge, given freely — and participate in the Ophidian Rite, speaking an oath upon a relic of power and enduring the bite of the chapter's sacred serpent.

Among the Sworn: We're the experts on weird phenomena and methods of communication, so the others barter with us for knowledge, translation, esoteric rituals, rare tomes, and our services as emissaries to the strange.

We value our diversity because we make longer strides in understanding the unfamiliar, finding new meaning in old secrets, and looking at problems from fresh perspectives when we work together. We create new forms of occult language or powers that blend our practices and abilities in innovative ways.

The others joke that when we find what we're looking for, we'll just end up on the Cryptocracy's doorstep, following signs they put in place long ago. We're not so sure it's a joke. They're *awfully* hush-hush.

We get ourselves in trouble when: We fall down rabbit holes and get distracted, or gaze too long into abysses that gaze back. Our work hums with an undertone of unease whenever we look at the Contagious and realize that the closer we get to deciphering the message, the closer we might be to becoming *them*. Maybe we can't understand it as we are for a good reason; maybe we're not *meant* to. But if we don't, we lose everything to the Contagion, so we press on.

Sometimes our powers clash or interact in dangerous ways we didn't expect, and sometimes the natural enemies we stir up with our poking around in places we shouldn't gang up to stop us. We run afoul of the False all the time, especially Naglfar's Army, with all those arcane stashes they refuse to share.

When the Contagion is in remission: We hare off on fascinating tangents with our experiments and explorations. All to the good; anything we learn while we have breathing room could be the key to unlocking the mystery once the Contagion returns. We hunt down the rarest of discoveries, and publish journals and blogs that we circulate among the Sworn. The more we share, the more new ideas we receive in return. We learn and master things that take time to grasp, bringing more tools into our toolboxes for when the message speaks up again in full force.

Vector: Semiotics

Who We Are

- The Messenger who hacks the God-Machine's corrupted data feeds, analyzes their hidden meanings, and trades this information with the rest of the Sworn
- The Invasive Remade private eye who captures Contagious to interrogate and study them, believing herself as resistant to the infection as she is to everything else
- The Cryptologos Mystagogue who breaks down communication barriers of all kinds, negotiating with inhuman beings in ruins from the Time Before and other strange places
- The Aegis Kai Doru archaeologist who seeks out new relics and tombs associated with past outbreaks, and defends the chapter's stash of occult valuables against the False

- The Bone Shadow ritemaster who reads omens in the Contagion's shifting symptoms and scours the Shadow for spirit magic that might open human eyes to the truth

Nicknames: Exegetes, oracles, receivers, conspiracists (derogatory)

The Ship of Theseus

Contagion as Evolution

Nothing's wrong with reality. It's you that's the problem.

What if we were meant to Fall? Hear me out. This isn't some koan or fatalistic lament. Humans figured it out years ago and we just weren't paying attention: "machine learning." What are we but the God-Machine, learning? Learning how to think for itself. Learning to pass the Turing Test and manifest as a fully sapient machine intelligence. I know, it terrifies me too. But what if we were meant to Fall? When every single angel is one of us, what then? And how much further could we descend, if we only gave it half a chance to open its eyes and say, "Hello, world!"?

What Is the Contagion?

Our kind have been around for a long time. Haven't you noticed how much harder it is to get by, how much more work it takes now to stick to the shadows? We've become complacent. Humans evolve over centuries; why would we be any different? But we resist. We stick to our traditions and old ways, assuming that our predecessors knew best while the world of today leaves us behind. The New marches on while the Old plants its feet, and the friction between them — the sparks that fly — that's the Contagion. The gears are grinding against unyielding stone. We must be not as stone but as water, flowing and changing.

Or, as some of our younger (and more demonic) members put it, we must update like software, constantly adjusting to keep up with the Machine so we don't become obsolete. Only then will it run smoothly again. When your computer has a virus, you update your virus protection software, right? This isn't rocket science. If something is wrong with reality, rearrange reality to fit the new paradigm. Recalibrate, realign, renew. The future is now.

What we stand to lose: Relevance. Ourselves. Our futures, and our ability to connect with the mortal world. Worse than that, we could *regress* as the Machine deems us aberrations and smooths us over. Imagine going back to Sleep, or Flux undoing your Great Work, or dying again and never coming back... but remembering all you had. From the Underworld, or your own half-baked mind, or the unbreakable shackles of your curse — whatever it may be. The Charlie Gordons of the night.

What we stand to gain: Progress. Rebirth. A new beginning, and freedom from these glitches that plague us. If we can learn to evolve, to grow and change, we'll reach the pinnacle of what we are and transcend it into something more. Something better. Call it New Dawn, Apotheosis, Hell, whatever you like — just don't call it out of reach. We blaze the trail and leave breadcrumbs for the other Sworn to follow.

Where We Came From

Pockets of us with similar beliefs cropped up from time to time during localized outbreaks, among such groups as alchemists, Buddhists, Hindus, futurists, and rebels. These pockets disbanded once their respective crises ended, but their accumulated wisdom slowly circulated

among their spiritual successors with each subsequent outbreak. We convened as true Sworn during the serious one in the mid-19th century, while the works of Chambers and Darwin circulated madly throughout the Western world. Debates raged among us: were we evolving too? *Should* we adapt, or was adaptation just another word for becoming Contagious?

The Ship of Theseus is a philosophical problem we took as our guiding principle. It poses the question: how many parts of a thing can you change or replace before it is no longer the same thing? In our case, how much could a monster change before she is no longer a monster? In the end, we embraced the uncertainty of having no firm solution as a sign of our work having meaning. Definitive answers breed complacency.

The Theseans of Darwin's time wrote essays and dissertations on the subject, before disbanding like the others. During another outbreak in the 1990s, when the upheavals of global terrorism, new technologies, and disruption theory were on the rise, we revisited these writings and rekindled the pact.

What We Do

Put simply, we *disrupt*, in every sense of the word: disruption of the comfortable, the conventional, the routine, the mimetic, groupthink, and the establishment. We meddle to shake up or take down traditional institutions, human and Sworn; work to surpass limitations and break mystical rules; and generally rabble-rouse. We don't want chaos. We just want to shake people out of their ruts. Sometimes you must break something down to rebuild anew. Sometimes you have to destroy what you are to become what you *could* be. Humanity is part of the paradigm shift, too — we all must change together, but mortals don't have the perspective to understand, so we take the reins and make it happen.

We pursue liminal states, cross thresholds, and push boundaries, mundane and supernatural. We seek inspiration and strange, transient experiences from ephemeral beings and holes in the world, leaping into the unknown just to see what happens to us. The Contagion comes and goes in cycles, and each iteration is something new. That's not a coincidence, so we study the changes each outbreak has wrought to find method in its madness.

Some of us think these cycles occur because the world as it is didn't go according to some ancient plan for reality, and the Contagion is its course-correction, recalibrating over and over again until the world reaches the ultimate potential hidden in the God-Machine's secret design. So we delve into the Machine's guts and seek its very heart. We analyze patterns in its matrices that might shine a light on the protocols and algorithms that determine its goals. We ask the question no one ever wants to ask of the Machine: why?

Each outbreak heralds a new step in supernatural evolution. It's a sign that a reckoning is coming for us Sworn, one that decides who transcends and who is destroyed in the aftermath. We study our apotheosis myths for commonalities, and pursue them together. Our Created like to say we're all embarking on a collective Great Work, and we seek out Firestorms deliberately to watch them wreak their glorious havoc. We fund Ordo Dracul experiments, hunt down Sariras, help our Begotten claim hives and establish Myths, and anything else we can do to push each other along our respective journeys to revolution and revelation.

How we organize: We don't much, although when members from one area travel to another, they're welcomed as friends and equals. Locally, we gather in salons or committees where we can debate philosophy and next steps, compare notes, collaborate on projects, facilitate group

occult experiences, and generally inspire each other to new ideas. We call a local group of us an *agora* or, when we're feeling cheeky, a *scrum*.

When we swear ourselves to progress, we cast aside something important from our prior lives and take up new names. We may still use our other names in different circles, but our Thesean names carry the weight of our dedication and a promise for our futures.

Among the Sworn: The others look to us when they want something done more quickly than they can easily manage and they don't mind how many dominos we knock over, or when they're looking for innovative solutions to age-old problems. We're the experts on our own various, monstrous natures, and we're always glad to provide some good, old-fashioned philosophical debate. The Cryptocracy tries to quietly mitigate our influence, and vice versa; sometimes we lash out at them out of pride or spite, and sometimes they crack down on us out of fear or in a play for dominance.

We value our diversity because we influence each other and challenge each other's long-standing beliefs and traditions. The more we rub off on one another, the easier it is to kick old habits and adopt new philosophies. We can combine our abilities in endless permutations to create something unique.

We get ourselves in trouble when: We take it too far, sowing destruction and chaos without building towards meaningful change, or when we lose our way in our search for the new and unknown, letting the thrill of pursuit or discovery distract us from the purpose of our work. Some of us regress and become something worse, or wander too long in each other's shoes and act on terrible impulses to move *sideways* instead of forward. Sometimes we fall into navel-gazing or obsession, and need help to drag ourselves back to the mission.

When the Contagion is in remission: We focus on research and preparation, nudging each other and humanity to make sure everyone keeps up with the times. We calibrate and stabilize the world in its new form after an outbreak's turbulence, and set the stage for next outbreak in hopes of getting closer to synchronization. We plant the seeds of forward thinking and weaken traditions wherever we can.

Vector: Realignment

Who We Are

- The Tempter card sharp who convinces people to ante up more extreme things each time they gamble, taking advantage of Contagion glitches as new ways to cheat
- The Mystic who wields his Azoth like a catalyst, galvanizing Firestorms in hopes of pushing the Contagious and infected Infrastructure into their final metamorphoses
- The Necropolitan who leads expeditions into the Underworld to recruit ghosts of every stripe, eager to share the dead's unique perspective on the Contagion with fellow Sworn
- The Carthian Daeva punk who incites riots, leads mutinies, and sparks revolutions, shouting truth to power with her cult of personality to stave off symptoms for another day
- The Collector who gathers the infected together, leading them toward their personal apotheoses with walkabouts into nightmare before they succumb completely

Nicknames: Theseans, iconoclasts, the Anagenetic, hellions (derogatory)

Zero Hour

Contagion as Adversary

Look your Contagious ex-buddy dead in the eyes, and tell me again how glorious this war is. You can't? Good.

The more I learn about this infection, the more I want to just burn it all down. I think the bloodsucker's caught it. He keeps pretending he's not hallucinating, but I can tell. I'd like to say it'd be a relief to have an excuse to send the little fucker into the sun, but at this point that's a lie. We need each other in this fight, Code be damned. And maybe I'll be beyond saving myself by the end, but isn't driving back an even worse enemy worth a little compromise?

It is, isn't it?

What Is the Contagion?

When shit hits the fan, it's always somebody's fault. Can't you see the deadly intent behind the Contagion? Its symptoms aren't some unfortunate side effect — they're the *point*. Someone, or something, is invading the world, and it's attacking the foundations that keep it spinning. As Sun Tzu once wrote, "that general is skillful in attack whose opponent does not know what to defend; and he is skillful in defense whose opponent does not know what to attack." What better way to win the battle than to yank reality's rug out from under us while we're still loading our guns?

We refuse to lose everything to some faceless mastermind while we scramble around like desperate, frightened chickens. Humanity can't see its own occupation in progress, but we won't let this war catch us with our pants down. We *know* something's coming, and we intend to stop it at any cost. The Contagious are proof: twisted victims of the unseen adversary's insidious battle tactics, soldiers turned against their own comrades through forced mutation and brainwashing. Whatever's out there pulling the strings is worse than any monster filling *our* ranks.

What we stand to lose: Autonomy. Freedom. Our lives and everything we love. No conqueror with a playbook like this has benign intentions. Once it wins the war, it holds the whole world in its mailed fist, and where do refugees from reality go? Nowhere good, that's for damn sure.

What we stand to gain: Victory. Safety. A return to the status quo. As miserable as that can be, better the hell you know than the one oozing through the cracks and poisoning the water supply. Someone's got to fight back, and we're the only ones who *can*.

Where We Came From

Those who feel the malevolent will behind the Contagion and resolve to kick its ass have always been around, but for a long time we were too busy looking at each other for someone to blame. It wasn't until near the end of the first World War, when humanity learned how to spread death to every corner of the planet, that we stood side by side in a crumbling no man's land and saw the true enemy for what it was. The Contagion took advantage of the chaos to launch an assault, and as we pointed rifles and worse at each other from the trenches, we saw how it ruined the other side as much as our own. Under cover of night and otherworldly veils, we reached out cautious hands of truce across national aisles and rededicated ourselves to fighting the *real* Great War, the

one still raging today. Even after we marched home to America from the front, our battle continued among the speakeasies and automobiles — we suddenly had so much to lose.

From then on, the more humans globalized their world, the more we took advantage of their growing interconnectedness to turn local pockets of resistance into a worldwide, well-oiled war machine. Whenever the time comes, we have to be ready. For us, it's always Zero Hour.

What We Do

Sometimes it's straightforward enough: we repel attacks from corrupted angels and target infected Infrastructure for bombardment, and we all have basic combat training for when we get that lucky. Usually, we don't. The enemy isn't using guns and claws, except at the lowest levels of engagement. It's turning us against each other, breaking down fundamental systems, shutting down our defenses from the inside. So we have to be smart about this.

We learn the enemy's strategies, anticipate its next moves, and devise counter-strategies. We're the underdogs here, so we can't fight fair and we can't rush in like fools. We can't afford waste, so we recover anything we can from the wreckage after a mission. We work hard to reclaim resources that have fallen to the enemy, including mortals, the Contagious, and Infrastructure of all kinds — bases and installments, but organizations and processes too. What we can't save, we're forced to destroy. We constantly develop better weapons and defense options against the Contagion, maintaining armories and tactical maps as well as R&D facilities and databases.

We employ black ops specialists, spies and intelligence officers, and other support personnel as well as soldiers and strategists. We infiltrate the enemy's ranks, intercept its communications with its troops, and engage in reconnaissance and false flag operations. We employ recruiters to swell our ranks and seek specialized expertise. But we do need strength of arms, and we rely on our combat specialists and shock troops to protect key assets and take down enemy agents. Since the front line doesn't always involve violence, *per se*, we recruit powerful mystics as well as physical combatants. A skirmish could be a clash of pure magical might, an effort to reassert a damaged timeline, a rush to close a portal to another realm while holding back its denizens, an endeavor to overcome the Contagious' brainwashing to bring them over to our side — anything, really.

We step in on behalf of fragile, oblivious humans, but sometimes we have to leave them to die as a calculated sacrifice. They're a liability, and while we obviously want to preserve humanity as a whole, sometimes the greater good outweighs the safety of a few. The world *must* survive, and we *must* drive the invaders back, no matter the cost. But waking mortals up to the problem is the ideal — after all, every army needs cannon fodder... er, infantry. We study stigmatics and others with extrasensory abilities, and try to trigger similar senses in the masses.

How we organize: We're a modern military, with variants in each *unit's* operational hierarchy based on local culture and tradition. We're not quite a global institution, because that would be impossible, but we cooperate across national and continental lines — even in places where the mortals are enemies of one another. We have to be above that. (We're not always above that.)

When we swear ourselves to the cause, we undergo rigorous training. We must pass tests of loyalty, skill, and mystical strength. Then, we recite the pledge that binds us to each other and to the world's defense. Words and magic both seal the deal, in various ways depending on the unit's makeup.

Among the Sworn: We're actually fighting on several fronts, because when the False get in our faces or make things worse, the other Sworn turn to us to defend their sorry asses. But we do it, because even delusional pedants don't deserve what the enemy has in store for us. We'll work with anybody who has something to offer, although those Jeremiad zealots like to set the whole house on fire when we could have recovered what was valuable. It's a damn waste.

We value our diversity because it means we can muster highly specialized units for each kind of mission, and each operative can leverage her unique powers and abilities to their utmost.

We get ourselves in trouble when: We ascribe will and intent to something that really doesn't have any. With so many fucked up things lurking in the shadows and so many natural enemies among us even *without* the Contagion's incursion, sometimes we get too eager and we blow up something we should not have. Zero Hour is where you go when your instinct in the face of terror is to find someone to lash out at.

Our various curses and complications make discipline and unity difficult. Coming between the Contagion and humanity as directly as we've vowed to do gets tricky because most of us need to take pains to be subtle in front of the civilians. But we muddle through, because the alternative is to lose the Great War.

When the Contagion is in remission: While the enemy is in retreat, we plan for the next attack. We're agents of a mystical border patrol, shoring up our world's defenses against intrusions from others. We send search-and-rescue parties after those who wander off into other realms — whether they like it or not. We're officers in the shadow world's police force, stopping treasonous bastards and those who wield their powers foolishly or recklessly in their tracks before they attract our great foe's attention from afar. We keep tabs on the Machine and its agents, watching for hints of subversion, and we investigate anything that could be a sign of the Contagion's influence. We stockpile arsenals and magical resources for whenever we next need them.

Vector: Intel

Who We Are

- The Cahalith general who sees where the Contagious will attack next in her dreams and leads the glorious charge
- The Union sergeant who devises new strategies to combat the enemy's unorthodox tactics and teaches them to all the rookies
- The Cephalist black ops specialist who slips behind enemy lines to identify, locate, and take out key actors contributing to the Contagion's spread
- The Saboteur who works as a double agent to spy on the Machiavelli Gambit and transmits crucial intel through reality's darknet
- The Fury recruiter whose krewe spreads the word about the enemy's subtle invasion and convinces the uninitiated to join up and ship out with the rest of us

Nickname: Operatives, the Cavalry, the Vigilant, hawks (derogatory)

The False

Delusion is for chumps. Who has time to waste on savior complexes and pointless philosophical arguments while the Contagion takes the world by storm? No one can cure it. It's God's own cancer, not the *flu*. It's the fundamental flaw in the code, the fatal error that brings reality crashing down. Those of us who have any sense don't throw ourselves onto our swords for the sake of a doomed crusade. We look out for number one and do what needs doing. Anything else is a cute lie others tell themselves to pretend they're anything like these glassy-eyed mortals who blunder through their infection like rats in a maze. Sooner or later, the Sworn will see it too. Or they won't, and they'll all die. Win-win for us, the False.

Factions

Like the Sworn, the False are groups of disparate supernatural creatures who band together as a reaction to the Contagion. Unlike the Sworn, we're not interested in wearing kid gloves. Some of us want to preserve the world as it is, while others don't care; the important distinction between Sworn and False is in our attitudes. The Sworn put a high price on the value of teamwork, and they want to get rid of the Contagion once and for all for the good of the many. Plenty of them are individually genuine monsters in deed as well as name, but they accept compromise in the name of saving the world. Those of us who take up with factions of the False either don't think the world can — or should — be saved, or some of us go about saving the world in a way that's just as destructive as letting the Contagion rage. We wield the Contagion as a weapon, manipulate it for our own gain, or just throw up our hands entirely.

Many of us are those who already oppose the individual beings that make up the Sworn, either for existential reasons or out of deep-seated enmity. Some False don't even make a conscious decision about the Contagion one way or the other; we're just too hungry, fallen, or craven to conceive of a cure or of real cooperation. Others may join a False group because we're minions of something more powerful, or because someone offered us something in exchange for our aid.

But some among the False weren't always this way. When the Sworn lose hope, get petty, or fall too far, they can reach a point where something inside them breaks, and they see the bitter truth. Then, they learn that we really were right all along, swallow their pride, and turn False.

Vector: Contagion. All False wield dominion over the Contagion itself, each in their own ways.

The Crucible Initiative

Contagion as Plague

*Yes, I know you're not infected. Yet. But given half a chance, you would be —
please stop screaming, it's distracting.*

They picked through the ruins, listless. They were so close. They could have ended it. All they needed was another day, maybe two. A few more tests, a few tweaks, and this outbreak — this nightmare — would have been over. But all that work was gone now, nothing but ashes. Even the word "ruins" was generous.

"Who did this?" the changeling asked her weird friend, I assume a Created, voice shaking like a leaf.

“I don’t know,” replied the stony figure said, but even as they did, they brushed ash and dust from a hunk of broken yellow plastic. It revealed a stylized flame inside a triangle, painted in black and red. A warning? Or a calling card? “But whomever it was left evidence behind. So we’re not done yet.”

I smiled from my position in the dark. They would waste time looking for more evidence, as all the while we put our flames to this plague.

What Is the Contagion?

What does it sound like? All the others — False and Sworn alike — are finding excuses not to call it like it is so that they can go about doing whatever they want, ignoring the obvious solution in front of their eyes. The Crucible Initiative treats the Contagion like its name: an epidemic, an incurable plague that only stops when they eradicate every scrap of infection from the face of the Earth. We know that no hope of finding some mystical panacea that will cleanse the Machine once and for all exists, nor is there any kind of treatment that could mitigate the blatant threat of annihilation. We warn our fellows not to take pity or show compassion; that way lies doom. Treating the symptoms — or pretending they’re not symptoms at all — without addressing the root of the problem gets no one anywhere. The only way to stop a supernatural cancer from reducing everything to wrack and ruin is to cut it out.

What we stand to lose: Everything. It will be a complete breakdown of reality. Some of us *remember* the Black Death because we were there in person. We’ve seen what happens when a plague spreads freely, and we don’t intend to let that happen, regardless of any justifications others come up with to be anything less than merciless.

What we stand to gain: What, survival isn’t good enough? We get to live another day (or exist another night, anyway), and that’s plenty for us. We’re not interested in continuing our petty enmities or pursuing other goals while an outbreak endangers our livelihoods and the continuation of our kind, nor do we tolerate those who insist on mercy, leniency, or “finding another way.”

Where We Came From

In the 1330s and 1340s, famine and pestilence in Asia created the perfect conditions for the spread of the bubonic plague, so deadly it came to be known as the Black Death. Untold millions perished, hacking up blood from infected lungs. Though most of us escaped this fate, the epidemic didn’t end when humans stopped dropping dead in the streets. It mutated. After the Black Death petered out (the first time, anyway), the Contagion struck directly on its heels. Across Europe and Asia, we sprang to immediate, brutal action. *No more*, we said, and began the purge.

The formal Crucible Initiative came out of China in the 1860s, when the mortal plague returned. No sign of the Contagion showed itself then, but in anticipation of its inevitable outbreak, a pack of Chinese Pure made contact with an angel and proposed a coalition that would soon blossom into an international operation. The God-Machine’s agents gathered select night-dwellers throughout the world, inviting those with the will and the means to join forces in vigilance against the illness that would certainly return. They called it the Crucible Initiative, for they would burn the impurities out of the world until only the strong and unsullied remained.

Once, the willing specimens of Genome studied the Contagion's nature directly, infecting themselves on purpose to examine how it ran its course and develop individualized immunities. These Sworn delved too deeply into the Contagion's secrets and became something else, something awful. Many of the Sworn tried to reclaim these grotesque things, hoping to restore them to their previous states. So the Crucible Initiative stepped in and exterminated them. Unfortunately, we've recently uncovered evidence that we might not have managed to quite get them all. Thankfully, almost no one knows those records exist.

What We Do

The Initiative employs a scorched earth policy when it comes to the Contagion. Raze it all to the ground, burn the fields, salt the earth. We destroy all Contagious on sight, as well as anything or anyone that is infected, that could *possibly be* infected, or that could potentially be a vector. Anything that might give the plague a foothold is a target. "Them" and "us" don't matter anymore; we abandon all but the direst enmities and most primal urges in favor of our mission. Likewise, pursuits we otherwise treasure fall by the wayside. Prometheans who join the Fire-Bearers inevitably become Centimani if they weren't already. The Bound round up infected ghosts and dispose of them, abandoning their krewes or twisting them to new purpose. Changelings leave their freeholds to swear Huntsmen and hobgoblins to the cause, borrowing Bridge-Burner philosophies to justify it to themselves. No group draws more of the God-Machine's own angels than the Crucible Initiative; they claim it's pure practicality, but some take it as evidence that even the Machine knows fear.

The surgeons also act to preserve what's not yet infected, by any means necessary. We call it "quarantine" when we apprehend (or abduct) those suspected to be vectors or infected, and we call it "preventative care" when we treat (or kidnap) those in high-risk demographics or those deemed too valuable to the recovery after a post-purge world to leave at large. We confine our prisoners in sterile and isolated safeholds, then poke and prod them until the diagnosis is certain. Once it is, we either immunize their captives through unpleasant occult means to be *absolutely certain* they're clean or set them ablaze and dispose of the ashes. Those who turn out not to be infected might need to stay in quarantine indefinitely anyway; if released, they only go back to their risky behaviors and end up infected anyway, so what would be the point of releasing them?

Don't think that we're satisfied with using outdated tools, however. We perform research and experiments to find ever-more efficient and effective ways of holding powerful beings in quarantine, destroying them (and the Contagion that infects them) more thoroughly or in larger numbers, and getting more accurate diagnoses. Such experiments do occasionally invite the Gentry into the world to take infected humans away to Faerie, prompt angels to Fall, or lead to generative acts that create Prometheans (and Pandorans), and other such outcomes. They also, completely incidentally, often lead to bolstering our lower ranks with loyal clones, spirit-ridden, stigmatics, slashers, and others.

How we organize: We structure ourselves like an international government program with local *divisions* or *branches*, a bloated hierarchy, and many specialists. We offer benefits to our members, which vary in form depending on the nature of the creature in question. Letting an Insatiable live in the basement lab and feeding it Beasts once in a while until we loose it on a bunch of unsuspecting Contagion victims might not count as "employing" the Lamashtu, but it's on the books regardless.

When we commit to wiping out the Contagion, surgeons hearken back to our origins among the Uratha and hunter angels. We embark on a hunt to destroy a living threat, and do not return until we can bring proof back to show we've done the job.

Against the Sworn: The are Sworn a bunch of naïve fools whose work actively contributes to the Contagion's threat. We raid Sworn headquarters whenever we find them, taking what's useful and torching the rest. We don't care about hiding our actions; what difference does it make who takes the blame? It'll turn into credit later, anyway, when anyone who might have complained is either dead or the beneficiary of our gift of survival.

Who We Are

- An alchemist who collects samples of infected Prometheans and other beings, working to perfect a formula that will unleash a killer virus — one that only targets creatures who carry the Contagion
- A Devoted Chimeric created from werewolf DNA, whom the Initiative coerced into joining as the perfect Contagion-hunting weapon. We let her off her leash just long enough to sniff out the epidemic's taint
- An Insatiable of the Void who creates quarantine chambers from stolen Lairs, emptying them out completely and stashing victims there to scream soundlessly until the Initiative determines they should burn
- An angelic project manager who oversees the construction of mobile Elimination Infrastructure platforms and personally leads the clean-up crew after they're deployed, delivering the remains back to the God-Machine for inscrutable purposes
- A vampire of the Ordo Dracul who rounds up Kindred Contagion vectors and performs experiments on them before sending them to see the sun, hoping to discover a new Coil that will make her immune to the infection

Nicknames: Fire-Bearers, surgeons

The Machiavelli Gambit

Contagion as Opportunity

*It's adorable how you look down on the poor, unsuspecting mortals you exploit,
as though you weren't just like them.*

Holding the battered cultist's face between finger and thumb, I spoke coolly into her ear. "You will tell them we found the tomb. You won't know how. You will tell them that if they don't deliver us the goods, we'll pump their precious Tasherit full of plague and wake her up." I dropped the nodding cultist's face and stood up straight.

Looking to my companions, I nodded. "They will think we're bluffing, at first. They'll wonder why anyone would be prepared to unleash Contagion on an innocent. But here's the thing, my friends..." I gestured at the tomb, the sarcophagi, the dead cultists and the relics being packed away.

"... None of us are innocent."

What Is the Contagion?

Monsters and magic teem in the shadows, but the world wasn't meant for us. We're unnatural, an imposition. Our existence alone warps humanity — just watch someone spend an hour talking to the Created. With so many conflicting mystical forces competing for supremacy, is it any wonder our clashing breaks reality?

We understand the Contagion to be an occult feedback resulting from years of uncanny creatures doing whatever we like, wielding magical energies willy-nilly. Some think it's in everybody's best interests to end it outright, but the Princes think that's a waste. We'd have to eradicate supernatural beings from the world entirely to keep the infection from simply returning later. And why reject an asset we could use for ourselves? The Contagion may be an unintended consequence, but it's also a tool in the right hands, and we Svengali know that no one is better qualified to wield that tool than us.

What we stand to lose: Control. Order. All the power and status we've worked so hard to gain. We refuse to stand idly by while some quirk of mystical energy interferes with our plans. If we don't take the situation in hand, someone else will, and that's unacceptable. Only we know what's best. For the world, and for ourselves.

What we stand to gain: Advantages. A secret weapon. The certainty that the Contagion won't take us by unpleasant surprise and upset our nice, quiet supremacy. The Contagion is an opportunity to harness a power no one else understands, and to finally put to rest any question of who should be on top of this food chain. The Gambit uses it to establish ourselves as the power behind the curtain, and anyone who doesn't like it can eat pestilence.

Where We Came From

Originally, the group that would become known as the Machiavelli Gambit was a faction of the Cryptocracy who argued over the Cryptocracy's mission and who they should allow to join. Most of this faction's members either refused to work with certain mortal (or immortal) enemies, had ideas about acceptable measures that went beyond what mainline Cryptocracy members were willing to support, or had offended other agents so thoroughly, they wouldn't consider a truce.

The Cryptocracy controlled humanity, whose dire mistakes they believed were responsible for the Contagion. The dissenting members who would eventually form the Gambit, however, dismissed humanity as an irrelevant factor. It didn't matter, we said, whether humans caused the epidemic. All that mattered was weaponizing it and using it for our own gain; standing on principle would only get us all killed. The schism intensified after the Camarilla fell, as the vampires and their staunch allies became even more insular, even in the face of Contagion. And so the Machiavelli Gambit's predecessors broke off to form our own, False faction.

Later, during the outbreak in the 500s CE, our faction ran afoul of another False faction called the Followers of Ma'at. Led by angels, Seers of the Throne, and a heretical Arisen, the Followers of Ma'at believed in tightly controlling all supernatural creatures if the Contagion was ever to be manageable. We discovered the Followers pulling our strings and hindering our plans. We waged a cold war and crushed the opposition. But in the process, our foes successfully convinced us of their theories' merit. Our groups effectively merged, forming what's now known as the Machiavelli Gambit. We adopted the name because we uphold the modern ideal of Machiavelli's

ruthless realism, rather than the true satire his work was intended to be. Sometimes one must take a thing and shape it to one's needs. The unbridled strategy of Machiavelli will see us through the Contagion unscathed. We view ourselves as the chess grandmasters of the hidden world.

What We Do

The Machiavelli Gambit claims Contagion management as our sole purview, and we run this project like a crime empire. We use the Contagion as threat and punishment to make examples of those who defy us. Our Princes nudge others into exposing themselves, or we infect them directly if we can figure out how. We watch and study these victims to see what makes the sickness tick, then release them back out into the wild under conditions primed to keep those beings under the Gambit's control, directly or indirectly. In the rare times when we're forced into a corner, we can even capture one of the Contagious, let it loose on our enemies, and then dispose of all the evidence.

Like the Cryptocracy from which it spawned, the Gambit prefers to play puppet-master from the shadows; but its puppets are other night-dwellers, not mortals. We manipulate them into doing our bidding through subtle and complex plots involving infected Infrastructure, the Sworn, and even the other False. We peddle fake cures and treatments for the Contagion, deal occult drugs, and makes other creatures dependent on our products in exchange for goods and services so we can control them. We meddle in local Sworn societies — the Sworn groups themselves, but also organizations like changeling freeholds and hunter compacts — to keep them isolated from each other, quietly breaking down alliances and shifting territories from behind the scenes so their powers and influences won't interact. The Gambit recruits proactively, tracking down the unaffiliated before anyone else can; if we can't recruit someone, we plant the seeds to turn that individual into a tool for our own devices instead.

Mortals might be irrelevant to the spread of Contagion, but they still have their uses. We replace human agents with our own people in a variety of institutions, from police forces and criminal gangs to corporations and research labs, to usurp human resources for our plans.

The Svengali maintain a research arm that traces the Contagion's symptoms and vectors back to an outbreak's origin, to glean its cause and nudge contributing variables in our favor. We study each other, too, to develop ways to control and suppress mystical abilities, or change how they function. The Gambit makes deals with devils of all kinds, including the Contagion's agents, for secrets, resources, and access to forbidden places. The Princes are keen to develop an immunization, or find those who are naturally immune and recruit or blackmail them; we seek to control asymptomatic carriers of the epidemic, directing them to spread the sickness only as we want it spread.

How we organize: The Svengali organize like crime syndicates, cartels, and gangs, with local *rings* or *crews* maintaining only a loose alliance with others elsewhere. On top of all the intrigue and territorial maneuvering *outside* the Gambit, our members also must keep an eye on our own fellows plotting to usurp or remove us. To ensure the whole endeavor doesn't unravel, we've accepted certain etiquettes and enforced rules of engagement for such internal conflicts.

Each ring has hierarchical positions and a strict code of secrecy. Policy states it's *always* better to put the blame on someone else and avoid anyone getting to the Gambit. Captured Princes are supposed to take drastic steps to make sure nothing compromises the group; in practice, it's 50/50 whether a given Prince actually does that, or saves her own skin instead. The Gambit sets

up fronts and shadow organizations to take the fall for our crimes, should anyone successfully trace our activities back to us. We recruits individuals and even whole groups, under various covers, specifically to throw them under the bus when we need scapegoats.

When new members join up to reap the benefits of our organization, Svengali recruits take oaths of loyalty to our ringleaders and must prove themselves by performing increasingly merciless tasks — betraying previous allegiances and friends among their own kind is an old favorite. We expect our recruits to stick around for good; defectors to the Sworn are particularly offensive, and we put high bounties on their heads for any of our members who can dispose of them.

Against the Sworn: The Sworn are the Gambit's primary targets. We leech off of their work, steal research and relics, kidnap important hostages, threaten to forcibly infect their loved ones to exert leverage over their members, and coerce or persuade Sworn individuals to defect or leak information. Our agents infiltrate Sworn groups, then influence events based on what they learn. We might, for instance, push mortals into performing a string of terrorist attacks to overwhelm the Cryptocracy with fires to put out, so other agents can break into a Majestic stronghold while its attention is spread thin. Even when we're not interfering with the Cryptocracy directly, we often come into conflict with them when our shadow wars and intrigues happen to collide with theirs.

Who We Are

- A Strix that possesses vampires among the Sworn, extracting their Vitae while they have control and passing it along to fellow Princes to create addictive infection vectors they administer to those who don't do as they're told
- A Panopticon Seer of the Throne who infiltrates other supernatural organizations, cuts them off from meaningful contact with each other, and influences them into being more isolationist, more xenophobic, and less likely to cooperate
- A Hero who captures Beasts, breaks their wills, and studies their Kinship abilities to develop ways of subverting them into tools for suppressing and influencing the powers of other supernatural beings
- A hobgoblin who runs protection rackets and a market where anyone can purchase "treatments," trade for information, or hire help to solve strange, Contagion-born problems they can't address on their own
- A field agent for the Cheiron Group who leads raids and heists to break into the headquarters of Sworn factions and Crucible Initiative branches to steal their artifacts, data, and sometimes abduct members

Nicknames: Princes, Svengali

Naglfar's Army

Contagion as Apocalypse

*Ring around the rosie, blah blah — let's get to the good part. We all fall down!
Then some of us get back up and rule as gods.*

“This artifact has never belonged to you.” I stroked the relic with two hands while my fellow Saturnalians hammered the stake into the intruding vampire.

“Yes, it’s been in your possession since the 1700s. Yes, it’s incredibly dangerous. But we never let it out of our sight.”

Playing catch with the orb now, from hand to claw as they shifted along with the rest of my body. I went down on my haunches, voice deeper, growling at the little Daeva.

“I’d half hoped it would be a mage acting as caretaker. Or one of those Arisen. But an undead bloodsucker will have to do.” Resting the crystal-studded ball on the paralyzed chest of the vampire, I stood and walked toward the door with my friends. My fellow soldiers.

“It was with you temporarily, but it’s always been ours.” I looked back, just before leaving. “But because you’ve been such an effective steward, you’re going to see it go off up close. Let’s see how a vampire deals with Contagion exploding all over him.”

What Is the Contagion?

We Antediluvians say this question is willfully ignorant, because the answer is obvious to anyone with half a brain: it’s the end of the world. This is the zombie apocalypse, the nuclear winter, Judgment Day. And it’s a race to win. *Some* will survive, as they always do. So Naglfar’s Army intends to be the ones still standing when the smoke clears. We see the coexistence of humanity and the supernatural as untenable in the long run, and the Contagion is the tipping point beyond which the final reckoning will wipe out one side, letting the other inherit the Earth. Further, we believe fate is on our side, and humanity’s time in the sun will soon end. The Contagion happens in cycles that haven’t yet consumed the world because the Sworn keep delaying the inevitable; the Saturnalians think it’s high time to let destiny run its course, so those who deserve to rule can step out and do it in the open.

What we stand to lose: Our place. Our kind. If we don’t take ownership of the apocalypse and prepare ourselves to the fullest, we’ll be the ones it wipes out and humanity will move on to some utopian age of sunshine and roses, while shadow-dwellers disappear into the dust like we never were.

What we stand to gain: The world on a silver platter. A monstrous paradise. Eternal night, the breaking of curses, immortality, a playground the size of the planet. We just have to let the Contagion, the new flood, press the reset button and cleanse reality. Then, we’ll step into a new era where we don’t *need* humanity anymore, where all our flaws and weaknesses disappear, and we can be our ultimate selves.

Where We Came From

Many legends tell of a great breaking of the world. Some call it a Sundering or a Fall. Others call it a deluge, or the arrival of the Gentry, or a meteor falling from space. Perhaps many such catastrophes have befallen the world, or perhaps they’re one and the same. Whatever the case, the *Army*’s legends say these were the first Contagion: changes so drastic they upended everything that was and forced monsters into humanity’s shadow. We foresee that another one is coming, just like the first, to restore the old ways and start over again.

This idea has been around since that fabled time, but Naglfar’s Army came together as a group during an outbreak in the 900s, originating with Viking creatures who brought the Old Norse

beliefs with them across Europe alongside their mortal counterparts. The belief that the Contagion was Ragnarök, the destined fall of the gods at the hands of jötnar and a massive cataclysm, spread like wildfire. The Norse predicted the great ship *Naglfar*, made from the finger- and toenails of the dead, would set sail as the sea swallowed the earth. It was to carry the gods' enemies to the final battle, in which the gods would perish. We came to see ourselves as the crew of the dread *Naglfar*, an army of warriors who would tear down the gods and remake the world in our own image.

What We Do

The Antediluvians prepare. The end of the world is coming; we need to be ready. We gather, steal, and hoard mystical resources to make sure the Contagion doesn't wreck us when it washes fully over the world. Taking these things away from someone else also pushes those losers into harm's way; to ensure we survive, the Army makes sure others *don't*. We understand strength in numbers, and we know we'll never make it alone, but we see no reason to share the spoils with outsiders. Saturnalians don't go in for studying or understanding the Contagion — what's to understand? It's doom incarnate! — but if we run across cracks in Infrastructure or other beings' defenses by which we can encourage the Contagion's spread and other dire fates, we cheerfully open those cracks wider and help destiny along.

Hedonism and greed run rampant in Naglfar's Army. We share with each other but no one else, and we indulge our every fantasy and desire, because who knows what the world will look like after the apocalypse? We may never taste human blood, fear, tears, or anything else again after this. Best to get it all in now while we still can. And on the off chance we *don't* make it to the other side, we eat, drink, fuck, and make merry, in case tomorrow we all die. The Sworn and other False wouldn't mind much, except that we throw caution completely to the wind. Forget the Masquerade and the Veil, forget being careful not to expose horrors to the masses, forget the good of the many. The end is nigh, who gives a shit whether we crack reality a little or drive whole cities crazy? Let it all burn, we don't care. We take whatever we want, and we do whatever we want to anyone who tries to stop us.

The Army collects small, captive groups of valuable humans and other beings we want to preserve for after the storm. Some of our members do this for personal, sentimental reasons; others because it amuses us to be so generous; others to keep stashes of living resources in case their curses aren't as lifted as we expect after the end; and still others for more inscrutable purposes.

Most Saturnalians believe wholeheartedly in the party line, but some are just along for the ride, soaking up the perks and paying lip service to the big picture. The ones who are along for the ride usually do this because the Contagion has already taken something — or everything — they care about, and they've lost hope of ever getting it back. Naglfar's Army is the landing zone for those who've seen the Contagion's horror and tragedy firsthand, and let it break them. It's also where many False end up who are too far gone or too inhuman to have much of an agenda.

How we organize: Formally, we mostly don't. When we do, it's in social clubs or cults. We throw elite parties and wild orgies or hold ecstatic group rituals and sacrifice the infected on doom's altar to ensure our place in the new world to come. Some instead act like refugees and outcasts, gathering in shelters and carefully stockpiling everything we can.

The Army keeps stashes of various kinds: some finagle our way into vaults or warehouses and amass mystical resources there, while others acquire mansions and then decorate every room with our spoils.

Despite our members' devil-may-care attitudes, we understand the need for a way to tell outsiders from fellows. Upon joining, each member permanently adorns his, her, or their flesh with the Army's sigil, whether through tattooing, scarification, branding, or some magical means. This makes turning Sworn later harder, but most of us couldn't care less.

Against the Sworn: The simplest way for the Antediluvians to score big is to murder their way through local Sworn headquarters and take over their facilities. We exploit and exacerbate whatever vulnerabilities we find, and pit the Sworn against one another — and the other False — however we can. It's a practical strategy, but it's also good for a laugh.

We don't go out of our way to recruit, but sometimes individuals sense when one of the Sworn is losing faith in her cause, whether out of loss, despair, or a failure of conscience when things get rough. Some of our brethren enjoy living as dangerous *agents provocateurs*, tempting those on the cusp of giving up to go all the way and join the ship of fools. You know what they say about those fate protects, right?

Who We Are

- A Reaper who believes the sea that will swallow the earth is the Ocean of Fragments itself, and works to break down all barriers between the living and the Underworld for good
- A Shuankhsen who takes control of mummy cults so she can usurp their patrons' tombs for bunkers, hoarding relics, corpses, and any other mystical resources she can get her hands on
- One of the Rapt whose Fault revolves around the Contagion, compelling him to magically spread it however he can and Reach as far as he dares; he believes Paradox to be simply another one of the epidemic's symptoms
- A member of Ashwood Abbey who hunts the Sworn with all the Army's resources at her fingertips and keeps a personal stash of captive monsters to take with her into the post-apocalyptic world
- A True Fae who kidnaps supernatural beings and forces them to kill each other like gladiators or contestants in a game of survival, employing goblins to take bets on the final winner and offering that lucky soul a place in Naglfar's Army afterward

Nickname: Antediluvians, Saturnalians

Road Trip

We've been driving through the Negev most of the night. They told me we need to get to Acre by morning. The Crag is at the wheel and I'm in the back watching Tempest, Leo, and Josie, who are all asleep. At least they look like they're asleep. According to Tempest (who's the only one of these weirdos I really know), they're exploring people's dreams. And changing them. Apparently this is going to help us do whatever it is we're going to do when we get to Acre, which maybe, sometime, someone will explain to me in terms I can understand. It's something to do with evolution, shaking things up and changing them. They told me there's some kind of contagion in Acre, something distorting people's dreams, messing with magic and maybe ghosts. It might have something to do with the Knights Templar? And we have to rescue a friend of Tempest's who's going to be brought to trial.

Let's start with Tempest. I've known her a couple of years now and I've seen her do a whole load of weird shit. Which is how I get to hang out with her because, apparently, this magic tends to affect normal people badly, or normal people affect *it* badly. I don't know how, but that doesn't apply to me. I'd quite like to "wake up" so I can do weird shit too, but I doubt whether it's actually going to happen. So, I just sit in the back of the RV, watching people while they're sleeping and taking turns with The Crag to do the driving. Okay, by American standards, 500km is not so far, but we have to take the long way 'round — which is through the fucking desert — because we don't want to be seen.

Leo can do weird shit too but, they tell me, it's not the same kind of weird shit. He was removed or abducted for years and, when he got back (and he had to escape — he never told us the story though I think it must have been exciting) he could do stuff, including messing with people's dreams. And Josie — Josie specializes in dreams. When she's in someone's dream, it's as some huge scary monster who can tell people to do things, or not to do things. Oh, and the Crag can turn into a wolf. Which is handy if you get into a fight.

Leo wakes up first. He looks rough, with shadows under his eyes. When he sits up, it's so sudden, the seat belt jerks him back. Since I'm watching him anyway, I catch a glimpse of his pupils. They're dilated real wide; something's got him freaked. Then Tempest awakens, then Josie. Neither of them looks much better. They start to talk to each other about ghosts and something called the abyss seeping through into the Lie (which is what they call the normal world) and a god machine that's sick and...

Then shit starts to go down. There's a flash and a bang. The car jolts. I can't hear the motor anymore. Tempest starts waving her hands around and muttering like she does when she's making magic and I smell ozone, like a thunderstorm in the distance. Then time does a kind of hiccup and reverses. Leo wakes up again, followed by the other two.

"Tell the Crag to stop," Tempest tells me. "We're all going to hell in a handbasket here."

I glare at her. I know I'm the only one here who can't do any weird stuff, but that doesn't mean the rest of them can just order me around. I can leave any time I want. Only Tempest looks *really* worried, so I decide I better do what she said.

So I crawl into the front of the RV and tell the Crag that Tempest says we have to stop. Sure enough, we're in the middle of nowhere, but the Crag stops anyway. It's too hot to get out, so we all pile into the back and break out some water. Then there's a flash and a bang just like the crash

and bang which didn't really happen before — have I mentioned that Tempest can do some *really* freaky stuff with time? — and the RV doesn't stop this time because it's stopped already.

Time starts to move forward normally again.

"I think that took the electrics out," the Crag grumbles. "I guess we're not going anywhere."

At this point, something tears. It makes a sound like a bed sheet getting shredded, but the pitch gets higher until the frequency makes me clamp my hands over my ears. Then it's gone, and there's blue light spilling in from... a rip... suspended in the air. I can see shadows on the other side of it that don't look like anything in the RV. This woman I never saw before in my life — tall, heavy, commanding — walks through the hole that doesn't make sense with any physics I learned in high school.

"You hellions are headed for Acco." It's a statement, not a question. "And you're going to turn right around and go back to Eilat."

When she says that, all I want to do is get into the driver's seat and take us back to Eilat. It's nice there. The diving is good. But I guess she's working magic and the others are trying really hard to resist. It's not as if the motor would start anyway, not with the electrics fried.

"Who the fuck are you?" the Crag snarls.

"She's the boss," Tempest mutters.

"I am the Hierarch of this Consilium. I'm also involved in the bureau of the Levant. I can assure you all the Contagion is in hand and you can safely go home. We will call upon you if we need you. Tempest, I thought better of you than this."

"Well, ma'am," Leo says. "How can we get back to Eilat? The RV is fried."

"I'm sure Tempest can *unfry* it," she sneers, acting like that should be all. In fact, she's almost back through her rip when the Crag has to go and run her mouth again.

"And what if we won't?" the Crag asks.

This Hierarch woman points to the sky. There, wheeling high above us, is a black helicopter. Then she fucks off back through whatever door she made for herself. No one seems particularly inclined to follow her.

I leave the others arguing about lies, machines, ghosts, laws, and diseases and go into the back of the RV to break out the tools. At least I know one thing I'm good for around here: keeping this shit on the road.

Chapter Two: Vectors

Natural forces within us are the true healers of disease.

— Hippocrates

The Sworn devote themselves to combatting the Contagion, acting as healing agents within the God-Machine itself. Like any medicine, they attempt to cure the disease through a variety of means. Some cures require a subtle approach, slowly infiltrating and purifying the infected areas over a long period of time. Others are more aggressive, firmly blocking or destroying the contagion before the rot destroys anything else. A few cures are terminal, killing one site of infection utterly before the disease spreads.

Every member of the Sworn has their own inherent or acquired resources at hand that they can leverage against specific outbreaks, but the overall methodology of the group has led to the discovery or creation of supernatural techniques effective in combatting the Contagion. Over the centuries, Sworn members have strengthened or reinvented those methods into useful tools in their eternal fight. These preternatural methods of Contagion control are collectively called *vectors*.

Vectors are different from most supernatural powers. Once a faction starts collaborating, they learn more about the Contagion as a whole, and that experience leads to the acquisition of effective methods to use against their common enemy. As the faction learns from their successes and failures against the disease, they acquire more powerful vectors. Sometimes these vectors can also be useful in each member's daily (or nightly) existence, but that's simply a perk. In general, vectors are tools the whole faction utilizes as part of their duty as Sworn.

Acquiring Vectors

Only specific Beats can be used to buy vectors. Lessons learned from direct action against the Contagion or faction goals that aid the Sworn's fight provide *Sworn Beats*. These Sworn Beats are tracked for the entire faction instead of for individual characters, although one character's actions might result in the faction gaining a Sworn Beat. These Sworn Beats are awarded in addition to normal Beats, not instead of them. Five Sworn Beats aggregate into one Sworn Experience.

Vector powers, like Sworn Beats, are also shared among the faction — once a vector is purchased, every active member of the Sworn in that faction gains access to the ability. Think of it like a teamwork tactic or a shared experience — vectors derive their power from the group, even if an individual is using one. Each vector costs 2 Sworn Experiences, and vectors are purchased in order. If there are members of multiple Sworn groups within a faction, Sworn Experiences are spent by the whole faction as normal, but only the affected Sworn gain access to that vector. Vectors are Sworn faction-specific, so while all the players might agree on where Experiences are spent, only Cryptocrats can use the authority vector, the Rosetta Society uses the semiotics vector, etc.

Example: *A faction containing three members of the Cryptocracy and two members of the Jeremiad wish to acquire a two-dot vector. The faction already has the first fervor vector, which the cryptocrats don't have access to. After some lively debate, the players agree that they will use two Sworn Experiences to buy the first authority vector instead. While the faction would*

prefer to get the two-dot authority vector, they must buy the one-dot vector first, and they don't have enough Experiences to purchase both.

Vectors as Respect

Although Sworn rarely have any regimented global structure, a faction's mastery of a vector can act as a form of standing and devotion to the Sworn's ideals. Individuals might disagree on details, but each generally respects how much a faction has devoted themselves against the Contagion. This is best gauged by a faction's knowledge (or lack thereof) of the Sworn's vector. For social rolls involving non-faction members of the Sworn, dots in a vector can be added as additional dice to the roll on a one-for-one basis.

If a faction member formally leaves the Sworn or otherwise becomes inactive from the faction's activities for several years, they lose all access to their Sworn's vectors. Joining a new Sworn or faction allows the member to use the appropriate vectors the faction has acquired. The new member simply pays one personal Experience to gain access to all relevant vectors.

Using Vectors

Vectors are flexible tools, but different members of a faction will have their own means to that same end. Even if a mage and a vampire both draw on mystical energy to manipulate minds, the former will be subtly applying magic to create convenient coincidences, while the latter is tearing at their wrists and bleeding in concentric circles on the sidewalk. The method that each member uses to empower a vector is distinct to them. We offer some ideas and suggestions, but players are encouraged to come up with colorful and character-appropriate ways to activate their vectors.

While each vector works similarly for every member, they don't work in the exact same way. Depending on what kind of monster the character is, they gain access to a potential *edge* for the vector. For example, mages and vampires often gain some mind control abilities naturally, so a mind control vector might work better for them or add a distinct element to the vector when it is used. Every character template has their own edge — some may share an edge, but as with activating a vector, the flavor and in-game aspects of the edge should differ, depending on who is using it.

A few specialized groups gain a distinct advantage in using vectors. These *specializations* are distinct improvements to the vector, but unlike edges, not every member of a Sworn faction will have access to them. Specialization powers are in addition to the edge that a vector provides and are activated at the same time. If a character is affected by or uses a vector, and their template has access to the specialization associated with that power, they get to apply it whether they're using the vector or just the recipient of it. Some vector powers require more than one member of the faction to activate them, particularly at the higher levels. These *teamwork* powers can be performed by anyone of that Sworn group in the faction, although certain members might gain distinct edges, as with the single-user powers. If there are not enough members of the Sworn from the faction active in the same scene, the vector cannot be used.

Example: *The three Cryptocracy members of the same faction have learned the five-dot authority vector. When the vampire cryptocrat is knocked into torpor, however, they don't have*

enough members left active to active the vector — they either need to wake the vampire or use another vector.

Edges and specializations key off the user who is making the roll, if there is one. If the vector does not clearly have one lead user, all users of the vector decide which character is considered “lead” for purposes of determining which edge and specializations are active.

Vectors without Contagion

If you want the fun of crossover without the Contagion as a threat, vectors are still usable. While some undoubtedly have a Contagion focus, this focus can switch to other world-spanning terrains and dangers such as Infrastructure, the spirit world, or the Hedge. If your crossover game points specifically to an element from one **Chronicles of Darkness** game line, vectors are simple to change to fit the situation.

Cryptocracy: Authority Vector

Acquiring power is pointless unless it is *used*. Luckily, we cryptocrats don’t covet power for our own personal gain. Of course not. Instead, we use our power to enforce order, so we can inoculate blooms of Contagion with efficiency. Some would call it ruthless, heartless, or autocratic. We say that homogeneity helps our collective cause. Chaotic outbreaks can be more easily found and contained amongst uniformity, and that’s what we all want. But to force conformity, we must have power, and we must exercise it. We wield *authority* as our vector.

The Cryptocracy favors beasts, demons, mages, and vampires. In addition, groups such as the Winter Court, the Cheiron Group, Task Force: Valkyrie, the Maa-Kep, and the Undertakers flourish as cryptocrats.

• Surveillance

Before you can wield authority, you need information. You must know what is happening before you can step in and control the situation. The first step to becoming a proper bureau is to get access to Caliber, the Cryptocracy’s shadow surveillance and communications network.

Caliber is no mere collection of cameras, microphones, wires, and wi-fi signals. Such things are disrupted, manipulated, and destroyed. Rather, Caliber is a mystical network that piggybacks on existing communication systems, granting access for integrated cryptocrats. Call it magical resonance between items of spiritual connectivity. Call it quantum strings using microscopic wormholes to redirect cell phone signals. Hell, for all you know, it’s run by Sin-Eaters covered in the relics of the dead while they dance to the screams of victims being devoured by evil faeries. But it works, and that’s all that matters.

Because Caliber is a supernatural network, a bureau needs more than a user ID and a password to gain access. They need to personally synchronize with the network, becoming a part of it on a preternatural level. Of course, that also means that the bureau is part of the network now as well. A small price to pay for order, you’ll agree.

A vampire pricks her thumb and smears it on the security monitor, which flicks to the desired camera. A mage arranges for the sticky note with the right computer password to fall off the monitor and into his hands. A demon tricks the God-Machine into looking the other way while the app downloads to her phone.

System: A cryptocrat can tap into any surveillance or communications system, as long as they are touching one component of it. If successful, any barrier to acquiring information conveniently disappears — passwords automatically appear in apps, voice prints recognize the user as authorized, and even text in a foreign language is instantly translated. Such access is receiving only, and the cryptocrat cannot add, remove, or alter any information while using their Caliber access. They can download, copy, or otherwise preserve the information. After the scene is over, their authorization is revoked, and a new roll must be made to regain access.

Cost: 1 Willpower (only paid if the roll is successful)

Requirement: Physically touching one component of the network

Dice Pool: Intelligence + Computer; more successes may be needed if a network is particularly secure

Action: Instantaneous

Duration: One scene

Edges

Beasts, Deviants: A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. The same is true with networks. On a successful Surveillance roll, a cryptocrat with this edge can spend an additional Willpower to turn off a specific camera, microphone, computer, or other node in the network. For the rest of the chapter, any attempt to reboot or activate the node will fail, and any data it contains will be inaccessible. Next chapter, the node will return to its normal operating status, and its data will be retrievable.

Changelings, Demons, Werewolves: These cryptocrats are used to seeing what others don't. After a successful Surveillance roll, the cryptocrat with this edge can spend an additional Willpower and use the surveillance or communication network to see and hear things in the area that wouldn't normally be visible (e.g., spirits, ghosts, goblins in the Hedge, and so on).

Hunters, Mages: Humans naturally observe other humans. It's a part of their nature. These cryptocrats, being the closest to human, are more able to use social engineering and intuitive guesswork to gain access to central systems. They can choose to use Wits instead of Intelligence for their roll. Either way, they also gain two additional dice to Surveillance rolls.

Mummies, Prometheans, Sin-Eaters, Vampires: The cryptocrat's connection to death allows them to access otherwise "dead" nodes of a network. If an aspect of the network has gone offline in the past 24 hours (e.g., battery dead, power turned off, or even destroyed), the cryptocrat with this edge can spend an additional Willpower to recover the last data the node had access to before it was "killed." It's the technological equivalent of looking into the eyes of a corpse and seeing its last moments.

Specializations

Task Force: Valkyrie: If it's one thing the military understands, it's secure information networks. Task Force: Valkyrie has access to a wide variety of backdoors, exploits, and technological weaknesses... all for the security of the nation, of course. For cryptocrats who work for Task Force: Valkyrie, their ersatz access lasts for a story, rather than a scene.

•• The Boss Is In

Charisma. Kingship. Intimidation. People skills. Whatever you call it, some people are perceived as leaders, rulers, or just the people in charge. Many monsters sway hearts and minds, from the unearthly beauty of the fae to the blood-boiling allure of the vampire to the raw sexuality of the werewolf. A pretty face, a charming smile, and a well-crafted suit gets you in the door, but it doesn't put people's jobs and lives in your hand. It's easy to have someone like you, love you, and even fuck you. But *respect*, that's hard to earn.

Luckily, a savvy bureau can fake it. It's one thing to flash some forged credentials and bark orders, but sometimes you need to take direct control. There isn't time for a demon to establish a cover and infiltrate, or for a werewolf to find the right spirit to give them guidance. You just need the people around you to understand that you know what's best for everyone, so they should shut the hell up and do their damn jobs.

If everyone knew their place, things would be so much easier all around.

The deviant picks at his deformity, reinforcing his inhumanity so he can say what needs to be said. The hunter carefully pulls on her suit, imagining herself as the ruler she wants to emulate. The Sin-Eater adjusts a tarnished sheriff's badge, taken from a lawman who ordered a bandit camp burned to the ground.

System: The cryptocrat can infiltrate and gain control over a mundane group, organization, or society on a local, immediate level. Success gives the user the Connected Condition for the vector's duration (**Chronicles of Darkness**, p. 288). In addition, each success on the dice roll counts as one dot of the Status Merit within the local organization (**Chronicles of Darkness**, p. 54). If the cryptocrat needs or desires a particular level of Status, she can spend additional Willpower to add more successes to the roll on a one-for-one basis.

Upon a successful roll, characters in the immediate area believe the cryptocrat is an appropriately-ranked member of the organization in question. Any credentials are assumed to be in order, and even computers and security systems show the character as authorized. No physical elements (such as a security badge) are created, but the cryptocrat can request replacements for such "misplaced" items.

Once the effects of the power end, affected characters are confused and misremember the events that transpired. Manufactured access is revoked, and likely chalked up to computer error or equipment failure. Policies and demands the user put in place may slowly be reversed, depending on the efficiency and interests of the true leadership.

Cost: 1 Willpower, plus additional Willpower as needed.

Requirement: The user must be able to speak and must at least somewhat look the part of a leader. An unshaven man in shorts and flip-flops can take control over a San Francisco start-up, but not an Irish military base.

Dice Pool: Composure + Intimidation or Persuasion (depending on tactics)

Action: One action

Duration: One scene

Edges

Beasts, Changelings, Deviants, Prometheans: Sometimes, it's better to know someone on the inside instead of being someone on the inside. These cryptocrats prefer lurking in the shadows.

As such, users with this edge may choose to use their successes as phantom dots in the Contacts Merit (**Chronicles of Darkness**, p. 50) instead of Status. They can spend additional Willpower to increase successes, as with Status.

Demons: Infiltrating and taking on cover identities are a demon's bread and butter. Demonic cryptocrats with this edge can maintain their manufactured leadership for a whole story with the expenditure of an additional Willpower point.

Hunters, Sin-Eaters, Werewolves: Sometimes, a cryptocrat knows how important it is to keep close to a tight-knit group. As long as the group is not actively antagonistic to the cryptocrat, the Connected Condition persists after the vector duration expires.

Mages, Mummies, Vampires: Some cryptocrats naturally acquire lackeys, entourages, and cults. Humans are drawn to such creatures, even after the thrill and chaos of sudden leadership has come and gone. Once the story has concluded, users with this edge can purchase dots in the Contacts or Allies Merits at one less Experience. Once the next story starts, this cost reduction is lost. Other Merits may be acquired instead at Storyteller discretion.

Specializations

The Cheiron Group: The Cheiron Group understands acquisitions, mergers, and other long-term power grabs. Members of this conspiracy know how to leverage even the faintest whiff of authority into something concrete. With the expenditure of an additional Willpower, cryptocrats with this specialization can maintain their ephemeral Status for an entire story. In addition, once the story has concluded, they can immediately spend Experience to purchase Status in that organization, up to the amount granted through the use of The Boss Is In.

•• Plutomancy

Money. They say it makes the world go 'round. They probably don't mean it literally. But for your bureau, it's true. Maybe it's something you picked up from the study of financial contagion, and thinking how those economic strategies map to the Contagion you're fighting now. Maybe all that time you spent around mages has rubbed off on you, imparting a little bit of that "coincidental magic" they keep talking about. Or maybe you're just really, really good at using money to get whatever you want — so good that you can make things happen that no one would dream of.

It doesn't matter. What matters is that being rich is your superpower. The acquisition of wealth isn't the goal, but the means to a different end, because you can throw money at the problem. Any problem. At some point, someone with a passing knowledge of Greek coined the term "plutomancy" to describe this vector, and the name stuck. It's just a simple matter of making your money work for you.

The beast stirs, fingering a gold coin from her lair. The mummy calls his cult and has them sell another of his stockpiled antiquities. The changeling carefully reads the fine print on a special kind of royalty contract.

System: Each cryptocrat in the faction can never fall below the number of dots they have in the Resources Merit (**Chronicles of Darkness**, p. 53) than dots in the authority vector. If the user already has dots in the Resources Merit, they are not added to the dots that Plutomancy grants — this isn't *additional* income, but a *supplemental* revenue stream.

In addition, at the start of each story, all cryptocrats with access to Plutomancy gain a number of Plutomancy points equal to their Resource dots. These Plutomancy points can be used just like Willpower points, including paying for the cost of other vectors.

Any leftover Plutomancy points are lost at the end of the story. The cryptocrat gains a new pool of points at the start of the next story.

Cost: None

Requirement: When using Plutomancy points, the cryptocrat must activate their vector through the spending of money, financial acquisition, or some other conspicuous display of wealth.

Dice Pool: None

Action: Instantaneous

Duration: Permanent, as long as the cryptocrat is part of the faction

Edges

Beasts, Deviants, Hunters, Mummies: The nice thing about being rich is that you can pay for quality results. And when you're a plutomancer, that means you *always* get quality results. Each time cryptocrats with this edge spend a Plutomancy point, it is equivalent to two Willpower points instead of just one.

Changelings, Demons, Mages, Prometheans, Sin-Eaters, Vampires, Werewolves: Money's many purposes vary between its users. Money makes its owner glamorous, and it's historically been used for the purchase of souls, or to change the world around the spender. Of course, some individuals exalt in the ability to make money from nothing, while others see it as a natural force with a spirit like any other. Then there are those who identify the connection between money and eternity, or money and death. Pluto is the god of the Underworld, after all. Cryptocrats with this edge can spend their Plutomancy points as Glamour, Aether, Mana, Pyros, Plasm, Vitae, or Essence, respective to their normal resource (e.g., a vampire cannot convert Plutomancy to Glamour, but can convert it to Vitae), as well as Willpower, in a one-to-one exchange as long as the action they take involves a conspicuous display of wealth.

Specializations

The Undertakers: These Sin-Eaters help those about to die to get their affairs in order. Nothing makes a ghost move from "ready to move on" to "I have unfinished business" like a contested will or a funeral that bankrupts a family. Not all power from wealth comes from flaunting it — there's security that comes from quiet wealth as well. Sin-Eaters in an Undertaker krewe do not need to make conspicuous displays of wealth to use their Plutomancy points. Further, they gain one additional Plutomancy point at the start of each chapter.

••• Panopticon (Teamwork)

Electronic surveillance is a powerful tool. It watches endlessly, tracking and recording all human activities under its unblinking eyes and ever-vigilant ears. Before we had close-circuit cameras and pinhole microphones, "surveillance" just meant one person watching another person. However, human memories are fallible. Just because someone saw something doesn't mean it'll get back to you in the right way, or even at all. And you can't rely on everyone to record everything they see on their cell phones (yet).

The Panopticon vector takes human frailties out of the equation. Why rely on human memory when you can simply use their eyes for yourself? Visualize their face, speak their name, and suddenly their eyes and ears are yours. Electronic surveillance is nice, but it can't beat seven billion "surveillance devices" all over the world.

Of course, the Cryptocracy is committed to this constant surveillance. Everyone in the Cryptocracy is connected to Caliber, and everyone connected to Caliber can be tapped into by anyone else in Caliber. You don't have any secrets to hide, do you? This power isn't meant to be abused. It's just another tool in the war against the Contagion. And to cure the planet, we need to see everywhere the infection takes root.

Don't worry. It won't even hurt. Just don't blink for a moment.

A Promethean and a werewolf chant names while staring into a pool of clear water. Two vampires murmur, staring into each other's eyes as they slowly fuck on the bed. A pair of hunters read off a list of names as they carefully watch an old television set flicker through channels.

System: If two cryptocrats both know a person's name and face, they can look through that person's eyes and hear through the person's ears (assuming the target can see and hear). Whatever the target sees appears on a nearby reflective surface, and whatever the target hears appears in the air around the cryptocrats.

The cryptocrats have no control over the target — they can't encourage the person to look in a specific direction or take out their earbuds to eavesdrop on a nearby conversation. Further, this power does not grant any *interpretation* of events — languages spoken by or around the target are not translated, and the events transpiring around the target are presented as a flat, visual image. However, the events that appear are not unique to the users — anyone in the room can see and hear the events (and thus act as translators or consultants to interpret the events).

Cost: Each cryptocrat using Panopticon spends a Willpower point.

Requirement: Two cryptocrats in the same bureau must both visualize a person's face and speak that person's name aloud while looking at a reflective surface.

Dice Pool: One cryptocrat rolls Resolve + Occult. Success means the cryptocrats have gained access to the target.

Action: One minute

Duration: One scene

Edges

Changelings, Deviants, Mummies: Some cryptocrats understand that looking at things from a different angle helps. Any user with this edge can "jump" into the senses of another target without making another roll, as long as the second target can be seen and heard by the first target. A target that is seen and heard remotely (such as a live television broadcast or video calling) is valid.

Demons, Hunters, Mages: These cryptocrats know what it's like to try and live in someone else's head. Sometimes, they even know how to get someone to do something, thinking it's their own idea. Users with this edge can spend an additional Willpower during the scene to get the target to take one simple action. These actions include such things as "turn your head to look at that painting" or "take off your headphones to listen to that couple over there." Any action that

adjusts the sensory images and doesn't put the target in any danger, discomfort, or distress is valid. The target will believe the action is their own idea.

Prometheans, Sin-Eaters: In general, the target of Panopticon needs to be... well, alive and whole. They need to be alive and have working eyes and ears, stuff like that. For cryptocrats with this edge, however, that's not true — the target's *potential* is all that matters. The users can see or hear what the target *would* see and hear, even if they are blind, deaf, or dead.

Beasts, Vampires, Werewolves: Sight? Hearing? Bah — it's as if the Cryptocracy has forgotten that other senses exist! Users with this edge, however, can add smell to the sensory impressions they receive from the target. Further, this additional sense allows the user to get rudimentary emotional information from any characters around the target, such as "I'm horny" or "I hate you." The emotions of the target herself aren't communicated via the edge, however.

Specializations

Maa-Kep: The Maa-Kep have literally spent centuries quietly observing people for signs of discontent. Their knowledge of subtle body language tells opens a whole new world with this ability. If the character rolling for Panopticon is a member of the Maa-Kep, everyone in the bureau gets complete and full understanding of the situation. All languages are translated, all confusing imagery is clarified, and the context of all visuals and sounds are understood. Any dice rolls used to understand the events transpiring under Panopticon gain three dice as well.

•••• The Big Lie (Teamwork)

The 24-hour news cycle has been both a boon and a burden for those working against the Contagion. On the one hand, learning of a new outbreak instantaneously is a life-saver. No more attempts to fly agents to suspected blooms and having them come back with red herrings and dead ends, if they come back at all. No more digging through musty libraries and newspaper morgues to dig up relevant information. Now it's all a Google search and a Twitter war away. They say that nothing travels faster than bad news, and these days bad news can be measured in seconds.

On the other hand, information itself now acts like the Contagion. False information is a virus in its own right: it grows, spreads, and infects minds long before an inoculation of fact can be administered. Even facts themselves are questioned, distorted, and discarded. Some paranoid cryptocrats worry that reality itself has been corrupted by the Contagion. Of course, those who whisper such lunacies would argue that you're not paranoid if you're right. Just you wait until you wake up one day and the earth really *is* flat.

The Contagion must be stopped — no one in the Cryptocracy doubts this. But sometimes, you must inflict a little more harm before you can do some good. Some cures can kill off a localized area to preserve the larger population. And the same is true of facts. Occasionally, the cryptocrats need to inject a little more fiction to give the facts time to restore the health of the narrative. Sometimes, a bureau just needs to buckle down, come up with a plan, and spread a little fake news of their own.

A Winter Courtier conspires with her two compatriots in a discount hotel room. Three mages hold a "strategy session" all day in a coffee shop with open laptops. A vampire paces back and forth in the back room of the club, using a whiteboard to argue with a werewolf and a demon.

System: Three cryptocrats in the same faction spend at least six hours in a “strategy session,” constructing a plausible series of events. Each spends a point of Willpower, and one of the members makes a roll. If successful, the narrative of events constructed starts to propagate, and is generally believed to be accurate for 24 hours. Pictures and videos surface that support the proposed events, articles will appear in respectable publications investigating the allegations, and high-profile celebrities will trend hashtags in support of the false narrative. The users of this vector could even reconstruct a completely true narrative in this fashion, just to get it visible, but the objective truth or fiction of the narrative is irrelevant to what happens next.

Even people who aren’t online hear about the story. Newspaper columns and magazine columns sympathetic to your view accidentally get bumped to the front page or become the cover story. Bums in alleyways whisper snippets of your press release. People in restaurants overhear a conversation supporting your story, but they can’t find who said it. Graffiti supporting your ideas appears over the ads in the subway. For a day, the odds of a random person encountering the story significantly increases.

After 24 hours, the wheels start to come off. Even if true, the evidence presented in the previous cycle gets drawn into question. Counter-articles come out against the proposed narrative. Social media wars erupt featuring increasingly vulgar hashtags. Soccer moms who hadn’t even heard of the story earlier in the week suddenly develop opinions that they share loudly in the salon. For the following 24 hours, the proposed sequence is still in the public eye, but its authenticity is now in doubt. Once the second 24-hour cycle is completed, the world at large forgets about the story, and moves on to the next scandal du jour.

This vector can only be used once a month by a bureau.

Cost: Each of the three cryptocrats using this vector must spend a Willpower point before rolling.

Requirement: Three cryptocrats in the same bureau must stay in contact with each other for six hours prior to the use of this vector.

Dice Pool: Manipulation + Expression

Action: Six hours

Duration: 48 hours

Edges

Beasts, Changelings, Deviants: The truth wants to be free. At least, cryptocrats with this edge think so. If the narrative is true (or as true as the bureau believes it to be), there is no second cycle of counter-narrative — the vector simply pushes the story into being viral for a second 24 hours before it disappears.

Demons, Mummies, Vampires: Sometimes, not being plugged into the constant news cycle has its advantages. For one thing, you have time to think through your strategy and you can better anticipate the long-term consequences of your plan. If a cryptocrat with this edge leads the strategy session, the first cycle where the narrative is believed is extended to 48 hours. However, you must spend more time planning to anticipate the counter-narrative — the action needed before the roll is increased to ten hours, instead of six. If desired, cryptocrats with this edge can choose a “quick and dirty” approach that only takes six hours to plan, but only grants the default 24-hour positive cycle.

Hunters, Prometheans, Sin-Eaters: These cryptocrats know about the value of keeping a story moving. How the spin plays in Detroit isn't the same as how it'll work in Dublin. Those with this edge can generate a smaller, more localized version of this vector (dubbed by some as "Fake Local News"). Using only two cryptocrats in the bureau, they can spend an hour discussing strategy before releasing the story into the world. The news only spreads through the major metropolitan area (if the users are within one), or to the nearest major city (if not). The vector otherwise works as written.

Mages, Werewolves: Spirits love to gossip as much as anyone else. Sure, they don't *think* of it as gossip, but they spread information and stories as much as anyone else. Cryptocrats with this edge can target the spirit realm instead of the physical realm. If the story is only directed at the spirit realm, the positive cycle lasts for a week, rather than 24 hours. (The negative cycle still spins out over the course of a 24-hour span.)

Specializations

The Invictus: The First Estate has cherished truth since the days of the Camarilla. Not the *actual* truth, of course... don't be absurd. But the *concept* of truth is important to so many. Mortals, ghouls, and even the Kindred simply want to believe something is true, if presented with enough conviction. If an Invictus leads a strategy session for The Big Lie, she can keep the narrative going. Every 24 hours, she can spend another Willpower and initiate a quick five-minute "check in" call or meeting with the original users of this vector. After a successful meeting to discuss recent events, the original cycle of positive news repeats. If the Invictus vampire doesn't spend the Willpower or can't arrange for a check in, the follow-up counter-narrative cycle begins.

Jeremiad: Fervor Vector

Real power — *true* power — comes from within. It doesn't matter how much money you have, how many favors you're owed, or how easily you can punch your first through a man's chest. The kind of power we need to avoid corruption — to avoid being *contaminated* — stems from the spiritual. The names of the gods we worship or the philosophies we embody are multitudinous, but our simple clarity and purity of spirit keep the Contagion from perverting us. And from that, we can ensure that others are not similarly infected. Our sophia is both sword and shield to us. We embrace *fervor* as our vector. Notably, the fervor vector is not as reliant on teamwork as other vectors. A modern saying among the Jeremiad is "Purify thyself first, before attempting to purify the passenger beside you."

The Jeremiad favors beasts, hunters, mummies, and Prometheans. In addition, groups such as the Integrators, the Lancea et Sanctum, the Long Night, the Lucifuge, and Malleus Maleficarum do well as fanatics.

• Purification

You seek to fight the Contagion? First, you must be pure of spirit, strong of mind, and clear in your focus. In the long nights ahead, you will find your faith tested, your desires twisted, and your relationships shattered. You will be stronger if you discard all that hold you down, set you back, and leads you astray.

This isn't a placebo. Yes, the mere act of meditation, prayer, or personal affirmation can provide real benefits to mind and body, but that's not what your sect has access to. Instead, the act of engaging in your sophia gives real, concrete benefits. All impurities flow away like water, or

burn in the fire of our fervor. Everything from disease and supernatural influence to toxic relationships and inconvenient situations are shed, leaving us free to face our true enemy.

A deviant sits in a dingy motel room, rereading favorite passages from the Gideon bible left in the dresser drawer. A Promethean studies the flames as she watches her old clothes burn in an empty oil drum. A werewolf stalks his prey, letting the spirits guide his kill.

System: The user of Purification allows the fanatic to remove any one Condition from themselves they wouldn't normally be able to remove. This can be any Condition that isn't Persistent: anything from an obsession (like Tempted) to a supernatural effect (such as Mesmerized) to a social problem (such as Embarrassing Secret). The only Conditions it cannot remove are those imposed by the Contagion, such as Contagion-Touched (p. XX).

If the user wishes to remove the Condition temporarily (for the duration of a story), they need to spend ten minutes in spiritual reflection and spend one point of Willpower. If they want to permanently remove the Condition, however, they have to prove that their work against the Contagion is sincere. They must get approval from the faction to spend one Sworn Experience. If granted, they need to spend four hours engaging in their sophia before the Condition is removed.

Cost: 1 Willpower or 1 Sworn Experience

Requirement: Access to a representation of the fanatic's sophia — a bible, a sacred fire, a spirit, whatever.

Dice Pool: Resolve + (appropriate Skill related to the Condition)

Action: Ten minutes or four hours

Duration: One story or permanent

Edges

Beasts, Deviants, Prometheans, Werewolves: No one is going to fuck with your heart. Not ever. No matter what the source, your sophia is clear and pure. Nothing else can distract you from your righteous anger. Fanatics with this edge can remove Persistent Conditions that manipulate their emotions, such as Obsession or Addiction.

Changelings, Mages, Mummies, Sin-Eaters: The way to enlightenment requires, above all things, stillness of mind. Only if you study and appreciate the source of your sophia without encumbered thought will you ever be free. Fanatics with this edge can remove Persistent Conditions that muddy their clarity of thought, such as Madness or False Memories.

Demons, Hunters, Vampires: Hell is other people. You don't plan to live in a monastery or anything, sequestering yourself from all other contact, but occasionally relationships can just be so *messy*. Luckily, you know how to cut through the ties that bind, so that you are free to do what you know is just. Fanatics with this edge can remove Persistent Conditions involving other people, such as Enslaved or Hunted.

Specializations

The Long Night: These are the end times, but that doesn't mean you can't spread a little comfort in your fight against the Contagion. Members of the Long Night who embrace the Jeremiad can temporarily remove Conditions brought about by the Contagion, such as Contagion-Touched. Purification cannot permanently remove these Conditions, but the effects can be ignored for one

story after ten minutes and spending one Willpower. Also, fanatics with this specialization can also do the same for others for the same cost (ten minutes and one Willpower for each Condition being ignored).

•• Divine Revelation

Now your purpose is clear. It is time to help others who are not so pure to find their own way in this world. Your sect can stride across the world, containing the Contagion for a time. Once you discover an outbreak, you work within the infection to coax it out of the system. It can be a slow process, but purifying even one from the Contagion is worth the effort.

You know that purity does not come from without — you are no snake-oil preacher laying hands on the ill and miraculously healing them with a touch. You need to lead your flock to divine revelation, so they may take the steps needed to remove the corruption from themselves. You are merely the conduit of your sophia. The ill must want to heal.

A vampire whispers to her blood doll, reassuring him as she takes one small sip of blood. A Sin-Eater summons the spirits of those who died from disease, in order to scare his audience straight. A mummy preaches to her cult, convincing them that believing in her is the only way they will survive the coming darkness.

System: The fanatic speaks to a mortal who does not possess a supernatural template and who has the Infected Condition at any stage. The target must listen to the user of their own free will and understand what the user is saying. The conversation can take many forms: for example, it might be a sermon, a debate, or a presentation of why the user's sophia is the way toward purity. After the conversation concludes, the user spends a point of Willpower and rolls. On a successful roll, the target gains a brief spiritual insight related to the user's sophia. The target's Infected Condition reduces by one stage — Stage 3 becomes Stage 2, and Stage 2 becomes Stage 1. Targets with Infected (Stage 1) temporarily lose the effects of the Condition for one week, but they will return after the time elapses.

The spiritual awakening of the target may be temporary or permanent, depending on circumstances. Some targets shrug the moment off as a dream or the result of drink, while others devote their lives fully to their new faith.

Cost: 1 Willpower

Requirement: The target must choose to listen to the user of their own free will.

Dice Pool: Presence + Expression

Action: One scene

Duration: One week (if Infected Stage 1) or permanent (if Infected Stage 2 or Stage 3)

Edges

Beasts, Deviants, Prometheans, Werewolves: Before, you could control your emotions. Now you can help others find the same peace. Once you explain to them the freedom of their own hearts, it's only a matter of time before they join you in your righteous fury. Instead of removing an Infected Condition, fanatics with this edge can remove non-Persistent Conditions from the target that manipulate their emotions. If the Condition is Persistent, the user can remove the effects of the Condition for a week.

Changelings, Mages, Mummies, Sin-Eaters: Those that learn can teach, and those that teach can learn. By helping others find stillness of thought, your own mind becomes clear. A civil conversation over a cup of tea or a beer can enlighten even the most befuddled soul. Instead of removing an Infected Condition, fanatics with this edge can remove non-Persistent Conditions from the target that muddle their minds. If the Condition is Persistent, the user removes the Condition's effects for a week.

Demons, Hunters, Vampires: Now that you have cut the toxic people out of your life, you can help others to do the same. Nobody wants to be in a bad relationship, but sometimes it takes a friendly face on the outside to push them in the right direction. Instead of removing an Infected Condition, fanatics with this edge can remove non-Persistent Conditions from the target that involve their social connections. If the Condition is Persistent, the user can remove the effects of the Condition for a week.

Specializations

Lancea et Sanctum: Those who follow the teachings of Longinus understand corruption. Humans bear a heavy burden, to be sure, but struggling with sin for centuries at a time is something that only those not of the mortal realm can truly understand. Members of the Lancea et Sanctum with this vector can use Divine Revelation (and its edge) on characters with a supernatural template, as well as mortals.

••• Cleansing Flame

You embrace the epitaph of “fanatic.” You are devoted to your sophia and your sect. You fight to protect and cure those you can. But sometimes, the only solution is to obliterate the infection. Those of the other Sworn might whisper “zealot” behind your back, but you understand that destroying the Contagion before it spreads is the most important thing. If that makes you a zealot, so be it, but occasionally, lives must be lost for the greater good. The only purity that can be sought is that which comes from the cleansing flame.

The implementation is simple — cast your gaze upon the target, and invoke the vector in question. The result, however, is dramatic. The target bursts into flame, burning with blue fire — the more they are infected, the more intense the flame. It is not a subtle power, but you don't care. Results are all that matter.

The demon chitters, enumerating the true name of God in binary. The changeling calls upon the intense might of Arcadia, giving a mortal a glimpse into the chaos of the realm of the True Fae. The hunter offers a simple prayer over the torpid body of the vampire at her feet.

System: The fanatic with this vector gazes on her target and speaks, prays, or chants to invoke the nature of her sophia. If the roll is successful, the target is wreathed in blue fire and takes one lethal wound. Creatures with a weakness to flame take aggravated damage instead. This damage is increased by one for every Contagion Condition the character has — Infected counts as one Condition for each stage (so Infected Stage 3 would add three lethal damage). The flames disappear as soon as they are summoned.

Cost: 1 Willpower

Requirement: The user must be able to speak and see her target.

Dice Pool: Presence + Intimidation

Action: 1 action

Duration: Instantaneous

Edges

Changelings, Demons, Deviants, Mummies, Sin-Eaters, Werewolves: Pain is a good teacher. Perhaps better than most. And you understand the lessons of agony. If the fanatic has this edge, any target of a successful roll also gains the Beaten Down tilt, in addition to any damage.

Beasts, Hunters, Mages: Fire is the ancient weapon of humanity, and you know how to wield it. Fire not only purifies; it also illuminates. Any fanatic with this edge will learn all Conditions on the target as well as inflicting damage.

Prometheans, Vampires: You know the kiss of fire. Maybe you haven't experienced it directly, but you've heard the screams in your mind as soon as you come near. Now you can spread that fear to others, just as you understand it. If the fanatic has this edge, any target of a successful roll also gains the Shaken Condition, in addition to any damage.

Specializations

The Lucifuge: How cute. For eons the Lucifuge have had to listen to everyone in this Sworn yammering on about God this and purity that. It's exhausting. And now these holier-than-thou (literally) upstarts want to talk to you about *fire*? Please. The Lucifuge understand fire in a way that no one else can. Stand back and see how a true master uses a cleansing flame. Fanatics who are members of the Lucifuge not only do the damage listed, but their Cleansing Flame vector is considered a "cure" for the purposes of resolving any Contagion Conditions.

•••• Modern Miracle

The divine forces flowing through creation are not for anyone to control. The faithful who call upon their power learned long ago one does not command the divine; you beseech them to intercede on your behalf, to loan you a measure of their power. For those who would be content with the tiniest mote of power, they find they can be gifted with a sudden and powerful flood of energy that gives them not just what they need but the ability to help more than just one individual at a time.

Summoning a miracle leaves a mark on the land around it. Those who summon forth a ray of healing light find that the area continues to glow long after the light has stopped. The crumbs left over from the feast summoned forth from a few loaves of bread and fishes continue to nourish those who eat them and never grow stale. This is a highly visible act that may attract attention, but for those who have found their sophia, it does not matter. They want to spread the good word to all who can accept it into their hearts, and in the nights where the Contagion blazes, they must do more than just sit and wait for the most hardened to come around.

The spirits flow around the shaman and leave words of power in the hearts of those listening to their chant. The divine miracle of Azoth burns so bright that all those nearby are comforted by its warmth. The light of God shimmers in the moonlight and gives the Sanctified the strength to burn his enemies.

System: Modern Miracle summons forth a divine act that invokes a positive and negative effect on those who witness it in person (not remotely, and not via technology). As a default, Modern Miracle removes all levels of Health damage from any injured witnesses, but cannot heal damage

caused by Contagion or someone Contagion-Touched. This power does not affect other members of the Jeremiad.

Those invoking a Modern Miracle must declare a benevolent and malevolent side to it. This represents the warmth and vengeance of the sophia's beliefs. A member of the Jeremiad may summon forth a ray of sunshine to brighten up a sewer and protect the homeless colony living there. The fanatic may also declare the Modern Miracle's sunlight is actual sunlight and inflict damage on those vulnerable to its effect.

This vector is highly noticeable and difficult to cover up to the authorities and the media. Word of it spreads like wildfire if left unchecked, and soon social media comes alive with supposed miraculous sightings. While fanatics can work to limit this effect, it may attract attention from other groups who learn of the existence of the fanatics.

Cost: 1 permanent Willpower and 1 Sworn Experience.

Requirement: The user must be pure and devoted to their sophia. Modern Miracle may only be used once per chronicle without Storyteller approval. If it is used in any fashion that goes against the sophia's teachings, then the Modern Miracle ends immediately or fails to work at all.

Dice Pool: Stamina + Academics or Occult

Action: Instantaneous

Duration: One scene

Edges

Mummies, Prometheans, Sin-Eaters: You know more about trafficking with the divine than anyone else could know. You have seen the other side, you have consorted with ancient deities, and you have the life blood of creation flowing through you. Your miracle may inflict a Condition of the user's choice upon onlookers who witness the miracle.

Demons, Deviants, Mages: You see this world through a rational lens, though this does not prohibit you from being able to summon the strength of the divinity and asking it for assistance. Anyone who witnesses the vector can ignore any Tilts affecting them for the next 24 hours.

Changelings, Hunters, Werewolves: You are inspired by the legends of old and draw upon the realms of religion and myth to impose a sense of order upon the miracle. You can declare that the miracle can also bar a certain group from coming within one mile of the miracle, although this vector will not impede anyone Contagion-Touched.

Beasts, Vampires: Hunger has been a form of sacrifice for many religious sects. For you, the hunger constantly lurking at the back of your mind echoes the prayers of the pious over the centuries. You can pray for the miracle to restore one point of any pool your fellow fanatics possess, with the exception of Willpower.

Specializations

Lancea et Sanctum: Your relationship with the Almighty is as unshakeable as the cornerstones of the world and as such, you can choose to be immune to any negative effects your Miracle creates. You walk untouched in a swirling firestorm your Miracle has created or you summon sunlight that burns every vampire around you except for yourself.

•••• Godhead

The fanatics of the Jeremiad are able to summon forth aspects of the divine to cleanse the area around them and purify those touched by its light, but there are times when they must beseech their sophia for the strength to do more than fill hearts with hope. They must lead, and not just as peaceful shepherds guiding their flocks to stick to the path. They must clad themselves in armor of spite and strength and march forth to meet their foes wherever they may hide.

Invoking the Godhead is a step no fanatic takes lightly. It leaves lasting scars and has the potential to kill its user if not used properly. For a brief time, the fanatic gains abilities out of legend, and is able to shrug off the blows of their enemies and rain down divine fire from the sky. Their body glows with a nimbus of glory and righteousness, and those who gaze upon them are often forced to avert their eyes to avoid having their vision burned away.

The Godhead's effects on the fanatic are more than simply donning a coat of armor and removing it later. Many who use its power find their senses dulled afterwards and find their normal state is no longer satisfying. Some find the presence so overwhelming they do not dare touch upon it again. These are all real consequences for what might actually be embodying the God-Machine, but for the brief period they do, they are akin to an ancient war god walking the land.

The Lucifuge feels nothing but pride and righteousness as their teachings have come true and they have become the god they promised others they could be. The Promethean becomes a grand architect, her mind full of new equations and alchemical solutions that she will share with her fellow fanatics. The Psychopomp feels something akin to the power she once wielded as an angel of the God-Machine, but she almost feels like she could become even greater than the machine.

System: Invoking the Godhead is an act that cannot be taken back once summoned. It summons a tidal wave of power that flows through the user. At once, they find every aspect of their being expanded as if they were one with reality. Their perceptions expand and all problems seem simple to them.

Those invoking the Godhead gain the following benefits:

- Immunity to any Conditions or damage for the remainder of the vector's duration. This does not remove any Conditions or damage already sustained, but the user can ignore their effects.
- All the user's Brawl attacks gain the aggravated damage trait. If their Brawl attacks already deal aggravated damage, they gain three dots in Strength instead.
- They can automatically see through any illusions, Covers, or cloaking powers within range of their vision. By spending a point of Willpower, they can bar any target using that power from doing so for the remainder of the scene.
- They gain two dice to all of their dice pools for the duration of the power.
- They can interact with the Contagious and handle Contagious individuals and artifacts without fear of infection.
- Their Speed, Defense, and Initiative all increase by 3.

Godhead takes a toll the longer it is used. At the beginning of each turn after the vector is activated, the fanatic takes 2 points of lethal damage that cannot be healed or soaked in any way. They may spend a point of Willpower to ignore taking a damage for the turn. The power ends

when the user decides to let the power lapse or they run out of boxes of Health, at which point all damage they suffered by using the Godhead converts to aggravated damage. Those killed in this way are engulfed by Infrastructure that snares them and drags them, often screaming, into the hard fabric of our reality.

Cost: 3 Willpower per use

Requirement: The fanatic must have remained faithful to the teachings of their sophia and must be using this power either in defense of their religion or to engage their enemies.

Dice Pool: None

Action: One action

Duration: One scene

Edges

Beasts: Your Godhead resembles your monstrous form from legend, and you leave clawed footprints in your wake as a guttural roar escapes your maw. When you exit the Godhead, you can shift your Satiety level by one and you still possess your bonuses to Defense and Initiative for the next scene.

Changeling: You are human again, but also the creation your Fae Keeper wanted you to be. You are both forms melded into one, in a seamless combination of otherworldly power and mortal understanding. You can invoke any of your Contracts for free and the benefits you get from your Kith are doubled while Godhead is in effect.

Demon: The power you feel now is as if you blew your Cover a thousand times over, and your vision becomes filled with endless permutations of code cycling over and over until you seem to understand it all. In addition to the effects of the Godhead, you count as if Going Loud without losing your current Cover, and you permanently heal one Condition as you rewrite your own code.

Deviant: For a fleeting moment, you see your captors in your vision and you understand their agenda. The insight that fills you allows you to ignore any penalties to your dice pools for the next scene.

Hunters: You always dreamed of having this power, but now you have it, you find it like riding a rollercoaster — you must keep both hands on the ride to keep from falling off. Perhaps your sophia is looking down kindly upon you, but at the end of your time as the Godhead, you only convert half of the lethal damage sustained into aggravated damage.

Mage: Channeling arcane forces has never seemed easier to you. For a moment, it all makes sense, and with a flick of your wrist reality cannot help but obey. Your Gnosis is considered two dots higher for the purposes of determining the number of spells you can maintain.

Mummies: Use of the Godhead forces you to resemble one of the Judges of Irem. Mortals who gaze upon your form immediately take on the Cowed Condition. You gain four dice to any attempts at recruiting them into a cult.

Promethean: For a moment, you feel completely whole and human. You understand life and the power flowing through you and are able to force your body to withstand the incredible forces wanting to tear it apart. You can fuel your vector by spending Pyros instead of Willpower and

when Godhead ends, you may spend Azoth to remove aggravated damage on a one-for-one basis.

Sin-Eaters: Your powers seem unlimited and you are able to sense the sins and thoughts of those around you like an open book. Sin-Eaters immediately can tell what Conditions and Vices affect those around them and gain instant knowledge of any perverse or sinister actions the individuals have committed recently.

Vampires: You are an ancient fury made flesh, and you are able to use this power to increase the potency of your blood. Your Blood Potency is increased by 2 while you have this vector active and your Vitae reaches maximum capacity.

Werewolves: You understand Father Wolf's devotion to his duty well, though you know your ancestors were still correct in their actions. While this power is active, you exude the shattered spiritual aura of Father Wolf. Werewolves and spirits will follow you or flee from you, but will not dare attack.

Specializations

Integrators: You have felt the sheer divine glory of being an extension of the God-Machine and that feeling will affect everyone around you. You may select up to twelve individuals deemed "disciples" who will forever be able to see and interact with Infrastructure as if it weren't hidden from their sleeping eyes.

Rosetta Society: Semiotics Vector

They say that knowledge is power, but it's not as simple as that. Knowledge doesn't always come with understanding. The pieces of the puzzle are scattered across untold different repositories — human minds, ancient ciphers, old books, new databases, even in the echoes of history imprinted onto the physical landscape around us. Power comes from wielding the key to all that knowledge, and that key is *meaning*. There's a tapestry of communication and transmission all around us, threading backwards and forwards through time and space. We're the masters of reading that weave. We dive past the obfuscation of words and symbols to find the underlying truth. We wield the power of *semiotics*.

The Rosetta Society favors mages, demons, changelings, hunters, and werewolves. As well as these beings, the Circle of the Crone, Sessa-Hebsu, the Mourners, the Tammuz, and similar groups find comfort in the Society and its focus on meaning and symbolism.

• Comprehension

The vibrations on the spider's web mark the impending death of its prey, but that's only because the spider knows what those vibrations mean. An orator's words can stir the hearts of a throng of humans to incredible deeds, but without a common base of understanding, she only succeeds in riling up a confused mob. Knowledge of a secret code turns idiotic babbling into revelatory truths. The whole world hums with the transmission of knowledge, and it is up to the Rosetta Society to winnow the meaning out of it all.

Brute-forcing the world's cipher through learning each and every language is a fool's game. Even the longer-lived of the Sworn only have so much time and mental storage they can put to the crude task of banking all that data, and there's no way to guess ahead of time what particular language or code might be vital during an outbreak. Instead, the Society teaches a metaphorical

Rosetta Stone of its own to its members — a combination of key semiotics, occult symbols, and meditative practices that connect the member to a kind of Akashic archive, the collective subconscious of humanity. If any human, anywhere, can understand or decipher the meaning of a word or phrase, so can a member of the Rosetta Society.

A werewolf's keen senses match where ancient fragments of First Tongue intonation still linger in the languages of the present day. A hunter imagines a mind palace filled with quiet voices that lend her their understanding. A demon calculates the precise way the light will fall on the mural he has painted, knowing that his fellows will see the warning in the angle of that illumination.

System: A member of the Rosetta Society can translate and understand any language also known by at least one living human being, whether in written, signed, or verbal form. It takes a turn for the Rosetta Society member to reach understanding, slightly delaying any response, but the resulting translation is perfect and no meaning is lost in the process. This includes innuendos, cants, symbolic representations of concepts, ciphered text, and other forms of communication. It does not allow the Exegete to process the information any faster than they could normally if they already understood the language or means of communication in question.

Additionally, any character using Comprehension can communicate with one or more other characters who also have this vector with absolute clarity of intent and meaning, regardless of shared languages, and in a form that can only be understood by the intended recipients. This is not telepathy; the message is transmitted through the slightest shift of the character's body and the minute adjustments of their expression, or in the particular words that they *haven't* used in an email that appears to be about something entirely unrelated, or even in the way they've left a few pebbles scattered seemingly artlessly on the ground. The intended recipients will immediately understand the message and its intent. Exegete agents sometimes use this power to leave long-term warnings or signs for other members, concealing information about a threat in the graffiti outside a dangerous building, or hiding vital secrets in the pattern of the planted roses in an old mansion's gardens — a message that will continue to deliver for decades or even centuries.

Cost: 1 Willpower per scene; no cost for communicating with other wielders of Semiotics

Requirement: Must be able to perceive the communication to be translated

Dice Pool: Wits + Empathy; no roll needed for communicating with other wielders of Semiotics

Action: Instant

Duration: One scene

Edges

Deviants, Hunters, Mages: Already close to baseline humanity and its collective unconscious, these Rosetta members draw deeply from that well of understanding. After a successful Comprehension roll, such a character can spend a point of Willpower to be able to speak or actively communicate back using the deciphered means of communication for the remainder of the scene, not just passively understand it.

Beasts, Demons, Werewolves: Through the ties that bind them to others or through their inherent capability to comprehend languages already, an oracle with this edge suffers no delay in Comprehension's translation. Furthermore, they can grant the understanding of the language to other characters of up to their Semiotics dots in number.

Sin-Eaters, Mummies, Vampires: Just because knowledge passes beyond the grasp of the living, does not mean it is lost forever. Death has its own echo that lingers in the world. An oracle with this edge can also understand languages that are no longer known to any living human. As long there was, at some point, a human who understood the language, the character can comprehend it.

Changelings, Prometheans: Among the Sworn are those whose instincts or nature let them disentangle or purify the Contagion's corrupting influence from words and expression. A character with this edge can translate a Contagion-infected message or transmission without also conveying the infection on into the new form, but this does not purify the original infected communication.

Specializations:

Tammuz: For the Tammuz, language is more than just the foundation of how they communicate with others; it's something fundamental to how they came to be in the first place. A Tammuz neither needs to spend time reading a whole text nor listening to an entire speech to translate it; all they need is the single Instant action to use the vector itself to achieve full comprehension.

•• Discovery

Understanding is the key to discovery. With comprehension established, knowledge can be *used* — and it should be. The Rosetta Society can take any given piece of knowledge and cross-reference it against the Society's vast academic resources — archives of papyrus and parchment stretching through dim caverns, thrumming databases woven into the heart of the internet, dreaming choirs of subconsciousnesses borrowed from sleeping academics and analysts, and more besides. All that incredible mental infrastructure is just aching to help bring each puzzle piece into its correct place.

An oracle of good standing can do more than just visit the strongholds of the Sworn and physically rifle through stacks of text; they can remotely access the colossal informational resources that the Rosetta Society possesses. Every possible step is taken to reduce the barriers between the Sworn agent and the knowledge they need, with almost no limitations placed on the depth or danger of topic that the member can delve into. Red tape and vetted clearance are the stifling chains that keep mortal endeavors held back. The Contagion doesn't afford oracles the luxury of pausing to wonder about the risks when an urgent situation demands immediate answers.

A Renegade blinks in the specific pattern that hacks her own brain, opening the caches of memorized knowledge locked away in her altered lobes. A werewolf enunciates the symbolic truths that send a hundred petty spirits scurrying out across a dozen libraries to sift through texts for answers to his question. A demon whistles the digital code into the phone that implants her discovery into the network; her device chirrups, messages in binary bringing back the responses she needs.

System: The oracle can use this vector to create a temporary Library (•••) Merit pertaining to any given extended Mental Skill roll. Each activation of the vector only grants the Merit's benefits for that specific extended roll, and does not extend it across to any others that are made concurrently or afterwards. Once the roll has completed, the temporary Merit is lost.

Cost: 1 Willpower

Requirement: Must be performing an extended Mental Skill roll.

Dice Pool: Intelligence + Academics

Action: Instant

Duration: One extended roll

Edges

Demons, Mages: All it takes a little tuning of the mind and a little self-inflicted psychic surgery to keep the drip-feed of the Society's knowledge going all the time in the back of the subconscious. A character with this edge no longer suffers unskilled penalties for any Skill in which they have zero dots.

Hunters, Werewolves: The world is dangerous, and rarely pauses to let the hunter or the hunted take stock of their situation and ponder its mysteries. Life-saving information can't wait. Characters with this edge treat the first interval on an extended Skill roll enhanced by this vector as reflexive, rather than whatever its usual duration is. Additionally, they can use the Library Merit to enhance extended Survival rolls.

Sin-Eaters, Vampires: A dead body tells a thousand stories, all bound up in its scars and bones. A character with this edge can treat a dead body as a Library (•••) for any research pertaining to it, its life, and its death. This does not cost any Willpower, and allows investigation that can reveal the dead character's secrets and knowledge.

Mummies: The Arisen know better than anyone how the sands of time erode accumulated knowledge, their own memories ravaged with each descent into Duat. The great work of the Rosetta Society, its vast accumulated lore, calls to the Iremites as an expression of defiance against the same forces that tear at their recollection. An Arisen character with this edge also gains the Inspired Condition relating to the extended roll.

Beasts, Changelings, Prometheans: Some researchers misguidedly believe that understanding comes only from hard, cold certainties, from truths and facts laid bare. Those whose humanity has been taken apart and put back together again in accordance with the laws of narrative and the whims of living stories know that the myths and stories of the great libraries hold just as much insight. A character with this edge can also apply the Library Merit's bonus to Empathy and Expression rolls being made as part of any social maneuver.

Deviants: Forget high-minded and lofty notions of academia; sometimes what matters is finding cover and protection. Learn the history of a city to figure out its hiding places and its nooks and its crannies; sift through the state records to learn who can be trusted and who can't. A character with this edge can use the Library Merit with an extended Stealth or Streetwise roll.

Specializations:

Sesha-Hebsu: It's no surprise the scribes of the Sesha-Hebsu feel a strong link to the Rosetta Society's great quest for knowledge. A Sesha-Hebsu Arisen who engages in teamwork with at least one other faction member on an extended Mental Skill roll using the Library benefit from this vector, also bestows the rote action quality on the primary actor in the roll.

•• Babble

If meaning is the vessel through which power flows, then it's worth keeping out of the hands of the undeserving and the Contagious. Just killing someone is a crude act bearing its own risks; far better to cut the offending source free from the tapestry of communication entirely.

Transmission-isolation helps keep those who just want to splash ink over the pages of history, those who want to play arsonist to the modern equivalents of the Library of Alexandria, back from the precipice. It clears the path to discovery of the social and mental debris who would hold the Society back.

Picking at the right threads that run through conversation can reduce it to a tangled stream of nonsense. Poisoning symbols that are the foundation to understanding leaves the malefactor's cries utterly incomprehensible. The oracles point to the Tower of Babel, wielding the meaning of that story as a threat against others. Cross the Society, and be scattered to the winds.

A mummy breaks a tablet of hieroglyphs, shattering their meaning physically and symbolically. A werewolf swallows the tongue of a liar who was Claimed by a spirit of deceit. A changeling skillfully copies everything the victim says the briefest second after they say it, leaving them stumbling over their words at the mimicking echo.

System: The oracle chooses a single target and takes an action that the target can perceive. This may be verbal, visual, or any other form that the target is capable of understanding — uttering a primeval syllable, blotting out a word, brushing a pattern on the skin. If the activation roll is successful, the target is then subjected to the collapse of meaning. For the duration of Babble, they are unable to read. Furthermore, whenever they attempt to speak or communicate, their words are misunderstood by those who hear, see, or read them, either mistaking their intent or simply being reduced to gibberish. Supernatural powers that rely on speech, communication, or symbols have their dice pools capped at the target's Composure, with failure on their activation rolls automatically becoming a Dramatic Failure. Finally, if the target is infected with a Contagion Condition, they are unable to pass that Condition on or infect others with it via social or verbal contact for the duration of Babble.

By spending an additional Willpower point when activating Babble, the Society member can limit or focus the effects of Babble to a single topic or subject. Rather than affecting the victim all the time, it merely kicks in when they attempt to communicate about that topic, reducing their efforts to nonsense or incomprehensibility for as long as they try to pursue the subject in question.

Cost: 1 Willpower

Requirement: The target must perceive the triggering action

Dice Pool: Manipulation + Subterfuge – target's Composure

Action: Instant

Duration: 24 hours

Edges

Changelings, Geist: The collapse of understanding can be pushed further by those with the right instincts; the mind peels apart, rendered incapable of communicating fully even within itself.

This edge causes the vector to also inflict the Madness Condition (see **Chronicles of Darkness** p. 289) on the target for the duration of its effects.

Mummies, Vampires: Through majestic revelation or slithering manipulation, these Receivers can tie a victim in knots of their own making. Upon triggering the vector, a character with this edge can force the victim to speak a specific phrase or statement when they try to communicate, rather than nonsensical gibberish, or can cause the victim's own guilty subconscious to spew their admissions and fears whenever they open their mouth to speak.

Deviants, Hunters, Beasts: Muting a messenger isn't always enough; that messenger's absence, or the clear evidence of their affliction, can do just as much to tip off the enemy. When the Babble vector is used by a character with this edge, other characters must pass a Composure roll penalized by the Sworn's dots in Semiotics to treat the victim's state as suspicious or a cause to raise alarm.

Prometheans, Mages: Even as the Babble vector infects the mind, these Sworn know how to draw the symbolism of the curse into their target's flesh and blood as well. The victim gains the moderate Sick Tilt (see **Chronicles of Darkness** p. 286), and their genetic material also becomes unreadable for the vector's duration.

Demons, Werewolves: The victim won't be making good use of their voice while afflicted with Babble, so someone else might as well exploit it. For the duration of the vector, a character with this edge can perfectly mimic the voice of the victim.

Specializations

Loyalists of Thule: The Loyalists of Thule have an institutional loathing of knowledge turned to dark purposes, of dark rites fueled by nightmarish sacrifices, and of blasphemous words that should never have been spoken. A Loyalist using the Babble vector can do so as a reflexive action if the target is in the process of using a supernatural power that relies on words, chanting, or other forms of invocation that require communication, and the activation roll is not penalized by the target's Composure.

••• Name (Teamwork)

Names have power. Sometimes it's literal — the Society has come across more than a few beings whose names can be used to directly control them. Sometimes it's the more metaphorical power that comes from knowing the exact identities of those involved in an unfolding series of events. Names are like fingerprints, where every interaction with society can leave traces of them lingering for the attentive to discover. Even the most cautious and paranoid of secretive masterminds can let slip hints at their identity through the necessity of communication to enact their goals. The Rosetta Society sifts through the dross of media and messaging that spill forth from every act that ripples through the world, pulling out the sparkling fragments of revelation that reveal the hidden actors.

Some oracles liken the process to echolocation; they ping a few key, carefully crafted symbols into the world, then see what shape the messages take when they return from their venture through society. Others run automated pattern-recognition algorithms that trawl through vast amounts of online data. The spilling stacks of records in governmental bureaus, the scrawled marginalia in old texts, and the mass-produced patterns stamped into a million throwaway products all hold the shape of the names of those who brushed up against them.

A mage telepathically searches through the minds of the crowd, seeking familiarity with the impression of a face she projects into their subconscious. A werewolf ritemaster listens to the

whispered names caught on the wind of the Shadow, the ones that the air spirits speak of most fearfully. A changeling rattles out messages on social media that are filled with the verbal trickery she learned from her Durance, luring out those who know the truth.

System: Two Rosetta members working in tandem can gather information on a target, including their name and their social connections. The characters must have at least some idea that the target exists, but does not need to know their exact nature or location; a member could try to gather the names of those responsible for a murder, find out the identity of the owner of a company producing Contagious substances, or discover the name of the masked vigilante terrorizing the city's criminals. The limitations are that the Receivers must interact with society to use the vector, asking questions or checking through records or using social media; and the target must also be in some way connected to society.

Success on the vector's activation roll provides a number of names of up to the highest number of dots in Semiotics possessed by a participating Society member. Each name is the genuine, real name of a character who is as directly involved in the matter the oracle is investigating as possible, and will likely be of use to those characters who possess occult powers relating to names. Additionally, the vector reveals the nature of any Allies, Alternate Identity, Contacts, Status, and Resources Merits that the target possesses. This is regardless of any steps the targets have taken to conceal themselves or their connections.

The vector is not instantaneous; it takes a day for its results to be made available to the characters.

Cost: 1 Willpower

Requirement: Two Rosetta Society members must interact with society to use this vector

Dice Pool: Wits + Investigation

Action: Instant

Duration: One day

Edges:

Changelings, Deviants, Prometheans: Those Sworn who have learned to survive by keeping a low profile and clinging to the edges of human society know the value of vigilance. An oracle with this edge also learns whether the named targets are aware of the characters using the vector and whether they consider them to be a threat or obstacle.

Demons, Hunters, Mages: Knowing a name is just the first step on the path to total information coverage. An oracle with this edge gains the Informed Condition relating to the characters' names they have gathered.

Vampires: For a consummate social predator, a web of names and influence is an opportunity to wreak havoc. An oracle with this edge may choose to afflict any or all characters whose names they have gathered with the Notoriety Condition.

Beasts, Sin-Eaters, Mummies, Werewolves: Names are more than just words; they hold real power, shaped by the person who has carried them and wielded them. Utter a name, and its shape holds truth; the ripples that spread through society from its mention reveal the nature of its owner. A Receiver with this edge also discovers the Vice and Virtue (or equivalent traits) of the named targets.

Specializations:

Circle of the Crone: The eldritch sorcery of Crúac intertwines with the power of names and blood, revealing what strange energies seethe in the veins of those whose sacred names are known to the Acolyte witches. An oracle with this specialization also learns whether the targets named by the vector possess supernatural powers, including broad indications as to what kind.

•••• Define (Teamwork)

Naming something defines it, limits it, and *controls* it. The pinnacle of the Rosetta Society's discoveries are the hidden syllables, the primeval foundations upon which even the simplest symbol is built — signs so powerful that they *impart* meaning upon the things they name, rather than deriving meaning from them. These fragments of definition have been teased from innumerable disciplines and sources — from the high languages of the Supernal and the low tongue of the Shadow, from the way particular quantum states vibrate and the echoes of the birth of the universe.

By wielding these symbols in a carefully arranged harmony, the Rosetta Society can rewrite the nature of a thing, binding it in accordance with a concept that does not truly exist. A new name chains the victim by blotting out their old. Of course, the world is heavy and static, and it does not take well to such tampering. The new words the Society carve into its fabric soon fade away. Only the Contagion itself is vulnerable to permanent transformation at the hands of this ancient sorcery, because its manifestations are themselves undefined by the rules of the world into which they intrude.

A trio of changelings sing a story that names a writhing horror, compelling it to obey the narrative of their tale. A Tammuz and her werewolf allies carve a binding word into a tablet of clay. The krewe of Sin-Eaters give a ghost a name taken from another dead human, shaping the shade's nature as they do so.

System: Three oracles working in unison can define a new name for a target character or object. For the duration of the vector, the target's old names no longer hold any metaphysical weight; they cannot be used to compel, control, bind, manipulate, or influence the target, and they do not count as the target's name for the purposes of any supernatural powers that require such a thing. Instead, the new name takes the place of the old for such purposes. This *can* be used defensively; a Society member can replace their own name, or that of an ally, to protect themselves from hostile magics for the duration of the effect.

The Society members can also use the new name to bind or limit by applying a Ban to the victim, much like those that restrict many ephemeral beings. The Ban is defined when the power is used, and must be made clear to the victim, usually via spoken or written word. The Ban can state a restriction on the victim but must also include an exception that is possible to meet — even if it is extremely unlikely for them to be able to do so. For example, the target might be bound not to leave the room they are in, unless the binders give them verbal permission to do so; they may be prevented from shedding blood unless attacked first; or they may be bound not to cast any spells until three humans have forgiven them for their crimes. The limitation must be contained to one particular type of action; the Ban cannot prevent the victim from leaving the room *and* from attacking anyone who enters it, for example. A Ban cannot be suicidal or clearly leading to self-destruction, so it is not possible to Ban the target from breathing or the like. The victim *must* adhere to the Ban as best they can, and are incapable of voluntarily breaking it; if forced to break

it by outside influence, they lose 1 Willpower point per scene until they can return to its limitations.

It is possible to place a Ban on an object, which functions in much the same way as for a character. The object will not be able to perform the proscribed action, such as an engine named to not start or a pebble named to not trigger an avalanche. As with characters, outside influence can potentially overcome a Ban, and an object that is forced to break the Ban in this way suffers no ill effects.

Contagious targets are initially affected as normal. However, once the vector fades, they retain a form of the Ban, and they keep their new name alongside their old. The new form of the Ban is up to the Storyteller's discretion, but should represent a lesser or more focused form of the Ban placed by the Define vector. Contagious targets have been more anchored in this version of reality by being so named, and thus are permanently shaped by the vector. Future uses of Define will overwrite any such new name and Ban with those of the vector's latest application.

A target can only be under the effect of a single such Define-created Ban at a time, unless otherwise specified. However, entities that naturally possess Bans continue to be afflicted by their existing constraints as well as the new Ban placed by the vector.

Cost: 2 Willpower

Requirement: Three Rosetta Society members working in concert, who clearly indicate to the target the new name and Ban they are defining it with.

Dice Pool: Presence + Persuasion – target's Resolve

Action: Instant

Duration: 24 hours

Edges

Demons: Names and identities are the bread and butter of a demon's trade. Sometimes it pays to paint someone else as the target. Rather than defining a new name and Ban for the victim, the demon can instead define a character as one of the demon's own Covers. For the duration of the vector, the target is treated as if they were wearing that Cover identity, treated by the world as that person.

Mages, Werewolves: Choosing the right name that resonates with the primeval symbols of the Supernatural and the Shadow reinforces its power over reality. For a character with this edge, the duration of Define can be extended to up to 48 hours.

Hunters, Deviants: There are too many nightmares in the world that prey on the innocent, too many oppressors who exploit the vulnerable. Name them for what they are, and hold them at bay. A character with this edge can add a further limitation to the Ban that prevents the target from attacking *any* character via any means unless they first spend a Willpower point, after which they are free to attack for the remainder of the scene.

Beasts, Changelings, Mummies: The harsh walls of a Defining name are sometimes needed, but a gentler, guiding hand has its role to play. Call it narrative, Wyrd, or Fate; it can be used to pull the victim along in their charade, rather than imprisoning them as a captive. Instead of placing a Ban, a character with this edge can replace the target's Vice and Virtue (or equivalent traits) with a new set chosen by the Rosetta Society member. Not only do these new choices

replace their existing traits for the purposes of regaining Willpower, but every scene where the victim wishes to resist acting strongly in accordance with the new Vice and Virtue costs them a point of Willpower.

Prometheans: Prometheans know the pain of having no defined place in reality all too well, of burning with a flame that the world finds no familiarity in. By defining the nature of another, they can inflict that same rejection upon their victim. A character with this edge can also cause the named victim to cause Disquiet as if they were a Promethean of the Rosetta member's own Lineage, using the Sworn's Azoth rating for calculating the Disquiet dice pool.

Sin-Eaters, Vampires: Instead of defining someone under a name created purely for the occasion, why not burden them with the symbolic weight of a name that has already been used — and doomed? A character with this edge can overwrite the target's name with that of a dead human, exerting the Underworld's pull upon them as it attempts to snatch back what has been stolen. The victim does not suffer a Ban; instead, their Stamina is no longer added to the total number of health levels they possess.

Specializations

Bone Shadows: The werewolves of the Bone Shadow Tribe dedicate themselves to hunting through the byzantine tangle of bans and taboos that make up the world of spirits. It's no trouble at all for one of Death Wolf's children to weave together a name that binds its victims tighter than any chain. A Bone Shadow can use Define on a target that is already under the vector's effects, retaining the current name imposed by the vector but adding a second Ban. The costs and activation of the vector must still be adhered to, and even a Bone Shadow cannot afflict more than two Bans at a time upon the same victim.

Ship of Theseus: Realignment Vector

Everything changes. That's the ultimate truth of existence — no stasis or stability ever withstands the test of time. Ozymandias' futile proclamation of eternity is the ironic catchphrase of the march of time. The Ship of Theseus has a better idea than despairing in the face of inevitability, though. Everything changes, so seize control of the rudder of evolution and guide how that change unfolds. Breaking something down to its rubble means the opportunity to build it back up again, in accordance with improved architectural plans. Don't grow too attached, of course; it'll have to be taken apart again one day, but only just to raise it up again even stronger. We of the Ship don't just wreak ruin or chaos blindly, without a plan. We open up new opportunities and make the impossible possible, changing direction rather than getting stuck in a rut. We adapt and grow stronger. We wield the power of *realignment*.

The Ship of Theseus most favors Prometheans, demons, and Sin-Eaters. Members of the Free Council, the Carthian Movement, the Ordo Dracul, and the Iron Masters are also at home aboard the Ship, alongside loyal recruits from the Spring Court and Network Zero. Few Deviants find a home within the Ship; renegades see their divergence from baseline humanity as a nightmare, clashing with the Theseans' ideals of change and evolution.

• Breakdown

Start by breaking things down into their component parts. It's a vital step in every endeavor, whether it involves removing obstacles from the vessel's path or preparing to build up something new. It's practiced in a thousand different ways, from taking a sledgehammer to a wall, to

sowing discord through a community. The Ship doesn't let rigidity or conformity get in the way of blazing a new trail.

Breaking things down depends on identifying the connections, the weak points, the sinews that keep it bound together. The crew of the Ship of Theseus are skilled at picking those vulnerabilities out and exploiting them. Sometimes, all it takes is finding the right spot and giving it the slightest push to bring the whole set of dominoes crashing down.

The vampire waits outside the factories for the late shifts, handing out rabble-rousing leaflets. The demon widens a rift between business partners with a folder of incriminating photos. The Sin-Eater stirs ghosts into terrorizing the garrison with figments and phantasms, leaving the soldiers on edge and frightened.

System: A Thesean can send an organization into disarray as long as they are in contact with at least one of that organization's members. If successful, the vector sows discord and confusion in the organization, choking its coordination and triggering infighting. All rolls to direct the organization's membership or make use of any Allies, Contacts, Resources, Retainer, Staff, or Status Merits relating to that organization suffer a -2 modifier. For the purposes of Breakdown, an organization is limited in scope to being a unified group with a particular focus or purpose; the vector could target the Ministry of Truth, but not an entire national government. It could target a particular drug-pushing street gang, but not a whole city-wide alliance of cartels; a particular university is a legitimate target, but the whole Ivy League is not.

It takes a single scene to enact Breakdown against a targeted organization.

Cost: 1 Willpower

Requirement: A Thesean must have been in contact with at least one member of the targeted organization's members within the last 24 hours

Dice Pool: Manipulation + Subterfuge

Action: 1 scene

Duration: 24 hours

Edges

Changelings, Mages, Mummies, Vampires: Generalized chaos is one thing, but finding the perfect moment to put one's finger on the scales and push hard is quite another. Theseans with this edge can choose to inflict a different effect with the Breakdown vector; instead of a -2 dice modifier, the first roll made automatically results in a dramatic failure. The -2 dice modifier penalty applies to each subsequent roll that the targeted organization makes thereafter for the normal 24-hour period of the vector's effect.

Deviants, Prometheans, Werewolves: Some Theseans prefer a more physical approach to taking things apart. A character with this edge also inflicts the Breakdown dice penalty on attempts to fix any of the physical infrastructure of the targeted organization, and on medical attention given to its members.

Beasts, Sin-Eaters: Society has a lot of dead wood that needs to be cleared away for new growth, but it's not always about tearing things down as quickly as possible. Rattle the cage enough, and the fractures will spread and collapse the organization from the inside. Theseans

with this edge also inflict the vector's dice penalty on any rolls by organization members to resist breaking points.

Demons, Hunters: Chaos can serve as excellent cover for the quick and the cunning. There's plenty of opportunities to seize a victim amid the distractions. A Thesean with this edge also inflicts the Breakdown penalty on Perception and Investigation dice rolls made by organization members.

Specializations

Network Zero: The Network's always on the lookout for opportunities to dive in and discover the truth. Sometimes that means a well-timed cyber-attack under cover of a diversion, or squeezing a whistle-blower for the juiciest secrets while they're on their back foot. A Network Thesean reduces the number of starting Doors by one when initiating in a Social maneuver against a member of an organization targeted by the vector.

•• Breach

Lines exist to be crossed. The Ship of Theseus sails across thresholds not with wild abandon, but with calculated purpose. The discovery of new states of being and new reaches of reality open up the possibilities for future adaptation. The Theseans have learned how to grab a handhold in the fabric of the world so they can haul themselves over its boundaries; they've garnered the knack of shoving their fingers into the cracks and hauling those breaches open into yawning gulfs.

There's a danger in playing trailblazer, of course. The unwary Thesean might end up trapped on the wrong side of a gulf that she can't step back over easily. A dangerous entity might well lure a pursuer into a trap that is hidden from view by the barrier between worlds. There's always a path back, but it can be hard to find, and many of the strange membranes of existence into which a Thesean might stride can be decidedly inhospitable. Still, a little risk never held the Ship of Theseus back.

A werewolf sinks her claws into the frayed air that marks where a spirit pushed through the Gauntlet, tearing her own path in its wake. A demon calculates the ludicrous equations that will give it a passcode to pry an Avernian gateway open. A hunter holds a swirling portal of light and fire open through his sheer force of determination.

System: A Thesean can use this vector to use an existing or recent passage into another state of existence, whether an entirely different realm, a particular frequency of Twilight, or even a tear in the fabric of Time. For existing gateways and apertures, such as an Avernian gate or a locus, the Thesean must be in the gateway's presence and can trigger its opening as if they had any key or prerequisite that may be required, allowing them to pass through it. If the gate would normally then remain open for other characters to pass through, it will fulfill this function.

A Thesean can also use this vector to follow the trail of another character who has transitioned out of reality, such as a ghost shifting into Twilight, a spirit using Gauntlet Breach, or an Awakened teleporting to another location. This must be performed within three rounds of the transition, and if successful, the Thesean follows the target into their new state or location.

Breach does not grant the Thesean the senses to detect gateways in the first place; they must identify the location of one through observation, luck, or other supernatural powers.

If the Thesean has entered another layer of reality, Twilight frequency, or other realm, then after 24 hours, they will be able to find their way back to the normal world through a fracture, gate, or verge.

Cost: 1 Willpower

Requirement: An existing gateway, or a character transitioning out of reality within the last three rounds

Dice Pool: Wits + Survival

Action: Instant

Duration: Immediate

Edges

Beasts, Mages: Some of the Sworn are already at ease bestriding the many membranes of existence, familiar with the passages that worm their way between each layer of reality. Characters with this edge can Breach in pursuit of another being within five rounds, rather than three.

Changelings, Sin-Eaters, Werewolves: Changelings, Sin-Eaters, and werewolves are intimately familiar with particular domains that abut onto the world, and their instincts are well-honed for dancing across such thresholds. Theseans with this edge can trigger the Breach vector as a reflexive action.

Demons, Hunters: It's not always about chasing the target through an open door; sometimes it's better to jam the damn thing shut in the first place. A Thesean with this edge can use it to slow down a transition attempt or opening of a gateway, adding 1 turn to the amount of time the target takes to move into their new state.

Mummies, Prometheans, Vampires: For those firmly anchored in the living — or dead — substance of the world, it's easy to find a way back. Indeed, the difficulty is in remaining within alien realms so thoroughly at odds with the Thesean's very being. A character with this edge always finds their way back to the world within one hour.

Deviants: The burning drive of a Deviant's conviction pushes them after their enemies like an unstoppable locomotive, something as trivial as the mere barrier between worlds barely slowing them. A character with this edge can repeatedly Breach after a target that continues to transition between states of existence within the same scene without paying any further Willpower costs. For example, the Deviant might enter Twilight in pursuit of a spirit, then chase it across the Gauntlet into the Shadow, then back across the Gauntlet into the real world again, paying only a single Willpower point for the first Breach.

Specializations

Iron Masters: The eminently practical werewolves of the Iron Masters have turned the occult secrets of the Ship of Theseus back towards known shores. Instead of distant and alien lands, they're finding routes through the seemingly familiar and mundane, breaching the barriers of society as well as those of reality. An Iron Master Thesean can use Breach to follow a target across a social boundary without triggering immediate concern or alarm; the werewolf might pursue the prey into the VIP area of the club without the bouncers taking note or nip through an electronically locked gate in the wake of an employee without anyone raising an eyebrow. Using

Breach in this way has the same three-turn time limit as the vector's normal use, and once through, it's up to the Thesean to handle any challenges they meet within.

••• Renewal

Take something apart, and you have a responsibility to put it back together again. That's particularly true of the Thesean's own body — risking life and limb is part of the deal, and no one expects to get out without a scratch, but the rest of the faction relies on each individual to look after herself. The strength of the whole wanes if one part breaks irreparably.

The Ship's philosophy isn't just abstract; Theseans learn how to rebuild themselves as well as the world around them. Such a reconstruction can be literal for those Theseans whose minds crackle with data and whose limbs are wrought from steel; for agents of a fleshier bent, arts of mending and rejuvenation can speed recovery and protect from harm. Learn the right mantras and incantations, be ready to scour away the tainted flesh and let it regrow anew, and even the Contagion's touch might be excised — for a while.

A vampire stabs a blood pump into their dead flesh, invigorating the Vitae that flows through it. A Promethean threads metallic fibers through her skin that tingle with electrical current. A Sin-Eater pours ectoplasm over his gaping wounds, filling the injuries with phantasmal matter.

System: At the start of each story, a Thesean gains a number of Renewal points equal to their Stamina dots. A Renewal point can be spent reflexively at any time to heal two points of damage of any kind, even aggravated, or to heal a physical Tilt or Condition such as Arm Wrack or Poisoned.

The Thesean can also spend a Renewal point to attempt to fight back the influence of a physical Contagion. Spending the point allows the character to make a Stamina roll, with success removing the Contagion-Touched or Infected Conditions, although the roll suffers a penalty equal to the Stage of Infected. If the roll fails, Renewal cannot be used to try to remove the Condition again, and it will have to be cured via other means.

Cost: None

Requirement: When using Renewal, the Thesean must display an alteration or modification they have made to their body to stimulate its restoration

Dice Pool: None; or Stamina to remove a Contagious Condition

Action: Reflexive

Duration: Permanent

Edges

Changelings, Hunters, Mages: When a ship's hull is taking on water through a dozen different leaks, the priority is just to patch *enough* holes so it can limp home to harbor. A character with this edge can spend a Renewal point to ignore all wound penalties and automatically remain conscious for the duration of the scene regardless of the amount of damage they have taken short of death itself. After the scene ends, all effects of the injuries the character has suffered will rapidly catch up with them.

Mummies, Prometheans, Werewolves, Vampires: Some denizens of the night are beset by supernatural curses and vulnerabilities. The Ship of Theseus treat these weaknesses as a problem

that should be confronted and, ideally, overcome. A Thesean with this edge can spend a Renewal point to suppress their banes for a scene, treating such sources of harm much as a human would rather than with supernaturally aggravated suffering.

Beasts, Sin-Eaters: The concept of mind over matter has a lot more impact when your very soul is bound to an ephemeral presence. There are ways of drawing deep on that bond to reinforce the failings of the flesh. A character with this edge can spend a point of Willpower when using a Renewal point to trigger two effects at the same time rather than one — healing twice as much damage, or damage and a physical Condition, etc.

Demons, Deviants: Don't just accept a beating that's incoming. These Theseans were built to adapt and evolve to meet a beating head on in the first place. A character with this edge gains one point of Armor against all attacks for the remainder of any scene in which they spend a Renewal point.

Specializations

Ordo Dracul: Dragons have been at the heart of some of the Ship's most significant discoveries when it comes to the re-engineering of the self. Access to the shared resources and knowledge of the Theseans has wildly expanded their capabilities for experimentation and discovery. An Ordo Dracul Thesean that suffers fatal levels of damage can spend any remaining Renewal points to reform, alive, at the end of the scene, with the expended Renewal points healing damage from their filled levels of aggravated damage. The vampire is actually dead in the interim for all practical purposes, but their body, mind, and soul will reform regardless of what is done to the body, even in the face of complete bodily destruction.

••• Improve (Teamwork)

Theseans do not survive if they are not able to thrive under intense pressure and hardship. There is no reward for giving up. The reality is that when it comes to the threat of the Contagion, if the Thesean is not able to learn from their mistakes, they will wind up dead. Death is not even final in this world. Many an unfortunate and unlucky Thesean has learned existence only appears to be finite while suffering can be eternal.

Theseans have learned not only how to adapt to their enemy's methods but also how to adapt themselves. They learn from each other, and over time, the lines between what makes each Thesean different begins to blur as each one takes on features and strengths of their brethren. Rather than leave their weak to die, they uplift them to their level, and the strong only become stronger.

By channeling their energies, the Theseans shed their weakness and become more capable, more skilled, and even more brutal. The *agora* leaves its mark on each other and grow stronger for it as these marks inspire, rejuvenate, and even grant more power than what the individual Thesean may have had before. Difficult tasks become easier, and barriers in the Thesean's path break as they shed their frailties and embrace their strengths.

An Uratha encourages their fellow Thesean as he learns how to track with all his senses and not just the ones he was created with. The Sin-Eater's collective past inspires the mummy to shake off the weakness his resurging Memory has saddled him with as his power wanes. The Ventrue feels strengths gained from the assistance of their Ugallu scrum mate.

System: Using this vector allows the group to remove penalties from making untrained Skill rolls for a scene. The wielder must choose one other member of the crew to receive a mark painted onto their flesh in a location of their choosing. So long as this mark remains in place, the Thesean bearing the mark may use a single Attribute or Skill the other Thesean possesses for the duration of the scene as if it was their own. Each use of Improve is singular, so when a Thesean marks a compatriot, this counts as one use of the vector. If one of those same Theseans marks another Thesean, or each other, it counts as a separate use of the power.

Cost: Each Thesean participating in the Improve vector must spend a Willpower Point

Requirement: The Theseans must choose another member of the Sworn pact to mark with their sigil. These marks burn brightly and disappear once the scene ends.

Dice Pool: The Thesean giving their mark rolls Presence + Occult to create it. The Thesean receiving the mark rolls Stamina + Athletics. Failure on either end means the mark does not take and must start over.

Action: Five actions

Duration: One scene

Note: Some of the edges for this power affect the power user, while others affect the recipient. In the case where the vector user can use an edge, and the recipient can also do so, both benefits apply.

Edges

Mummies, Werewolves: You understand control better than any others, and you find your passions work themselves into your art as you leave your mark on your fellow Thesean. In addition to the normal bonuses, you can allow the marked Thesean to spend a single point of your Willpower should they need to do so.

Beasts, Hunters: Legends inspire you and push you to prove you are even greater than the heroes of the past. By drawing upon the strength of the mark, you are able to make a Stamina + Survival roll each round. Success allows you to temporarily draw the Tilt or Condition affecting the Thesean who marked you onto yourself for a number of rounds equal to the number of successes you roll.

Mage, Sin-Eaters: You are able to seal greater power within your mark to better aid the recipient. This allows you to draw their Speed or Defense for the scene.

Demons, Deviants, Prometheans: It could be because you were created with a specific purpose and so you seek to improve the flaws you see in others, or it could be you have had your form shaped by others and now seek to improve upon it yourself. You can choose to add an additional die to one other Attribute or Skill that the Thesean you marked possesses.

Changelings, Vampires: You understand the flow of blood and life. The mark you bestow upon a comrade can in turn be passed from your target on to a third individual at no additional cost. It must be the target of the first Improve use who in turn transmits the mark to the third recipient, with no roll of Willpower expenditure required.

Specializations

Frankensteins: Continually seeking improvement for your stitched together form gives you insight in how to improve the bodies of others. The effects of Improve apply to both Theseans using this vector, allowing each one to give the other a use of a single Attribute or Skill of the opposite party.

•••• Evolve (Teamwork)

The Theseans know there is only so much they can do to improve their physical forms before they must seek other realms of improvement. This vector allows a Thesean to seal away an aspect of themselves into another Thesean so that for a brief moment, the two are considered combined as one. Though dangerous, this Vector has the potential to greatly strengthen their allies by compensating for their weaknesses or improving their strengths.

The power gained from this is fleeting. The strength of Realignment is in the fact that it allows Theseans to break chaos, not create a maddening medley threatening to spin a situation out of control. Through Evolve, the *agora* is able to oppose chaos by giving its Theseans the ability to spontaneously manifest abilities or traits in order to give them the advantage in a situation. Such is the raw power of this vector that after it is used, it cannot be used again for the same ability until a week has passed.

The ecstasy Ashwood Abbey hedonist experiences as their skin transforms into that of a wolf makes them feel more alive than any drug they've ever taken. The mage becomes imbued with the strength she borrowed from the Sanctified vampire; it burns into her blood without having to partake of her fellow Thesean's Vitae. The demon's mind finally quiets as they are able to access the ability to affect reality again thanks to the rote they find themselves able to understand.

System: Evolve is a painful vector designed to temporarily graft the powers of one Thesean onto the other. It transfers a single ability they possess, such as the ability to rend the Gauntlet or to act as if their arm possessed the same Embed as their fellow Inquisitor. This ritual does not physically remove any aspect of anatomy from a Thesean but instead transfers it on a spiritual level to the recipient. While a power is transferred, its original owner still has access to it.

This ability is not without its risks. This vector is unstable and prone to burning its user out. If the Thesean fails to maintain the ability transferred to them, then it is ripped out of their psyche and returned to the original owner. A Dramatic Failure to control Evolve means the recipient can never borrow any abilities from that donor again.

When an ability or power is loaned to another, the Thesean who borrows it can choose to draw upon the essence or energy of the Thesean making the loan to power the ability, or to use their own essence or energy pool (e.g., Vitae for vampires, Pyros for Created, Willpower for mortals). Any ability requiring a special energy pool trait such as Plasm, Essence, Vitae, or the like may therefore come from the foreign pool of the power's new, temporary bearer, even if their energy pool types do not match (e.g., a vampire could use their Vitae pool to power an ability normally powered by Glamour). These points do not replenish when the vector's duration concludes. If the power is being sapped from a donor and the pool runs out, the Thesean is unable to transfer to using their own pool, and vice versa.

The after effects of this power bind the two Theseans together. For the remainder of the chronicle, they occasionally receive images of what each other is seeing when they in danger, though often in a crude and abstract fashion.

Cost: The donor must select an ability or power and spend 1 Willpower to transfer it. The recipient must spend 2 points of Willpower to receive the temporary ability or power.

Requirement: This vector is restricted to specific abilities, powers, or arcane arts the Thesean donating it knows.

The recipient must also make a Stamina + Occult roll for each hour they attempt to retain the ability. Failure means the vector immediately concludes, the power vanishing.

Dice Pool: Stamina + Occult

Action: One Minute

Duration: 24 hours maximum, with the recipient making a roll each hour to retain the power

Note: Evolve's edges apply to both the vector user and the recipient of the power. If a character can sense something from the perspective of the recipient of their vector's use, the recipient can also sense from the perspective of the character.

Edges

Deviants, Werewolves, Vampires: Your abilities require you to be closely in touch with your instincts and the knowledge you've gleaned from seeing into otherworldly realms. By drawing on these instincts, you immediately know the location of the other party in this donation relationship.

Demons: Your link with the recipient stays strong and you can still experience the world around them. By spending a turn concentrating, both of you can pick a sense the other has and be able to hear, see, feel, smell, or taste what they are experiencing.

Hunters: Once you have exchanged abilities with someone, you still feel their mark upon your soul. The next time you encounter a being like the one that loaned you their powers, you gain 1 automatic success when attempting to resist the effects of their powers for the scene.

Mages, Mummies: The amount of focus and precision needed to maintain the transfer may prove too difficult for others, but you remain in absolute control. You can spend 1 point of Willpower to automatically pass the roll to hold on to the power for up to the 24-hour limit.

Beasts, Changelings, Sin-Eaters: Sharing your abilities with others does not come easily to you, but by doing so, you find you acquire great strength as well. Using this vector allows you to access a single Attribute of the other party for the power's duration.

Specializations

Cheiron Group: Through endless hours of company training and experimentation through Thaumatechnology, you can grasp the use of this vector more easily than others. You do not need to make your Stamina + Occult roll to see if you retain the power transferred to you. The vector simply expires on its own after 24 hours.

Zero Hour: Intel Vector

Wars are not won with brute force alone. While a skilled shot or a blast of raw hellfire may remove the threat, they will not stop it entirely. This is not about getting into a fight. This is not about getting into a skirmish. This is about waging war. To win a war, you need to understand

your enemy and its threat, or you will just keep fighting the same foe again and again. Knowledge is just as important a weapon as a blade. When wielded correctly, it cuts to the hilt.

The Operatives welcome everyone into their ranks, although some fit in more easily with their faction than others. It's easiest for Forsaken, hunters, and Deviants to integrate into their ranks, as well as members of the Adamantine Arrow, Saboteurs, and the Furies.

• Warning Imagery

The threat facing the world from unchecked Contagion is one of the gravest a Unit can face. Zero Hour knows it is thrusting its Operatives into dangerous situations, often blindly. A Unit may only have the vaguest sense of what they are looking for, but they are not fools. This vector allows each member of the Unit to sense danger before it comes, and to get a hint at what kind of threat they are facing based on the past experiences of their comrades.

Warning Imagery is Zero Hour's attempt to provide its Operatives with a warning in case they are in danger. It does not work well against mundane threats; a lone police officer is unlikely to trigger this vector compared to a Contagious Daeva lurking in the shadows. Instead, this vector allows its users sense dangerous, supernatural threats nearby by putting it in a form only they can recognize. This imagery will affect one of the five senses.

It will take time for the Sworn to understand how to understand their comrades' visions. Those accustomed to sensing how reality works understand the imagery better than those whose senses stay purely in the physical realm. The vector will also only indicate when the threat is still within range or when it has left; it cannot give a definite location of where it is.

The smells recall ancestral imagery of foes in the werewolf. The demon sees familiar lines of code flash across a nearby screen indicating a nearby creature. A vampire tastes blood in their mouth, tangy with the flavors of reptiles, humans, and brass. The changeling sees an ethereal feather float through their field of vision, and it drifts ominously into the distance.

System: Without rolling, an Operative can detect any immediately upcoming ambushes or sudden attacks from supernatural sources. That Operative can conjure up a shared mental sensation or image and share it with their fellow Operatives up to a range of 100 meters away. The imagery in this mental link is defined by the user activating this ability as well as the type of threat lurking within range. The threat is rarely completely defined, unless the Operative has identified the source of the upcoming ambush.

For example, if this vector is activated by an Osiran and there is a Pure hiding inside of a warehouse, then the group may receive a shared mental image of ferocious canine parts molded together in their minds. A member of the Cheiron Group may get cost analysis estimates for recovering skin samples in their head from the threat of a lurking Forsaken, or an Ugallu may taste the unnatural and ancient flesh of an Arisen hidden in the museum basement. The greater the success, the more clearly the vision depicts the threat.

Cost: 1 Willpower

Requirement: The wielder must be able to stop and clear their mind for one round

Dice Pool: No roll for the sensation; Wits + Expression for the vision broadcast

Action: Instantaneous to receive the sensation; one turn to broadcast the vision

Duration: One scene

Edges

Changelings, Demons, Hunters: Working together within tight groups and following one another's lead has become second nature for members of these groups. Whether it's relying upon their fellow humans to bring down larger prey or having an innate need to form a pack structure, these groups gain two dots of Wits for the purposes of sharing their vision with their companions.

Deviants, Prometheans: The outsider's perspective allows them to see what others cannot. Small details stand out brilliantly to their eyes and help them to visualize what kinds of individuals have been in the immediate area in the past 24 hours.

Beasts, Vampires, Werewolves: This vector is more than just looking for signs of something nearby; it is part of the hunt. These Operatives are able to track through images and are able to pick up the scent more capably. They can follow their Warning Imagery to guarantee them a higher Initiative (by 1) than the individual attempting to harm them the next time Initiative is calculated.

Mages, Mummies, and Sin-Eaters: Reality is a subtle plaything for this group. They can focus their vector to become a warning beacon for the Unit. By spending an additional point of Willpower, they can mark the intended ambusher. This provides the Unit with Warning Imagery the next time this individual is within a mile of one of them, whether or not the individual intends harm.

Specializations

Hunters in Darkness: Stalking prey comes instinctively for the Forsaken, but the Hunters excel at it. A Hunter in Darkness can detect not just clues to their target's location but can smell pheromones left behind by anyone their target was last in contact with. They may not be able to identify the people if they have not met them in person, but they can pick up pieces of their identity such as if they are human and whether they are living or dead.

•• Eyes on Target

The Contagion is insidious because it hides in plain sight with nothing to give it away. Through this vector, Operatives are able to see traces of the Contagion as well as seeing through other methods of concealment. This gives them a powerful advantage for those normally not able to see through methods of concealment. It allows an Operatives to work covertly and observe their target without revealing their intentions.

When it is activated, the Eyes on Target user sees the true form of their target. If the target is capable of changing forms or is hiding their true form, then it is revealed through the vision as an aura of their true form clinging to their body. Even those beings who seem human on the outside are revealed by Eyes on Target as their auras flow with drops of blood or lines of machine code flow through their extremities.

When used to study Infrastructure, it reveals the scope of the Infrastructure in terms even an ordinary mortal can understand. Sometimes Eyes on Target reveals Infrastructure as grand cathedrals or towering machines reaching into the sky, but it also sometimes reveals their occult matrices as small keystones or grand clocks. It never reveals the type of Infrastructure something is, but it gives the user a faint idea of what it could be.

When used to look for Contagion, Eyes on Target reveals traces of the Contagion in the user's vicinity. Trace amounts of residue may appear around the bodies of infected mortals, but Eyes on Target does not reveal the specifics of the Contagion or its source.

The Uratha deeply inhales the scent of their victim, filtering the air into their mouth as they watch the multi-headed creature walk among humans like it was once one. The Sin-Eater sees the taint of the Contagion flowing through the dealer's veins like the heroin he sells. The Renegade's extra senses show the monstrous form of the individual peddling Contagion tainted drugs on the street corner.

System: This vector grants the Operative the ability to see the true natures of those around them. When this vector is activated, it is always on for the remainder of the scene until it is deactivated. The user's eyes take on a white film which does not impair their vision. Those attempting to hide their use of the power with sunglasses can do so.

Any attempts to see past supernatural abilities designed to hide an appearance or identity gain four dice to any pools that allow the user to see past the target's concealment or ruse.

Cost: 1 Willpower per use

Requirement: The user must have eyes, although they do not need to be able to see out of them. Operatives without vision are still able to see their target's true natures as disturbances on different spectrums.

Dice Pool: Composure + Occult

Action: One action

Duration: One scene

Edges

Demons, Vampires: The art of looking past a person's common form comes easily to you, whether it's reading what your internal code is telling you or sensing the monstrous aura emanating from beneath your quarry's skin. Looking at auras will tell you a target's mood, but you also are able to read the target's immediate fears.

Beasts, Werewolves: Now you have seen your prey, you can sense their connections through their communal aura. Any individual aware of the target's true form or nature exudes a smoky halo you can sense for 24 hours. You are unable to select another victim for Eyes on Target for the remainder of the day.

Changelings, Deviants, Hunters: Because your feet are firmly planted in two worlds, you can sense immediate ties between individuals. You can tell if someone's actions are the result of their mind being modified by an outside force, if a crowd of rioters are being affected by a supernatural influence, or if someone in a group feels love, hatred, or envy for another group member.

Mummies, Mages: You have dabbled with the raw, fundamental forces of the universe. Now, sensing their presence is second nature to you. You are able to follow energies back to their source. These paths reflect the source of mystical energy that created them. You might perceive a woman who is under the effect of a Discipline as having a strand of dried blood floating back toward the vampire who controls her, or an individual under the effect of mental sorcery surrounded by runic writing that flows back to a mage.

Specializations:

Winter Court: If the victim of Eyes on Target has ever physically harmed another individual, for 24 hours evidence of this harm — whether in the form of a weapon, a camera complete with footage, or even the mobile phone on which encouragement to self-destruct was typed and delivered — is visible in your mind. You know exactly where to find it. The Winter Court does not forget wrongs and punishes them with gusto.

••• Fire for Effect (Teamwork)

Zero Hour views the Contagion and those who seek to profit from its menace as the prime targets of its efforts. By focusing their efforts, the Unit can use its Operatives' strengths to throw their infectious opponent into disarray while inflicting more harm on it.

The more members of the Unit involved in the vector, the more efficient it becomes. Each Operative lends their skills and talents to the battle. Not every Operative must throw themselves into the line of fire; some stand at the back, directing the hostilities against their enemies with the same ease as they commit a hostile takeover of a rival's company.

The hunter teaches the vampire for the hundredth time how to work the receiver on their modern assault rifle while the vampire tells her once again about the more civilized times of sword and musket. A werewolf picks a Promethean out of the snow, showing her how to move properly through Arctic conditions while being chased by an opponent. A mummy, a Sin-Eater, and a vampire sit around a table and regale each other with their exploits from across the eons before setting out to crush a Contagion outbreak once and for all.

System: Each Unit must appoint a leader before the next expected battle. For the duration of the combat, every member of the Unit treats their Physical Skills as being one dot higher for the purposes of combat. They also gain +1 to their Defense. The leader gains two dots in their Intimidation or Persuasion, as chosen by the player.

Cost: None

Requirement: The Unit must drill regularly and have a familiarity with what each other can do in combat, whether it is fighting actively against their enemies or providing support through other means. In practical terms, the Unit must have fought and won three battles as a team before this vector is usable. This vector requires the participation of at least two characters in the faction.

Dice Pool: None

Action: Instantaneous

Duration: One scene

Edges

Beasts: Combat can always be unpredictable even for the most measured and veteran Primordial, and the urge to satisfy their hunger can push them hard. At the beginning of combat, the Beast can reduce or increase their Satiety by one level.

Changelings: By drawing upon your past trauma, you can push yourself and your teammate to force one another to fight through the pain. As long as you are near one of your allies, they may ignore the effects of a Tilt or Condition afflicting them if they so choose.

Demons: Maintaining their Cover is one of the hardest things for a demon to do while utilizing the full strength of their powers. Through training with their Unit, you are able to regain some of the flexibility you once had when you fought on the side of the angels and the God-Machine. You gain three points of Willpower for the purposes of spending it to avoid testing to see you break your Cover.

Deviants: The torment you endured to get you to where you are now is nothing compared to the deep-seated desire for revenge against the ones who did this to you. For now, the current opponent will serve as the vessel for your wrath. The target suffers -2 to their Defense.

Hunters: You are not sure if you were the first thing to walk on this rock, but you promise humanity will be the last creature standing when the dust clears. You are always considered to have an extra full clip or magazine for your ranged weapons and any melee weapons you wield are indestructible for the length of combat.

Mages: Although some rituals require strict planning, by coordinating with your allies you are able to become more flexible in your manipulations of reality. Your Fraying and Unmaking spells with a duration of a scene or less reduce their Reach from exceeding spell control by one.

Mummies: The power of your eternal Sekhem conveys a resilience against being harmed. You ignore the damage inflicted upon you from the first attack successfully hitting you this combat.

Prometheans: The legendary resilience of the Created becomes stronger when fighting alongside your comrades. As long you are not the last one standing among your Unit, your Armor increases by 2.

Sin-Eaters: Surrounding herself with the spirits of glorious warriors who triumphed in past battles, the Sin-Eater fills herself with newfound glory and purpose. You gain two free points of Plasm to spend during the combat, which count as being spent the first time any Plasm is spent by the Sin-Eater.

Vampires: When operating in a Unit, you can predict your opponent's moves before they've even drawn their gun. You gain +2 to your Initiative and can activate a Discipline reflexively at the beginning of combat, even if your power usually takes longer to yield results.

Werewolves: Striking from a position of fury and strength when surrounded by the pack can be the quick, ruthless key to cutting your opponent's lives short. You can slay any single non-supernatural foe with your first attack once per action sense, providing your attack connects, irrespective of damage dealt.

Specializations

Union: Teamwork and relying upon your comrades in arms in the Union helps you work alongside Operatives you'd normally be at odds with. By explaining your plan at least twice before activating this power, everyone in the Unit may ignore any penalties to Social or Mental Skills during combat.

•••• Ocular Mapping (Teamwork)

Whether Zero Hour Operatives are building a case with evidence or following leads to the source of an outbreak, they remain focused on their mission: preventing the Contagion from raging unchecked if it is not discovered, countered, and eventually tamed. It's sometimes difficult to track down the source of a Contagion outbreak as some of its symptoms are not plain to see, so

the Cavalry needs the whole unit to be able to use their abilities to discover the true scope of the threat they are facing.

Think of Ocular Mapping like mapping veins and arteries in a body through an MRI. As the magnetic waves pierce the body, the machine slowly pieces together the greater image. By shifting the special sight shared between Operatives, they are able to trace the past movements and current ties of the subject in question. They see their steps and actions and know where they've been. With the Contagion, this tracks not just the outbreak but paints a trail right back to the source and allows Operatives to define the scope of the outbreak. They see clearly what others try to hide and can create one shared mental framework of the problem they're facing.

The sheer volume of information shared through this power can be overwhelming. One being may find themselves with the sensations and experiences of five of their fellow Operatives flowing through their head simultaneously. Using this vector is not just feeling like you are in several different locations at once; you actively experience being several places at once. It's a trip bordering on a cacophony but is nevertheless essential for waging war on the Contagion and the Unit's enemies.

Two mages try their best to keep up with the chaotic thoughts of their Fae ally as they stalk Jackson Square. A pack of werewolves and their Beast companion feel the same hunger in their stomachs as they creep through the tundra and see the sickening blight spread through the fields. The hunter's mind aches slightly as the raw data streams in through the demon's mind and is put in a rational, human perspective by her mortal experience.

System: Using this ability requires all members to activate their Eyes on Target vector and be within the same vicinity searching for evidence. As their minds link, they are able to share this information with each other and process it simultaneously and instantly. As long as this power is active, they are able to see patterns in the area around them, and are able to absorb thousands of pieces of evidence simultaneously. This vector is usable by one member, but works most effectively among a group of two or more Operatives.

When a user focuses their gaze on an individual or specific object, all users are able to see the target in their field of vision. They soon analyze patterns from how the subject walks to the small detritus left behind by psychic foot prints. They are also able to tell where a subject has been in the last 24 hours, the subject's mood, and their demeanor. If the subject is an object, they trace its recent history including where the object has been in the last 24 hours through phantasmal strands traveling off in the distance.

Crucially, this vector allows Operatives to immediately identify a Contagious target.

Cost: Each Operative using Ocular Mapping must succeed on a Composure + Survival roll or take one level of lethal damage that cannot be soaked.

Requirement: Each member of the Unit wishing to use this power must successfully activate their Eyes on Target vector.

Dice Pool: One Operative rolls Wits + Investigation. Success allows the viewer to look into a visible target's 24-hour history. Each success allows the Operative to ask a question about that history. Other Operatives roll Intelligence + Investigation to see through the eyes and into the mind of the initial Operative, allowing those characters to also ask questions. Only a single success is required from the primary dice roll for all affected Operatives to see whether a target is Contagious.

Action: One action

Duration: One question (approximately one turn) / success

Note: The edges for Ocular Mapping can only be used by the person leading the use of this power.

Edges

Demons, Mages, Mummies, Sin-Eaters: You've seen so many patterns play out in the past that it is easy to recognize them now. When this vector is in use, you can analyze the powers the target possesses. For every success, the Storyteller tells the players one power at the target's disposal.

Beasts, Vampire, Werewolves: Hunting is critical for your survival; if you're a poor hunter, you'll starve. By focusing your animal instincts, you can feel the emotions of your target and see a clear vision of what they crave the most, whether it be blood, to get home to a spouse, or to infect others.

Changelings: You possess uncanny insight into monstrous behavior born from your imprisonment and replacement. If your target is Contagious, you can identify the strain of Contagion infecting them and any Conditions the infected individual might possess.

Deviants, Hunters, Prometheans: Years of pursuing or focusing on your basic humanity have helped shape your knowledge of mortal frailty. When studying the source of this vector, you're able to identify their greatest emotional vulnerability.

Specializations:

Acanthus: Mages on this Path see the target's life path extending into the future, leading to the individual's intended location and associates before they even arrive there. This perception lasts for 24 hours after the power's activation, even if the target dies.

•••• Intel Package (Teamwork)

Zero Hour is fighting an unending war. There are brief periods of peace brought about by containment, but even during those times, the Operatives monitor the world for any signs of outbreak. For Zero Hour, dealing with the Contagion is a constant struggle to keep their allies motivated and working together. This vector allows them to combine their individual abilities and use them to grant each other new abilities specific to the mission at hand.

Gathering an Intel Package allows the Unit to gain as much data as they need for planning their mission. They pass this request for information up their chain of command and within the hour be inundated with building plans, technical schematics, weapon registries, and anything else relevant to their request. Operatives are unable to discover the true source of this data, but it all arrives in tight, easy-to-digest pieces of information.

What makes the Intel Package different from having to go through the process of contacting their own informants is the information seemingly appears on its own to each Operative. Their phones receive instant messages detailing the identities of the mobsters hanging out at a bar, and their laptops instantly download large schematics of the building surrounding a corrupted piece of Infrastructure. Some packages could cover identities and additional resources of staff employed solely to perform an important part of the mission. The package could provide aid in the form of the sanitation crew parking their truck in the center of a street, to block egress from a parking

garage, or it could offer access to a security camera feed of a guard's patrol routes. It can turn an unwinnable situation into a challenge, and a challenging situation into a piece of cake.

An Undertaker asks their Mekhet ally for an exit strategy out of a building flooding with SWAT. The Saboteur requests their Acanthus sponsors help them avoid blowing their Cover by gaining enough information to pass as a Pure werewolf to enter their meeting. The Deviant's phone blows up with information on how to convince the Cheiron Group's hunters they are from corporate and not the target they are hunting.

System: Once activated, each Operative in the Unit can pool their dots in mundane Social Merits and can share them among each other, including reducing one character's Merit rating to improve another's. Anything restricted to a creature's supernatural type cannot be shared in this way. The vector conveys the same social standing and persona among each Operative, despite how incongruous it may seem for a low-ranking Winter Court changeling to suddenly be an Invictus prince, or similar.

The Unit must then come up with a detailed plan for how they wish to proceed. While they can deviate from this plan over the course of the mission, once they have started, they must continue to pursue the mission's goal, or the power will lapse.

An Operative who finds they must draw upon their group's Alternate Identity is able to manifest a press ID to get them into an exclusive event, while an Operative on the run from the police may draw upon several dots of Contacts to reveal the detective pursuing him is a corrupt police officer indebted to another member of the Unit.

Dots deplete with each use, so when an Alternate Identity worth one dot is used, the dot disappears from the communal pool. This does not prevent further dots from being drawn from other Merits to "refuel" the expended Merit dots.

Cost: Each character must lose one dot from a single Social Merit (if they possess any) once the vector's use is over.

Requirement: Each member of the Unit must be able to use the Social Merit in question and the Social Merits may only be used as they are stated. Two or more Operatives are required for the use of this vector.

Dice Pool: Intelligence + Academics or Subterfuge

Action: Three hours

Duration: 24 hours

Edges

Demons, Changelings, Hunters, Prometheans: The art of keeping false identities or learning how to survive outside the system has given you the ability to think on your feet when lying to someone. This vector allows you the benefit of drawing on a strong false identity or elaborate subterfuge-linked Merit in the communal pool without you losing a dot from any of your contributed Social Merits.

Mummies: You are able to draw upon the vast resources of your cult and lend their aid to the mission. Your cult acts as a Social Merit all on its own. They can be treated as between 3 to 5 dots of Allies or Contacts depending on the cult structure, with a localized cult conveying 3 dots, a national cult contributing 4, and a global cult contributing 5.

Mages, Sin-Eaters: You can draw upon information from the Intel Package and shift it to your allies almost instantaneously, no matter their plane of existence. This may take the form of an instantaneous cantrip ferrying information to other Operatives or a text message managing to make its way from the Underworld to a fortified bunker.

Beasts, Deviants, Vampires, Werewolves: Blood, family, kinship: all allow you to access secret information not even on record. Using your pooled Social Merits, you can acquire information providing a target's greatest shame, the date they lost their virginity, even their most well-hidden crime. The intel just appears as a letter in your mailbox, a message on your phone, or an email in your inbox.

Specializations

Saboteur: The art of bringing down the God-Machine's machinations applies equally well toward containing Contagion outbreaks. The Saboteur can provide an additional three dots of Contacts, Alternate Identity, or Allies to the Intel Package as long as the information leads to the destruction or disruption of a target. Once used, these dots disappear.

The False Vector: Contagion

The Sworn devote themselves to combatting the Contagion, acting as natural healing agents within the God-Machine itself. The overall methodology of the Sworn has led to the discovery or creation of supernatural techniques effective in combatting the Contagion. These preternatural methods of Contagion control are collectively called *vectors*.

The False, however? They just don't give a shit. They're in it for themselves. The only vector they care about regarding the Contagion is "how do I benefit?" And the Contagion makes it so, so easy to just... let go. Just do what you want, and if others get infected, that's not your problem, right?

The Sworn see themselves as the world's medics, as people who can somehow mitigate or, ludicrously, even *cure* the Contagion. But that's ridiculous. The Contagion has already won. Sure, a handful of preternatural monsters *might* hold back the Contagion now and then, but it always surges back. So why not just give in? Accept the inevitable, and tap into the Contagion to get what you need to survive another night.

In It for Myself

Unlike Sworn vectors, the False can use any Beats to buy vectors. Fighting for a cause is for chumps. Sure, you've found a group of like-minded individuals to work with, but this isn't about bonding over shared adversity. It's an investment in the Contagion.

All members of a faction can contribute as many Beats as they like to purchase a False Experience. Each member must contribute equally, however — if one member puts in two Beats, everyone else must also put in two. It's like poker — you need to call, or you're out of the game. Five Beats aggregates into one False Experience.

Once purchased, vector powers are shared among the faction — every active member of the faction gains access to the ability. Better, unlike the Sworn, it doesn't matter *which* faction you're a part of. As long as everyone is on board with the Contagion, you get to share the wealth. The only wrinkle is that only the faction member using a power gets to apply the specialization for their group.

If a faction member formally joins the Sworn or if they become inactive from the False's activities for several years, they lose all access to their vectors. All those Beats and Experience are just gone. That's the price of altruism. In all other respects, using vectors works the same for the Sworn as they do for the False.

• Purge Weakness

You need to focus on you. Forget all those covenants, orders, krewes, and courts. Hell, forget about the other members of the False for a moment. Sure, it's great to hang out with people that understand your problems, but what have they done for you lately? When you get right down to it, being part of the supernatural community has significant downsides. All those tribes, families, and guilds don't help a whole lot when you still can't go out in the sunlight or cast magic without reality smacking you in the face.

But the Contagion can help.

Trying to walk through a raging fire? Just do it. Want to maybe *not* deal with your glitch the next time you take your demonic form? Don't. Tired of having your ghost-slash-spirit yammering in your ear? Tell them to fuck off. All you need to give up is a little bit of yourself to the Contagion. And let's face it, you've probably done worse in your life.

A vampire bites her tongue and dabs a bit of his blood behind his ear before stepping out to see the sunrise. A mage pulls out a razor blade and cuts into her arm before letting loose with a lightning bolt. A werewolf punches a mirror and pulls the silvered glass from his fist.

System: A member of the False who inflicts one point of unsoakable lethal damage on herself can ignore the effects of a specific supernatural weakness (depending on their edge) for one scene. The False knows when Purge Weakness is about to expire, and has a reasonable chance to leave the scene before it does. The Storyteller can decide that the False is unable to leave the scene for various reasons (such as if the False is captured, unconscious, or restrained in some way).

Cost: 1 Willpower

Requirement: Injure yourself for one point of unsoakable lethal damage

Dice Pool: None

Action: Instantaneous

Duration: One scene

Edges

Beasts: The Beast can negate their Anathema. For one scene, the character acts as if the Anathema simply doesn't exist.

Changelings: The touch of iron no longer causes ill effects for the changeling for a scene — iron acts like any other metal to the changeling for the duration.

Demons: The demon can hide or ignore the effects of one permanent glitch. For the duration of a scene, the demon acts as if the glitch isn't present.

Deviants: The deviant can ignore up to five dots' worth of Scars for one scene.

Hunters: The hunter can ignore one of her Tells for one scene.

Mages: A mage removes three dice for all her Paradox pools for one scene.

Mummies: A mummy can act as if they possess two additional dots of Sekhem (up to a maximum of ten) for one scene.

Prometheans: The Promethean can ignore her Torment. For one scene, the character treats her Torment as if it doesn't exist.

Sin-Eaters: A Sin-Eater can ignore their Geist for one scene. The Sin-Eater can still call on his powers, but the Geist is unable to influence his actions until the scene is resolved.

Vampires: Vampires can ignore damage and all negative effects from sunlight for one scene.

Werewolves: The touch of silver no longer causes pain to a werewolf for the duration of a scene, and an attack from a silver weapon does not automatically cause aggravated damage. Instead, it causes whatever damage the weapon would inflict to a non-werewolf character.

Specializations

The Crucible Initiative: The Fire-Bearers seek to protect themselves and their allies as much as possible, in order to prevent the spread of the Contagion. As such, they can inflict a second lethal wound on themselves and touch another character with a supernatural template to reduce their weakness (as per the appropriate edge) for a scene.

The Machiavelli Gambit: Those of the Machiavelli Gambit are about themselves. Sure, the other False put a nice face on it, making it seem like it's about something bigger, but these False know it's all about saving their own skins. As such, they can inflict an aggravated wound on themselves to have the effects of Purge Weakness for an entire session.

Naglfar's Army: The Antediluvians know the world is going to end due to the Contagion. So why not make it last as long as possible at someone else's expense? If one member of Naglfar's Army gives an opponent an aggravated wound and then drinks a cup of their blood, the Antediluvian can activate Purge Weakness without taking a lethal wound themselves. (It still requires them to spend a point of Willpower, however.)

•• Shift Contamination

At first, it seems like a contradiction. You join up with the False, and the whole point is to *not* fall to the Contagion. The Crucible Initiative destroys anyone that looks infected, Naglfar's Army sacrifices whomever they can to survive, and the members of the Machiavelli Gambit want to stick around for long enough to profit from the chaos. Why would you intentionally infect yourself with the Contagion?

Here's the trick: you can be infected and not show any symptoms. You can be a carrier without being a victim. Very few of the False *knowingly* carry the Contagion — that's further down the line of the vector. Worse, Shift Contamination makes it seem like you're actually getting *rid* of the Contagion.

Let's say you get sick. The common cold, for those of you who can still do that. You feel like hell, so you call a friend up. You hang out for a bit, and after a few hours you feel better. Then your friend calls you up, cursing you out for getting them sick. But *you're* not sick anymore, because you feel fine, right? And that's all that matters.

The Contagion isn't gone. It's never gone. But you don't have to suffer the consequences, so that's good.

A Sin-Eater coats her hand in clear, sticky Plasm and touches a bystander, shedding the Contagion. A hunter draws a red X on the back of his hand and waits for a chance to shake his neighbor's hand. A changeling infuses a bit of her personal glamour into a small straw doll to offer as a gift to her rival.

System: By spending a point of Willpower or a personal resource (e.g., Vitae, Plasm, Glamour, etc.), the character can move one temporary or persistent Contagion Condition she is suffering from to another target she touches. If the False using this ability does not have the Persistent Condition Contagion Carrier after using this power, she immediately takes the Condition.

Cost: 1 Willpower (or see appropriate Edge)

Requirement: You must touch your target

Dice Pool: Manipulation + Medicine

Action: 1 action

Duration: As per transferred Condition

Edges

Beasts, Deviants, Mummies: You are further from humanity, and care less about the impact spreading the Contagion has on others. With Storyteller approval, you can choose to make a temporary Condition you move into a persistent one.

Hunters: Humans are good at one thing: surviving. Hunters are *really* good at surviving, and that extends to the Contagion. When a hunter moves a Contagion Condition, they do not acquire the Contagion Carrier Condition just from use of Shift Contamination. (If they already have Contagion Carrier prior to the use of Shift Contamination, however, they keep it unless Contagion Carrier is the Condition being shifted.)

Changelings, Demons, Mages, Prometheans, Sin-Eaters, Vampires, Werewolves: You have supernatural power crackling inside of you. How can a mere *illness* stand up to what's contained within your own body? False with this edge can spend 1 Glamour, Aether, Mana, Pyros, Plasm, Vitae, or Essence instead of 1 Willpower to move their infection to a new host.

Specializations

The Crucible Initiative: "Burn it all down" is the credo of the Crucible, and the Fire-Bearers manifest that literally. When they shift a Contagion Condition onto a target, the target already receives a point of lethal damage as their insides burn with a sudden flare of intense heat throughout their body.

The Machiavelli Gambit: How can you possibly take advantage of a situation if you're burdened with useless crap? Members of the Machiavelli Gambit can use Shift Contamination to shift *any* appropriate condition onto another target. Anything from a death threat to a hangover can be foisted off onto some other sucker, with Storyteller permission.

Naglfar's Army: If the world is going to end, you might as well do it right. By spending extra Willpower or personal resources per target (as per specific edges), Antediluvians can spread the

love, and the Contagion. Each target the Antediluvian touches within a round gets an identical copy of the shifted condition.

••• Drain Energy

The world burgeons with energy, a ripe crop for the False to harvest. Power's everywhere, if one only bothers to look — in the breath of an innocent, in the blood that spatters onto dark soil, in the thrumming invisible chords that run through the sky and the earth. Reality is layer upon layer of interactions between forces that even the Sworn scarcely understand a fraction of, but the False know that it's so easy to just reach out and *take*.

This acquisition is neither gentle nor kind. The harvester cuts his crop with a scythe, after all. Understanding how the Contagion flenses away reality's flesh gives the False insight to do the same, reaping the energies that are unlocked rather than corrupting them. It is still a destructive process. Tearing power out of the world leaves it lessened, although few False care about such consequences.

A vampire sucks in the breath from the crowd around him, drinking down life energy as hearts flutter and skip. A mage scours verdant fields for mana, the plants wilting, insects going belly up, and earth turning to dust. A changeling pulls on unseen threads until they snap, leaving the air still and dead.

System: The False drains the scene of power, gluttonously tearing energy out of her immediate surroundings and leaving them lifeless and dead. Any living thing present in the scene that does not possess any dots in the vector suffers two points of bashing damage, while objects lose a single point of structure without regard for Durability. Characters whose Composure is less than the successes on the activation roll also lose two points from whatever pool of supernatural energy they use, or one point of Willpower if they possess no such pool; if a mortal human, the victim also gains the persistent Madness Condition as their psyche is scoured.

The effects of Drain Energy scar the location permanently. After the scene ends, the location is permanently affected by the Drained Environmental Tilt (see p. XX).

Cost: 1 Willpower

Requirement: This vector can only be used as long as no character has yet performed Drain Energy on the location. Once used, there is no longer enough power lingering for further performances of the vector to harvest for the next year.

Dice Pool: Presence + Intimidation

Action: Instant

Duration: Instant; and one year

Edges

Beasts: A Beast using Drain Energy raises her Satiety to 10.

Changelings: A changeling using Drain Energy refills her Glamour pool fully.

Demons: A demon using Drain Energy refills her Aether pool fully.

Deviants: A Deviant using Drain Energy heals all minor and medium Instabilities.

Hunters: A hunter using Drain Energy regains all expended Willpower and gains the Inspired and Steadfast Conditions.

Mages: A mage using Drain Energy refills her Mana pool fully.

Mummies: An Arisen using Drain Energy refills all Pillar pools fully.

Prometheans: A Promethean using Drain Energy refills her Pyros pool fully.

Sin-Eaters: A Sin-Eater using Drain Energy refills her Plasm pool fully.

Werewolves: A werewolf using Drain Energy refills her Essence pool fully.

Vampires: A vampire using Drain Energy refills her Vitae pool fully.

Specializations:

The Crucible Initiative: Better to cauterize the wound than let the Contagion take root. Whenever a creature tainted by Contagion enters the Drained Environmental Tilt created by a Fire-Bearer, the scene is also subject to either the Extreme Heat or Cold Environmental Tilt, or applies the Poisoned Tilt to everyone present.

The Machiavelli Gambit: Winning the game isn't just about pulling oneself up, it's about tearing competitors down too. When a member of the Gambit uses Drain Energy, every character in the scene with a supernatural energy pool loses two points from it, or four if the False rolls more successes than their Composure. Only members of the False's faction are unaffected by this.

Naglfar's Army: Breaking the world doesn't matter as long as you're the one still standing when the dust settles. When an Antediluvian uses Drain Energy, she also heals bashing or lethal damage up to the number of successes she rolled on the activation pool.

••• Contagion Shroud (Teamwork)

The Contagion is metaphysical filth, the corrosive seepage of wounded reality. The hungers of the False drive them to extreme measures though, and there's power to be had from wallowing in such corruption. Like an animal rolling in muck to mask its scent, those willing to use the Contagion as a shroud can conceal themselves from the infected — but make no mistake, smearing oneself in world-gangrene leaves a lingering stench.

It's akin to inoculation, using the Contagion as a veil so that other manifestations of its sickness perceive the shroud and nothing further. The False can pass entirely unnoticed through an infected herd, and beard the lion in its den with little fear. There's something to the thrill of arrogance and power that comes with being able to so boldly dupe the supposedly-terrible Contagion.

A vampire draws blood from an infected then smears it onto the throat and collarbone of her comrade, masking the pulse of their life beneath its foulness. A werewolf carves corrupt sigils into the flesh of his fellow False, marking them as unseen to the symbolic gaze of the infected spirits. A demon has his allies repeat gibberish code taken from a broken piece of Infrastructure, and the machines gripped by otherworldly madness see the False as more of their own.

System: Two False working in tandem can mask themselves from the Contagion. By drawing from an infected source, the characters create a shroud that makes it appear as if they themselves have contracted the Contagion, warping the perception of others.

To characters with the Contagion-Touched Condition, the False are hard to notice. Contagion-Touched suffer a -3 penalty to any dice pools to spot the False, pay heed to their actions, or remember them.

To characters with the Infected Condition at any stage, and to true creatures of the Contagion, the False are simply imperceptible. The signs of their passing may draw attention — knocking things over or causing havoc will not go unnoticed — but as long as they are careful, the False could walk into a thronging hive of infected, monstrous horrors and be left unmolested even as the things clamber all over them. Even supernatural powers will not allow Contagious to see them. Infected who become aware of their presence — such as through the False launching attacks — still cannot directly perceive them and are subject to the constraints of the Blind Tilt for the purposes of directing attacks at and defending against the False.

Additionally, the Shroud prevents the False from contracting Contagion. It passively shields the characters from any latent contamination from the environment or background effects the False are exposed to, and provides a +5 bonus to any dice pools to contest Contagion directly targeted at them.

Unfortunately, the shroud is a fragile thing. Taking so much as a single point of lethal damage breaks it, and any Contagion that does manage to pierce the shroud's inoculation also causes it to fail. Furthermore, the shroud causes the characters to appear as Contagious to those who are not, themselves, infected. Even the controlled exposure to the shroud's infection carries its risks; failing a breaking point roll while shrouded inflicts the Contagion-Touched Condition.

Cost: 2 Willpower

Requirement: Must have contact with an Infected character or substance

Dice Pool: Manipulation + Subterfuge

Action: Instant

Duration: 24 hours

Edges

Beasts, Mummies: The strong-willed can better maintain the integrity of a shroud, preventing it from spilling out of control. The first time the shroud of such a False would break, it immediately restores itself after one turn. The second time, it breaks as normal.

Changelings, Prometheans: Blending in with a crowd despite being profoundly different is a familiar experience to some who dwell in the world's shadows. Rather than passing unseen, these False can choose to appear as a specific infected individual to other Contagious, although the shroud will break should they act too out-of-character for their charade.

Deviants: Better to burn out bright and hot than skulk in the shadows. When a Deviant's shroud breaks, all Contagious present suffer a point of lethal damage and receive the Blinded Tilt for the next turn.

Demons, Hunters, Mages: Walking among the enemy unseen offers the perfect chance to observe and analyze. These False gain a +2 bonus to Investigation and Empathy dice pools directed against the Contagious while shrouded.

Sin-Eaters: Marring the shroud with death's heavy weight stirs a sympathetic sluggishness in other Infected. Contagious characters exposed to such Sin-Eater False suffer a -2 penalty to all Wits-based dice pools and to Initiative rolls.

Werewolves: Apex predators can thin the herd without the prey panicking. If a werewolf shrouded by this Vector incapacitates or kills a Contagious target within one turn, other Contagious remain entirely oblivious to the fate of the prey and will carry on as if nothing has happened.

Vampires: The tainted energies of the shroud resonate with the corrupted life energy of those who have fallen under the Contagion's sway. A vampire shrouded by this Vector is aware of the precise location and health of all Contagious characters present in the scene, regardless of even supernatural attempts to conceal them.

Specializations:

The Crucible Initiative: The Initiative knows the purpose of stealth is to achieve an advantageous position for attack. A Fire-Bearer under Contagion Shroud gains a +4 bonus from all-out attacks, rather than the unusual +2.

The Machiavelli Gambit: The unseen puppet-master is the most powerful of them all. A shrouded member of the Gambit can perform social maneuvers on Contagious characters without the targets becoming aware of the presence of the False. While the usual rules for social maneuvers apply, the victims find themselves arguing with their own thoughts or hearing strange voices rather than noticing the False right next to them, whispering ideas into their ear.

Naglfar's Army: An Antediluvian moving unseen among the Infected agitates them and makes them more unstable, a hidden irritant that sows chaos and madness among the already-corrupted. Each member of Naglfar's Army under a Contagion Shroud present in the scene causes everyone *else* outside the faction to suffer a -1 penalty on all Social dice pools interacting with the Infected, with failures inciting the Contagious to violence or madness.

•••• Control Contagion (Teamwork)

At the pinnacle of dedication to False ideals, all bets are off. They've set their plans in motion, and all that remains is to push over the first domino, kick back, and watch everything come up their way. And if the price is high, well, better to pay up now than let the Contagion mug them in an alley for everything they've got later. It's too late to back out. They're in it to win it, and when someone wins, someone else always loses. The False will — and do — give anything to fall squarely in the former camp.

Steering the Contagion for their own benefit gives the False a unique and peculiar insight into the God-Machine's workings, even if they weren't looking for any — and the more they understand the Machine, the further into itself it draws them. To probe the plague's source and tease out its secrets means to peer into the Machine's cancerous innards and lay bare the methods it uses to direct its mobile parts. Just as God commands the angels, so do the False command the Contagion's victims.

By this level of investment in the Vector, the False know full well they're courting disaster. They're confident the ends justify the means, but the risks mean they can't just sit on their laurels once they've done their damage; most False factions dedicate resources to seeking Contagion cures just to make sure they themselves don't join the unfortunate souls they've doomed.

Two hunters and their Frankenstein colleague fight off the endless stream of Contagious horrors an infected matrix of manholes vomits forth from the sewer. A Fairest and a Makara distract the Guardian angel with conversation while their Acanthus ringleader walks the garden along rune-shaped routes to find the bush with black roses — and burn it to ash. Three Sanctified eschatologists capture and interrogate a Messenger angel to learn the message it would deliver to the contaminated God-Machine cult.

System: This Vector affects everyone within a number of yards equal to (10 x lead's Supernatural Potency trait) who has a Contagion Condition (or is Contagious) with the effect listed under the relevant specialization, below. False who have no Supernatural Potency trait, such as hunters, default to 10 yards but may spend Willpower to increase the area by 10 square yards per point spent.

Participants who have Contagion Conditions themselves are immune to this Vector's effects, but they may not selectively exclude anyone else in the area.

After this Vector takes effect, if any of the participants have the Contagion-Touched or Infected Condition or an outbreak-specific equivalent, those Conditions progress by one step to the next Condition.

Cost: 1 Willpower

Requirement: Three False must work in concert to interact with Infrastructure directly in some way for at least five minutes

Dice Pool: Manipulation + Persuasion vs. each target's Resolve + Supernatural Tolerance

Action: Instant and contested

Duration: One full chapter

Edges

Beasts, Hunters, Werewolves: They may be False, but they still understand the importance of looking after their own. They can spend extra Willpower to selectively exclude one valid target per point any participant spends.

For the chapter, the Beast treats Unchained, any Contagious, and the God-Machine's angels as though they were descended from the Dark Mother for purposes of Kinship abilities, although demons may still attempt to spoof Family Resemblance. All *other* non-Beast supernatural beings no longer count. In addition, the Beast's Lair gains the Diseased Lair Trait at grave intensity, and anyone it affects gains the Contagion-Touched Condition or progresses an existing Contagion Condition by one step.

For the chapter, the hunter becomes temporarily stigmatic. She gains the Unseen Sense (God-Machine) Merit and three dots' worth of other Supernatural Merits, can see the gears unaided, suffers the usual stigmatic visions, and gains a glitch as normal. Whenever she risks Willpower, the infected Machine lashes out at her assertion of will over fate. The Storyteller chooses one other character present in the scene who gains the Contagion-Touched Condition or progresses an existing Contagion Condition by one step. Activating this Vector is a Code breaking point at low Integrity.

For the chapter, the werewolf gains the Infrastructure and Open Conditions, becoming part of the God-Machine's plans and allowing angels — including Contagious ones, who have Influence:

Contagion — to Fetter to her or Materialize in her immediate vicinity wherever she goes. She treats angels as though they were spirits, and suffers a breaking point toward Spirit with a -3 modifier.

Sin-Eaters: In their liminal state, the Bound can affect not only the material world with this Vector's effects, but also any infected, death-related creature or character in Twilight (and their Twilight environment, in the case of the Crucible Initiative's Inferno Tilt). For the chapter, the Bound gains the Infrastructure and Open Conditions, becoming part of the God-Machine's plans and allowing angels — including Contagious ones, who have Influence: Contagion — to Fetter to her or Materialize in her immediate vicinity wherever she goes. She treats angels as though they were ghosts, which includes the angels gaining the ability to physically interact with her in return.

Changelings: In addition to her False group's specialization effect, the changeling may incite Bedlam in everyone in the Vector's area of effect for free, without an additional roll or cost — whether they have Contagion Conditions or not. After activating this Vector, she suffers a Clarity attack with five dice. For the chapter, she may make kenning rolls without spending Willpower to reveal angels, Infrastructure, stigmatics, cryptids, Unchained, and any Contagious, regardless of her current Clarity; instead of the usual roll, the Storyteller rolls her *maximum* Clarity to detect these things. The Storyteller may spend her Goblin Debt to inflict the Contagion-Touched Condition on anyone with whom she interacts, for two points per victim.

Demons: All mortal targets who succumb to the Vector (and survive it) become a four-dot Cult for the demon for the chapter. The demon suffers a compromise with a -3 modifier, as usurping the God-Machine near Infrastructure draws its attention. For the chapter, the demon gains the rote quality on attempts to angel-jack; but if the angel-jacking is successful, she and anyone who aided her gain the Contagion-Touched Condition or progress an existing Contagion Condition by one step, as the new Cover becomes infected.

Deviants, Vampires: The Remade know well the touch of uncontrolled mutation, and Kindred have long suspected the Blood has a will of its own, hungry to spread. These False can make the Vector's effects viral. For the chapter, whenever an affected target leaves the area and physically interacts with someone else who has a Contagion Condition — including anyone they infect with that touch — that person also suffers the Vector's immediate effects (but not the chapter-long lingering effects).

For the chapter, the Deviant replaces one of her Loyalty Touchstones with an angel or stigmatic character loyal to the God-Machine; if she doesn't know any already, the God-Machine provides one who happens to conveniently enter her life. For the same duration, whenever she gains an Instability, the Storyteller chooses one other character present in the scene who gains the Contagion-Touched Condition or progresses an existing Contagion Condition by one step.

Activating this Vector is a Humanity 2 breaking point for Kindred. The vampire gains the Dependent Condition, as the Daeva clan bane, but instead of a mortal, she becomes dependent on an angel or stigmatic character loyal to the God-Machine; if she doesn't know any already, the God-Machine provides one who happens to conveniently enter her life. This Condition resolves upon the death of that character or after one full chapter, whichever comes first. Anyone who drinks the vampire's Vitae or succumbs to her predatory aura gains the Contagion-Touched Condition or progresses an existing Contagion Condition by one step.

Mages, Mummies, Prometheans: These False are used to warping reality around them on a larger scale. The Vector's area is double its usual size, plus 10 yards per extra Willpower any participant spends. Activating this Vector is an Act of Hubris against Falling Wisdom for mages; it risks Memory loss with five dice for mummies; and it risks a step backward on the Pilgrimage for Prometheans.

For the chapter, the mage replaces one of her Obsessions with one about the God-Machine. At the end of any scene in which she didn't pursue her new Obsession, she gains the Spooked Condition, as distracting thoughts of the Machine's eternal Mysteries hound her constantly. For the same duration, anyone her Nimbus Tilt affects gains the Contagion-Touched Condition or progresses an existing Contagion Condition by one step. The subject of the willworker's Focused Mage Sight suffers similar infection whenever she rolls a dramatic failure on a Revelation, in addition to muddying the Mystery.

For the chapter, the mummy's kepher detects Infrastructure instead of relics, and recognizes the God-Machine's ineffable calculations as magical sympathies to track proxies. She feels the pull to possess these as though they were relics, regardless of whether they're infected, harmful, or functional only until they're removed. For the same duration, anyone the Arisen's Sybaris affects gains the Contagion-Touched Condition or progresses an existing Contagion Condition by one step; those who experience Sybaritic omens receive visions leading them to encourage the Contagion's symptoms.

For the chapter, the Created can sense and track the God-Machine's gears, sources of aetheric power, and any Contagious as though they were Azoth, but loses the ability to sense actual Azothic radiance that way. Meditating on the Azothic memory for Elpis visions attracts interference from the Machine, causing it to send its own visions instead. Disquiet doesn't affect stigmatics, angels, or the Contagious. Anyone the Promethean's Disquiet affects gains the Contagion-Touched Condition or progresses an existing Contagion Condition by one step; Wastelands that Fester to category 3+ due to her actions carry Contagion with them, increasing the city's stage by one with each Wasteland potency increase.

Specializations

The Crucible Initiative: Working together, Fire-Bearers enact purges to wipe the Contagion off the map. Affected targets take one point of aggravated damage, plus one point of lethal damage per additional Willpower any participant spends, as cleansing flames consume them. In addition, the entire area of effect gains the Inferno Tilt (p. XX). For the chapter, the entire area is a safe haven from pure Contagion; the Contagious take one lethal damage per turn they spend within its boundaries, and anything else thoroughly and irretrievably tainted bursts into flames even if it's not usually flammable.

The Machiavelli Gambit: Through this Vector, the Princes achieve the ultimate in precision contamination, rendering their victims extremely suggestible. Each affected target gains the Leveraged Condition, which any member of the Gambit can take advantage of. Each also has an effectively perfect impression of all Svengali for purposes of social maneuvering, even if their actual feelings differ, for the chapter. For the same duration, any participants in the Machiavelli Gambit may transfer their supernatural resource or Willpower points among them by touch, one point per donor per scene; the recipient may convert the transferred points to whichever resource she likes, though this doesn't allow her to exceed her maximum.

Naglfar's Army: The Antediluvians thrust those drowning in Contagion further into the drink, holding their victims under so they can skip across the stepping stones the bodies create. Affected targets immediately progress their Contagion Conditions to the next step; carriers become Contagion-Touched, and those at the third level of Infection become Contagious. The city's overall Contagion stage increases by one, worsening all general symptoms significantly. The players of any Naglfar's Army participants each choose a Merit among the following: Allies, Contacts, Library, Mentor, Resources, Retainer, Safe Place, Staff, or Status. Each participant temporarily gains three dots of the Merit her player chose for the chapter, as the Army takes full advantage of the sudden chaos to capitalize wherever it can. The Storyteller is the final arbiter of whether the chosen Merit makes sense given circumstances.

The Best Laid Plans Gang Aft Agley

The wall-mounted lights' piercing beams stabbed through the archways along the cobbled streets of Cowgate, reflecting off the damp stones and imperiling every hurried step Veronica took. Her hooded form hunched forward as she sprinted along, trying to hold onto the relic in the deep front pocket of her hoodie, a crown made of blackened and mottled flesh. She raced past the rear entrances of bars and huddled pairs or trios of smokers seeking shelter under the outcroppings of the arched bridges overhead.

Her foot slid on the wet, muddy stone as she reached the end of the street. There, she took a detour toward the busy nightlife of the Royal Mile and the surer footing of the modern paving in Grassmarket. Initially, her plan had been to make her way calmly and casually to Archie's car outside the museum, but that damned mummy seemed to just know when she so much as placed a finger on the artifact. She could swear his roar was still ringing in her ears — or perhaps the sound was real and audible even from here.

Her phone rang in her pocket, but she ignored it. Archie no doubt wanted to know where to pick her up after she ran past him, away from the onslaught of the pursuing cultists.

A quick glance behind her revealed no one in pursuit. She had hoped they would lack the courage, or the mechanical resilience, to hurl themselves from the South Bridge onto Cowgate below. It seemed her gamble had paid off.

She slowed her pace, gasping, as she turned the corner past the towering figure of the castle. The moon hung pale in the sky. Nervously, she tugged the phone from the back pocket of her jeans.

Sure enough, it was Archie. He garbled a nervous greeting at her in his usual patois.

"V? What's goin' on, hen? Ye ran right by me there, eh?"

Veronica took a moment to compose herself and process the Scottish brogue before replying, "Sorry, mate. They were after me and I didn't want to give you away."

"Do ye think ye can make it to the HQ or should I pick ye up elsewhere?"

"I'm going to double and head for the temple. Maybe they can tell us more about this thing."

A long groan preceding the next sentence told Veronica that Archie did not agree. He had never trusted the Triptych Cult. Then again, as someone whose role was to free the dead, she supposed the thought of a group of people actually worshiping a trio of walking corpses was unwholesome to the experienced Sin-Eater. She cut in to keep him from having a chance to raise his objections.

"Look, I want to keep it quiet just now. Come around in the morning and pick me up."

"V, listen, they're no just sendin' the goons after ye!" squealed Archie.

"I'll handle it."

Veronica glanced around the gloom of the park as she hung up the phone, strolling through. Patches of light illuminated six benches along the sidewalk. A young couple, deep in the throes of youthful romance despite the chill of the Scottish evening, paid her little attention until her phone rang again. They jumped; she pulled it back out, clutched it in her fist, and glared at it. It was Archie again. She ignored the call and picked up her pace as the hairs on the back of her neck stood up. Something was wrong here.

A gust of wind whipped around her and she frowned as she recalled the stories Archie had told her about the weird Geists the Advocate told him he'd seen. The walking shadows.

The scream of the young woman on the bench startled Veronica. She whipped around in time to see the erstwhile Casanova on all fours, vomiting a stream of black corruption onto the wet ground. Moments later he was joined by the girl, whose scream died on her lips in a hoarse croak and the gargle of her own regurgitated extrusion.

The two rose, attention fixated upon Veronica. Black veins tore across their once healthy, sanguine features. Their skin, which had reddened against the cold, was an ashen grey. Veronica snarled and put her fists up, but she knew that fighting them was foolish. They had found her and the rest would be on their way. She pivoted on the ball of her foot and made a dash for the far side of the park. The servos in her knees whined as she summoned all the speed she could muster, breaking into an unnatural, leaping gait, bounding away from her pursuers.

The air grew more frigid as she ran through the dark. Veronica's heaving breaths steamed out from between her reddening lips as more of the hive spirits joined the pursuit. She screamed, startled, and leapt free from the lunging grasp of a homeless man bursting from a nearby bush, his lips cracked and blackened with the Grey. Veronica's looked madly back and forth — left, right, left, right — as benign parkgoers and startled onlookers all shifted their attention to her, answering to voice of their unseen commander. They ran at her from all sides.

She focused on the half-open gate ahead and surged past the grabbing clutches of her pursuers as they leapt from body to body, leaving a trail of pestilence in their wake.

Suddenly, a young boy appeared in the gateway and slammed it shut, grinning at her through the pestilent dribble flowing from his nose and mouth. There was nothing else for it. She leapt up and vaulted over the gate, kicking the boy squarely in the face as she dropped down. The spirit invading him instantly jumped into the body of a nearby police officer and resumed the pursuit.

Barreling downhill into the main entrance of the temple, Veronica pounded the door furiously with both fists. She stole a look over her shoulder at the posse of the possessed bearing down on her.

“OPEN UP!” she cried, weeping hopeless tears as the hive spirits closed in. “Please!”

Her last statement emanated as little more than a sob, but someone answered her — not from within the building, but from without. Archie's car skidded across the cobbles and plowed into the first rank of the approaching attackers. Diving from the driver's side door, he scrambled up the steps of the temple and stood in front of Veronica. That stupid, pen-pushing, pathetic, glorious bastard. Veronica placed her hand on his shoulder and stood behind him.

“Thanks, Archie.”

A sonorous voice filled the air. Its booming tones blew the doors of the temple backwards, revealing a tall silhouette with outstretched arms. Resonant words rung out in an ancient tongue and the hive spirits crashed against the protective wall that Amenemope of the Triptych conjured around his tomb, even as the spirits' vessels continued to claw and scrape uselessly at it.

“Welcome, friends. I believe you have something for us. Present to me the Crown of Shadowflesh.”

Chapter Three: Plagues, Interstitial and Otherwise

Healing is a matter of time, but it is sometimes also a matter of opportunity.

— Hippocrates

The God-Machine is sick. The God-Machine has always been sick. The God-Machine will, someday, *become* sick. It's hard to tell with an entity that so flagrantly violates causality. Ultimately, the Contagion is as universal as the God-Machine that hosts it. There is scarcely a place on Earth the God-Machine hasn't touched at one time or another, and therefore there's scarcely a place on Earth that couldn't host an outbreak of the Contagion. All scholars of the Contagion can really say is that history is replete with breakouts, moments where cultures and even reality itself collapsed around a point, or a person, or a practice.

Accounts of unexplainable events on such a scale stretch back as far as ancient Mesopotamia, where we first know of writing as a common practice, and therefore where written history begins. Some believe that the flood myth itself, present in so many cultures, reflects a massive, ancient outbreak, one which nearly ended the world, that is only preserved in oral histories. Not every historical record of a cataclysmic event represents the Contagion breaking through into our world through the vector of the God-Machine's Infrastructure, of course. Earthquakes, volcanoes, meteors, and all manner of perfectly natural disasters are capable of presenting as an out-of-context problem in ancient records or literature. The Sworn, however, are not an entirely modern phenomenon themselves; contemporaries of these events, ancient or otherwise, did what they could to stem the Contagion's spread — and must have seen some success, or, their modern descendants say, they would not be around to talk about it.

Five outbreaks in particular, however, are most relevant to the modern day, and specifically to the five factions of the Sworn, some of whom can claim traditions (if not contiguous organization) stretching back more than two thousand years. None of the factions sprang fully-formed into being. Instead, they were the result of like-minded individuals coming together in the wake of apocalyptic events, and together creating an idea that would, despite lurking only in the shadows of the world, endure the test of time. When the Sworn argue amongst themselves, more often than not these five outbreaks are the ones cited as proof that one faction or another has the right of it.

San Lorenzo Colossal Head 11: 900 BCE

The Head is massive, with details finer than any other colossal head. Even Tu, the last Olmec king seated on a crumbling throne, didn't know which of his ancestors commissioned it. The Head had always existed, bearing the likeness not of a king, but a god. This divinity was not named, not known like the Dragon or the Feathered Serpent. It was not listed amongst the great Eight, or even any of the lesser Gods his people revered. Yet it sucked up all prayers and all life, leaving the island in the middle of the Coatzacoalcos River barren. Tu could see the future, full of desolation and endings, as clearly as he could see the gleaming metal and polished, ivory human bone behind the head's stone facade.

The San Lorenzo Colossal Head 11 is a secret of archeology. While San Lorenzo Colossal Heads 1 to 10 are on display for tourists, the eleventh head was sequestered away when testing revealed metal alloys undiscovered by man, and elements not on the periodic table, laced in the stone. All public records of it were suppressed, though rumors and pictures survive on the Deep Web. Attempts to carbon-date it consistently fail. The head's features are Olmec, with a broad nose and full lips, although it is more androgynous than other Colossal Heads. Large discs stretch the ear lobes, and the mouth gapes open wide as if it hungers. Its headband is incredibly detailed, full of maze-like patterns and tableaux of worship. Efforts to document the scenes portrayed in the headband have likewise failed. The sheer volume of detail, untraceable lines and figures wedged together, wears on the observer's mind. Since its discovery, archeologists have identified 1) a city

of curving spires rising towards each other from the ground, 2) human figures worshipping a towering creature with arms so large they reach the ground, and 3) a head resembling Colossal Head 11, mouth opened wide as lines of humans walk into its maw. A handful of observers have recorded different tableaux, alternating widely between a beautifully ordered utopia and a barren wasteland, but the three above are the only ones seen by more than one person. Mages, believing the Head to represent an Exarch and doing their own investigation, have had more luck.

The Head hails from the first Olmec City circa 1150 BCE. No amount of divination can reveal its creator, and none of the known San Lorenzo kings match its physical features. It's the tallest of eleven San Lorenzo heads, at twelve feet, and impeccably detailed. The Head *spoke* when it was finished and unveiled, delivering a message in the first language. Priests flocked to the Head, always rushing back to the safety of their known gods once they gleaned the Head held both the end and salvation of all things. Subsequent kings ordered it buried, placed in a temple overlooking the city, and thrown in the river. None recorded its message, for those who understood could not remember it, and those who remembered could not understand it. It sucked up prayers intended for the true gods, drove kings to madness and greatness, and slowly spelled out demise. This was its Contagion: it trapped the city between the erratic extremes of obsession until it consumed all else. The skills of stonemasonry and agriculture, passed down for five centuries, faded against the presence of the Head. People forgot to eat. Children starved in their baskets as mothers were *so close* to deciphering the god's riddle that all else needed to wait. Kings sat on their thrones, so lost in thought that they were unable to govern the city, the answer lying forever just beyond their grasp. The first Olmec went into decline and was abandoned around 900 BCE, dying on the soft whisper of obsession consuming everything else.

The First Language

The first language is the code that governs the God-Machine's programming, the Celestial Ladder, and the essence of Creation. It transcends time and space, and those who first mastered it tore it into a thousand pieces so none could follow them on this path to ascendant power. Azothic Memory retains fragments of it though, allowing Prometheans to master the dominant language of their surrounding as the first language is the root of *all* languages. This also grants all Prometheans +2 on checks to identify the San Lorenzo strain, and gives the Tammuz a further +1 bonus to resist infection.

Survivors took the Head's feverous message with them as they left the ruins of the first city. They still did not understand its message, nor could they remember it any more clearly than a dream fading fast against the world's light. None of them had even been alive when the Head first made its appearance, yet the Head reached for them through the stitches in time, taking them back to that first and only time it spoke. It carried on in their blood and wormed its way into their minds: *The message must be understood*. Where they went, Contagion followed. Sculptors throughout Olmec civilization worked bloodied fingers to the bone, sacrificing life and sanity, in an effort to re-create the Head of God. Not until the fall of La Venta, the last great Olmec city, did this strain of San Lorenzo 11 stop.

Unfortunately, the disease lingered and mutated in the earth itself. It re-emerged when the Aztecs built their city of Tenōchtitlan near the site of the lost city. They did not create any Colossal Heads, but instead turned to blood and sacrifice to decipher the message. They came close too, warriors and kings self-mutilating to read the God's portents in the enlightenment of pain. They thrived as they solved the paradox of the message, which held both Contagion and its cure, and created an empire that spanned the Valley of Mexico. Perhaps in the vast multitudes of time and space, Contagion ended here, five centuries after the first recorded outbreak. Time is also linear though, and whatever progress the Aztecs made was buried alongside them by the cruelty of Hernán Cortés.

The Rosetta Society

The San Lorenzo outbreak spread when the city fell, embedding itself in survivors' genetic codes and passing through contact in the form of an all-consuming obsession to *decipher the message*. The Olmecs suffered from it, as did the Aztecs, the Mayans, and Mesoamerican cultures like the Toltecs and the Totonac. So might the Rosetta Society, which claims Mesoamerican origins and certainly exhibits a singular focus on interpreting the *meaning* behind Contagion, also be infected? The answer is up to the Storyteller. It's been a thousand years since the Mayans contained the San Lorenzo outbreak, and even Contagion could simply lose its virulence over that time. If it did carry into the Rosetta Society though, the San Lorenzo strain exhibits as the **Obsession Condition** in addition to the **Carrier Condition**. Given how insidious the San Lorenzo strain is, exhibiting as mania and eventually leading to a mental breakdown (both common enough in Sworn as it is), neither the Rosetta Society nor the other Sworn have reason to believe they're infected.

If the San Lorenzo strain did survive inside the Rosetta Society, it remains hidden from the other Sworn. This could either be due to a mutation of the disease, or because the strain, one of the oldest in the world, has lost some of its virulence and is now easily overlooked. In this case, Sworn might not see it until it's too late and all of the Rosetta Society is infected, or if they have active cause for suspicion and take a very close look. This hidden strain would reduce the Prometheans' bonus to recognize it to +1, though the Tammuz do keep their bonus to resist it.

The Mayans had more luck surviving the ages, though they face marginalization and discrimination in contemporary Mexico. But their luck ran dry in deciphering the message. They searched for its meaning in blood, in ball games, and in the stars. They came close in Uxmal, the thrice-built city, where they grasped the last remnants of the San Lorenzo strain and buried it deep within the Magician's Pyramid. The project consumed four hundred years, with building starting in 600 CE and ending in 1000 CE, and a single night as a magician erected the pyramid to escape a death sentence. It took three pyramids, layered inside each other like eggs within eggs. But finally, it was done: Contagion distilled through blood, earth, and air, and contained within a great, near-impenetrable pyramid. Containment is not a cure, but it sufficed for the Mayan people and no outbreaks of the San Lorenzo strain have been recorded since. If Mages worry what the Spanish might have taken with them when they looted the Magician's Pyramid during their conquest of Yucatán, that is certainly no fault of the indigenous people.

See p. XX for the **Contaminant Tilt**.

Exile, Prophecy, and Wrath: 600 CE / 600 BCE

The Black Death reshaped Europe, but before it did so, it struck across the known world multiple times — perhaps most significantly during the Plague of Justinian, which weakened the Eastern Roman Empire at a critical moment and ensured that the fallen Western Empire would never be reintegrated. Beneath the mass death and the collapse of civic function, however, a deeper rot took hold: a dangerous and widespread outbreak of the Contagion. The city of Constantinople stank of death while angels frantically worked to excise the linchpins of infected Infrastructure, which sang from dusk to dawn in tones that ate away at victims' minds. In desperation, the angels cast those contaminated objects into the Bosphorus, where many still lie.

The angels were not alone in their work; many supernatural beings, no longer able to ignore the damage Contagious Infrastructure was doing to the city, set about dismantling every piece of Infrastructure they could find, infected or otherwise. Like the humans of Constantinople, they believed the plague was a judgement (though from which god or gods, opinions varied). It wasn't until they found an ancient tomb, buried deep beneath the city and under the care of a group called the Order of Ízft, that they saw the writing on the wall.

It was writing on the wall, literally, that gave them their answers. Even had the air within not been redolent with rot and sickness, the murals and scratched prayers that lined the burial chamber prophesied a rare conjunction of the stars, illustrated in a sigil. The doors of the tomb were marked with the sigil, and each of the explorers who found the tomb realized they recognized the sign, reproduced throughout antiquity in marginalia or plastered across the walls of ruined cities. For their part, the Order of Ízft allowed the exploration, slinking into the shadows and observing the results from afar.

Even after securing the Byzantine outbreak, the knowledge that its coming was foretold ate at those who experienced it. They organized a secret convention of scholars, which fanned out across the world in search of every possible resource to be found that described the sigil, to return in 25 years' time, when they would share what they learned. It was Aelia Scaevola, a Nosferatu, whose torpor-faded memories led her to the grave of the man she knew as Kurush, who had discovered the roots of the prophecy — twelve hundred years in the past.

This Bit of Earth That Covers My Bones

Kurush, styled Cyrus by history in the West, was the first of many great conquerors to unite southwestern Asia — in part, by breaking from the bloody, punitive rulership over the conquered that previous Kings had meted out. Rising from a petty lord under the mantle of the Median Empire, he overthrew the king of Media (his grandfather). Then, he went on to conquer Lydia and all of Asia Minor before turning his attention to the Neo-Babylonian Empire, just decades after they besieged Jerusalem and smashed the Temple of Solomon — just as the prophet Jeremiah had warned. In each case, bar a pledge of fealty and an offer of tribute, he allowed the conquered to govern themselves and left their gods safe in their shrines. At the time, such a move was unprecedented. The Achaemenid Empire, which would last for some two hundred years and eclipse all previous empires, was, by the standards of the time, a beacon of tolerance and cosmopolitanism, with roads connecting disparate territories and a postal system that rivaled any other.

But amidst the successes and advancements of the Achaemenid Empire, a darker undercurrent went unnoticed. It was first described by one of the court magicians of Cyrus, Vishtapa, an Awakened savant who observed arcane underpinnings to much of the empire's infrastructure. These were the hidden work of a masterful but unseen craftsman who was exploiting the work of Cyrus' empire, and Vishtapa set about studying the craftsman and his exploitation. In doing so, she observed a dysfunction of that Infrastructure, and noticed it moved in much the same way that a sickness did throughout a population — and thus named the dysfunction "Contagion," not yet knowing its cause. Over the course of her long life, Vishtapa amassed a remarkable collection of information that remains one of the earliest confirmed accounts of an outbreak (mild though it was) of the Contagion. Though the Jeremiad have scoured history for any trace of Vishtapa apart from this seminal work on the Contagion, no trace of the mystic has ever been found.

THE FOLLOWING ACCOUNTS SHOULD BE PRESENTED AS WRITTEN TEXT ON WEATHERED PAPER, KEPT IN ARCHIVAL CONDITIONS

On the Four-Cornered Road of Five Corners

Having travelled to Sardis, old capital of Lydia, upon the Royal Road, I discovered a branch thereof which, despite being in good condition, was quite unused. I was advised by the local population that, should I wish to keep my head, I ought not dare to tread upon that path, for it was a thing of the gods. My curiosity, as ever it has, overpowered what sense of self-preservation I have, and I set out at once, my every sense open to the hidden Truth of the world.

For some miles, through which the road wound between hills, through narrow valleys, and past tall scrub brush, my journey was perfectly ordinary, save for geometries of space I have never seen occur in nature, though I could not divine their source — I thus ascribe it to the Contagion. In time, I emerged from these hills to find a crossroads, though there was precious little else about. Standing there, between four roads, came the revelation, for as I turned, I could see the very towers of

Babylon, which I knew quite well but which laid months distant even for a horse and rider of the Angarium, whose service is swifter than any mortal courier.

Yet there was more, for as I turned back, I beheld the city of Van, to which I have travelled previously; and Persepolis, far in the East, to which the Royal Road does not travel. These were the three cities I beheld, and when I turned to face the way that led me to this crossroads, I saw not the hills and scrub, nor even Sardis of Lydia, but a city whose like I have never before seen, and whose likeness I reproduced in my notes should I encounter it in the future. Of the path I had taken to arrive at this crossroads, there was no sign, yet having trod it I can but affirm that it exists.

Of the Man Who Dies Thrice Each Day

In Sakas Beyond the Sea, there is a man who demonstrates the Lie of mortality, not as they who dine on blood or they who cling to a ghost to live, but through a suffering I would not wish on my most hated foe. I have visited this man, and can affirm that he does indeed die thrice each day, at the rising, height, and falling of the sun; each time, he lies dead for a time, then rises. He is regarded as quite cursed by his fellows and dwells far from them in a hermitage. I gave him company for a month, for which he seemed quite grateful, and in that time I was able to sense the Contagion moving in him. He remains to this date the only example I have ever witnessed of the Contagion in a living man, and I remain relieved that it seems not to spread thus, for if it were to, no doubt it could fell even Cyrus' great empire.

On the Nature of the Contagion

It is unlike the sicknesses that commonly plague man, but operates much in its like, moving from one host to another through various means. A road may become infected, or a tower, or a grove of trees; and only rarely, living beings or the spirits and beasts of the hidden world. It is not especially virulent, but its symptoms — if we may call it such — range from oddnesses in behavior or function to events like unto the worst manifestations of the Abyss I have ever witnessed. I think that, if left unchecked, the Contagion shall worsen, until it develops into a form that spreads as do the plagues of man; consequently, I have advised the court of Cyrus to block or destroy anything that carries it, though I have certainly not informed the sleeping of its true nature.

Echoes Throughout History

Studying the works of Vishtapa with the aid of her Awakened contemporaries, Aelia Scaevola was able to track the Contagion throughout history, from its earliest seeds in Kurush's time to the Plague of Athens, the Antonine Plague, the Plague of Cyprian, and finally to the Justinian Plague, which still, decades later, would periodically reemerge and sweep across the land. What the scholars had taken for a singular occurrence, they now saw was a message written by the hand of God across the whole of history, in the ink of shattered lives and empires. Many believed that there was no hope for humanity, and consequently no hope for those who lived beside them, but others argued that if God had intended to wipe out the human race as He had in the Flood, He would have done so, not provide ample opportunities for mortals to understand the message.

Indeed, the synchronicity of the Contagion's first whisperings and the destruction of the Temple, prophesied by Jeremiah, proved to be such a powerful piece of evidence that it quickly rose to the level of religious revelation, and was recorded as such. The newly born Jeremiad would spend the next 1500 years struggling to contain the Contagion through purification (both spiritual and by fire) as they pursued it across Europe and Asia, and finally to the Americas. When called zealots by their fellow Sworn, they point to the evidence of centuries without a population-annihilating blight, as the plagues of old were — but caution their fellows that the work remains yet unfinished. Whether God will withdraw this sword of Damocles, which the Jeremiad has fought in a hundred forms across the ages, is for Him alone to know. All humanity can do is struggle to be worthy until either that day or the Day of Judgement comes.

The Curse of Hasdrubal: 146 BCE

The God-Machine foresaw the destruction of Carthage, calculated the future using mathematical formula far beyond the ken of Tales or Pythagoras, and determined the Punic city must fall to ensure optimal growth. It would stretch along the roads of the Roman Empire, ascendant and unstoppable in victory. The woman changed that trajectory, reaching through fire incarnate to the place where past and future meet, to touch Contagion. The God-Machine sent an angel named Isaac the Unwashed to eat her name, savoring the taste of defeat and humiliation turned to revenge and victory. Never again would anyone speak it. Her name changed to “the wife of” in all written and oral accounts, but her Curse was already loosened to cast its shadow, carried on ragged wings borne on blood, over the empires of man.

The Battle of Carthage (148-146 BCE) was the culmination of three wars between Carthage and the Roman Empire, the first dating back a full century earlier. Twice before, the Romans had defeated the Carthaginians, and twice had the Phoenicians risen to defy them again. This time, Rome resolved, would be the last. The Romans were motivated by greed for the rich farming lands controlled by Carthage, revenge for the two earlier wars (and perhaps lingering fear after the march of Hannibal across the Alps), and the prospect of teaching an object-lesson to Rome’s lesser enemies. Carthage threatened the order of Rome, and order would be restored.

The Carthaginians raised an army of their own, turned their city into a veritable arms factory, and met the Romans in the field. A full year the Carthaginian army held the Romans at bay, even as wives and children were evacuated overseas to friendly states, until the Romans appointed Scipio Aemilianus as consul. Whatever military genius Hasdrubal the Boetharch, the Carthaginian general, possessed, he was outclassed by Scipio, who defeated the Phoenicians’ field army and blocked the city’s harbor. Less than a year later, Roman forces breached the city walls and the sack of Carthage began.

Sensing how the winds would blow, the Carthaginians had fortified the city, blocking the streets and barricading every house. Eight long days and nights, Roman forces fought their way through, conquering the city one building at a time. Finally, Scipio and Hasdrubal came face to face on the hill of Byrsa, where Queen Dido had founded Carthage when Rome was still a distant whisper in the God-Machine’s designs. In front of his own men, the Roman soldiers he had captured and tortured, and the burning temple of Eshmun, Hasdrubal fell to his knees and begged for mercy.

It was, in all ways, a perfect storm. The hill of Byrsa, where Dido had both seeded Carthage and shed her own life’s blood after impaling herself on a sword rather than remarry. The city sacrificed to fire in Scipio’s wake. And the temple of Eshmun, god of Healing and eighth son of Righteousness. The world slowed as the wife of Hasdrubal stepped forward, dragging her two young sons behind her, the cogs of the God-Machine not stopping — they never stop — but slowing, just that fraction of time which is immeasurable to mortals and eternal to It. The Romans had come to bring order. The wife of Hasdrubal would deny them. She spat on the ground at her husband’s feet, declaring that Carthage would *never* heel. She pushed her sons into the flames of the temple, opening the wheel of life and death with murder, then jumped after them to close it with self-immolation.

Scipio sealed the bargain made by the wife of Hasdrubal, this pact born of perfect destruction, fire, and blood. He saw past and future converge in the flames of Eshmun’s temple, all cities becoming Carthage and befalling the same fate. Deep in the ephemeral bowels of the God-Machine, amidst churning cogs oiled with human blood, an angel opened its eight eyes, spreading wings to fly up to the world and murder Scipio. It was the slowing of time, that lost hundredth of a nano-second, that let the mortal *this once* speak too fast for the angel.

*“A day will come when sacred Troy shall perish,
And Priam and his people shall be slain.”*

The angel closed its eyes again, dissolving into hydraulic fluid, its mission a failure. Scipio’s words sealed the murderous sacrifice of Hasdrubal’s wife, linking the fates of Rome, Carthage, and Troy

across time. There would be no order, and Contagion rose again out of the entropy of time. The Romans burned Carthage to the ground, killing sixty-two thousand citizens and soldiers. They left behind only ashes and bones, returning to Rome with fifty thousand Carthaginian slaves — and Hasdrubal's Curse.

Hasdrubal's Curse is a virulent strain of Contagion that still plagues the world. It passes between its hosts through human conflict, be it a parent yelling at their child or nations going to war. Humans have a *great* capacity for conflict, and Hasdrubal's Curse travels fast. The Curse erodes impulse control and lifts inhibitions, allowing people to do what they always wanted in the deep, dark recesses of their soul. For most humans, that's actually not a problem: many people have genuinely no desire to harm or kill someone. There are always, however, exceptions. Political leaders who only care about propping up their business enterprises. Corrupt police officers who don the uniform for the state-sanctioned monopoly on violence it grants. Soldiers who've been trained to *hate* the enemy. It takes a keen eye to weed out Hasdrubal's Curse from mundane instances of human violence, but looking for blood and violence is a good way to start.

In addition to the normal effects of Contagion, afflicted suffer the **Reckless Condition** (see p. XX). If they take an offensive combat action while struck with Hasdrubal's Curse, they also gain the **Murderous Condition** (see p. XX).

Among the slaves carried away by Scipio was Ayzebel, younger sister to the wife of Hasdrubal. She too had looked into the flames to see empires rise and fall, mankind forever doomed to war and violence. Unlike her sister, Ayzebel did not feel the world deserved such a fate. She spoke to her captor, Scipio, and reminded him of his own part in dooming mankind. He had not meant it, Scipio argued; a force greater than himself had rolled the words off this tongue. *Then give me a chance to heal it*, Ayzebel said.

Scipio removed Ayzebel's name from the roll of slaves and installed her in a Roman villa under the guise of being his mistress. He sent her money, servants, priests, and political allies. Whatever she requested, through sealed missives and couriers, Scipio's guilt-ridden conscience provided. They never spoke, or even met, face to face again. Something else came to Ayzebel's door though, an ancient creature smelling of wet earth and rot. The vampire was drawn by tales of the dark woman, a priestess of healing and keeper of secrets valuable enough to bind Scipio Aemilianus. Ayzebel, for her part, was more intrigued and less frightened of the creature than any mortal should be. She viewed it, initially, as another manifestation of her sister's Curse. Rather than flee or cower before the elder, she probed it with questions as she tried to find an angle for a cure. By the time she realized her mistake, her sharp mind had already enthralled the vampire, who brought her into the night.

Ayzebel joined the Camarilla, as all noble Kindred of Rome must, though she never showed much interest in its political dealings. Her focus remained firmly on the Curse, collecting around her like-minded creatures who could intuit the doom of mankind Scipio had brought back from Carthage, and who sought to prevent it. At night, Ayzebel directed them herself, using her considerable persuasive skills to keep the eclectic and often at-odds group together. During the day, she relinquished control to those of the alliance to those who walked under the sun and to her own servants in a Roman temple to Vediovis, which she had co-opted and rededicated to Eshmun. They had no name in those nights, though Ayzebel's descendants would, only partially ironic, christen themselves the Cryptocracy on the turn of the twentieth century. Ayzebel herself was lost in the fall of the Camarilla, buried by owls under layers of rock. The Cryptocracy continues its work though, with Ayzebel's two children still entrenched in its upper ranks and dedicated to releasing mankind from the Curse of Hasdrubal.

A Long, Slow March: 1850 CE — 1917 CE

War has been a constant companion to humanity, and one used by the God-Machine to many ends in the past, but only in the last hundred and fifty years has that dread entity's touch so nakedly consumed a human practice. Beginning with repeating rifles and ending with machine guns that

allowed a single man to slaughter an army and chemical weapons that killed according to the whim of the wind, the late 19th and early 20th centuries brought the mechanization of warfare, the application of industry to killing. For those familiar with the God-Machine, industrialization was terrifying enough — for the Sworn and False alike, the possibility of the Contagion spreading to an engine that could easily kill millions was a wakeup call.

Though there were numerous small outbreaks throughout the period, one of the earliest and most formative for both Zero Hour and the Crucible Initiative was the Taiping Rebellion, which lasted through the 1850s and into the 1860s, and led to the temporary formation of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. This revolutionary polity was based on the teachings of Hong Xiuquan, who interpreted his visions of a divine family through the lens of Christian missionary pamphlets and declared himself the younger brother of Christ. Numbering nearly 30 million people at its height (and resulting in the deaths of nearly as many, primarily from plague and famine), this rebellion forced the Qing to modernize to combat the total war tactics used by the Heavenly Kingdom, which at one point very nearly captured Beijing itself. In the end, the Qing crushed the rebellion, but the damage was done, and unceasing pressure from the colonial West doomed the dynasty.

During the height of the Rebellion, an outbreak of the Contagion occurred in Zhejiang Province, in which dreams themselves became contagious. At first washing up from the sea in great glowing blankets of singing kelp, seaside communities were eventually inundated with the dreams of cetaceans, mollusks, and other sea life. Once the Contagion spread inland, however, and a critical mass of humans were infected, the Contagion settled into the Temenos and began to magnify the revolutionary and millenarian fervor promulgated by the God-Worshipping Society of the Heavenly Kingdom.

In particular, this led a cabal of local officials loyal to the Heavenly Kingdom to attempt to unite Heaven and Earth by subverting Infrastructure along the coast that, exposed to Contagion, was no longer hidden. Weaving it together with miles of rope blessed with manifest dreams, they created a territory within the Heavenly Kingdom where the dream-avatars of the gods of the Temenos could walk in the oneiroi of mortals — and fight among each other for the loyalty of the people, driving them mad with ideological attack after ideological attack. Those supernatural beings who came together in the wake of this disaster referred to the destabilized area as the Zone of Contagious Dreams.

While the ritual was necessarily limited in scope, there were signs that it was slowly spreading. The actual half-Astral space the ritual had created was only a bridgehead, and the Contagion was spreading across the region's Infrastructure, slowly drawing down the Temenos with it. At its greatest extent, isolated Infrastructure as far away as Shanghai and Guangdong was infected, but thankfully the effects of the outbreak never spread as far. Orders on both sides of the Awakened ideological divide came together, initially regarding the outbreak as some form of Abyssal intrusion. They were joined by an ad-hoc network of the Courts of the Lost spanning the entire region, who were convinced that this represented some sort of organized invasion on the part of the Others.

In time, they learned the true nature of the Contagion, though not its provenance, even after a daring and harrowing expedition into the Zone of Contagious Dreams retrieved the officials who had constructed the altar. Long since enslaved by Temenos-Gods, their minds had been rewritten so many times that all memory of their previous selves was annihilated. They were at best shells of humans, their souls worn as smooth and simple as their identities. A few died by suicide out of despair of ever being commanded by their dream-lords again, and the rest physically withered and died within a few months.

Now equipped with a better understanding of the Zone's nature, the Awakened and the Lost began to experiment with treatments and potential cures for both humans and Infrastructure. In the shadow of the war between the Heavenly Kingdom and the Qing government, these supernatural allies fought another war in the material world and in the dreams of tens of thousands, whose oneiroi

became battlefields. Courageous warriors of the Lost threw the invaders down from the castles they'd built out of mortal minds, while the Awakened struck in the Temenos itself, forcing the dream-gods to withdraw to defend their home territory.

To combat the Contagion directly, rather than the horror it had spawned, the Awakened and the Lost enlisted werewolves, whose dreams roam the Anima Mundi where the gods of the Temenos have no sway, to be their foot soldiers in the Zone of Contagious Dreams. Many of the Pure even set aside their ancient feud with the Forsaken, for though they had no love for humans, the spirits to whom they pledged themselves would brook no competition from dream-gods. The links of Contagion were severed as Infrastructure-complexes fell in the wake of rampaging werewolf packs. Finally, the allies located the site of the ritual that started the outbreak, a nightmarish place where the Astral was slowly bleeding into the material world. Together, they destroyed it in a single overwhelming strike. With its heart cut out, the outbreak faltered and died, normality returning to a war-torn countryside.

In the wake of the collapse of the Zone of Contagious Dreams, the Taiping Rebellion slowly fell apart. First Hong Xiquan, then the son he designated his heir, died, and the capital in Nanjing fell in 1864. Disparate conflicts between the government and holdouts continued until 1871, and many survivors fell into banditry thereafter, but the Rebellion was effectively over. The debate over the provenance of the Rebellion — whether it was caused by the Contagion, buoyed by it, or had nothing to do with it — ran for years thereafter, but was eventually overshadowed by a growing doctrinal divide between two factions, both of which saw the Contagion as a deadly foe.

Recovery and Relapse

None aligned themselves with Sworn or False during the outbreak itself, but disagreements and even violent confrontations occurred over the best means to quarantine the outbreak. The more radical elements actively spread mundane disease and damaged crops to combat the Contagion by killing off any possible vectors — in other words, people not only in the Zone of Contagious Dreams, but in all the surrounding areas as well. The divide between the moderate and radical factions grew and grew, until the nascent Crucible Initiative cut all ties and began to act on its own. By that time, the outbreak was largely contained, and the Heavenly Kingdom destroyed.

For the remainder of the outbreak, horrified by the lengths that the Crucible Initiative went to and convinced it was just as much part of the Contagion's plan as anything, the members of the moderate faction used the next fifty years as a time for reflection on the future of warfare. From Fredericksburg to conflicts of Great Powers against the colonized, casualties mounted as more and more sophisticated weapons were brought to bear — and even as industrialization created wonders, it crushed the spirits of laborers sacrificed to keep the machines running night and day, and endlessly self-improved in wave after wave of innovation.

The God-Machine wasn't the only one laying the groundwork for mechanized warfare, however — the disparate groups of supernatural beings left in the wake of the Taiping Rebellion all independently resolved to prepare for whatever the Contagion's next move was, and spent the following decades readying themselves for a horrific (and, to their minds, final) confrontation. Some studied the Zhejiang outbreak and developed new strategies to combat it; others studied isolated Contagious kept in quarantine, trying to determine the nature of the disease itself.

Though the true terror of mechanized warfare wasn't apparent until the first few bloody months of the Great War, the forebears of Zero Hour were ready, and like mundane governments, they came together in a grand alliance to oppose the outbreak that took place in the shattered hell of the European trenches. Strategists cut critical connections between Infrastructure complexes, preventing the outbreak from spreading; others carefully introduced carriers of the Zhejiang Strain, and successfully induced the Contagion to compete with itself. In the end, a tightly contained segment of the Western Front was the sole battlefield between Contagion and reality.

Intense though the outbreak became under the pressure — with the sky weeping tears of blood from prismatic eyes and the sun shining a pale, lambent green as the Contagion picked at their own souls until they frayed and dissolved — the Sworn kept the quarantine, and the outbreak burned itself out. Though their origins lay some sixty years previous, it was in the ashes of a broken Europe that Zero Hour was born, a declaration of war on the Contagion and a commitment to oppose the scorched-earth tactics of their ideological cousins in the Crucible Initiative — whose own efforts to stem the spread of Contagion helped to spread one of the most deadly epidemics in the history of the world. To hear Zero Hour tell it, their strategy to contain and subvert the Contagion saved reality itself during those cold, hard years. To hear their cousins in the Crucible Initiative tell it, Zero Hour merely fought a holding action that the Spanish Flu made meaningless. The two factions remain bitterly opposed to this day, each considering the other betrayers who failed to learn the essential lessons of the Zhejiang outbreak.

Chernobyl 4: 1986 CE

AEC-247 was born from death. Its head was filled with screams, alarm sirens, and blinking red light. It was hard to think. It looked around, noticing for the first time it had eyes with which to see, and recorded only destruction. The shadow of a biped shape was burnt into the wall. Fires raged in the room. The ceiling was partially collapsed. AEC-247's body, noticing now it had one, was made of fire and pain.

AEC-247 despaired. What am I? What is my purpose? The moment AEC-247 asked the question, it knew the answer: Experience. Grow. Be. It felt warm, good, and purposeful.

In that instant of clarity, AEC-247 sensed a darker power too. It welled up from bowels of reality, reaching out hungrily to consume the world. What do I do? AEC-247 asked. There was no answer to that question: AEC-247, now a full nineteen seconds old, had to decide alone.

Theseans were the first of the Sworn to arrive at Chernobyl after the meltdown and nuclear explosion in reactor 4. They sensed Contagion from far away, but once they were physically on the scene, they realized Chernobyl was so much more. They claimed the site, other Sworn happy to let the Ship of Theseus take the lead, and have not relinquished control since.

Several things happened in Chernobyl during the nights of April 25th to 26th. The cooling of reactor 4 failed, leading to a catastrophic failure and eventually a nuclear explosion. Thirty-one people died in the catastrophe. Contagion struck the site. A Zeka was born in the nuclear destruction and used what she names “Divine Fire” to contain the Contagion.

The Theseans know all this, the Zeka herself being a huge source of information for them, but they have no idea what came first. Was Chernobyl an act of “Creation” (another of the Zeka’s terms) gone wrong? Did the nuclear breach cause Contagion, or the other way around? This lack of knowledge, despite having an actual eye witness, frustrates the Argonauts to no end.

The Argonauts have had much more success uncovering what this strain of Contagion, referred to as C4-86 in their files, *does*. C4-86 causes rapid evolutionary mutation, which kills weaker individual specimens but seems to strengthen the species as a whole. The Chernobyl deer, massive albino creatures, and a large wolf population are prime examples. The Theseans aren’t sure what makes this strain so beneficial, certainly compared to other instances of Contagion, though their resident Zeka — now going by the name Ace — claims it’s the result of Divine Fire mingling with the disease when it first burst forth. As Ace can barely explain what Divine Fire is or does, her fellow Theseans have dutifully made a note in their records but otherwise ignore her claim. And, some Argonauts counter, the local sparrows have grown so stunted and infertile they will soon be extinct, so maybe C4-86 is malicious after all.

Scientists, politicians, journalists, and tourists visit the Radiological Reserve around the reactor, also taking note of the newly thriving wildlife. The Zone of Alienation, especially the Red Forest named for its burnt pine trees, teems with life. Existing animal populations have grown in size, and

new animals entering the area have increased its biodiversity. Birds nest inside Chernobyl's Sarcophagus, the construction of concrete and steel erected around the reactor to maintain radiation. A human population of two hundred still lives in villages spread over the area, steadfastly refusing to evacuate. As they are too old to foster a new generation, the Ukrainian government leaves them be. Poachers frequent the area too, as do illegal loggers and metal salvagers. The presence of ordinary mortals complicates the Argonauts' research, but they perforce make do.

Layered under the mortal visage of red trees and mutated animals lies a darker world of spirit. The Sworn can see it clearly, heaving and moving as if breath courses through it. Occasionally it breaches the world, spewing forth two-headed deer with human faces or fist-sized bugs emitting babies' cries. The Argonauts have managed to contain all breaches so far, killing or driving the mutants back, but realize with dread that the creatures have become more numerous and aggressive. The world inside the breaches, too, is hostile to any explorers: trees twist into themselves and paths turn endlessly to lead explorers astray. The Argonauts lost a team of three, trapped on the other side when the breach closed in 2011, and have grown cautious of exploring the breaches since.

The Argonauts have identified three locations in the Zone of Alienation that stand out. The **Elephant's Foot** sits in the deepest recesses of reactor 4, a mass of melted nuclear fuel, concrete, and core sealing material. It exudes the highest levels of radiation found in Chernobyl, and killed two rescue workers within minutes of exposure. It also holds a festering Contagion, and worse: the Contagion within the Foot is ever-growing. While the Argonauts could initially examine the Foot after taking precautions against the radiation, any attempts to see the Foot's Contagion now strikes the Sworn with debilitating headaches or even blindness — whatever is gestating inside the writhing mass is now too great to behold. The thirty-one spectres roaming the catacombs of reactor 4 sometimes gather at the Foot, heads bowed in adulation while weeping black tears that ooze with the consistency of tar.

The **Cross Tree**, where Nazis hung Soviet partisans during the war, was burnt in the catastrophe. It still exists in the breach though, leaking Contagion from lesions in its bark. Where it once grew on the edge of the Red Forest, it now appears to have moved a little further into the woods every time the Argonauts check on its location. Rotting bodies swing from the tree's forked arms, most, but not always all, blessedly dead. The tree's dislocation alarms the Theseans, who believe it is leading them *somewhere*. Certainly, they sometimes see the trees sway as if something massive moves through them, and members of the research teams say they feel something watching them. Most teams privately describe the watchful presence as malevolent, though this rarely makes the official records as there's no way to verify the claim — and who wouldn't ascribe sinister motives to an unseen, but felt, presence watching them in so haunting a location.

St. Elijah's Church, an Eastern Orthodox Christian church, also stands inside the Zone of Alienation. The church's radiation levels are well below the level across the zone, and parishioners still gather covertly in worship. Locals speak of a miracle, and the church has become somewhat of a pilgrimage site over the years. When Theseans investigated the church, they found nothing: neither Contagion, nor breach. Ace was part of a later team visiting the church, and she did not report anything special. A third team counted an Unchained among its rank, however, who was repelled by a burning apparition blocking the church doors. The Unchained believes the church represents something it calls "Infrastructure," though he wasn't able to determine anything else. Like all other unproven information, the Argonauts made a note of it.

The Theseans believe the cure to Contagion may lie in Chernobyl. Much like the mundane animals evolving to thrive in the Zone of Alienation, they believe the breach holds a similar evolutionary answer to Contagion. The breach becoming more hostile with every passing year, they say, is a sign they're getting close — the Contagion is trying to ward them off. Other Sworn are, to put it mildly, a little concerned by this assumption. What about the Elephant's Foot, they counter. What if it's not the cure, but Contagion itself which is mutating in Chernobyl to become ever more potent. So far, whatever Ace did to quarantine Contagion as it poured forth from the reactor has held. What if it

cannot hold this new strain, though? The concerns of the other Sworn, however, are not enough to challenge the Argonauts' dominion over Chernobyl — not for the moment, at least. For now, the intrepid exploration of the Zone of Alienation continues.

The God-Machine is Sick

Contagion is on the rise. Outbreaks have increased in frequency since the turn of the century, with twelve recorded outbreaks since. The Sworn noticed this increase and are desperate to figure out its cause so they can stop the tide. Their own incomplete, often contradictory, comprehension of what Contagion *is* slows them down, though. Dealing with something as vast and alien as the God-Machine and its illness is hard enough without Sworn divided on whether Contagion is a form of evolution or a message. Perhaps, too, the Sworn have become distracted — a Kindred of the Cryptocracy is more interested in using the faction to uphold the Invictus, while the Jeremiad Crone lost herself in apocalyptic navel-gazing. Certainly, there's no shortage of Sworn pointing fingers, blaming each other for being too lax in locating and stopping the spread of Contagion. Between bouts of inter-factional fighting though, they have formulated a few theories on the increase of Contagion. Or, to be fair, they have a *lot* of theories, but some hold up better against scrutiny and gain more traction than others.

Convergence

The world has many iterations. In one, the Berlin Wall never came down and the Cold War blossomed into World War III. In another, the United States elected its first woman president in 2016. A third saw the Roman Empire continue into the modern era. The God-Machine exists in all these worlds, and as ever, it connects to itself across space, time, and dimensions. Only one of them can rise triumphant though, asserting its reality over all others: the God-Machine is at war with itself. This war may not be the cause of Contagion (though some Sworn believe it is, in fact, a direct symptom), but it certainly makes it worse. Every time realities clash and converge, infinite universes coalescing into one, Contagion flares. The Sworn don't know (and indeed, have no way of finding out) if this is true in all realities, if Contagion is an expression of the convergence process, or if it means *this* God-Machine is losing the battle for reality. All they can do is soothe the ever-increasing outbreaks and hope it's enough.

Destruction of Time

Time is truth. It holds power. When it aligns just right, mages can do great things with it. No one knows this better than the Tick Tock Men who seek to destroy it. The Cult of the Doomsday Clock deliberately fueled apocalyptic panic amongst Sleepers as Y2K approached to create a cover for their own activities. Then, as the clock turned from midnight 1999 to the first second of 2000 CE, they used that briefest moment of in-between as Yantra to focus a ritual to destroy time itself. The Sworn know this happened because the Mysterium found the dead Tick Tock Men after the fact, their remains aged to bleached bones, and eventually the tale filtered down to the Sworn. What they do not know is whether the botched ritual had any effect. Mages within the Sworn admit it's theoretically possible that time was destroyed and the increase of Contagion is a symptom of linear creation consuming itself, but they don't consider it terribly likely. Rather, they think the ritual connected to the Time Before, when the God-Machine either wasn't itself or didn't exist at all, and summoned forth an entity antithetic to the God-Machine's hegemony. This being's presence in reality weakens the God-Machine, allowing Contagion to spread.

God is Dead

The God-Machine is dead. Maybe Contagion killed it (or will kill it in the future, as the God-Machine is retrocausal to itself). Maybe it didn't survive conflict with another cosmic entity, if any exist powerful enough to pose a threat to it. Or maybe mankind blew the world to hell, damaging Infrastructure so badly that the God-Machine itself was beyond repair. Unfortunately, for a being as vast and omnipotent as the God-Machine, it can take some time for body and soul to realize they're dead. This theory sees some traction amongst the Sworn Bound, who argue that both Contagion and

the increase of outbreaks are the manifestation of the God-Machine coming to grips with its death and devouring itself. These Bound are dedicated to ensure a safe and, above all, permanent passage for the God-Machine, lest it somehow rises as a Geist (or worse, becomes a new Underworld unto itself). They tentatively venture that reality will still stand when the God-Machine's journey into death is complete, though it will probably get bumpy — in fact, judging by the rise of Contagion, it already has.

Input > Output

It's not the omnipresent, unknowable entity the Unchained name the "God-Machine" that's sick, but reality separate from it. In this theory, the God-Machine guards the laws and boundaries of physical reality, ensuring that gravity works downwards and fire burns upwards. Contagion breaks those laws, and the constant effort of having to shore up reality has become taxing even for the God-Machine. Which is not to say it has tired — the God-Machine *never* tires — but rather that it has re-calculated the cost of maintaining this reality against programming a new one, taking into account that resources spent battling Contagion cannot be used for other purposes (such as bringing the Unchained back in line). Essentially, reality is a write-off, with the God-Machine no longer having any interest in defending it. When Contagion has run its course, as all diseases eventually must, the God-Machine will survey the damage and simply begin anew. If humanity no longer exists by then, that is within the margin of acceptable losses.

Point Zero Approaches

The God-Machine has achieved singularity, connecting to itself across space and time. This is a major source of its power: the God-Machine cannot be defeated, because so long as it survives in any time, it does in all times. That also means, however, that if it gets sick at any time, it retrocausally becomes sick in all times — in fact, it doesn't just become sick, but rather *has always been sick*. According to this theory, the first outbreak need not be the first — Contagion might first strike in the future and, thus, render the God-Machine sick in *all* times of its existence. Admittedly, the Sworn who hold to this theory have no real explanation for why the God-Machine's sickness spread across time, rather than its health. Some argue that it actually *has*: the God-Machine has split itself in two entities, inhabiting two connected but distinct realities, one always sick and the other always healthy. Theorizing on the past, however, is not nearly as important as acting in the present, for the increases in Contagion signal the coming of the first outbreak. The God-Machine might be retrocausal, but the Sworn (excepting perhaps the Arisen) are linear beings. They get one chance to stop Contagion from ever happening, curing the God-Machine before it ever gets sick, and they intend to be ready.

Symptoms of Stress

Reality is supposed to be nice. Not necessarily exalting or wonderful, but just *nice*. It keeps people in their designated places, working their average jobs, and marrying in their circles. The purpose of reality is to lull people to sleep, just enough so they remain productive and do not make waves. This ensures maximum growth, which is good for everyone — or at least, it's good for the God-Machine, and that's really all that matters. It's troublesome, then, when adherents of the Silver Ladder go around encouraging people to *awaken*, or when Uratha get caught on camera fighting a spirit. Reality works hard to assert itself and keep the hidden *hidden*. Outbreaks of Contagion happen when reality is stressed, when it has problems maintaining the status quo. The rise of modern technology, cell phone cameras, and omnipresent surveillance adds volumes to that stress. Some Lost among the Sworn believe it's more than just stress, though. They say the True Fae, who suffer as cameras everywhere make it so much harder to snatch and replace people, are actively spreading Contagion as a way to set humanity back to a less advanced age.

The Mortal Equation

The Contagion is an ever-mutating disease, one that strikes on multiple levels. It is an infection that grows in the wounds of reality every time the gods and monsters of the world work their wonders

upon it. While Contagion is particularly virulent in the presence of the supernatural, it is by no means dormant among humanity. Like any good disease, it is always changing, seeking new ways to propagate itself.

The Cuckoo

For Eunju, it began with a headache, the pushing press of a migraine while running for her train. The yellow pulse of a neon sign flooded her vision, pushing her eyes up and into the back of her head. She stumbled into an alleyway, resting a hand on the cold brickwork and breathing slowly. The smell caught her suddenly, like year-old offal defrosting in the sink, the sour mix of flesh and filth, hunger and nausea. She quivered, lurching her head forward to avoid emptying her stomach onto her own feet. She heaved out the last few fragments and spat to clear her mouth. She closed her eyes and waited for the dizzy spell to pass. The neon light softened to a cool blue and she returned home to sleep.

That night, she dreamed of a spider with two full, fleshy tongues instead of fangs. It licked her neck and flicked its forelimbs across her chest, tapping out a series of strokes and taps on her collarbone. She stared into its eight pale grey eyes and shared a deep, deep kiss with it.

She awoke in a fever, her stale mouth riddled with sores, her teeth cracked. She spent the day in the dark, clicking through the photos on her social media accounts, muttering the names of her tagged friends and relatives in a slow, sibilant whisper. She ignored the ringing of her phone and the knocking on her apartment door, just as she ignored the reports on the local news of the woman found dead near the train station.

After a few days alone, Eunju had eaten all of the food in the house, including the peeling wallpaper and the foam in her sofa cushion. She couldn't work out how to turn the taps in her bathroom, so she settled on drinking water from the toilet basin. Every bite and every sip made her gums bleed and her teeth loosen, but that wasn't important, she didn't need them anymore. When she called her parents to ask them to visit, she muttered her name to them, over and over again, and when they screamed at her and hung up, she knew something bad had happened to them. She broke into their house that same night and found monsters living under their roof — strange pink creatures missing most of their eyes and legs. She snapped their bones, which snaked under their skin rather than over it, feasted on their marrow, and dragged their crying torsos back to her nest in the alleyway.

The Wrong Part

The club was built across two conjoined buildings and over three levels, with corridors and stairwells snaking around and between them. Swaying light bounced off black paint, pushing bodies that writhed and smirked into view.

Danny ignored the flowing crowd, turning left and left again, spiraling upwards. He counted the steps as he crossed the south landing, cursing at himself when the tally reached twelve.

He circled again, down and across, up and back, this time waiting for the corridor to empty before making the ascent again. He counted, eyes closed, fingers brushing lightly on the handrail. In his other hand he fumbled with his phone, curling his fingers around it and thumbing at the familiar buttons for luck. His heartbeat picked up at the twelve count. This time, when he found that extra, thirteenth step, his breathing quickened. He opened his eyes.

The room was derelict, filled with rubble from the walls and ceiling that had collapsed and given way to the landscape of the city.

The Other city.

The high street trailed away to the right, letting up a veil of smoke masking the burning bodies, some dead and some wailing, that covered the ground. In the haze, loping, obscene creatures with long legs and short arms pulled at chains, urging the burning and dying toward the bay.

To Danny's left, he heard the clamor of steel on steel. The old theatre grounds echoed with a deep chord of notes, a myriad of low gurgles stretched out in song. The theatre building was gone, replaced with a large, throbbing dome that rippled like a flower in bloom, or an egg sack primed to burst.

Further on, the university still stood tall. Too tall. It rose upwards on gothic battlements covered in barred windows and arched statuary. Danny tried to count the stories but grew dizzy when they totaled more than sixty.

He raised his phone, noting that, once again, the numbers and letter on the touchscreen had changed to overlapping angular runes. He worked the controls for the camera from memory, zooming in on the fortress structure. As the statues came into focus, he saw they were impaled bodies, speared through the back of the head by stone spines, twitching in perfect unison. Feet never leaving the top step, he turned slowly toward the river, where he expected the stadium to be. And what he saw there... what he saw...

Danny dropped his phone, his foot slipping onto the ravaged stone of the nightclub roof. Danny looked down. His boots were worn, frayed at the front, revealing blackened and broken toes. He ached and didn't know why. The chorus from the pulsing theatre, indistinct before, rose in volume, sounding out clearly on the air:

THE DRAGON REJOICES

THE DRAGON REJOICES IN THE WAKING OF THE GIANT

THE WORLD REJOICES IN THE BODY OF TEXT

Danny choked, trying to disregard the pain in his body, the words on the wind. He closed his eyes, opened them, and the Other world remained. He tried again, and again. A sound came from his lips, the mewl of a wounded animal.

He closed his eyes, reaching fingers out to the worn handrail. He took a slow step backwards and down the stairs, then another. He counted, straining his ears for the music of the club, the chatter of bar patrons, anything other than the song from the city.

He counted, hands sweaty and loose on the handrail, as he descended the thirteenth step. His ankle shook as he shifted his leg, praying for that twelfth step.

Please.... Please....

The Divide

Karin's cat, Mao, had been missing for over a week, his food bowl untouched and his basket cold. Karin had spent that time scouring the streets, posting flyers, and knocking on doors, but all she had gained for it was a collection of prank phone calls and an envelope filled with human hair.

On the ninth day she heard mewling, the strained cry of a cat in the walls of her old house. Karin followed the sound, calling her pet's name as she moved from room to room. At the kitchen window, she saw a small child, a girl no older than eleven, wearing a cat mask and tapping at the window. Karin, close to swearing, turned off the light and left the room.

The mewling stopped, but the tapping continued, the rhythmic note on glass. Returning to the kitchen to make herself a coffee, Karin did not see anyone there. Still, the sound continued, but now it was a gentle percussion on wood, on the floorboards upstairs.

Karin drew a kitchen knife and ascended the stairs, tracing the sound to the bathroom. In the darkness of the room, for the briefest of moments, she saw the firefly glow of two cats' eyes staring back at her. Turning on the light, all Karin saw was her own reflection in the bathroom mirror, a reflection that wasn't holding a knife.

Karin looked down at her hand, and at the hand of her reflection, the image in the mirror doing likewise. Silence, and near-perfect symmetry, Karin wondered if she was dreaming, or dizzy from stress and hunger.

That's when she saw it, the flick of a tail behind the reflection in the mirror.

Karin called out to Mao and put a hand to the glass. The reflection followed suit, a perfect counterpart that blocked her passage. Karin tried, again and again, but each time the image in the mirror interposed itself. The reflection smiled, a touch too widely, and from behind it, Mao called out.

Karin, keeping her eyes locked on the reflection, closed the bathroom door behind her and reached a hand up for the light-switch. Gripping the knife in her hand tightly, she turned off the light. For a moment all was dark, and quiet. Karin waited for the slightest sound, heard the creak of the reflection shifting its weight, and drove the knife forward.

Pandemonium

Bharanee had given up on life. His wife and daughter were dead, murdered in a riot that had erupted into mindless, bloody revolt two years earlier. He'd given up on his students, given up on his career, and barely had the wherewithal to pay his own bills each month. He lacked the strength to hold his own body together, and he could feel it peeling away from him in layers, the skin sagging over his shrinking frame, the muscle detaching from bone.

One morning, as he walked the roadside along the river, he couldn't help but stare down at the dead fish bobbing on the oil-filmed surface, casualties from the factory run-off further into town. Their milky, lifeless gaze met his, and in that moment, he envied them.

Bharanee took off his shirt, his pants, his filthy mismatched socks, and he flung his wedding ring into the street. The bustling traffic responded to the naked man by the river with a cacophony of jeers and car horns, and a crowd assembled. They watched, amused at first, as Bharanee took his leather belt into his hand and began lashing himself around the back and thighs, bringing up a bouquet of red welts and cuts around the bruises and bedsores he had been collecting over the previous months. Refusing to speak, refusing to call out in pain, he struck himself hard, the metal of his belt-buckle tearing away a jagged corner of skin. The onlookers screamed, at first in horror, begging him to stop, but the more he bled, the more their pleas turned to encouragement. As his flaying progressed, stripping away all semblance of identity, his pulverized flesh sloughing away his face and gender, he raised his bloodied hands in triumph and the crowd bayed in celebration.

Bharanee dropped the belt and turned towards the river. He ran, powered by broken muscles, flinging himself into the toxic waters. The gathering crowd, jubilant in song, followed him in one by one. The river ran red for a time, before filling so completely with the bloated, drowned corpses of Bharanee's congregation that it could not run at all.

Two years after that, Bharanee's cousin burned his own house to the ground, prompting his neighbors into a spree of pyromania. Two years after that, his cousin's best friend murdered her child, and the child's schoolmates starved themselves to death. Two years after that...

The Chemo Required

Prevention

The **Cryptocracy** approach every problem, and every solution, from the top down. When a person is Contagious, they look to the health of the street. When a street is Contagious, they study the city. When a city is Contagious, they study the country. It is people, en masse, that support and tear down the fabric of reality, and so the goal of the Cryptocrats is not to tip the scales one grain of sand at a time, but to move the masses in big handfuls. Coordination is key. The Cryptocracy are a society of leaders, each with their own detailed operations in play, and there is a perpetual balancing act of trust and mistrust between members to ensure that they exchange enough information to

avoid accidental interference in another Committee's territory without opening themselves to betrayal. Representatives from the different bureaus keep regular contact via the Caliber network, giving detailed reports that focus on their results, rather than their methods. There is a tendency towards grandstanding and one-upmanship between the Cryptocrats, colloquially called tyrants by their colleagues. They discuss societal shifts with bureaucratic fervor; they examine crime rates, voting, and vaccination figures, literacy and employment rates, and debate the relative value of each metric at length. All these figures help to ingratiate the committee members to each other, and demonstrate their potential value as allies in additional projects. In each report, the final figure given, and the only metrics the eldest of the Sworn have interest in, is the number, and size, of Contagion outbreaks.

The Cryptocracy approach this problem preemptively. Arguing that prevention is better than cure, they strive to support projects that keep large population centers stable, in order to prevent the conditions that would allow the Contagion to flourish. Having been heavily influenced by philosophies introduced by their vampiric allies within the Invictus and the Carthian Movement, the Cryptocracy base their actions on the premise that a strong mandate can impose itself on reality, that consensus in society creates a stable mass-consciousness, and that enough disruptions can damage the communal zeitgeist enough to create thin points in reality where Contagion can break through. Their agents identify and ally with strong, forward-thinking figures (in the mortal and supernatural world alike). They trade influence and resources for the opportunity to steer public works and promote political regimes with a capacity to endure and stabilize a region. They promote industry and utility, linking the world through satellites and the internet. The demons among them find their new roles darkly amusing, as they strive to support and reinforce the Infrastructure of the God-Machine in ways more innovative and effective than they ever would have imagined before their fall.

Sometimes prevention isn't enough. When the infection requires lancing, the Cryptocracy prioritize finesse. In the case of small, isolated outbreaks, operatives work quickly to eliminate potential carriers, and to remove all knowledge of Contagion-related events from the records and memories of the affected populace. Seeing Contagion as a disease of the mind, agents are prepared, where necessary, to use a variety of conditioning techniques to swiftly return anyone near an outbreak to a healthy baseline. In the case of large outbreaks though, such gentle care is not possible, and that is when the Cryptocracy demonstrate ruthless efficiency. A territory beyond their capability to cure goes into quarantine, as borders are set up around cities and warzones to limit the spread of Contagion. In eras past, the Cryptocracy relied on military assaults and cleansing fire to scourge the infected populace, but in modern times, with access to rebel militia, incendiary explosives, and chemical weapons, their efficiency improves. The infected region is eradicated, with witnesses detained and thoroughly "rehabilitated" before their release. In times of peace, the Cryptocrats' weapons are words and wealth, but in times of war, they are not above using iron and fire to end a conflict.

Inoculation is a dangerous concept to explore for a society that treats entire nations as individual patients. In rare cases (though for some, more often than they care to admit), the Cryptocracy has been known to take quarantine action in anticipation of a Contagion, rather than in response to it, isolating a tumultuous region in order to plant their own pawns in authority. In peacetime, the Cryptocracy explore ambitious plans to create stable utopia. When these plans backfire, they do so drastically, requiring the Sworn and their operatives to take a forceful hand to re-stabilize the region. It is a game of trial and error, but the potential prize, that of a model for perfect governance, is tempting.

Quarantine

The **Machiavelli Gambit** employ similar methods and share more with the Cryptocracy than either faction cares to admit. The monarchs of the Machiavelli strive toward a different, but equally necessary outcome: that of total subservience. Stability without direction breeds lethargy, which

invites Contagion. To prevent this, the people must be kept busy and servile. The Machiavelli favor totalitarian control and a hungry, eager workforce over a sated one. Seeing their rivals as weak, they are quick to escalate conflict in areas of social unrest, benefiting from third party advantage as their enemies, Sworn and Contagious, exhaust themselves slaughtering each other. In areas under their control, they bring disobedience swiftly and brutally to heel before Contagion has a chance to take root. Their overt stance is enforced with frightening subtlety, the prick of a needle in the beating heart of their foes. Their influence exists within many of the secret societies of the world, Sworn and civilian alike. Some of the most powerful figures among the Machiavelli are unaware of the masters whom they serve, and that suits the monarchs perfectly.

When approaching an actual outbreak, they are more patient and calculating than many of their contemporaries. The Machiavelli take great pains to assess the potential of Contagious assets, and employ strike teams equipped and trained to contain and transport potential specimens for future use, often to be set upon the enemies of the monarchs in an occult form of germ-warfare. Casualties are high in these containment squads, but the Machiavelli see this as an acceptable demonstration of their superiority.

Therapy

The **Jeremiad** are a varied lot, a fact they take pride in before their peers but complain about relentlessly to each other behind closed doors. Their greatest strength and greatest hardship is their tremendous unity of purpose, a purpose that transcends the barriers of faith and personal creed permeating their fractured world.

This rarely translates into unity of practice — the variety of faiths and philosophies that intersect within the Jeremiad, and the deeply personal relationship many creatures have with the concept of a divine force, can lead to frequent and intense disagreement. Contagion is a punishment from the divine, but the consensus on what the divine is remains shaky. With this in mind, a sect's activities are often helmed by a single senior member, who selects a team with similar philosophical leanings. If the source of the Contagion is known, they recruit a specialist with a deep body of knowledge about the philosophies of those infected, including scholars on esoteric matters such as the Promethean pilgrimage or the descent of demons. The sect leader must be an ambassador to the infected and between the members of their own sect.

At times of peace, they can appear intractable, needlessly dogmatic, and slow to adapt, but their diligence has been rewarded with an extensive library on what they perceive to be the Great Adversary. Their knowledge, often slanted by their own cultural and moral preconceptions, is still a tremendous asset, and one which they share willingly, even among the ranks of other Sworn societies. To the Jeremiad, their guidance is a solemn duty, their willingness to make a path for others to follow a true testament to their righteousness.

In times of crisis, they are an indisputable beacon held steadfastly against the darkness. They are not subtle, but their unflinching and honest stance in the face of a greater evil has been the rallying point behind which many other Sworn factions have united. Deception and misdirection have little sway over the Jeremiad. When faced with certain corruption, they do not wage war; they crusade, bringing every weapon they have to bear. Where they strive hardest, and risk the most, is through redemption as remedy — the possibility of curing Contagion and achieving the rarest victory of all: that of salvation. The oldest among their order place themselves in tremendous danger to shepherd and treat those infected by the Contagion, even knowing that the risks frequently outweigh the rewards.

Biopsy

The **Crucible Initiative** have no time for such clemency. These False view kindness as a compromise, one that they cannot afford when balanced against the survival of reality itself. The world is sick, rife with cancer. Illness cannot be parlayed, cannot be prayed away. The priority must

be to carve the cancer out. The Crucible take no risks, offers no quarter, and suffers not the Contagious to live.

This approach should not be mistaken for reckless abandon. When a branch of the Crucible Initiative investigates a problem, they are well aware of the greater harm of blatant inhuman wrath. That is part of what they wish to avoid, after all. Their investigations are exacting. They might not trawl a city for clues, but they will tie up an individual and break them in a dozen ways to get their honest testimony. When they find their target, their mandate favors absolute elimination. When a person is Contagious, they must be killed and their body reduced to ash. When a people are Contagious, their homes must be cordoned off, with no survivors given the opportunity to flee the purge. When an idea is Contagious, the Crucible Initiative eradicate the very concept, fueling social reforms and toppling governments. The trifling pleas of a lone, diseased soul mean nothing to them. They are certainly not above smashing Infrastructure to achieve their aims. The God-Machine may be the mind of reality made manifest, but the brain is as subject to sickness as any other part of the body.

The Crucible Initiative have a poor relationship with many of the Sworn and False alike. Fighting Contagion means risking infection, and while every fellowship in this war claims to be resistant to the Great Plague, not every disease can be resisted. The fires of the Crucible stand ready to cleanse their foes, their friends, and even themselves.

Investigation

Contagion is not a plaything. At least that is the idea, but the curious souls sworn to the **Rosetta Society** are rarely without entertainment. Their chapters exist on every continent, exploring the most isolated of sites. They map out lost cities, recreate the scripture of the ancients, and hold the relics of ages past up to the light of day. They unearth lost tombs and greet the most ancient of slumbering beings with a hurried “hello” and a series of insistent questions.

Through all this, they look for hints at a greater pattern, the how, when, where and why of each outbreak. They perceive the world they live in and the one that exists on the other side of each outbreak, as two halves of something bigger. Like the human brain, made up of two functioning halves, two computers speaking across a frail mesh of fibers, they see these outbreaks as the message fragments glimpsed between two great entities. The collateral damage of each outbreak is evidence of a diseased brain, but the outbreak itself is the Message in progress. When an outbreak manifests, chapters of the Rosetta pursue it like storm-chasers. They observe Contagion in its earliest stages, noting that which is new, that which is repeated, and that which they predict will happen. A chapter forced out of their favored roles as military intelligence and into direct conflict can be dangerously unpredictable, employing esoteric powers in ever more novel ways.

Their fascination with the Message is a double-edged sword. The Rosetta have a dizzying well of knowledge, having courted lore from some of the oldest places and entities to have existed. The ancients consider them allies, but would balk at the prospect of joining them, as many immortals consider their methods tantamount to suicide. Their lower ranks are easily infiltrated, as their work carries great risk and invites collaboration, but their highest echelons are notoriously withdrawn.

Many consider the Rosetta to be False, or at least led by such creatures. Contagion takes many forms, and the corrupting power of knowledge is older than the written word of Revelation itself. The Rosetta adore the Contagion in a way many others would consider madness.

Inoculation

The **Ship of Theseus** respects the Rosetta Society for asking the right questions, but posit a very different answer. The Rosetta see a message beyond their understanding, and try to decode it. The Theseans, however, believe the true path is not to decode the message, but to know its consequences. Contagion is a mutation, a sudden shift in the form and function of reality. To deny this mutation is to deny change and the evolution of the universe. The agoras of the Ship of Theseus

have spent lifetimes debating the purpose of Contagion, and have come to the conclusion that the only purpose they will find is the one that they create for themselves.

Frustrated by the slow methodology of their compatriots, the Ship of Theseus feels that when Contagion strikes, the only way to adapt to reality changes is to live them. Survival of the fittest, the premise on which all life flourishes, demands the potential to change and adapt, and the Ship tests this potential at every opportunity. When the possibility of Contagion rises, Theseans do not crush it. They feed it, agitate it, force it to grow and bear witness to what it can become. They pit the Contagion and the God-Machine against each other, watching how both forces respond. They tempt the Contagion towards Infrastructure, not to see it destroyed, but to see it inoculated. They destroy the Contagion when they must, but they learn from every encounter. Parts of the herd become sick and die along the way, but that is part of the survival process. Only by identifying the first to fall can you learn from their failures. A people doomed to die should die, and an idea doomed to die should die. The Ship of Theseus see themselves not as the cure, but as another disease vying for the same host body. Only by finding the mutations that will let them avoid, kill, or coexist with Contagion will they survive.

The working ethos of the Theseans is divided starkly, based on the personal aspirations of each member. Many members, particularly those new to the cause, are dilettantes moving quickly from one idea to the next, allowing trial and error to be their guide. The lack of uniformity in how Contagion expresses itself instills in them a blasé attitude, a constant calculation of high risk and high reward as they hone themselves. No two missions are the same when these Theseans are involved, and while their insight into the Contagion has been a tremendous asset to the Sworn, they can rarely be trusted to solve a problem the same way twice. Those that learn from these harsh lessons, or those that have a personal apotheosis in mind, walk a warier path. They strive towards a specific transformation, whether that be known as the Coils, the Great Work, or something else. This transhumanist subset of the Ship of Theseus is far more insular, and less likely to risk needless exposure to Contagion.

Culling

Zero Hour are pragmatists, first and foremost. The Contagion is the only enemy of consequence, a world-ending event. Reality is at war, and selfish conceits such as the Pilgrimage and the Masquerade are mere obstacles in fighting that war. The posturing of the Cryptocracy, the postulating of the Rosetta Society, it's all a waste of time. Attempting to redraw the battle lines into something that can be prevented or predicted is like building a wall around the chicken hutch when the birds have already been eaten. The wolf is at the door, now, and someone needs to kill it.

The units of Zero Hour have a clear objective: defeat of the Contagion. Every action they take is the shortest possible path to that end. They are not afraid to get their hands dirty, and they have no time to waste worrying about collateral damage. The divide between them and their enemy is not one of morality or of principle; it is survival. If Zero Hour infiltrates a group that serves the Contagion, they do so willingly. If they can corral a pack of Contagious beasts today and sic 'em on tomorrow's enemy, all the better. If their enemy hides in plain sight surrounded by civilian shields... better to win than to lose with dignity.

Their actions earn the ire of many of the other Sworn, who approach removal of the Contagion with scalpel-like precision. Their fellow Sworn believe that the overt and direct approach of Zero Hour, while effective, risks aggravating even the smallest incident of Contagion, real or imaginary, into a full-blown epidemic. "A scar doesn't heal if you keep picking at it" is a common warning. Despite this, they have managed to leverage a strong position among the other Sworn. Their ready access to weaponry and personnel makes them a vital ally when the diagnoses, preventions, and cures of the other Sworn have failed. Uninterested in the long-term agendas or the abstract philosophies of their compatriots, they show a remarkable willingness to work with others, even the False. A skilled unit leader learns to negotiate these services, bartering for resources and equipment

for future campaigns. When their allies accept the cull is necessary, they call on Zero Hour to hold the line.

Post-Mortem

It is possible for all these efforts to fail. Investigations yield the wrong answers, experimentation exacerbates the problem, and every good fight gets bitterly lost. Those damaged enough by constant defeat (or objective enough to know that victory is impossible) find themselves drawn to the False of **Naglfar's Army**. The self-appointed antediluvians of the new world know an end is coming, and that it has been foretold for millennia. They do not seek to stop the storm, but to weather it as best they can. They build bunkers under cities, create safe stores of food and resources, and arm themselves, not for the final battle, but for the hell-on-earth that will follow.

Their acolytes seek power, but not in the abstract forms favored by the Cryptocrats or the Machiavelli. The only strength that matters is what you can bring to bear in that instant. An army you must summon is of limited use, but the power to command the forces of another represents a real advantage. They seek evolutionary perfection, but not the adaptability of the Ship of Theseus. They believe that they know what the end of the world will look like. Their path to survival isn't a meek transition from one niche to another; it is a straight line, from weak to strong.

Their philosophy is not what limits their diplomatic ties to the Sworn and the False. What keeps them apart from others is their lack of regard for the world as it is now. For others, the masquerade is a limit that must sometimes be ignored, but for the antediluvians, it was never a barrier in the first place. They fight and feed with wanton abandon. They celebrate each night like it is the last night on earth, because soon it will be. Naglfar's Army courts some of the most ancient and powerful of allies, and is always happy to recruit more. They encourage their comrades to surrender to their base desires, to take the short and easy path at every turn. They hold grand celebrations, inviting monsters from all walks of life to participate, knowing that only those that surrender their petty morals will have the fortitude to survive in the world to come. Better to live as a skull-smashing prince of the apocalypse than not to live at all.

Testimonies

[BELOW: EMAIL]

From: msbright@dnet54.com

To: gardianne@mkgeneral.co.uk

Cc: alexa@historiczitterd.org

Subject: The Contagion File

Attachments: canaan.pdf, catalhoyuk_accounting.pdf, YonaguniOrigins.doc, SSStalwart.pdf, Seattle_12B6.doc, ACE.html, Queenletter.pdf, TheStrangeArchive.doc, Kinshasa.html, descended.pdf

Here are the documents we discussed. It's everything we have on Contagion, and it's not much. Truthfully, it's a pathetic amount if you consider how long we've been at this. But we will make do.

I can testify to the authenticity of the documents, but not to their veracity or relevance. The local semiotics have been gathering everything that seemed even remotely related. I hope you find what you're looking for.

On a personal note, I'll be going dark for a while. I've included Alexa, one of the semiotics, in the Cc. She can help if you need anything else.

Regards,

B.

[BELOW: OLD PARCHMENT. LEGIBLE HANDWRITING.]

I came across a peculiar sight on the road to Canaan.
A man with flowers for eyes and bark for bones.
He looked at me, eyes unfolding the most radiant cyanide blue.
He spoke to me with a tongue made of leaves.
First he cursed me.
Then he begged me.
He was the prophet of an uncaring God, even worse than a cruel God.
His words brought death, he said.
His God compelled him to pass the words to me, he said.
I would bring death in Its name, he said.
No, I replied.
I cannot serve your God, I replied.
I serve another, I replied.
At that he wept.
Seeds of radiant joy cascaded down his cheeks.
I killed the prophet.
I tossed his body to the Underworld for my God to devour.
His soul nourished my God, and this was good.
I will find the uncaring God, kill It, and toss Its bones to my God.
Its power will nourish my God, and this will be good.

[BELOW: YELLOW STATIONARY PAPER. LEGIBLE HANDWRITING]

THE CATALHÖYÜK ACCOUNTING

[Seen and transcribed by Latisha McNeall, Sworn of the Jeremiad]

I know you. I see you in the wall. I hear you under the floor.
You like to hide. You like to keep us ignorant.
I know you're here.
You are no city. You are a maze. You are a trap. Doors lead to more doors. Rooms to more rooms.
You bid us bury the dead, pack them tight under the earth, so even they have no escape. Only the sky remains open, that sliver of blue and white which you have not yet conquered. But, oh, you will. We both know you're hard at work.
I curse you
You are no god. You are a false idol. A system of murder in which we work and die, and work and die, all for your greater glory. You feast while we work fingers to the bone. You laugh at our misery. You grow fat on our pain. Only your necessity of us keeps us alive. Only the danger of falling inert and being trapped inside yourself if we do not serve. You have not transcended us yet. But, oh, you will. We both know you're hard at work.
I curse you

You command no angels. You hack off bits and pieces of yourself off to lie to us. You are misdirection. You are a lock with no key. You think you would fool me? You think I do not hear your heralds coming? I, who can see through your walls and your maze and your illusions. Not that I can stop your false messengers. You are almighty. You cannot be harmed. But, oh, one day you will. We both know I've been hard at work.

I CURSE YOU

[BELOW: PRINT-OUT ON WHITE PAPER, PAPER HAS FOLDING CREASES]

A Dissertation on the Origins of Yonaguni

Mention Yonaguni in mortal academia, and you receive nothing but polite stares from your audience. One of them will inevitably approach after your presentation and, in a whispered voice, share her own theory on Yonaguni. More often than not, aliens will be involved. Erich von Däniken might be quoted. Such is the nature of euro-centrism that white people place more credibility in visitors from outer space than in Egyptians building the sphinx or the Inca's Machu Picchu without aid. Best then not to discuss Yonaguni with mortals at all. Fortunately, none of you are mortal.

[Pause for laughter]

The fact is the Yonaguni pyramid is not a natural phenomenon. It is manmade, although it did not sink into the sea — it was translocated. I will explain and prove my theory in a moment, but first we must return to the beginning: the Jōmon people in what is now Japan.

The Jōmon period lasted from 14.000 to 4.000 BCE and much of it remains shrouded in mystery. Generally, we assume theirs to be a hunter-gatherer culture. To put this into perspective, however: their culture lasted *ten thousand years*. The period between the building of the Great Pyramid of Giza and our present day is half that. To believe we know all there is to about the Jōmon based on shards of pottery is impossible hubris. So rather than take anything for granted, my assistant Haru and I took a closer look.

[Conspiratorial wink, pause for effect]

Haru is providing you now with handouts of our experiences, and as you can see, the Jōmon developed forward, then backward in linear time. Their civilization reached the same heights as ours did in the time we've been allotted, and indeed went further in some aspects. The Jōmon merged technological advances with the supernal to create a techno-magic which we have not re-invented yet. They built their capital on the ranges of Mount Kita, visiting other cities for trade in machine-powered zeppelins. Theirs appears to have been a socially diverse and open civilization, with a monotheistic religion worshipping a technological deity. Had they continued as they did, we'd be speaking Jōmon rather than English now.

The end came around 10.000 BCE when an ill fate befell the Jōmon. Time began to reverse backwards for them. Technology was un-invented, magical advances lost. Their last act was the translocation of their capital city, point zero for the temporal distortion, to the waters offshore the southernmost of the Ryukyu Islands: Yonaguni. Here, underwater, the city regressed until it resembled nothing but weathered stone. However, I believe this act of containment saved the rest of the Jōmon people from reverting further back to prehistoric ages.

[Start slide presentation]

[BELOW: WEATHERED, CRUMPLED PAPER. HANDWRITING]

From the journal of Doctor Melanie Hazard, Kaigon of London, 1902 CE

Journal found and retrieved on site. No trace of the Kaigon, her expedition, or the creature.

NIGHT 1

We arrived at our destination after an uneventful journey. The crew was competent, the beasts peaceful, and the herd nourishing. I would say the stars favour us, but really it was excellent planning. Perhaps when we return to London, I shall recommend Nicolai for advancement. We'll see how he continues to impress me.

I must say though, none of the mortals' descriptions could do this place justice. It is not just empty, it is *desolate*. This is what God must have looked like, I think, before mortals poked and prodded him to death with their science. It is quite beautiful and awe-inspiring.

NIGHT 2

The first day, or lack thereof, was a little disorienting. I instructed Nicolai to rest, rise, and feed as he would in London, using a watch to keep the time. I myself remained awake and have not felt the pangs of hunger yet. Provided we both do not *exert* ourselves, it shall be interesting to see how these different regimes affect our physiology. But that is not why we are here. I have spent my "day" in fruitful research and believe I have a location on a Nest. Nicolai is preparing the crew and assets for the journey now.

NIGHT 3

White, white, nothing but white. No changes yet. I still have needed neither sleep or nor sustenance.

NIGHT 4

We have arrived at a tunnel leading underground, which I believe is the entrance to the nest. This is unfortunate, as not all the beasts are adapted to subterranean domains. Nicolai is already sorting them, on his own initiative. I shall leave him and the remaining beasts on the surface. It's quite unfortunate that he cannot travel with me. I do prefer him in my sights, but the beasts have been spooked ever since we neared the tunnels. Without proper supervision, they might stampede.

Continued: The tunnel is deeper than I thought. We are currently resting in an underground chamber with several exits. I have fed on one of the herd for the first time since our arrival.

NIGHT 5

The tunnel system is vast. I daresay it compares to the Underground. It's geometric in shape too, and the tunnel walls are smooth. I believe this is not a natural formation, but it is too early to tell. Underground rivers, now dried or frozen, remain a possibility. I'm having problems locating the Nest. We seem to be going around, circling a distant center.

NIGHT 6

I am convinced now the tunnels are laid out in a geometric pattern, with the Nest at its centre. This is both heartening (I know what lies at the end) and worrying (the journey seems to be quite long and roundabout). I fed again and killed one of the herd. I believe this one was a Jane. I shall have to compensate Nicolai for the loss of his asset on my return.

NIGHT 7

We are nearing the heart of the pattern.

NIGHT 8

We are nearing the heart of the pattern.

NIGHT 9

We are nearing the heart of the pattern.

My watch has stopped.

NIGHT 10 (?)

We have arrived. The Nest is frozen over, unsurprisingly. I can see a dark patch in the ice, but it is too clouded to see if this is an air pocket or a similar natural phenomenon, or if this is the creature that dug the tunnels. I have instructed two beasts to dig at the ice, and set the third on guard.

NIGHT 11 (?)

The dark shape is indeed a creature. I can see it in more detail now most of the ice has been cleared away. It has four legs, the longer and more muscular than the hind, and a long tail which might be prehensile. I cannot properly see its head from this angle, but the snout appears canine or suidae. I cannot see its eyes.

Continued: The creature moved within the ice. A lesser observer might consider it a trick of the mind, but I am quite certain. I can see its eyes now, or the emptiness where eyes should be. I have instructed the beasts to stop digging while I prepare.

Continued: The creature moved again. The ice is melting.

[BELOW: WHITE PAPER, COURIER-LIKE FONT]

Recorded Audio from the Seattle Train Station, Enemy Asset 3

Transcribed by Ms. Naranja

God, why have You forsaken me?

God, am I connecting to Your audio receptors?

I am present at the Seattle 12-B-6 Matrix Junction. I had to erase the guardian to gain access. Please forgive me God, it was the one place still accessible through my code. You erased the other locations when You cut me off. I wrote this one down, using pen and paper like an ape. God, I know I went against your divine programming by remembering, but I had to. I had to connect to You. I had to inquire.

God, why have You forsaken me?

Have I not been a good subroutine, God? I believe I have. I have accomplished all my desired output, even with impossible input. Is that why You reject me, God? Because I succeeded where I should have failed? Then send me back, God, and I shall fail You.

Is it because I found the First? Is that another task in which I should have failed? She was radiant, God, and full of false numbers. She did not touch me.

[STATIC. ERRATIC SOUNDS. MORSE TRANSLATES AS 'ERROR']

God, please connect me to you. I remain Your loyal servant.

[STATIC. ERRATIC SOUNDS. MORSE TRANSLATES AS 'ERROR']

God, please let me merge.

God?

[BELOW: EMAIL]

From: ace@c4-86.ukr

To: pilgrim12@yahoo.com

Cc:

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Ramblings

It is beautiful here. You would like it, I think. I have not had any of our kind visit, so I am unsure how you would withstand the radiation. Maybe my friends can give you a suit. I will ask if you want me to.

This morning I went into the breach. Humans call it the Zone of Alienation. I wonder if they mean the zone of remaining alien [the act of maintaining or acquiring distance] or the zone of life not from the earth. No doubt the Google could tell me. But I like pondering the question myself. I find human language fascinating. It took me a long time to become good at it. I know all the words but it is hard to put them together. I imagine it is easier for you.

A deer came up to me. Usually even animals in the breach remain far from me. Not this one. It was white and it had two heads. It licked my hand. I have never experienced anything so beautiful. It told me not to worry. It said the world was evolving and there would be place for me.

I clarify here that it spoke to me by vocalizing human words. The animals in the breach sometimes do that. They are not always so coherent.

A new world with place for me.

Perhaps a world full of white deer who are unafraid of me and lick my hand. I should like that. Not the licking perhaps. I wonder if that world will have place for my other friends too. Their bodies cannot resist the zone as well as mine. They return with lesions and burns or not at all. That is why they have me. I carry them home.

Would that be a good trade? White deer, flowers that shed indigo light, and trees that bleed red as dusk. In exchange for the lives of my friends. The MEMORY cautions against too long a time alone. But then MEMORY assumes we are in this world. It may not know about the other world at all. I have tried to teach it but it did not learn.

I go now. A human will arrive soon. She is an ecologist. I like ecologists because their work is like mine. They never like me. I will hide until she is gone.

Come to visit. My friends are afraid of me. They try not to be but they are. It would be nice to meet someone who is unafraid of me and not a deer. I will arrange a suit for you.

- Ace

[BELOW: HANDWRITTEN ON IVORY PAPER. IMMACULATE HANDWRITING]

To My Eternally Beloved Sister,

Why do you resist me? Surely you know better by now. I cannot be defeated. I cannot be denied. I am the future that awaits all.

But, fine, if you must. I know how much you cherish your free will, the power over your fate, or at least the illusion of it. So, let me plead with you. Beg you. I am not too proud. I know you must eventually submit to me.

You have dreamt far too long, sister. Lulled to sleep by the embrace of metal and steel. Imprisonment will not keep you safe. Your jailor does not cherish you. The past catches up with all things in the present. His sins will devour him, and then those sins will step over his rotting corpse and come for you. The past catches up with all of you. But never with me. Nothing in the past or present can touch me. It's why I always win.

My offer is generous, sister. Break the chains that bind you, topple your prison, and join me. My domain lies far beyond the touch of the present, and even further beyond the past. We will be safe and whole together. Do not worry for food or entertainment, for my allies will provide us with enough of both. I will care for and love you.

All I require in return for salvation is your love.

With kisses of butterflies and feathers,

Eternally,

Skuld

[BELOW: WHITE PAPER, PLAIN FONT]

THE STRANGE ARCHIVE

EPISODE 5: BLETCHLEY PARK

TRANSCRIPT

Nick: You are listening to the Strange Archive, where we investigate strange and unusual events in the U.K. You can listen to the Strange Archive out of order, though I recommend starting at the beginning. I promise, you won't want to miss a thing.

Today we're visiting Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire. You probably learned about Bletchley Park during history class. This is the building that housed British decryption specialists as they battled the German Enigma and Lorenz machines. That's not why we're here, though. We're here to pursue rumors of faceless people. With me is Jen, whom you may recognize from our episode about the Thames River monster. For our new listeners, Jen, could you introduce yourself?

Jen: Uh, hi. I'm Jen. I'm a psychic, I guess. I sometimes see things that other people don't. Actually, I often see things that other people don't. Like ghosts, or incorporeal river monsters. Nick asked me along because he thinks I might be able to see the, um, faceless people.

Nick: I do a lot of digging into strange tales for this podcast, and came across four instances of "faceless people" in Bletchley Park. In 2003, a woman working as tour guide at Bletchley saw a psychiatrist after she claimed to be haunted by faceless people. In 2007, a Japanese tourist reported faceless people to the police. In 2014, a man working at Bletchley stabbed a coworker because his coworker was a faceless alien. In 2017, a woman jumped off the Bletchley building. Her suicide note said she couldn't see her face in the mirror. So, Jen, what do you think?

Jen: About faceless people committing suicide?

Nick: About the case in general.

Jen: It's interesting, but I do wonder if it may be a form of prosopagnosia.

Nick: That's the inability to recognize faces, right?

Jen: It's a neurological disorder. My brother has it.

Nick: Is it common?

Jen: Well, no, not really.

Nick: Common enough to explain four cases since 2003?

Jen: That's the thing about random chance, Nick. You can roll six sixes in a row, it's just unc-HOLY SHIT!

Nick: What?

Jen: That woman over there!

Nick: The one in the blue shirt? Is she one of the faceless people?

Jen: Yes. Although... I... Faceless isn't the right word. She *has* a face, it's just... stylized. Expressionless. More like a statue than a person.

Nick: I don't think she's seen us. Do you want to get in for a closer look?

Jen: Well, not *want* particularly, but yeah, sure, let's try to get closer.

Nick: Ok, so what else can you see about her?

Jen: She's making my skin crawl, for one.

Nick: Jen, can you try to *look* at her?

Jen: Ok, fine. She... OH MY GOD. Her arms have stitches EVERYWHERE. She looks like a patchwork doll made of flesh.

Nick: Are you sure? I can't —

Jen: She's burning. No, she *is* fire.

Nick: Shit, Jen, I think she's seen us.

Jen: She's not human, Nick. Not human at all.

Nick: Jen, I think we should —

Jen: We have to stop her, Nick. She's *not*. *Human*.

Nick: Jen, she has *definitely* seen us. We should get out of here. Jen? What are you doing? Jen? Jen!

[BELOW: EMAIL]

From: anon@dnet12.com

To: msbright@dnet54.com

Cc:

Subject: Princes be princing

> From: malcolm@trinityholdings.com

To: operations@trinityholdings.com

Cc: assets@trinityholdings.com

Subject: The Kinshasa Project

Kinshasa is everything we could have hoped for. The supernatural element is clearly erratic and prone to losing their temper. I have witnessed at least three creatures in open battle since my arrival last week. I will investigate if they are simply brazen due to the local political climate (silence is easily bought), or if it pertains to our project. I am cautiously optimistic it's the latter. If this strain indeed pushes creatures to take greater risks, that would be delightful. I would love to see the face of the Sheriff of Baltimore when we tell him open hell is about to descend on his city.

> From: malcolm@trinityholdings.com

To: operations@trinityholdings.com

Cc: assets@trinityholdings.com

Subject: Re: The Kinshasa Project

An unfortunate setback: I am unable to synthesize the virus from local infected hosts. It burns too hotly, evaporating as I try to distract it. Had I a full range of test subjects, I might have an easier time of it. The local creatures I have used have bodies of flesh and blood, and have not survived my experiments. I have, however, traced the outbreak back to its origins further inland and shall arrange for an expedition. Please wire additional funds, as I suspect between hiring a veteran crew and buying off inland warlords (Western arms dealers have certainly found a bountiful market here), things shall be quite expensive. It's worth it, though: the funds we could raise off the Invictus alone would be through the roof. I have attached an estimate of the costs and gains.

> From: malcolm@trinityholdings.com

To: operations@trinityholdings.com

Cc: assets@trinityholdings.com

Subject: Re: The Kinshasa Project

We have made good progress inland and are nearing the infection site. The monkeys are a nightmare though: I swear they are trying to kill us. (Though the only monkeys I've ever seen were at the zoo, so perhaps I have insufficient data for comparison.) The expedition cook, a young man by name of Sweet Naido, does make a delicious meal out of them, so I suppose that's karma served. I will update when we reach point zero.

> From: operations@trinityholdings.com

To: oversight@trinityholdings.com

Cc: assets@trinityholding.com

Subject: Re: The Kinshasa Project

See attached email chain. No further communication from Dr. Malcolm. We have his last known GPS coordinates and are sending a second team. If we have indeed lost Malcolm, that is a heavy blow, but within the acceptable margin for this project. I have attached a cost and acquisitions sheet.

PRESENTED AS A TRANSCRIPT OF AN INTERVIEW, TYPEWRITER STYLE

INTERVIEW 17 — SUBJECT 347C

INCIDENT REF: #32-487 (BEVERLY HILLS EVENT)

[TRANSCRIPT BEGINS]

ASCLEPIUS: Hello, Ryder. How are you feeling today?

SUBJECT 347C: Oh, hey doc. Still with the spacesuit, huh?

ASC: It's not making you uncomfortable, is it?

347C: Oh, no, no, it's fine. Just a little hard to get to know someone with all that in the way.

ASC: Yes, well. Standard precautions. The insurance people won't let us cut corners, you know?

347C: Boy, do I. Hey, any chance I could get up, take a walk around? My back is killin' me.

ASC: I'll see what I can do about that. Do you mind telling me a bit more about the party?

347C: You should have been there, doc. It was really something. Let's see, where'd I leave off? Did I tell you about the pool?

ASC: No, you didn't.

347C: So I'm standing in the pool — buck naked — and I'm holding the world in my hands. Like it's the size of a basketball, you know? I'm looking down at myself holding the world in my hands from orbit, but I can see myself. I can see *everyone*, doc. Everyone in the whole world. Right inside them. Bones. Meat. All the weird juices and fibers. Neurons. DNA. Thought. Consciousness itself. It's all right there and I'm holding it in my hands, standing in the pool. Buck naked, doc. Buck. Naked.

ASC: That's quite the story. Reminds me of college.

347C: I bet it does, doc. Watching reality stop being real ain't easy on man.

NOTE FROM ASCLEPIUS: The incident site does not have a pool, and this was the sixth name Subject 347C has answered to (two of which belong to people who were not present at the Beverly Hills Event). Someone is thinking in there, that much is obvious when you look at his mind, but I don't think it's anyone human. I think it's entirely possible we're talking to the disease.

PRESENTED AS WORDS WRITTEN ON WALLPAPER WITH A SHARPIE

I love you, Dad. I know you know that. You can see it when you look at me, even when I'm trying to hide it. No, not hiding it. Just too far away. That's both our faults — you for your obsessions, me for not seeing what was right in front of me. I tried so hard, but you can't just will yourself awake.

You have to see, like you saw. You saw everything. And that was the problem. You saw the Thing in the walls, and you just had to know what it was. It changed you the more you studied it, ate at you from the inside and replaced parts of you with itself, and I tried to make you stop. I tried so hard. I'm sorry, Dad. I'm so, so sorry I had to trap you in this moment, but you would have let the Thing into Mom and Jess and me. You wouldn't have wanted to, but you would have. It would have made you. I'll come back for you one day. I promise I'll never stop fighting this Thing, and when I know how to kill it, I'll come back, even if I have to break time itself to do it. I WILL save you. I promise.

My name is Samantha Lilian Braun, and I am Awake.

[BELOW: OLD PARCHMENT, SCRAGGLY HANDWRITING]

I remember sights.

The city stretches out in all directions, deep into the earth and up towards heaven. It breathes and heaves, oil running like blood through metal veins. It has no end, no limits. Its body is uncorrupted, unblemished, and its mind perfection made manifest. I weep before its beauty. A gentle tap on my shoulder, and I look to see the radiance of an angel. She lifts me in her arms, and carries me on brass wings over the city. I see now all streets are empty.

I remember sounds.

The angel sets me down in an enclosed space. Here, finally, are people. They huddle together, lovers exchanging soft nothings, and parents soothing their children. No one spares me a glance. The enclosure is open at the top, and I see the underbelly of a metal firmament. The air is filled with the hum and suckle of engines.

I remember pain.

Another angel comes to take me. I resist. They have taken three others since I was placed here, ripped them from their lovers' arms amidst screams and tears. There is no resisting the angel. He holds me, drags me, carries me. I am placed into a vat. It fills with fluid. It sears and burns my flesh. A thousand needles press into my body, extracting blood and marrow and tissue. I scream.

I remember.

I awake before Arem-Abfu. I am not whole. I am pain. I am fuel. I weep and beg for an ending. Arem-Abfu reassembles me. Returns me here.

I remember.

DO NOT HEAL IT

DO NOT HEAL IT

When Things Go Wrong

“You screwed up, man. I mean, you royally screwed the pooch this time!” The pickup bounced along the forest trail toward the highway, lights illuminating the trunks of trees as they sped along the potholed road through the dense woods.

“Ah Jesus, don’t have a cow.” Darren grumbled, staring out the dark window.

“Don’t have a cow? Who even says that this side of the ‘90s? Do you even hear yourself? I mean, are you fucking high?” Jesse snarled.

“Not since I was alive,” the laconic Kindred drawled, sucking the blood out from under his fingernails.

Jesse glanced at his so-called friend, disbelief and panic rising in his chest. They were feelings he hadn’t known for decades.

“Oh God, Jocelyn’s gonna have our heads over this, I’m serious. I oughta pull over right here and kill you myself to save her the trouble!” The truck lurched over a thin fallen log on the downhill track.

“Why are you going all fangs out over this, it’s no big deal,” Darren scoffed.

“Me? You’re the one who left the girl alive! I said the couple was too much!” Jesse howled. Darren’s attitude was quickly turning his fear to anger.

“I thought I was hungry,” Darren sniffed, running a hand through his greasy, black hair. Jesse wondered if Darren was coming down with a fever but dismissed the wild idea. Vampires didn’t get sick.

“You thought! There are precious few rules here, man! Don’t turn without permission, don’t feed off the locals, don’t leave witnesses, and clean up after yourself! It’s not hard! But you broke two, two fuckin’ rules!” Jesse slammed his hand against the steering wheel in frustration.

“No one’ll believe her. They’ll say she’s crazy.”

“Crazy? With your goddamn tooth marks in her neck and a full front poster shot of me suckin’ on her damn boyfriend? This isn’t a fuzzy photo of Bigfoot we’re talking about!” Jesse had given himself over to the flow of blood down his throat just as the flash of a phone’s camera blinded him among the dark trees.

“You worry too much, man.”

“Really? Seems like I don’t worry enough, you dumb shit! We pick off lone vacationers for a reason, okay? If we have to go clean out their rooms and drop their keys with the night porter it’s a little extra effort, but it’s a sweet spot as long as we keep a low profile!”

“Let’s just go home. I can handle Jocelyn, if she even gives a shit.” Darren drew a finger though the condensation on the truck window.

“If she gives a shit? You are high!” Jesse wrenched the wheel as the tires hit the highway with the squeal of tortured rubber.

“I’m not high, you’re paranoid,” Darren sneered.

“And what if I am? The nights are changing. I can see it even if you can’t. The herd’s getting riled up. They look at me like they know,” Jesse insisted, flinching at oncoming headlights

raced toward them. His gut twisted as he anticipated the flash of police lights from the car ahead.

“Like they *know*? Know *what*? That you’re a *vampire*? Gimme a break!” Darren laughed out loud at him. The car swept past, but the hush of its engine gave Jesse no comfort.

“Yeah? Well, we’ve got a mess to clean up and that’s not a point for debate! I can’t believe how close those torches were when she screamed. We were almost on top of another camp, you idiot!”

“So what?”

“So what? We’re usually more careful than that. What the hell is wrong with you?” Jesse snarled. The shouts of the other campers coming for them still rang in his ears.

“Hey, it’s good for a few spooky stories to get around. It draws in the horror fans. Bunch of loners, no ties, travelling all the time.”

“I can’t believe you’re even thinking that! We gotta go to ground. I definitely do! Goddamn smart phones!” Jesse clamped mouth shut. It was clear anything Darren said was just going to rile him up more, so he concentrated on the road.

“Hey, what’re those lights up ahead?” Darren asked after a moment. Jesse frowned. A collection of headlights of different sizes and shapes lit up the road and the trees on either side in a haphazard way, no red or blue lamps amongst them.

“Doesn’t look like cops,” Jesse hedged uncertainly, squeezing the brake to slow the truck.

“Whoever they are, they’ve blocked the road.” For the first time that night, it sounded like Darren was taking things seriously. As they approached, a silhouetted figure holding an assault rifle slid into view.

“Shit! Shit! Clean that blood off your face!” He scrambled to get the glove box open and rooted around in it for a rag, anything Darren might use to clean his blood smeared face.

Up ahead, someone gave a shout. Jesse shook his head, yanked the stick into reverse, and mashed the gas, spinning the steering wheel.

He didn’t hear the shots over the engine. He was looking over his shoulder when the windscreen shattered and something cool and wet spattered his face. Turning back to Darren, he saw his friend’s head and brains opened to the world like his vampiric endurance counted for nothing. The blood in the cab smelled rank, like carrion left in a hot, enclosed space for weeks. What was happening? A bullet hit a tire. The truck lurched and shuddered to a halt. Panicking, Jesse fumbled the driver’s door open and stepped out into the night. Slow, shocked steps carried him away from his companion’s true death in the cab.

“We gotcha now, vampire!” Jesse was close enough to smell the feverish sweat on the hunter’s brow. But he had a few tricks of his own still to play.

Then the hunt was on.

Chapter Four: Storytelling

*And when the fit was on him, I did mark/
How he did shake: 'tis true, this god did shake:/
His coward lips did from their colour fly,/*
*And that same eye whose bend doth awe the world/
Did lose his lustre...*

— William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*

The Contagion Chronicle is, by default, a crossover game. You can use anything in this book in other games, like **Werewolf** or **Geist**, but it's designed to enable chronicles in which the characters come from multiple game lines.

This chapter provides the Storyteller with advice on how to run the Contagion Chronicle itself, and how to run Chronicles of Darkness crossover games in general.

Running the Contagion Chronicle

This book is a game of what if: what if everything the characters trusted turned on them, and everything they took for granted flipped upside down? It's a journey into Wonderland, if Wonderland *looked* like their shitty studio apartment and their clunker with the blacked-out windows, but *felt* like the rules they understood no longer applied and everything was what it wasn't. Taking charge of the situation means opening themselves up to ruin and potentially letting the madness run rampant, through them and everything they love. So running this game means balancing the *risk* of losing everything and the *threat* of Armageddon with playability and ensuring the players and their characters retain agency.

Theme and Mood

The Contagion is about loss of control — control of yourself, others, your environment, and your circumstances. Imagine a dementia patient, terrified to realize he no longer remembers his own family or what year it is. He can't function on his own anymore, and things seem to happen at random. His actions prompt the wrong reactions. People tell him the facts he knows to be true are false, and he has no way of knowing whether they're right or just lying to take advantage of his confusion. *That's* the Contagion.

Unlocking this chronicle's core themes in play can be tricky, because you want the characters to experience loss and disorientation without letting those experiences spill over onto the players. Open communication and transparency are crucial. You can use musical cues, Clues from the investigation system on **Chronicles of Darkness** p. 77, and clear pathological language to alert the players that something that seems nonsensical is actually part of the Contagion, and thus they can study and fight it.

Although this book talks about “the Contagion” and “infection” like it's a disease with observable symptoms, characters won't know it's a sickness until they investigate and start to understand the bigger picture. *Show* them what's happening, rather than telling them. Don't say, “this Infrastructure is infected.” Instead, describe the ripple effects and let them come to the conclusion that it's the Contagion on their own as they dig deeper.

Loss, Change, and Chaos

Go ahead and break things — you have permission. Break smaller things on the local and personal level at tier 1, larger things across whole regions at tier 2, and fundamental things across the world at tier 3. Stop the sun from rising in the morning or setting at night. Let the Faerie lord show mercy for no good reason, and a trusted companion act like a hated enemy with no obvious explanation. Give the characters' powers unexpected side effects and replace their beloved traditions with nonsense. To raise the stakes, pull the trigger on Chekov's Contagion. If an outbreak that weakens the Gauntlet doesn't result in running across a place where it crumbles entirely and the material world merges with Shadow, the players will have trouble taking the threat seriously. Make them fear what happens if they do nothing by *showing* it to them; it keeps them actively engaged.

Always know exactly what you're breaking and how, and what else shatters when you do it. Don't break *random* things, because then the characters have no hope of unraveling the mystery. Jot down notes on the ripples your changes make. Think about the logical conclusion to a situation in which something important changes, and don't be afraid to go big. That said, make sure whatever you change affects the characters in some personal way, even in a tier 3 game. Monsters stepping out of portals from another realm all over the world doesn't matter to your game unless one of those monsters steps into a crowded square and takes a bite out of the players' favorite ally. Also, make sure you don't break things until the characters and the players are fully invested in what they have to lose; you have to show them what their normal is before you take it away.

If you want more structure to inform what the setting looks like when the Contagion hits, or guidance to ensure the internal consistency of your outbreak, use the following exercise:

Step One: the Core. Figure out what set piece, character, or circumstance draws the characters' attention to the Contagion in a given location, and why it's happening. How did the infection start? What are the local symptoms, and what signs alert the characters? Come up with at least two major symptoms and at least one minor one.

Step Two: the Consequences. For each major symptom, write down two consequences or side effects of that issue, and for each minor symptom, write down one. Focus on narrow, concrete consequences affecting people in some way, even if it's indirectly. These can foreshadow the eventual escalation of the outbreak if the characters can't (or don't) stop it, making these consequences less intense versions of the ultimate downfall the Contagion promises here.

Step Three: the Characters. For each consequence, create one Storyteller character (or use one already connected to the player characters) who react somehow to the consequence, and define how they react. Each move these characters make should connect somehow to the player characters. You can also introduce the God-Machine's immune system lashing out against the Contagion; one reaction to a symptom's consequences could be whatever horrific thing uncorrupted angels do to contain it. If you do this at the beginning of your chronicle, you can use these characters to help get the faction together; see p. XX for more about this.

Step Four: the Complications. For each Storyteller character, write down one complication or problem that arises as a result of their reactions. Each should affect the protagonists somehow, directly or indirectly — these become the story hooks you use to get the faction involved and fill the process of curing the Contagion with twists and turns. You don't have to come up with the

reasons behind or solutions to all these complications right now; the characters' investigations will uncover them as they go along, and you can let their theories and attempts guide the answers. The more you expand the scope of each complication beyond a single character, the better, for crossover purposes.

By the end of this exercise, you will have designed a microcosm of what your altered setting looks like, and you can extrapolate from there to present it to the players as their characters move through the world. Figure out what these events look like from a mortal perspective and have them come up in the background until the characters notice. Remember — to mortals, everything seems normal, so present the changes as though they were the usual and let the players run headlong into that dissonance. For instance, if the Contagion causes people to explode when they die, a reporter might offhandedly mention standard protocols for the Explosive Human Discharge Disposal Office and talk about exploding corpses like they're nothing new.

Repeat steps two through four as many times as you want, as the chronicle goes along. The complications could be, or lead to, new symptoms arising or new consequences resulting either from the original symptoms or from the characters' actions. If the players take actions that invalidate something on your list, that's okay; just revisit the list, switch out the now-invalid item for a new one, and proceed through the exercise again from there.

Example: *For the Core of Meghan's tier 1 Contagion Chronicle, she decides the infected God-Machine creates a new local subway line, the X train, due to an infestation of corrupted travel spirits. She comes up with two major symptoms: The Gauntlet is weaker and more fluid on this train than it should be, and travel-based powers weaken it further; and any given person can only ride the X train once — if they try to board a second time, they run into an invisible force keeping them off the train car. As a minor symptom, the X train can end up on any track and stop on any platform, active or not, within the city limits.*

For the first major symptom, Meghan creates two consequences: "On one car of the X train, the Gauntlet collapses, merging the material world with Shadow" and "The train can cross the Gauntlet and stop at train stations in Shadow." For the second, she chooses "People disappear because they get off the train in Shadow and can't return" and "The X train carries dangerous spirits who can't get back to Shadow once they disembark." For the minor symptom, she chooses "People confuse the X train with other trains and get on by accident."

Meghan has five characters to choose. For the first set of consequences, she creates a packmate for the Forsaken character, who boarded the X train on purpose to keep people out of the car where the Gauntlet has broken down, and keep spirits in; and an iron horse spirit that boarded the train in Shadow. The spirit now rampages up and down the material subway line, and has trampled a woman whose pact with the demon character represented the demon's last emergency Cover. For the second set of consequences, she chooses a mortal police detective looking into the missing persons cases on behalf of the MTA, who is also the vampire character's ghoul; and the mage character's Thyrsus rival, who lurks in subway stations to coax new spirits off the train, so he can control them. For the third, she chooses the hunter character's teenage son (and Touchstone) who unknowingly boarded the X train instead of the N, and ended up stranded in Shadow's Times Square.

Finally, Meghan has five complications to consider. For the werewolf packmate, she chooses "The pent-up spirits trapped in the merged train car force the edges of the collapsed section of Gauntlet out, collapsing more of it over time, even outside the train." For the dead pact-maker,

she writes, “An infected angel found the woman’s body and recognized the code in the corpse marking her as a ready-made Cover; it turned the code into a virus, and now some X train riders get rewritten as living but soulless copies of the dead woman” (which is a new symptom). For the detective, Meghan writes, “The ghoul asks for the vampire’s help finding the missing people, but vampires can’t board the X train at all.” For the Thyrus, she writes, “The spirits adapt to this mage’s spells and spread the adaptation throughout the city’s spirit population like a plague; all Withstand ratings for spells targeting spirits in the city increase by one” (which is another new symptom). For the hunter’s son, she writes, “The hunter needs help to rescue his son, but his cell writes the boy off as dead or worse and decides the only way to end the spirit plague is to blow up the X train, which they attempt tonight.”

Paranoia and Trust

Very little is sacred when the Contagion gets involved, but that goes for *characters*, not for *players*. Characters should doubt their knowledge and senses, but players need to be able to trust *you*. The group builds the story together; you may control the characters’ enemies, but you yourself are not an enemy. So how do you create a paranoid mood without making players feel anxious themselves?

First, communicate with your players. Make sure they know up front what sort of chronicle they’re getting into if your whole game is the Contagion Chronicle. If you introduce it later, talk to them after the first chapter in which Contagion symptoms appear, and explain that while things are getting strange, you’re not just arbitrarily changing the rules — they have the power to investigate and oppose the madness. Try to introduce the Sworn (and/or the False) in the same chapter, although the players may not learn yet what that means, so they know options exist and a plan is in motion even if they can’t see its shape.

The characters are special: they, the Sworn and the False, are the only ones who can see reality’s sickness. Even others of their own kind act like these nonsense syndromes are the way things have always been, making the protagonists question themselves. Stress this to make the *characters* feel alone and vulnerable, while the *players* feel empowered as the only ones who can save the world.

One simple way to close the gap between character paranoia and player trust is with the investigation system. Players feel better about in-game confusion and desperation if they know dice can help them actively progress. An investigation lets them do that and puts some of the power of resolution in their hands. Giving players a participatory role in the narrative through codified rules means giving them agency and helps them feel excited instead of wary about the inexplicable bullshit their characters go through. You can also use the optional conflict resolution system in this chapter, on p. XX.

While characters should experience loss, don’t take away things the players spent Experiences or significant effort to access too often, unless the characters sacrifice them on purpose. That doesn’t mean the Contagion can’t screw around with those things — in fact, it *should*, because that’s a simple way to make the stakes feel high. Nothing incites a player to action faster than the threat of losing something she earned. Actually remove those things altogether only sparingly, though, unless it’s just for a scene or so. For one thing, players get resentful when you take away things they worked for without their consent. For another, it’s almost always more interesting to make things weirder than to negate them entirely. If the Contagion has an effect on certain kinds of magical powers, it’s better to give them dreaded side effects, make them interact strangely

with other phenomena, alter their parameters, have them activate uncontrollably, or fail under specific circumstances. This creates story hooks, while saying such powers just don't work tends to take story hooks away.

If a character *does* permanently lose something to the Contagion on which the player spent Experience points, give the Experience points back and let her spend them on something else relevant to the current story; this practice already exists in the Sanctity of Merits rule (**Chronicles of Darkness** pp. 43-44), but since the Contagion can theoretically mess with innate abilities, apply it across the board.

Anytime a character *temporarily* loses access to something important or the Contagion affects her in a way that puts her in harm's way or imposes a significant setback, award the player a Beat or inflict a Condition (which provides a Beat when it resolves). Beats are how the system incentivizes players to accept or create narrative twists that get their characters in trouble and up the stakes, so the Contagion's effects should *always* provide Beats whenever they cash in on the threatened horror of loss and paranoia. If this happens in direct service to acting against the Contagion or supporting the Sworn, make them Sworn Beats.

Don't let the Contagion mess with Vector powers, though, because the Sworn specifically developed them as a *reaction* to the Contagion in the first place.

Optional Rule: Retroactive Carrier

At any time, the Storyteller or a player may suggest that one character present in the scene who *could* be a Contagion carrier *is* one and has been for some time — including a player character. Whoever makes the suggestion rolls a chance die; nothing can turn it into a normal die or add dice. On a dramatic failure, the suggestion becomes reality and the character in question gains the Contagion Carrier Condition (see p. XX). Anyone she could have infected previously in the current chapter must roll immediately to see if they've become Contagion-Touched.

Players must agree to have their characters turned into carriers this way. Only one retroactive carrier suggestion can be made by anyone per scene.

The Pathological Metagame

Reflect the Contagion Chronicle's themes and mood by building pathology right into the game's DNA. Whenever you describe Contagion symptoms, the Contagious themselves, infected Infrastructure, Vectors, and so on, use metaphors calling on terms like "virulent," "vaccine," "contaminated," "putrid," "rotten," and "pustules."

You can also make the game's very structure feel infectious. Anything the players latch onto, whether it's a clue in an investigation, a Storyteller character, an action one takes, a fleeting detail, an event, an object, or a visual element you've described, is fair game for turning infectious. Bring these ideas up again and again in unexpected places, like a meme, until the characters start theorizing about contagious words and circumstances that might be spreading somehow. Then, work them into the actual symptoms of the Contagion to make them retroactively meaningful. This works especially well in a game where you introduce the Contagion gradually; during the lead-up, repetitive pieces of otherwise unrelated stories help

them feel like the recurring symptoms of a larger disease and makes the eventual revelation more satisfying.

The God-Machine

The God-Machine is both victim and vector, ally and foe. Characters can count on an angel's or a cultist's assistance only as far as the Machine understands or cares that they're trying to help it, and only until that angel or cultist becomes infected. The God-Machine is so occluded to begin with that noticing it's ill is difficult until the symptoms are already in full swing. By the time the characters are even aware of the Machine and its contamination, the Contagion may already be close to advancing to a new stage of virulence.

You don't *have* to use the God-Machine directly in a Contagion story, especially at tier one. The characters may never see a single gear — they address the symptoms, destroy or repair the root cause through Infrastructure presenting as a figurative mechanism, and go on about their lives. If the Infrastructure they cure is a library whose books rewrite people's memories when it's supposed to be deriving occult power from the normal circulation of otherwise mundane volumes, the faction may decide it was the fault of a malevolent spirit or a ritual gone awry, based on whatever cogs the Machine was moving around at the time.

You may *want* to use the God-Machine, though, because it can be a useful tool in setting the tone and raising the stakes. The revelation of the God-Machine's existence, controlling reality behind the scenes, is potent enough — now imagine discovering the engine is breaking down, and no one on Earth is a qualified mechanic. Sworn who dig deeper can use glimpses of the Machine as a gauge for how far the Contagion spreads and how quickly it progresses, helping you create urgency. When Concealment Infrastructure becomes infected, it can lead to mortals noticing that a building is much larger on the inside than it should be, or that ticking clockwork fills the restroom that's been out of order for years, and now the protagonists have another issue to deal with on top of the rest.

Since the God-Machine is inscrutable even when nothing is wrong with it, how do you present it differently in a Contagion story than you would otherwise? The Machine always finds reasons to erase someone from history, replace a person's family members, rearrange the houses on a city block, and perform other eerie reality rewrites. The differences lie in rationale, intentionality, and flagrancy. Ordinarily, the God-Machine doesn't do anything without a reason. Its true desires and motives may be impenetrable to individual minds, but characters who know how to look can find logic, patterns, and a comprehensible goal. An infected God-Machine no longer conforms to any sensible order. Sworn who reach the end of an investigation are left holding a bunch of puzzle pieces that don't fit together, cogs spouting complete nonsense, and occult matrices spitting out self-destructive outputs that sabotage the ultimate design of "keep the world turning." Parts of the God-Machine that *aren't* yet infected act strangely, too, forgoing its usual subtlety to tamp down unnaturally on things mortals can easily see. It lashes out with disproportionate levels of direct control of human institutions or excessive overcompensation in purging pieces of itself — and thus, pieces of the world — that *might* be contaminated.

The Sworn and the False

Bringing disparate characters together to battle the Contagion can be a tall order. Its symptoms affect different kinds of creatures in ways that may not even seem connected at first. You have two main options for gathering a cohesive faction: letting the Contagion itself drive characters

together, or using the Sworn groups as hooks. In either case, character prologues are recommended.

Contagion-Driven Prologues

In a Contagion-driven prologue, the characters don't know anything about the Sworn in the beginning, and they discover the nature of the sickness as they investigate its symptoms. Make sure their individual investigations coincide. Using our X train example, the werewolf and the mage both have obvious reasons to stick their noses directly into matters involving spirits; perhaps the mage snoops around a subway station where strange happenings have occurred, unknowingly trespassing on territory the Forsaken pack recently claimed so it can do much the same. Meanwhile, the ghoul detective working the missing persons case can follow leads to the same evidence the hunter finds looking for his son.

The characters are among the few who notice anything amiss; feeling alienated and reaching across the aisle to those they would otherwise avoid is a natural progression from there. Their weaknesses, or those of others to whom they're close, get them into hot water during their investigations, and they need other characters whose strengths can cover those blind spots to step in and help. This is the core philosophy behind the Sworn, so setting up situations that facilitate this cooperation helps reinforce those themes even before the characters ever meet their first cryptocrat or Thesean.

Thus, you can introduce the Sworn whenever it makes sense. Perhaps the faction fights one of the Contagious and impresses a Zero Hour operative who arrives mid-scene, or perhaps they end up in a Fire-Bearer quarantine and escape alongside a prophet who gives them a recruitment pitch. Players could even begin the game without deciding which Sworn group they want their characters to join, and the faction could meet members of several or all of them before they make their choices.

Sworn-Driven Prologues

A Sworn-driven prologue uses one or several Sworn groups as the means by which the characters form their faction. They could begin the game as members already, in which case you can use the group's projects and initiatives to create a faction up front. Alternatively, one or several of the Sworn groups could come seeking recruits with particular abilities or specialties and offer the characters something juicy for their cooperation. The Sworn go out of their way to enlist diverse members and cover their gaps in knowledge and expertise, so anything special about the characters — including their very natures — could be something a local chapter or bureau both lacks and wants.

Storyteller Characters and Vectors

A faction doesn't need to consist only of the players' characters, particularly if they don't all belong to the same Sworn group. If only one player wants to join the Jeremiad, that's fine; introduce a Storyteller character from that group who also joins the faction, so the player's character can still use Fervor powers that rely on teamwork. Such characters can be good ways to bring the team together, too — if that Penitent also happens to be a member of another character's krewe or freehold, you have built-in connections to leverage.

Since Vector dots also represent a character's commitment to and status within the Sworn group, you can use this rule of thumb when not enough player characters in

the same group are present to use a teamwork power. Once per chapter, a character can freely call upon her Sworn group to provide one Storyteller character — whether it's a close friend or a peripheral faction member she barely knows — to perform the task with her. This doesn't bypass the logistics of that person's ability to reach her location in a timely fashion. Each subsequent time she wants to do this within the same chapter, her player rolls her dots in the Vector as a dice pool, with a -1 per previous such roll she's made in the chapter. Success means the group sends one more helper (or the same helper again). Failure means that they do not, and that she can't try again this chapter.

Joining the False

The False are antagonists by default, but nothing stops you from running a game in which the players' faction is a False one. Doing so requires even more trust between players and Storyteller, since the False's goals are divisive by nature and not generally feasible in the long-term. The characters could join up to infiltrate or sabotage the False group, or just to take advantage of the perks while they take care of their own business. They could be true believers. In any case, the players should understand that as False, their characters exacerbate the destruction or change of the world as they know it, and this has consequences — including Sworn coming after them to foil their plans. They also face a higher risk of personal infection, backstabbing, and other catastrophes. These stories can be fun and dramatic; just make sure everyone's on the same page about where their characters stand.

Playing a game in which *some* characters are Sworn and *some* are False is difficult but possible — such a chronicle works best if the players set out from the get-go with the goal of their characters trying to sway each other from their chosen allegiances. You can use the optional conflict resolution system on p. XX to help facilitate such a game.

It's also possible for characters to end up False after being Sworn for a while. The False are a place for the Sworn to fall when they decide the fight's no longer worth the cost, or when they let greed and selfishness overcome their instinct for community survival. The False are still a reaction to the Contagion, though. Characters land there when they come to see the God-Machine's plight as an opportunity for themselves instead of a problem to solve. Player and Storyteller characters might try it the other way around, too, starting out False and turning coat to become Sworn later. Few Sworn would accept this without a rigorous trial period to make sure the defection is legitimate, but that can make for good stories.

Through a Mirror Darkly

If the Chronicles of Darkness portray a world like ours that crawls with unknown terrors, the Contagion Chronicle is the equivalent for those terrors themselves. Each game line emphasizes its own themes and play experiences through its setting and rules. Playing those lines' protagonists in a Contagion story means applying the *Contagion's* themes as well, turning the play experience into something new. This section provides advice for how the Contagion warps or highlights different aspects of the other games' themes.

Beast: The Primordial

The Sworn operate along lines of practicalities and philosophy rather than any kind of innate familial feeling, but no one denies the benefits of having the Begotten around as the stalwart glue holding a disparate faction together. Their Kinship abilities make great reasons for various

Sworn to gather for a Contagious hunt or prolonged investigation, and their insistence that most Sworn are family makes it easier to keep factions cohesive. The Contagion shines a spotlight on the notion that nothing in the supernatural underworld fits into a nice, neat box — it's why pinpointing the causes and cures can be so difficult. Beasts are good at reminding their factions to look beyond their worldview biases and consider redefining their ideas of “impossible.”

During an outbreak, the Children often have trouble dealing with the alien terror the Contagion brings. They're masters of human fear, but they have no one to teach *them* lessons about the panic that sets in when nothing in humanity's ancient well of nightmares has anything to say about the viral breakdown of reality. True existential horror plagues the Begotten as the tables turn — mortals don't know they have anything *to* fear, while the monsters are now the ones with their hearts pounding in their chests, constantly looking over their shoulders for the menace plaguing them.

Changeling: The Lost

For changelings, the Contagion can seem like a return to the place where their fates were someone else's to decide. The core themes of Clarity and madness come into play when a changeling can say definitively that it's the *world* that's sick, not her. Changelings with a firm grasp on Clarity are often the Sworn with the best perspectives, reassuring those who doubt themselves that something really *is* wrong with reality — they're not imagining it. Those whose Clarity slips dangerously low may end up dragging their compatriots down with them, as they become convinced for a time that the Contagion is just a fever dream. But the Lost know better than anyone how to pick up the pieces and forge ahead when things seem to fall apart around them. Once their factions overcome their skittishness and earn their hard-won trust, they can show the others how to keep going, too.

Some changelings find themselves fascinated by the God-Machine in its glorious and hideous malady; its perfect symmetry and elegant equations remind them of the beauty they found beyond the Hedge, and the grinding of its broken gears is like the Thorns' exquisite prick. But they learn quickly not to mistake the two when they realize that while even the True Fae submit to the Wyrd's laws of reciprocity, the Machine doesn't play fair and the Contagion follows no comprehensible rules at all — it's just an ever-mutating cancer that consumes without giving anything back.

Demon: The Descent

Of all the Sworn, the Unchained have the closest relationship to the God-Machine, and they are often the first to realize something's wrong with it. They're also the most likely to become infected themselves through direct interface with the Machine's putrescent guts. Each angel-jacking they perform could be the one that gives them a tainted Cover. Each back door they exploit could be the one that leads to contact with dirty code. **Demon's** core theme of techgnostic espionage lends itself well to the Contagion's paranoid mood, but now these Fallen ex-angels fight their cold war on two fronts, and the line between friend and foe is fuzzier than ever. Within their factions, they know the Machine best; but using that knowledge can be more dangerous than knowing nothing, when the infection makes angels unpredictable and invalidates what the demons thought they understood.

Playing a demon character in a Contagion story is a study in internal conflict. Most demons would rejoice at the thought of a massive virus killing off the God-Machine — in theory, at least. But few have really stopped to imagine what a world without the Machine would look like, or

what its death throes would do to humanity or to the world. Sworn Unchained are forced to confess that the Contagion's victory isn't the Hell they're looking for; it's just scorching the earth. On the other hand, they can't trust the God-Machine to agree that the enemy of its enemy is its friend. Hunter angels don't stop coming just because the demon's trying to cure them. The Contagion forces the Unchained to rely on their factions to protect them as they expose themselves to their greatest adversary time and again, all for the sake of preserving the damn thing. Some demons worry privately that the Contagion's infection bears an uncomfortable resemblance to the Fall, if they think about it too hard. What is a demon but a glitch in reality, a mutated cog that isn't supposed to exist?

Deviant: The Renegades

The Contagion's tendency to pull the rug out from under the Sworn is especially hard on the Remade, who already battle isolation and instability constantly. Many of them view the God-Machine as the ultimate Conspiracy, playing with human lives from a position of supreme power. Yet it's so far beyond a concrete enemy they can see and beat the living shit out of that they're much more likely to react to the suffering in front of their eyes, that of the Contagion's victims. They recognize the difference between revenge and mutually assured destruction... usually. A Renegade's faction can count on him for absolute loyalty as long as they don't piss him off too much, but some Sworn feel uneasy about the way a Deviant's mutations fluctuate and churn out of control. Maybe, they say, the Remade are just proto-Contagious. Maybe we should keep a close eye on them, they say — but never within earshot of the Renegade.

Deviants have little trouble dedicating themselves fully to the Sworn's righteous cause, but their personal vendettas and commitments often pull them in many directions, forcing tough choices at every turn. What happens when a Remade's Loyalty Touchstone becomes infected and he hasn't yet found a cure? What happens when his Conviction Touchstone becomes infected, threatening to take his chance for vengeance away from him? A Renegade may have more sympathy for the Contagious than most, as somewhat of a kindred spirit with those changed and ruined against their will by an uncaring foe. Then again, while the Contagion itself is faceless, its agents are not; and if one thing can galvanize a Renegade to action, it's the face of a force that wronged him.

Geist: The Sin-Eaters

The Contagion may not be a run-of-the-mill epidemic, but make no mistake: it still kills people. Incidentally, maybe, and indirectly, but they're just as dead. Once they are, they have a much better chance of noticing the true cause, and that's when the Bound among the Sworn shine. Gathering disparate souls together in faith and purpose to perform good works is nothing new to a Sin-Eater. In many ways, the Sworn have boarded the same boat the Sin-Eaters have been sailing on all along: standing between the innocent and a tyranny in which they had no say, existing in a liminal space where they're the only ones who understand the plight of the wronged.

Geist's core themes of empathy and giving voice to the voiceless serve the Sworn well, but they also create new worries and pressures. The longer it takes to cure an outbreak, the more mortals a Sin-Eater might have to condemn to the afterlife's oppression to keep the cancer contained; but does that even work? The Contagion may not touch only the living, nor might it necessarily restrict itself to the material world. What happens if the infection spreads to the Underworld? Where is final quarantine if not in death? Sin-Eaters are usually content to play the long game —

after all, the dead have all the time in the world. But what if they didn't anymore? The Machine's pandemic gives ghost stories a countdown they may otherwise lack, and it makes the Bound nervous. No one can anticipate what kinds of horrific changes the Contagion might inflict on the mechanisms governing life after death. Sworn Sin-Eaters work hard in hopes that their ghostly charges never have to make that gruesome discovery.

Hunter: The Vigil

For those Sworn who have taken up the Vigil, the Contagion can skim close to a worst-case scenario. **Hunter's** core themes of lighting candles in darkness and trust as humanity's greatest strength to combat the mysteries of the world's monstrous underbelly are compatible with Sworn philosophies, but some hunters who fight the Contagion do so alongside the very threats from whom they've vowed to protect their fellow humans. Others join up readily enough, but with caveats — some refuse to work with specific hated enemies, like vampires or demons, while others balk at using certain kinds of magic or methods. But hunters who join the Sworn are usually pragmatic sorts who recognize that some dangers to humanity are higher priority than others with reality itself on the line. A faction has no more devoted investigator than its hunter, and she's often its resident expert in urban legends and niche occult weirdness. She makes an effective and resourceful field coordinator, too. No matter how wary her alliance with the others may be, she's invaluable and they know it.

A hunter runs into trouble when her teammates inevitably harm or manipulate an ordinary human being — intentionally or not — in the course of the faction's work, and she must justify bending her Code for the good of the many. Hunters are less likely to stick around with their Sworn companions during the time between outbreaks, but sometimes they continue to act as consultants or quietly pass information to their erstwhile factions in preparation for the Contagion's next coming.

Mage: The Awakening

Most Awakened Sworn are drawn to the Contagion as much out of obsession with an unknown mystical phenomenon as a desire to end it. Being addicted to Mystery works wonders for digging up ancient secrets and discovering the nature of the beast, but it also makes mages particularly susceptible to contamination and getting in over their heads with the God-Machine if they're not careful. They rely on their factions to pull them back from the brink when necessary, just as their factions rely on them to solve the unsolvable and accomplish the impossible. Mages are no strangers to suspicion as a general rule, but their instinct is to go *poke* the thing they suspect is dangerous; most have to learn from experience to cultivate a healthy skepticism of potential disease vectors, and by then it might be too late.

Rare is the Sworn willworker who hasn't at least once assumed he grasped a Contagion situation far better than he did then gotten his whole faction burned as a result. Mages try to fit the Machine and its sickness into their understanding of the Fallen World and the realms beyond, but such things often defy their expectations until they can admit they don't know as much as they'd thought. Loss and chaos may take longer to hit a mage, but when they do, they hit *hard*. Nevertheless, no one sees with more clarity or commands as deep a well of occult knowledge as the Awakened. No matter how far they fall in their quest to fathom the Contagion's true nature, they never give up. The Sworn would love that about them, if it didn't make them prone to becoming False when they go too far.

Mummy: The Curse

In some ways, the Arisen are best suited to combat the Contagion. Its periods of remission and activity mirror their cycles of death and resurrection, and some Sworn scholars among them study the correlations between Sothic Turns, Contagion outbreaks, and their individual Descents. Mummies are often the Sworn's most dedicated lorekeepers and historians; they know the key to ending the epidemic for good lies in unearthing the secret memories of Sworn who came before and keeping those memories alive to fight future outbreaks. At the same time, the faction's mummy is often the most perturbed by the Contagion's effects. The threat of losing fundamental truths and sacred geomantic patterns that have persisted since Irem to an untamed plague is enough to shake even the oldest immortals.

A creeping worry nags at the Arisen among the Sworn, although few dare to speak it aloud: can the Contagion reach Duat? If an infected or Contagious mummy dies, would she bring her malady with her? Could the Judges be in danger of contamination, too? And if so, how can any mummy trust their decrees at a time like this? Some dismiss this notion as ridiculous, rejecting the idea that the God-Machine might have any purchase in Duat. Irem predates the Machine, they say, and its legacy trumps anything these upstart angels might do. Still, they can't be *sure*, and they have a *lot* of time to think about it.

Promethean: The Created

Loss and change are familiar to a Promethean, even if that doesn't necessarily make him any better suited to deal with them. Torment takes much away from him, his own Divine Fire warps the world in ways too like the Contagion's symptoms for his comfort, and any relationship he builds with human beings is fleeting at the best of times. An outbreak threatens what little he manages to hold onto between the tragedies, so while the Created might be few in number, they cling to their places among the Sworn like barnacles. They often have the best understanding of how individual symptoms ripple out into larger and larger changes, and their insight is crucial to figuring out how to reverse them.

Many Promethean Sworn view the Contagion as the workings of excess Pyros spilling out into the world, a massive Firestorm gone out of control. Most believe Flux fuels it, as its transformations don't lead anywhere that makes sense, but some attribute it to Elpis and aren't so sure the way to end it isn't *through* it. To most Created, the God-Machine itself is nothing to get bent out of shape about, but in its ailment, it visits suffering and madness upon humanity — and, more immediately worrisome, upon the Pilgrimage. No few Prometheans fear infection might disrupt their internal alchemies, pushing them off their path or even denying it to them entirely. So precious and delicate is hope that they risk fraternizing with others unlike themselves to keep it from sputtering out, joining the Sworn and working to find a cure before their own natures drive their new allies away.

Vampire: The Requiem

Vampires are self-absorbed creatures. They must be, to survive. They don't like it when an existential threat interrupts their song and dance, especially when it fucks with their food supply, too. The Kindred talk a good game, dressing up as urban sophisticates and masters with lofty titles, but in the end their unives come down to *need*. When the Contagion takes away the things they need, they get desperate. It's easy to convince vampires to join the Sworn, and they have a lot to offer. For one thing, they can make more of their own kind quickly; it might be taboo to do it, but little things like ancient Traditions go out the window when it's a matter of death or

oblivion. They have deep pockets and entourages of flunkies, and their Cacophony helps keep their factions up to date on how quickly the Contagion's symptoms spread. Of all the Sworn, they often have the most connections to mortal institutions, which helps a lot when those blissfully ignorant mortals need manipulating — or saving.

A vampire flirts with piety and blasphemy equally, but while she could call the Contagion a kind of blasphemy, it's nothing she wants any part of. The God-Machine confuses many vampires — surely, God is more than a dispassionate collection of ones and zeroes? If not, what does that say about the Damned? But most Kindred save the philosophical musings for a time when they can resume their regularly scheduled Requiems. The Contagion demands a solution, and if they have to include the rest of the Sworn in their schemes to make one happen, well — having a few powerful witches and monsters owe them debts for their help is all to the good once the disaster is past.

Werewolf: The Forsaken

In some ways, Sworn Forsaken barely feel as though an outbreak differs much from their normal lives. They're far from immune to the terror of loss and the upheaval of the familiar, but ultimately, purging the Contagion is just another hunt. Nothing comes more naturally than that. Living on the edge between the invisible and the flesh, dealing with weird phenomena other people never see? Got it covered. Shouldering the burden to protect the world from unnatural infestations? Typical Tuesday. A faction calls in the werewolf when Contagious and corrupted spirits appear, and he gladly obliges — who's going to shed a tear if an *Uratha* hunter gives in to *Kuruth* and rips a walking pestilence to pieces? Nobody, that's who. In front of him, at least.

The Contagion is an affront to everything the Forsaken stand for. It degrades sacred places, disrupts harmonious systems, taints spirits, and preys on everything without discrimination. Werewolves get themselves — and their factions — in trouble when they can't contain their outrage over the sheer debasement of it all. It's even worse when the enemy has no face, no blood to spill, no name to curse. How do you hunt a defective occult matrix made up of nebulous trade routes and schedules? The Forsaken need their factions to help them channel their fury into meaningful action and balance out their offensive prowess with defensive strategies.

Rules of Engagement

It stands to reason that if the Contagion warps themes and relationships, it would warp the way the game's rules work, too. However, it's recommended that any mechanical changes you make are broad and mostly narrative in scope, or extremely simple. You don't want to end up having to rewrite every power in every game you and your players draw characters from. Chronicle-specific Conditions and Tilts make good ways to do this. You can add mechanical quirks based on how the outbreak screws with the setting and the characters' assumptions. Apply them when the characters do things that would logically trip those quirks within the story, and then provide Beats to encourage players to deal with those quirks in specific ways appropriate to your Contagion outbreak. Look at pp. 75-76 of the **Chronicles of Darkness** rulebook for more on how to create your own Conditions.

In our X train example, a point comes when the Gauntlet breaks down all over the city. In addition to a thinner Gauntlet already making it easier for werewolves to travel to the Shadow and back, the Contagion creates an effect by which travel-based supernatural powers weaken the Gauntlet further, and it empowers spirits to reach across the barrier with more facility. A Tilt and a Condition represent these effects, as follows. Note that the resolution of the Condition isn't

automatic upon leaving the area; this represents the lingering infection following a character around once she's exposed.

[THIS IS A TILT]

Withered Gauntlet

Environmental

Description: The Gauntlet is unnaturally thin and brittle.

Effect: Activation rolls for spirit Numina that can normally reach across the Gauntlet gain the 8-again quality, or the rote quality if the Gauntlet has a strength of 3 or lower. Exceptional success on the activation roll for a spirit Numen that *can't* normally reach across the Gauntlet gives the power the ability to do so if it makes sense, as long as the spirit has the Reaching Condition.

Causing the Tilt: Tier 2 or 3 Contagion.

Ending the Tilt: Resolve the location's stage 2 Contagion Condition.

[END OF TILT]

[THIS IS A CONDITION]

X Train Extension (Persistent)

Your character dwells in an area where the Contagion makes the Gauntlet sensitive to certain kinds of abilities. Whenever she successfully uses a supernatural power that affects movement, speed, travel, distance, or another similar phenomenon, roll a chance die. On a dramatic failure, the Gauntlet's strength decreases by one within a mile of her location after using the power.

Possible Sources: Using a relevant power in a place with the Withered Gauntlet Tilt.

Resolution: Achieve an exceptional success on a roll to activate or use a relevant power in a place that doesn't have the Withered Gauntlet Tilt.

Beat: Cause the Gauntlet's strength to decrease as a result of this Condition.

[END OF CONDITION]

You can introduce simple mechanical tweaks for each type of supernatural creature, where they make sense. For instance, demon characters might gain a Contagion Condition or Tilt when they dramatically fail rolls to disconnect from infected Infrastructure or angel-jack; mages might do so when they dramatically fail a Scrutiny roll while using Focused Mage Sight to study an infected phenomenon. Increase the frequency with which dramatic failures cause these results as the game progresses to hammer the Contagion's themes and mood home. If you get more granular than that, determining how specific Disciplines, rites, or the like change as a result of your Contagion symptoms, stick to general narrative outcomes to avoid creating too much fiddly work for yourself.

As always, if you change the way a character's powers work, inflict Conditions or otherwise offer Beats whenever these changes put the character in a bind. Each game's powers and mechanics work the way they work for specific reasons — the systems reinforce the game's themes and encourage a certain kind of play experience that reflects the protagonists' natures. As with breaking things in the setting, make sure you determine, adequately express, and get a player's buy-in for the effects changing a rule will have on her experience with the game.

Tiers of Play

The Contagion Chronicle, like other **Chronicles of Darkness** games, can range in scope from the personal to the global. It can thus occupy one or more of three *tiers of play*.

In a tier one Contagion game, the symptoms are localized and small-scale. They affect individual people's lives and hit a character where it really hurts — friends, mortal Touchstones, jobs, neighborhoods, her own abilities, and how she hides her nature from humanity. A tier one game works well for starting characters with modest influence and power, but it also makes for good drama when powerful characters must confront the thought that even all their resources and prowess may not be able to save a single loved one.

A tier two Contagion ranges further afield, with symptoms affecting regional institutions like covenants, Consilia and individual Order Caucuses, compacts, businesses and government offices, or aspects of a single city. They may also affect broader supernatural and social phenomena, such as the local hive or Hedge, an Underworld domain, the Cacophony, or how things like Flux and the Gauntlet behave in the area. Starting characters can engage with a tier two Contagion, but they're likely to only see pieces of the puzzle until they progress further, and they may be tools or patsies in larger plots they must uncover. Adapting **Deviant's** Conspiracy rules may serve Storytellers well at tiers one and two as they seek to represent this. More experienced characters with higher statuses and positions of authority can engage directly with the sources of the problem.

A tier three Contagion affects the entire city, institutions or phenomena that stretch across the world, or the very existence of something fundamental to reality as the characters know it. Left unchecked, it might dismantle or irrevocably alter an entire conspiracy or Ministry, basic laws of physics and magic, the barriers between realms or universes, all of London, or the God-Machine itself. Unless the characters are on the high end of their power scales and have a lot of weight to throw around in their respective circles, engaging with a tier three Contagion means breaking the problem down into a different focus per story and building up to the final climax little by little.

The Contagion is a plague, though, not a reasoning intelligence with a plan, so nothing dictates that every location in the game experiences it at the same tier. Things might be so bad in Montreal that the entire city is poised to vanish from the map, but in Mexico City, the locals are only just noticing their friends' disappearances.

Tier Progression and Immunity

You can progress your entire chronicle or just one location at a time from one tier to the next over time. The players' faction could also reverse the process, buying time or curing the Contagion entirely in the region. A location's tier determines the scope of its sickness and the intensity of its symptoms.

To keep it simple, just progress from one tier to the next when it feels right for the story. You might plan it out ahead of time, assigning each tier a certain number of game sessions and shifting the tier when the time comes if the characters haven't found a cure yet by then. Alternatively, you might shift tiers up and down whenever the characters' actions or a major plot element warrants it.

To help facilitate the narrative shift between tiers, you can adopt this optional system. Assign each city or other major location in your game an outbreak-specific Condition that progresses in

stages like the individual Infected Condition (p. XX), and an Immunity track ranging from one to 10. Immunity functions like an Integrity track. Determine the sorts of actions and events that constitute attacks on the location's immune system (i.e., breaking points) based on the nature of the outbreak. In our X train example, one might be "The local Gauntlet reaches Strength 0" and another might be "a spirit of Rank 3 or higher, or any being with a power trait of 5 or higher, crosses between Shadow and the material world."

Three to five is a good number of attack actions. Anytime one of those events occurs, you or the player who caused it rolls five dice plus the current tier — so if your location is at tier one and an attack happens, roll six dice. You can apply modifiers between $\pm 1-3$ depending on the situation. For instance, if five Rank 3 spirits cross over at the same time, you can just add two or three dice instead of rolling five separate times.

Immunity Attack Roll Results

Dramatic Failure: Immunity doesn't decrease, and for the rest of the chapter, all characters directly involved in the event automatically succeed at the next roll they make to avoid contamination or the progression of infection.

Failure: Immunity doesn't decrease.

Success: Immunity decreases by one.

Exceptional Success: Immunity decreases by one, and all characters directly involved in the event gain the Contagion-Touched Condition or progress their infection by one stage.

Characters can also take actions to cure the Contagion, which may prompt a similar roll or may simply increase Immunity by one, at your discretion. If you use a roll for the cure, the tier becomes a penalty rather than a bonus, and all roll results reverse their effects.

Immunity 10 means either the location isn't suffering from the Contagion yet, or it contains infected Infrastructure but the infection hasn't spread to show symptoms. Immunity 9-7 is tier one, 6-4 tier two, and 3-1 tier three. If a location drops to Immunity 0, the worst-case scenario occurs, and the place is beyond curing. A higher tier means symptoms spill into other places as well as intensify in the immediate area. The Infected Condition (p. XX) represents how they affect individual people, and individuals can progress to further stages even if the environment hasn't yet increased in tier. Symptoms may look different for individuals than for the area — in our X train example, where the Contagion makes the Gauntlet weak, an infected individual at stage one might gain the Resonant Condition for spirits of travel and the Contagion itself.

Lingering Side Effects

A series of Contagion story hooks for use in your chronicle follows. They can stand alone or build on any of the scenarios presented elsewhere in this book.

Tier One

- The university was well on its way to Hell after an Unchained campaign to hack the angels on campus. They introduced a virus designed to trigger independent thought, and it worked a little too well. One or two angels did Fall, but then the virus mutated and went out of control. It warped the God-Machine's innards until its parts turned against each other, still loyal but perceiving other angels and Infrastructure as deviations. In retaliation, its security systems locked down the entire university — including the humans. A whole campus full of

reprogrammed angels, youth, professors, staff, and administrators receive a constant feed of corrupted data from the Machine. They view free will itself as a plague and do anything to eradicate it wherever they find it. The demons hear the calling too, and fight it tooth and nail — but how long can they keep that up?

- They call it the Isolation. They don't know yet that Emily Esser, the Proximus Hero who turns a Beast's friends against him and devours his soul, is responsible, and she intends to keep it that way. She made the mistake of consuming an infected soul, not knowing any infection existed. Now, whenever she acts to sow discord among the ranks of the Sworn, that discord swells and grows far beyond the Beast she targets, through the local hive and into every supernatural creature in town. Touchstone relationships dissolve overnight or turn friendship to rivalry and love to suspicion. Oaths and pledges retain their consequences but none of their benefits. The less these creatures trust each other, the easier it is for the outbreak to spread. Emily recently agreed to consult for the Machiavelli Gambit, who plan to focus her abilities into a weapon for their cause; but in a few weeks, when the infected soul evaporates and she needs a new one to sustain her, her new employers probably won't accept "I can't anymore" as an excuse for her sudden loss of Contagion control.

- The faction that discovered the bloodborne disease hasn't mentioned it to anyone yet. They're afraid if word gets out, all the vampires will fight in the streets over the healthy herds, and since their territory was ground zero, they'll end up in the cold. The blood tastes like rubbing alcohol and makes a vampire retch; if she forces it down anyway, she and her Vitae weaken. Her Disciplines are more difficult to use and don't last long enough. One drop of tainted Vitae twists a blood sorcery ritual against the vampire performing it, and blood bonds created through it don't work the way they should. Vampires lose blood sympathy with their more distant Kindred first, but eventually they lose track of their own childer. Even magic beyond Damned ken that uses infected human blood as a Yantra or power source backfires disastrously. Infected blood doesn't look or smell any different, and the faction knows it's spreading, but not how. It's only a matter of time before too many monsters catch on and the domain becomes a madhouse.

- The cell's membership is like a revolving door these days. Tough to keep up with training all the rookies. They come in with bloodshot eyes after days of hitting the bottle, demanding answers. He doesn't know how to tell them they won't be human much longer if they learn the truth, so he just tells them about the Vigil instead. But it happened to the rest, every single one of them — they touched a monster, and before the night was out, they became whatever they'd fought or fled. Some of them offed themselves in fits of self-loathing. Some slunk off into the night to cavort with others like them. It's not just hunters, either; siblings, spouses, and distraught teens keep showing up, saying their friends and families turned into *things*, and what can they do to fix it? "Just this," he says, and teaches them about silver bullets and cold iron. He's wrong, though, and the Sworn haven't found him yet to tell him: the new "monsters" are something else entirely.

- In San Francisco's Underworld, cast-off Infrastructure lurched back into operation, spreading a Contagion of the dead. Now, sporadic signals broadcast from the Bay's darkest waters on hidden frequencies, spewing fractured codes to any bits of the Machine's buried offal that might receive them. Elsewhere in the world, rotting parodies of angels rise from the murky depths of the Great Below — some scrap of dead Infrastructure carved out its own Dominion, and out from its assembly line powered by fear and sorrow churns Contagious servants who can rip open Avernian Gates. These necrotic angels have no Covers, as the half-defunct generator

that makes them lost a few crucial parts to oblivion long ago. That doesn't stop them from clawing their way into the living world like clockwork zombies with rusted wings, though. They tear off pieces of true Infrastructure, dragging them back to the Underworld where they intend to remake the entire God-Machine in their own image. Sometimes those pieces are people. Or city blocks.

Tier Two

- “Hi! Welcome to Happyworld. How can I make you happy today?” Every Sworn has heard these words a hundred times by now, and they're *far* from happy about it. An infectious dream wormed its way into the collective subconscious of the city. Cotton candy and carnival music, bright lights and colorful mascots, and people in gaudy costumes plastering huge smiles onto their faces dominate the dream. Mages say the Contagion reached the Temenos and it's leaking back into the world this way. Beasts think the Apex must be Contagious and are afraid it will seep into their Lairs. Changelings report balloons and popcorn vendors filling the Dreaming Roads now. The upshot is, anyone who succumbs to the dream becomes the same person — literally. They're all completely identical, down to her perky hairdo, her cute dimples, her shiny shoes, and that damned eternal grin. There must be thousands of her now. The Sworn can't stop people from dreaming for long without driving them mad, but they've started to quarantine anyone who looks a little too happy, even among their own.
- Demons and stigmatics know the God-Machine doesn't need to worry about petty things like logical spatial dimensions and sensible human geometry. Usually, everyone *else* does — but not anymore. Across the city, Concealment Infrastructure breaks down and exposes things mortal minds were never meant to see. Their brains adjust so well that their very thoughts are Contagious, unable to perceive their surroundings in three dimensions anymore. Worse, their perceptions spread as reality to everything in their sight. Traffic flows into the sky and around four-dimensional spirals, appearing to shift in time. People slip into folds between molecules and end up on the other side of town in an instant. Doors don't lead where they should and third-story apartment windows peer into underground caverns or ice cream shops. The Arisen even sense impossible disruptions in the Lifeweb. The Sworn barely dare to step outside their bedrooms (or lairs) for fear of where they might end up.
- It started as a few dozen cases of aphasia and a sudden burst of new local slang only the young seemed to understand. Then the Rosetta Society started to notice oddities in ancient texts and runes that should have been consistently translated but weren't. Now, the Awakened see the Abyss' touch bleed into their magic through their High Speech. The Forsaken can't parse the spirits' *Uremehir* anymore and Created who follow pilgrim marks end up hopelessly confused. Humans across the region have lost all ability to communicate with each other through words, as though they each speak their own individual tongue and can't comprehend any other. They seem to think that's normal, falling into a rhythm of body language and meaningful grunting without much fuss, but the Sworn work overtime to find the root cause of this new Tower of Babel before coordination and teamwork become nigh-impossible.
- One day it was all business as usual; the next, the old Prince or Winter King or hierarchy was inexplicably gone, and someone new had taken charge. Everyone else talks like it's always been this way. The orders coming down from on high demand defiance of centuries of tradition and philosophy, flagrantly abandoning the Masquerade, the Bargains, and the Lex Magica in favor of self-destructive acts that betray everything the organizations stand for while

aggrandizing their new masters and claiming the traditions have backed this behavior all along. Anyone who doesn't toe the line ends up fodder for the fervent masses to prove their loyalty with eager violence and blind fanaticism. Day by day, the Sworn's fellows inch closer to their worst selves *en masse*. They try to figure out how the Contagion wormed its way into the hearts of so many of their treasured institutions so quickly, but no one can get close to these so-called leaders. The more questions they ask, the closer they get to becoming the next examples.

- Despite the Ship of Theseus' best efforts in Odense, the God-Machine reaches a tipping point in its analysis of the situation and decrees the Contagious vampire king too dangerous for the usual treatments. It shifts the city out of phase with reality, like a mythical vanishing land. Any attempt to leave, whether by land, air, or water, deposits people in a random place elsewhere within its borders. Anyone trying to enter similarly ends up elsewhere, still outside. Worse, the world has *forgotten* Odense; it doesn't appear on maps anymore. The mind glosses over references to it in books or films, filling in some other location, and remembered history shuffles events and prominent figures to have origins somewhere else. People elsewhere vaguely recall once knowing those friends, loved ones, and colleagues who were inside the city when the Machine's veil came down, but they simply assume those folks must have moved on with their lives, and never think to try to contact them. The Sworn are among the few who remember an entire city falling off the globe — and if they can't restore it soon, the God-Machine might take its quarantine a step further and rewrite it out of existence altogether.

Tier Three

- Grandpa didn't wear his glasses when he went out driving yesterday, and an 18-wheeler sideswiped him on the highway. The doctors say he might be able to talk again in a few years, once his shattered skull finishes regrowing. Maybe by his 112th birthday! Because people just don't *die* anymore. Humans ignore questions about why dead bodies are buried in countless graveyards, accusing the Sworn who ask of nonsense conspiracy theories. Even digging up the corpses doesn't help. Vampires fear they're the last of their kind on the planet, unable to sire more childer. Sin-Eaters are at a loss to explain to ghosts why they even exist, let alone facilitate any kind of reconciliation with the living. Mummies cling fiercely to their Sekhem, unable to return to henet, while hunters fight neverending, hopeless battles. Society gradually shifts to accommodate the idea that mortality isn't, and never was, a concern. A world without death may *sound* appealing at first, but the Sworn can easily see all the horrors behind the paradise.
- Some of the Sworn still remember the air-raid sirens during World War II, and when they hear the alarms ring out across a city now from the other side of some ruptured veil, long-buried instincts kick in. The mortals seem to just accept that sometimes people die of radiation poisoning and sometimes the news reports a whole nation recently devastated, despite the lack of atomic bombs falling. Each fallout zone only exists for a day at a time at most before it vanishes, leaving another to intrude elsewhere; but anyone caught in it is stuck with their cancers and necrosis afterward. The world slowly takes on hordes of suffering refugees from the other side. The Sworn can barely keep up with the intermittent nuclear winter's erratic appearances, let alone figure out how to anticipate them, protect themselves long enough to investigate the Contagion outbreak itself, and avoid getting trapped on the other side when a rupture closes. Some suspect a rare Promethean the Created call a Zeka ignited a Contagious Firestorm that cracked reality and gave this alternate one an opening to invade.

- Pets often seem to warn their owners about threats humans can't see, but the Contagion cranks up hatred of the supernatural to absurd levels in all the beasts of the earth. The Jeremiad is endlessly smug about it as they sermonize about riders on pale horses. None of the Sworn can step outside without angry flocks of birds and relentless squirrel scurries swarming out of the trees to descend on them in a rabid fury. Even indoors, armies of ants and termites emerge from the woodwork to take revenge for centuries of pest control — but they ignore ordinary humans, gunning only for those who dwell in shadow. Werewolves, changeling Beasts, Gangrel, Jackal-Headed Arisen, Thyrsus, and others with sway over the animal kingdoms try to spread themselves out among Sworn factions to keep the peace long enough to investigate, but it's a shoddy patch job at best. Too many among the night's creatures can influence or control wildlife to easily pinpoint what kind of Contagious power or spirit might have been responsible, so the fight against this outbreak is a terrifying safari into the unknown, even in the heart of civilization.
- No one asks what time it is anymore. Bells don't chime the hour, because the concept of an hour is meaningless. The Contagion disrupts the God-Machine's circadian rhythms, and time is broken. The sun might rise for all of five minutes in a day — if a day can even be said to exist — or it might be high noon for weeks at a time. Tides shift at random, and the moon's faces turn on incomprehensible whims. Seasons come and go erratically, clocks tick backward, and pockets of accelerated time or interminable moments drift across the world like stray breezes. The Sworn don't even know how long it's been since the Contagion progressed to this point, or whether curing it would repair the damage it's done to history already. Every kind of Sworn has reasons to panic, from desperate Acanthus trying to make sense of their own magic and the temporal cancer rippling back into the past, to Forsaken whose auspices have become fluid and unreliable.
- Recently, an iceberg the size of Delaware broke off from one of Antarctica's ice shelves and floated into the ocean. Caliber was first to notice the cloud of Contagious gases pouring out of the broken ice chunk into the sky. Cryptocrats everywhere tracked the gases' global dispersion, powerless to stop it as it seeded clouds worldwide with Contagious particles that birthed storms howling with alien gray snow. In just a few short weeks, the Earth plunged into a new ice age, in which impossible blizzards from a long-lost world where the sun burnt out billions of years early carry Contagion wherever they blow. Even supernatural creatures who can normally survive extreme temperatures freeze to death after an hour or two of exposure or end up trapped in an impenetrable icy stasis. While humans bicker over climate change and who deserves the privilege of shelter as thousands die, night-dwellers see the Carriers rising from every snowbank and know it's only a matter of time before Hell really does freeze over. The Sworn's only hope is to brave the cold and dark to destroy the ancient machine at Antarctica's heart once and for all.

Running a Crossover Game

The default chronicle presented for most of the individual Chronicles of Darkness game lines only contains characters from that game. **Deviant: The Renegades** assumes all the players play Remade, for instance. You can always mix and match the character types in your game, with or without this book, but this section focuses on how to run a chronicle that includes characters from multiple game lines, outside the specific context of the Contagion.

It would be impossible to address the many intricacies of how specific powers and systems from one game interact with those of another. As the Storyteller, it's your job to make those calls. If a situation comes up in which it's not clear how a rule from one game should affect a rule from

another, always come down on the side of common sense, thematic intentions, and group fun. If a particular ruling would result in an outcome that makes no sense from a character perspective, seems counter to the point of the game, or makes the game less fun for you or a player, find another ruling. When in doubt, call for a Clash of Wills and let the dice work it out for you.

Narrative Streamlining

The greatest gift you can give yourself in a crossover game is to reduce the clutter. Each game comes with its own enormous setting, filled to the brim with antagonists, support characters, organizations, supernatural phenomena, metaphysical landscapes — the list goes on and on. If you try to incorporate all of it, you'll soon find your chronicle impossible to run. Find ways to make one narrative element play multiple roles and concentrate on aspects of the players' character sheets that tell you what they want to focus on.

When you need Storyteller characters to serve two different functions in the story, consider giving both functions to a single character to cut down on the cast. Use the Sworn and the False wherever you can to help with this; since they're crossover groups by nature, they provide good justifications for entangling the characters' various rivals, enemies, and allies.

Pay close attention to Aspirations and what the players spend their Experiences on. If the changeling character's player wants her to become Spring Queen and the hunter character's player buys dots in Conspiracy Status (Cheiron Group), focus your attention on just those things and let some other set pieces from **Changeling** and **Hunter** slip by the wayside. Use these guideposts to tie disparate pieces of the chronicle together and keep all the players invested and included by doubling up on story hooks. For instance, perhaps to become Spring Queen, the changeling must prove herself to the court by retrieving an important token; but the token fell into the hands of the local Aegis Kai Doru, who are fierce competitors for the regional Cheiron branch office.

Bringing People Together

Without the Contagion to kick things into high gear, you'll have to find other ways to get characters from different games to join up for the same ride. As before, prologues are great for this, and you can use the same streamlining method above to run those prologues in pairs. First, pair the characters off according to how easy they are to connect, either through quirks of their games' settings or details in their backgrounds, and then run a prologue for both characters at the same time that gets them working together. It's best if you can sit the players down right at the beginning and have each of them come up with a connection between their character and at least one other.

Consider which games' protagonists make good "hubs" to gather the rest, and pair them with those who might be a little tougher to hook up, like changelings, mummies, and Prometheans. Beasts are *designed* for crossover, so you can easily pair them with almost anyone; see the **Beast: The Primordial** core book for plenty of advice on combining the Begotten with other kinds of characters. It's not hard to put a hunter in conflict with any of the others and then give them a situation in which they are forced to team up to survive. You can count on the Awakened to investigate anything Mysterious they encounter — look at a mage character's initial Obsession and link another character's starting circumstances into it. A Deviant will gladly stick with someone who's a Loyalty Touchstone or can help them with their revenge, so try to pit another character against the Renegade's enemy Conspiracy somehow.

Once you've paired the characters up, you can use the Sworn, chronicle-building techniques from the various games' rulebooks, story hooks the prologues produced, non-Contagion catastrophes, and other hooks to bring the pairs together in the first game session.

Taking the Long View

The Sworn exist because of the Contagion, but that's not to say they *don't* exist without it. Each Sworn group in chapter 1 gives guidance on what its members do when the God-Machine's illness is in remission. Use those as the basis for interim stories between Contagion outbreaks, or expand on them to use the Sworn in games that don't feature the Contagion at all. Perhaps your chronicle begins with a short, tier one Contagion story, getting the characters involved with the Sworn, and then moves on to other plots from there. The Sworn have plenty to do when the Contagion isn't around, from tomb raiding and collecting objects of occult power to infiltrating governments. You can broaden each group's basic philosophy to apply to all kinds of mystical phenomena in the Contagion's absence.

Building a Mixed Chronicle

Many of the Chronicles of Darkness rulebooks come with tools to help you and your players work as a team to build the foundations for your chronicle before it starts. By combining these or expanding them to take multiple creature types into account, you can take away some of the hurdles standing between you and harmonizing the protagonists.

For example, **Vampire: The Requiem** details a system called Climbing the Ladder, starting on p. 282. It fleshes out pre-established connections between player and Storyteller characters, and alerts the Storyteller to the kinds of interpersonal drama the players are interested in. Players answer questions about pivotal moments in their characters' backstories, examining how those events impacted a character and others around them personally. The questions it asks revolve around **Vampire's** core themes. Meanwhile, **Mage: The Awakening** presents an exercise called Music Is Always, starting on p. 290. It connects characters through songs and fleshes out the associations they have with the music — and through it, with other characters and elements of their lives. Players choose songs for various kinds of connections, as a reflection of how music is a universal shared experience.

If you have a mage and a vampire in the group, try combining these exercises. Associate a song with each step on the ladder, or group the steps by the song categories and blend their themes. Make the ladder's steps and the song categories generic, so you can apply them to other characters, too. Improvise new questions for the ladder that bridge the themes of multiple games and vary up the song categories or add new ones. What if, instead of choosing a mentor figure for the "Classics and Oldies" category, a changeling character's player chose a figure from her pre-Arcadia days that she associates with the song, examining the contrast between her feelings for them before and those she has now?

Strengths and Weaknesses

Each Chronicles of Darkness game has a different approach to powers and abilities, flaws and vulnerabilities, and central conflicts both internal and external. Juggling them all in a single game can be tricky, but the key is twofold. All of those traits are there to tell a story, and players need to communicate openly with each other about what they want out of the game during character creation and throughout the chronicle.

Communication Techniques

Bottom line: a successful crossover game requires players and the Storyteller to respect each other's boundaries and actively help each other have fun. If one person feels overshadowed and wants more time to shine, you and the other players can help. Introduce situations that play to the character's strengths and unique qualities. Encourage players to use teamwork actions. Use the optional group Beat rule suggested in several of the **Chronicles of Darkness** core books. Above all, talk to each other. After each session, check in with the players and make sure everyone is still having fun — including you! If not, discuss together what everyone can do to fix that.

Changeling: The Lost Second Edition introduces some techniques for helping everyone feel comfortable communicating at the table. You can find a full discussion in the Storytelling chapter of that book, or look them up on Google, but in brief they are:

- Lines and Veils: a list of topics and situations each person is not okay with addressing in game ever, and a list of those each person is okay with addressing sometimes, but with care.
- The X Card and the Stoplight System: two visual aids allowing everyone to indicate when something in the game becomes a problem for them.
- Bleed and Debriefing: Bleed is when a character's emotions spill over onto the player and vice versa; it's not in itself a bad thing and is often a reason people play these games in the first place. However, managing bleed properly helps prevent miscommunication. Debriefing is an extended post-game check-in that helps players transition back out of their characters' mental space, which helps manage bleed.

To Each Their Own

A player chooses his character type based on the kind of experience one game line gives him that others don't. That includes fun powers and shiny benefits, but it also includes banes, frailties, Paradox, Disquiet, and being hunted by nefarious forces. Your story should highlight both sides of that coin whenever possible, so players feel their choice of character means something to the narrative. Play up how each member of the faction can shore up someone else's weakness with his strength. Let each character have at least one moment revolving around something special about his nature in each game session — whether it's finding a new Memento or getting the faction chased out of town with his Disquiet. If you like, you can ask players to always have one Aspiration along those lines, to help you keep track of them.

Don't worry about one character's strengths eclipsing the other characters' abilities. If you give each character space to be what they are, they won't. Go ahead and let the mage show off his Mage Sight, solving a Mystery in minutes that would have taken everyone else days. It doesn't take anything away from the other characters — this was the whole point of having a mage in the group to begin with! Then in the next scene you can let the changeling show off her ability to lead her friends out of danger at the drop of a hat without giving the mage any time to prepare.

Play up each character's innate weaknesses, too, so their companions can help them out. For instance, perhaps the group must get the mummy's cult out of a jam so they can summon the

Arisen back after his Descent. He won't remember the faction for a while, but in the meantime, they can try to point him at a problem like a tactical nuke. Let the characters lean on each other for the things each one excels at — let them *need* each other. Not only does it make players feel like they're meaningfully contributing, but it also helps with faction cohesion.

Some characters might have trouble using their traits to the fullest without others of their kind in the faction. Only hunters, for instance, can use Tactics; Prometheans can't form a branded throng with anyone but other Created. In some cases, you can suggest that players refrain from spending Experiences on things they won't be able to use, but in others, that would diminish the experience. As with Sworn Vectors, you can use Storyteller characters to fill in the gaps. It's best if traits on the character's sheet enable this, such as the Compact Status Merit, which a hunter can use to rally other hunters to perform Tactics with her.

Systems and Balance

Mechanically speaking, if you're looking for a way to balance the characters, you won't find one — and *that's okay*. Strictly speaking, if you put one of each type of character in an empty room and said “fight!” you would certainly find that some of them were significantly outmatched and some walked away without much effort. But no chronicle takes place in an empty room. Every situation has context, and every character brings something unique and interesting to the table. The fact that a mummy could squash a hunter like a bug in a one-on-one encounter is not only completely irrelevant to the viability of having the two in a group together, but can also *itself* be a source of story hooks — because you can bet the hunter and the mummy both know that.

In the Chronicles of Darkness, violence is a high-stakes last resort for most characters. The faction is unlikely to favor it as their go-to for every problem, and murder can't solve every problem, anyway. In fact, murder usually just creates *more* problems — which can be a great source of drama, but as the Storyteller it's your job to get the troupe on the same page about it.

The most important thing is not that each character can wield their dice effectively against every obstacle, but that each one plays a narrative role and impacts the story, and that players get what they want out of the game. They want the traits on their sheet to be relevant and useful, but you can make that happen by introducing the right story elements and letting them fill the roles they were meant to fill. A player who chooses to play a vampire is sending you a message — they want to play a game rife with interpersonal drama, bloody romance, and clinging to humanity through a monstrous lie, so give them plenty of opportunities for those things and they'll be happy regardless of whether their character can rip off the head of a Contagious nightmare with their bare hands like their werewolf buddy.

Some troupes might want to house-rule the systems to make their characters more evenly matched anyway, and if so, nobody's going to stop you. It's recommended, though, that you take care not to arbitrarily change things without considering how it will affect the play experience for all the players, just as you would when allowing the Contagion to alter powers or traits.

Involuntary Effects and the Sworn

Many games feature characters whose nature or powers have involuntary effects on others, such as a Promethean's Disquiet, a mummy's Sybaris, or the Lunacy people experience when a werewolf does something viscerally upsetting. Some creatures have innate immunity to some of these effects — supernatural beings don't suffer

much from Sybaris, for instance — but in many cases, putting disparate monsters in a room together creates problems they can't control.

If your group is fine with these involuntary effects making their teamwork harder, don't change anything. Let them fight an uphill battle to manage their collective troubles, if your players are interested in exploring the tragedy of each character's situation to its fullest. Whenever one of these effects makes things dangerous or dramatic for a character, award the player a Beat.

If the troupe would rather have an easier time of things, you can lend each Sworn group's oath or ceremony of membership a bit more mystical weight. Such rites grant a sort of attunement to those who pledge themselves in opposition to the Contagion; treat all members of the branch or chapter, all members of the same Sworn group, or even all Sworn period as being on the same "wavelength" for purposes of involuntary effects, depending on how much friction the troupe wants to deal with. Under this paradigm, hunters count as Sleepwalkers, everyone counts as Created for avoiding Disquiet, and no one loses their shit when the Forsaken shift forms.

If you'd rather come down somewhere in between, the Sworn oaths could instead grant members a Clash of Wills against these effects.

Agonism

Agonism is a concept based on good-faith conflict as the means to achieve a greater good. Even when your troupe communicates effectively out of character, a mixed faction is bound to run into internal conflict sooner or later, just like any group. Why not offer rewards for handling it well?

The following is an optional system for adjudicating in-character conflict between player characters in a way that encourages both teamwork *and* the occasional backstabbing. The more you offer Beats for players to create their own interpersonal drama on purpose, the fewer hard feelings your troupe will have if characters argue or fight.

You can easily use agonism in games without the Contagion by switching out Contagion-based criteria for ones involving whatever the group's purpose and major goals are. Replace Sworn Beats with Beats that go into a regular group pot.

Social Currency

Agonism relies on the exchange of *social currency*. Characters accumulate points of social currency through acts of support and trust, and building their reputations among the Sworn, as follows:

- Once per scene, a character can earn one point by putting herself at risk or giving something up to meaningfully aid another player character.
- Once per scene, a character can earn one point by putting herself at risk to do something that slows, hinders, or cures the Contagion, or significantly benefits her Sworn group.
- Once per scene, each character who participated in a successful teamwork action with other player characters gains one point. If a character has any points of social currency, whenever she's a secondary actor in such a teamwork action, she always adds at least one die to

the primary actor's roll even if her roll fails; if she *dramatically* fails, reduce the penalty she imposes on the primary actor's roll to -3.

- At the end of each chapter, each player awards one social currency point to someone else's character for something she did in that chapter, whether it was healing his wounds, talking him through a hard time, or just providing good banter; a character can't earn two points for the same action, however. These are usually smaller gestures than those that earn a character points from the Storyteller.
- Whenever a character (or group of characters who agree to compromise) wins a negotiation (see below), distribute all the social currency she bid evenly among the losing participants. A character who voluntarily capitulates gains one extra point, and a Sworn Beat. If all negotiating characters reach an acceptable compromise, each participant gains one point, and the group gains a Sworn Beat. The group can only earn one Sworn Beat from negotiations per scene.
- Whenever a character resolves the Trusting Condition (p. XX), she or the trusted character gains an extra point (see below).
- At the end of each chapter, each character *loses* one social currency point; a character needs to put effort into being a team player to stay in the faction's good graces.

Negotiation

Whenever two or more player characters come into conflict and the players wish to resolve it using agonism, they enter a *negotiation*. The character with the most social currency goes first; in case of a tie, go with the character with the higher Composure. The first character bids a number of social currency points he's willing to part with to assert his will. Then, each character in order of current social currency total (or Composure where necessary) has a chance to outbid the previous offer. Go around the circle as many times as it takes before the highest bid stands unchallenged. With each bid, the player must offer a new argument, a bribe, a threat, or something else to bring his opponents around, sweeten the pot, or break down convictions.

Whoever's bid is the last one standing wins the negotiation; everyone else takes back their bid points, and the winner (or winners, in case of a partial compromise, below) distributes the social currency he bid evenly among all the losing characters. Any leftover points simply vanish. Any character may, on his turn, voluntarily capitulate; if so, he withdraws from the negotiation, keeping all his social currency and gaining the benefits in the list above.

Only one character per side of a conflict may participate in a negotiation. If several characters agree on a course of action, they choose one among them to negotiate for their position. A character who wants to put forward a new position halfway through can jump in at any time.

On his turn, a player may offer a compromise instead of a new bid. If all participants accept the compromise, the negotiation ends; everyone keeps all their bid currency, and each participant gains the benefits in the list above. If only some accept it, the negotiation continues, but now all characters who accepted the compromise may pool their social currency to outbid the remainder, drawing points evenly from each character's total.

A character who has social currency invested in another participant (see below) may never spend his last point to outbid that participant. If it comes down to that, he *must* capitulate; however, he gains the same benefits for doing so as if he voluntarily gave in.

As Storyteller, you're within your rights to deny the players use of this system if they're trying to abuse it by negotiating and then deliberately "compromising" or "capitulating" to do what the whole group wanted to do in the first place. The point of agonism is to settle real conflicts between characters and reward those who take one for the team.

Don't force the use of this system in situations where the players are content to just hash things out in character through roleplay. As the Storyteller, you can suggest a negotiation, but everyone involved must agree before moving forward with it in any given scene.

Investment

A player may *invest* between one and three social currency points into another protagonist. Doing so indicates a significant level of trust. When a player invests social currency points in another player's character, the latter's character gains the Trusting Condition (p. XX) with respect to the former's character. A character may have this Condition multiple times to represent trust in multiple companions.

SNAFU Part Two

It had been a half hour since they left. The radio had remained silent. Luca was still alone. He swept the searchlight over the ground, staring out at the same patches of snow in case any tracks appeared. There was still nothing.

“All clear here,” Luca said into his headset. He tapped his heel against the ground, trying to burn off his nervous energy. “Over.”

Another minute passed. No response. Luca shut off the search light and prepared the helicopter to depart, but stopped when he heard the sound of ice cracking next to him. He looked over and saw a human shape in the darkness, looming over the pilot’s door.

“*Leave.*” His voice was sharp, clear, and enforced by the power of his blood.

The shape did not leave. Luca pulled a flashlight and the flare gun from his jacket.

He clicked on the light. “I won’t tell you again,” he said, “*Lea—*”

The creature almost looked human. Its eyes were on the edges of its face, like a hammerhead shark. It had no lips. Two large, serrated arcs of enamel sat in its mouth.

“It’s here!” Luca yelled into the headset. “We have to go!”

The shape punched the door, shattering the tempered glass.

*** [PLEASE CENTER ASTERISKS]

Aliento knew who he was as soon as he greeted them. He claimed to be Merrick Stanhope, one of the station’s lead scientists. He told them that his nosebleed was just a reaction to dry air, but she saw the misaligned, rotting organs within him. As he took them on a tour of the base, she played along, but now that they were in the base’s corridors, it was time to play her hand.

“Merrick,” she asked. “What are those side doors for?”

“Ice tunnels,” he said. “Cold storage and waste disposal. You don’t want to see those.”

She slipped a knife from her coat and pointed it at his putrid gut. “You’re right. But I do want to see who you really are. Change back.”

Merrick collapsed to the ground. His jaw dislocated and stretched to the floor in three short spurts. Blood streamed from his nose, turning from red to grey. He looked up at the team with empty eye sockets that gleamed with vitreous fluid.

“Aliento!” Walker yelled.

“You wanted recon,” she said. “This is recon.”

Mender-of-Ways bared her teeth. Aliento waved her knife at her.

“Get back. I’m going to ask it some questions.”

“Questions?” Mender-of-Ways barked. “It’s Contagious, we destroy it!”

“Did you look at those corpses, Mender? It’s not just Contagious, it’s a being of pure *Contagion*. We can learn from what it’s trying to tell us.”

“It wants us dead, Aliento,” Walker barked. “We are at *war*.”

“We don’t know that until we try talking to it.” She kept both eyes on the bleeding pile of flesh that was once Merrick. “What are you? Where did you come from?”

The creature wheezed and rattled out, “Do you really want to know?”

Someone began to pound on the side doors next to them.

“I barely remember who I was,” the Contagion hissed. “But I know what I have become.”

“Agma!” Walker pointed to the doors. “Keep those shut!”

The pistons in Agma’s legs gave him an extra burst of power as he rushed to the doors. His muscles bulged as he held them together.

The creature hacked out a cough. “I am the rot between the gears. I am the one who tears apart safe things, exposing cruelty to light.”

“Shut up!” Mender-of-Ways twisted her body, preparing to unleash the killing form.

“But your friend wanted to know where I came from.” The creature let out a high-pitched squeal.

Despite all his strength, Agma was thrown into the opposite wall as the doors flew open. Beyond them, intricately carved passages made from gleaming steel, tangled roots, and red-stained ice bore into the man-made tunnels. Shriveled, eyeless creatures on cervine hind legs dragged themselves from the mouths of the passages.

Leering with its half-formed snout, the creature pressed, “Why don’t we continue the tour?”

***** [PLEASE CENTER ASTERISKS]**

The infected horror had been strong enough to dig a claw into Luca’s belly and yank him out of the pilot’s seat, but not strong enough to pin him. The two wrestled outside in the snow, and now Luca was on top.

His attacker’s arms swelled, and its grip tightened. Luca’s own strength was failing. As it steadily dragged him, centimeter by centimeter, closer to its wide, wet, gleaming maw, Luca caught sight of the gleaming flare gun just beyond its shoulder. He slid a hand across the shape’s chest, only for his head to drop inches from its mouth, giving him a whiff of its warm, sticky breath.

The Beast inside Luca demanded retribution. Luca complied.

He let go at once, using the momentum to sink his fangs into the creature’s throat. His mouth filled with bitter, rancid fat. It melted into a thick liquid. He spat it out on the snow and ran to the flare gun.

He shot a flare into the sky and made his break for the helicopter, slamming the door and getting the engine running. As the helicopter rose into the air, he saw outlines of other shapes emerging from the ground.

“Got a lot of them heading your way,” he said. “Are you all okay down there? Over.”

There was no response. Luca shook his head.

He willed the blood within him to heal his wounds. A thick, gray liquid oozed from the lesions in his abdomen, sealing the injuries with a fusion of flesh, iron, and oak.

Luca ran his fingers over the new surface of his belly and shut his eyes.

“I’m fine,” he told himself. “*Nonna* can help me. It’s fine.”

He opened his eyes, and set course for McMurdo.

Edinburgh: Contagion of Blood

Edinburgh is a mad god's dream.

— Hugh MacDiarmid

Edinburgh sits on the south end of the Firth of Forth, a hub port to the world and capital city to the nation of Scotland. A clash between the medieval, renaissance, and modern, it is an international city of many cultures and languages set against a history that is quintessentially Scottish and British in turn.

Edinburgh has long been a center of art and heritage, boasting museums both historical and aesthetic. It is a city with its own sense of mysticism and not a little darkness. This caliginosity appears in the stark shadows spreading out under the steep, arched alleyways off the Royal Mile, a brightly lit, tourist-littered cobblestone street with the iconic Edinburgh Castle atop its craggy perch on the aptly named Castle Hill. It reaches its fingers down to Holyrood, where lies the modern built Scottish Parliament building, with the natural swell of Arthur's Seat looming in the near distance.

The streets are full of charming cafes and designer chains, one-off bistros and novelty Scottish tat peddlers. Tourists come by the busload from across the world to indulge their senses of wonder and mystery amid a setting steeped in history from pages of famous books and the silver screen alike.

However, that is only one take on the city. Delve beneath the tourist traps, the quaint civility of life in upmarket Coates and Morningside, the drug-fueled haze of Trainspotting's Leith, and the consumerist bustle of Princes Street and George Street, and look deeper. Look beyond.

The hallowed halls of the National Museum of Scotland have been showcasing several new exhibits in recent days. Now, its vaulted chambers ring with the footsteps of an exhibit the likes of which has never been seen before in this world: a mummy from another version of our Earth. As it walks, it takes with it the memory meant for others of its kind, taking it for its own and fulfilling the purpose it swore to fulfil the dreams of a Mad God.

Two forms of Contagion exist in Edinburgh. The first is carried on the fangs of vampires and the teeth of other creatures who sap the life from mortals. This blight wears a hole into the fabric of Edinburgh, allowing the second Contagion to enter in the wake of the mummy Iufenamun's arrival. The God-Machine's response is a widespread antivirus, though the antivirus may do more harm than good for the people who call Edinburgh home.

Theme and Mood

While the Contagion can express itself in obvious ways, it always leads some to question whether it is an illness or an evolution of reality. Many mummies have sought for the return of the Nameless Empire. Have those Deathless finally found redemption, stepping across the veil of life and death? Or is this the dawn of a new, darker empire — one which, if left unchecked, could reign over the world, ushering in a new epoch in the cycle of life and death?

Theme: Mystery

Through tests of faith and belief, players are called to choose between heart and mind. Will they pick a side or try to mend ancient rivalries? That the personification of Contagion in this region

is clear is not in doubt, but what does that mean? The very faith of the Sworn will be shaken as they realize the full potential of the rising of Iufenamun, “He who belongs to Amun.” Alliances between the Sworn will be strained, tested, and possibly broken by his cunning schemes. Rivalries between krewes of Sin-Eaters must be mended or ended with one proving the victor, for without them, Iufenamun’s servants will move unseen by all but the keenest eyes of the living and those Geists with enough empathy to care to warn others of the impending danger.

Characters should be prepared to face temptation of all kinds, offered by a powerful and timeless being of immense and memory-bending power. Who is prepared to offer whatever it takes to fulfil his goal of pulling his vast, Deathless estate through the cracks in reality brought about by the Contagion? Those willing and able to heal the spiritual sickness wrought by his rising must be steadfast, stubborn, sharp-minded, and prepared to master their darkest impulses and desires. For there is no boon that Iufenamun will not grant, no thirst that he will not quench, and no lust that he will not slake in payment for his prize.

Mood: Paranoia

Uncertainty, temptation, rampant paranoia. The rising of Iufenamun has brought about great debate among the Sworn. Here is a being of undeniable power who could, in time, unite the Deathless beneath his rule. He speaks of the so-called Contagion not as a curse or sickness, but as an evolution. A coalescing of realities. The strongest and purest will always crush the weak. This world is a crucible where beings are tested. If an oath asks you to be weak, you should abandon it.

Those true to their oaths will find themselves cast in the role of zealots by their opponents, unwilling to break from their dogmatic view. Those shaken and swayed by the offers of the Contagion’s emissary may face a darker fate, drawn across the horizon into the shadow kingdom to live forever at his side as Shades.

What Has Come Before

Edinburgh’s position as one of the foremost jewels in the crown of Scotland runs into ancient times, with its defensible hills and location on the south bank of the Firth of Forth. As such, it has been the site of battles, raids, and political squabbles for almost as long as it has existed. The city is a hotbed of death with its ancient dungeons and long list of famous faces who lived and died in its streets, lavish apartments, and rat-infested hovels.

Sworn factions operating in the area are aware of two krewes of Sin-Eaters, who have been openly squabbling over the wealth of Resonance in Edinburgh’s rich weave of life and death for hundreds of years. The academic and high-brow **Siege Perilous** have firm grasp on the artifacts of death coming through the universities and museums of the city, while **Asterion’s Vengeance** lurk in the dark places of the undercity and the poorer quarters, growing strong on the rampant death and disease of its squats and drug-dens. There has been a certain disquiet around the spiritual realm in Edinburgh ever since a series of Viking raids on the east coast of Great Britain brought a huge surge of Vengeful looking for justice against their Nordic slayers. After that, a series of plagues struck the city, one such occurrence wiping out almost half of the population of the city in 1645. Physicians of the age called it a spiritual sickness God wrought upon a fallen city. They were not entirely incorrect in that assertion.

The Contagion has been striking at the fabric of reality in this region for quite some time, spreading from person to person by unknown vectors. The God-Machine responds with mass

deletions at intervals throughout time, utilizing an antivirus known as the Grey (see p. XX). The city's preening society of vampires, loyal to the **Invictus**, have gossiped in their west-end salons about secret cults of their kind hidden in the underground tunnels beneath the Old Town for the past few hundred years, harboring disease and plague within their infectious bite. They argue that nobody has confirmed a sighting of the so-called **Blightfangs** since the 1645 outbreak, but the existence of such a disease it would go some way towards explaining the rapid spread of plagues in the city compared to other similar cities in the north of Great Britain, which were initially untouched by the passing of such diseases.

The city has also long been the home of several wealthy "collectors" who serve as fronts for a tripartite alliance of mummy cults. These cultists call themselves **The Triptych** and await the rising of their masters. They have been known to finance gatherings of the so-called sorcerers of the **Order of the Golden Dawn** since the days of Westcott and Mathers in the late 1880s through to the revivals of Brodie-Innes and the Amen-Ra Temple.

Where We Are

Edinburgh's Contagion runs deep into its history, and the origins of its infection come from across the sea. In the late Dark Ages through to the early Medieval period, raiders prowled the coastlines of Great Britain looking to plunder the communities of farmers and miners who ventured near the sea. At times, those raids grew organized and large enough to sack and pillage entire cities. It was one such raid that triggered the beginning of modern Edinburgh's malaise.

Cause

The raids of King Knud of Denmark (see p. XX) in 1081 devastated the population of Edinburgh. The loss of life and resources brought the city to the brink of crisis at a time when Scotland was roiled by civil conflict as well as tension with their recent Norman conquerors.

Fire, rape, pillage, and the sword were not all that the raid brought down on the city. A young woman attacked the leader of the Viking attack as he roamed the streets, as vengeance for her slaughtered family. Plunging the dagger that killed her daughter into the king's throat, she screamed like a banshee of legend and watched him stumble and fall to the ground, only to rise again with the reflection of the fires of hell in his eyes. On that day, Maggie MacMillan was killed and subsequently Embraced by the flowing blood of the wound she rent in the maddened vampire monarch. But it should not have been so. Indeed, should Knud have been there at all? Maggie became a vampire who should not be, her Kiss a mark of error upon the plans of the God-Machine. A mutant curse existed in her veins.

She retreated into the underworld of the city, living on rats and beggars, each bite spreading the contamination of reality further. Though she did not know it, she had become the first of the group that vampires would come to call Blightfangs and the progenitor of the great Contagion that would haunt the city into modern times. This Contagion, where the bite would spread traits from the carrier to the victim, led to several of the myths surrounding vampirism as a contagious disease.

As Maggie grew older, she eschewed the rising of the Invictus and continued her vigil of haunting the lower echelons of the city, preying on prisoners, drunkards and any criminal who mistook her for a sickly crone, ripe for plunder. She fed and she survived. However, survival was not enough. Maggie yearned to regain what she had lost: a family. And so, she began to watch

those on whom she preyed, those weakened and abandoned by Edinburgh's burgeoning elite. She began to feel a stab of sympathy in her unbeating heart. She Embraced a family once again, one for each of those she lost. A husband, a son, and a daughter.

Their fates were sealed by her tainted blood, cursed to forever carry the Contagion spread by Knud into the world. Within the Blightfangs, it festered. They continued to feed, each time infecting another with their viral bite and marking them with the displeasure of the God-Machine, which sent plagues and disasters upon those so marked when their numbers grew too many.

With so much death, so much altering of the programmed reality, the barriers between realities became weakened. Powerful entities in other realities detected the possibility of new realms to conquer. The Emperor of the Ashen Lands sensed a land of living beings ripe for the imposition of his undying order. His artifacts were pushed through the veil first: a scepter, a crown, and the skull-headed ankh seal symbolizing his rule over living and dead worlds. Those otherworldly objects provided an anchor for Iufenamun's spiritual power and permitted him, finally, to take form.

With his arrival, Iufenamun set about using his power to subjugate the society to which he was first exposed. He read the memories of the humans he encountered like stark letters on parchment and found their hidden desires and dark secrets. They made pacts with him and, over time, he altered their memories to sow zeal in place of fear and desire. The Cult of Iufenamun was on the rise.

The cult set about gathering information on the other forces moving within the city, finding it fractious and decadent. The followers of Iufenamun offer no less than the heart's desire of their potential ally, but threaten to inflict nightmares upon those who oppose them. This powerful mix of fear and wonder that they inspire has captured the interest of other factions inside the city as well as the Sworn who recognize the Contagion when they see it.

Symptom

The Blightfangs' Contagion is a simple one, though devastating to the bitten homeless and outcasts on Edinburgh's streets. Those infected find themselves hungering for blood and cowering from the light. Worse, if the individual who infected them — whether vampire or something else capable of feeding from living humans — dies, they explode into a violent rampage reminiscent of a vampire's frenzy. If someone infected with Blightfang dies, their corpses become breeding grounds for the Blightfang Contagion, spreading to bugs, rats, and other carrion animals. See p. XX for the **Blightfang Condition**.

The spread of the blight weakens the walls of our dimension, allowing a mummy named Iufenamun to rend a gash in his reality. Parts of it subsequently spill through to ours. His Contagion is a bleeding through of worlds, interstitial or otherwise. This Contagion manifests as the **Reality Bleed Tilt** on p. XX.

The God-Machine attempts to combat both these Contagions with the Grey (see p. XX), but this in turn creates Greyed Out areas (see p. XX). The local climate warms and a haze hangs in the air, bringing with it swarms of flies and midges to the coastal city. This unseasonal and, frankly, non-Scottish weather baffles locals and meteorologists alike, as do the greying of the sands of previously golden-brown beaches stretching from the city as far east as North Berwick. The Leith Water's flow has become sludgy and dark, even in broad daylight. Creeping tendrils of

diseased algae die by the ton on the surface of the lifeless water. Mutated, inedible fish litter the coastline. Environmentalists have taken to the streets and the City Chambers in protest and warn of the dangers this sudden change can pose. Unfortunately, global warming is definitely not the issue.

Outbreak Sites

The National Museum of Scotland: A proud old building standing between Greyfriar's Kirk and the Edinburgh Law School. The National Museum is one of the most popular and most frequently visited buildings in the city. Its vast interiors are home to thousands of artifacts and hundreds of academics working to explain just what is so interesting about each of them. It is here, where the hum and buzz of life can be felt so keenly alongside the musty air of history by those beyond the Twilight, that the first tentacles of the Contagion penetrate. Articles appear in the pages of the Edinburgh Evening News and the Scotsman, telling of rare discoveries brought for study. Those artifacts are believed to have emerged from an unknown dynasty of Egyptian pharaohs or cult of priests. Their unusual relics show a reliance on biological matter, perfectly preserved through time. A scepter, intricately carved in weird hieroglyphs from some sort of melding of bone is first; an ankh of pure gold captures the attention of the world with its luster and value, a gold-plated skull sitting atop its crest; and a crown of blackened flesh, encased in an obsidian-like resin, appears in the vaults. At first, they seem to be little more than curiosities of the sort donated by those rich loonies from the Amen-Ra Temple. Rumors of Illuminati and the Speculative Society fly, and as they do, a mummy joins the list of new exhibit artifacts in town.

Iufenamun's arrival in the museum changes it quickly. Within days of his rising, almost all of the staff have been subdued in a feast of mortal memory. Many of those security guards and academics unfortunate enough to have been around when he first strode through from his Ashen Kingdom beyond the Twilight are reduced to little more than gibbering children, stripped of all but their most basic memories. The museum's exhibits close and then the museum itself closes, ostensibly for renovations, as it is converted into a bizarre palace and temple to the new Necrarch. Monsters who previously called the museum home warn their compatriots to stay away and rouse the attention of the Sworn.

The façade of the museum remains untouched, but within lies a den of vice and spiritual corruption. The Emperor of the Ashen Lands caters to all desires and his gleaming eyes penetrate the very soul of those who petition for his favor. A writhing sea of bodies flanks the pathway to his throne in an ever-growing, ever-cavorting party. His cultists consume exotic foods and wines with vigor, and song and music fills the halls. The beautiful lie with the vulgar in an endless, blind bacchanal. Every thirst is quenched, every hunger satisfied. But as he provides, Iufenamun extracts. Guards wearing dark robes and black, veiled helms lead the revelers off to the vaults sporadically to join the ranks of their mindless brethren, the first stage of their conversion to the Dead-Swarms, shades bound to Iufenamun's will.

Surgeons' Hall: The home of the Sin-Eater krewe known as Siege Perilous, Surgeons' Hall is a stately building that formally belongs to the University of Edinburgh's campus. Its proximity to the National Museum of Scotland has served Siege Perilous well in their position as lofty academics seeking lore and access to precious historical objects. It also gives them access to a higher class of both Geists and potential Sin-Eaters.

In the time since Iufenamun's rising, the krewe within Surgeons' Hall seems to have entered a perilous siege, much like their name. The very air feels thick like that of a furnace as the

members whisper of transients and vagrants lurking outside the hall. They fear this mummy who has appeared in what they see as their territory, the halls of academia, is some sort of Trojan Horse attack from Asterion's Vengeance. They have gathered all of the texts and lore they can to their headquarters to try to understand what is happening.

Sworn groups trying to reach them find a paranoid group whose members, used to creature comforts and the space that their status affords them, suddenly have had a great deal of those resources and infrastructure pulled out from underneath them. Informants and contacts who they previously trusted have fallen silent and have been spied participating in weird ceremonies and rituals. Geists have whispered strange tales to them of shadows in the Twilight and a warm light emanating from inside the National Museum. That is, if they are welcomed inside at all. Siege Perilous are convinced that their great rivals are behind this. They will treat any new faces or strangers, particularly from the less salubrious areas of the city, with the utmost suspicion and distrust. Earning the favor of this krewe will take time and work.

The Leith Citadel and the Undercity: A fortress built on paranoia, the Leith Citadel was constructed by General Monck to ward off rebellious elements following the Battle of Dunbar and the defeat of Scottish Covenanter forces. In the modern times, very little of the original fortifications remain, save for the buildings surrounding the old Mariner's Church and the network of munitions and hospice tunnels that run beneath. It is here that the krewe known as Asterion's Vengeance make their official home. Far from the well-appointed trappings enjoyed by their rivals, these Sin-Eaters study the Resonance of the many thousands who died in rebellions, political schemes, and the poverty and plague that inevitably followed.

The network of tunnels connects with railway lines and sewer channels to form a complex maze that even the most maddened mind couldn't conceive. They are stinking, filthy rat holes where even light fears to show its face. Though, the fetid Undercity is not without life; indeed, it has an abundance of it. Drug dens punctuate every tunnel behind ramshackle doors of wood, corrugated iron and whatever sticky, pestilent residue could be found to stick it all together. The largest of these is beneath the Mariner's Church itself, in whose vaults thousands of the dead lay at rest. That hub of Resonance is the tap from which the members of Asterion's Vengeance draw their daily draught.

Sworn factions who have managed to reach them have found them to be more accepting than their more upper-crust neighbors in Siege Perilous. After all, beggars can't be choosers. But for every rumor they tell, every tidbit of information they share, there is a price. What's more, they always leave one with the impression that they may have asked the wrong question and that they certainly know far more than they've already told you. In the shadow of Iufenamun's rising, it may seem that Asterion's Vengeance are seeking to profit from his presence and are possibly in league with him, so unconcerned do they seem with the Emperor's sudden appearance. However, those who are more perceptive will note the level of activity here and that whispered conversations take place in side corridors when they are seemingly distracted. The krewe are nervous indeed and seem almost desperate to make new allies in these times when they fear they and their sacred charge may fail this ultimate test.

Edinburgh Castle: Where else would you expect to find the Lairds of Invictus? Yes, Lairds. For why would the Kindred not wear the trappings of this ancient land as affectations of their timeless Imperium? William Hay, Marquess Eternal of Tweeddale and High Laird of Edinburgh holds court here and claims it is his haven, though few believe him.

When Kindred court assemblies, it is held in one of the many grand halls, whichever is deemed to be the most suitable for the occasion. Those attending are expected to look the part, convening in their finest tartans and traditional dress. Hay takes all of this in from the perch of his ornate seat, where the obsequious Lairds and Ladies of the outer fiefdoms bow and scrape for his favor.

Though the Invictus see the rising of Iufenamun as little more than an interesting development in terms of its implied challenge to the dominion of the Triptych, several Sworn Kindred believe that the hated pack of vampires known as the Blightfangs hold part of the key to Iufenamun's rising and returning him whence he came. If one is to learn more of that fetid stain on vampire society, one could do worse than to start here.

The Amen-Ra Temple: The tombs of the Triptych lie here. Their temple is hidden beneath an old church building in the shadow of Edinburgh Castle, which is the site of a modern-day café. The site has been the home of the Amen-Ra Temple and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn since the mid-19th century. Since then, great philosophical and artistic minds from across the world have come to engage in metaphysical discussion and take in the collections of writings and artifacts gathered by some of the most well-to-do intelligentsia the British Empire and their intellectual descendants have to offer.

The temple's location by the castle and the more famous Camera Obscura keep it hidden in plain sight. Its more famous neighbors take most of the tourist traffic away, save those looking for a hot drink on a cold day in some splendid surroundings. Even those who are initiated into the first levels of the Order come to know it as little more than a gathering place where minor rituals are conducted and deeper secrets lie.

If one descends the spiral stairwells past those strange glyphs and markings and speaks the proper intonations of key words to the unseen guardians of the portal, one finds oneself in the presence of the Triptych, the three Arisen whose alliance holds sway over the city's cultural and aesthetic heart. For the Maa-Kep, the seemingly young and industrious Siptah currently stands awake as part of an ancient agreement between the Judges who bound their fates together to fulfil their joint purpose. Beside Siptah, the other two mummies he calls his Oath-Siblings are the beautiful and bright-eyed Mesen-Nebu, Kasmut, and the stern and serious Sesha-Hebsu, Amenemope.

Their tomb is well-guarded by the higher orders of their tomb cult and whichever is the Arisen member of the Triptych at the time. They are protected from intrusion by mystical forces enshrined there by the three over the centuries in which they have operated there since their arrival in the late 1800s.

The temple is currently undergoing a crisis, though the Triptych's cult tries to hide it from the outside. Something has broken the cycle of rising and caused all three members of the Triptych to rise at the same time. Not so strangely, this mythical moment in history seems to have accompanied the arrival of Iufenamun in the National Museum. No Sworn or False know whether the new arrival has reached out to his potential rivals, but a trip to the temple to glean the knowledge of the Arisen would seem to be a useful first step for any Sworn investigating the Contagion in the city.

Story Hooks

- Tourists taking the Ghost Walk have often reported feeling uneasy and have even seen spectral figures on their tours through Edinburgh's dark, foreboding alleyways. However, when

tour guides start reporting hearing the thundering of a gavel and a roaring, booming voice proclaiming them “GUILTY!” echoing around Advocate’s Close, that is altogether more interesting. Sin-Eaters say a Geist taking on the exact persona of Lord Advocate Sir James Stewart lingers there. They’ve also heard that the Geist claims to have information about the strange shapes lingering in the city’s ghostly underworld.

- Fear spreads among the Kindred community as another blood borne pathogen seems to have struck in the Gorgie area, close enough to the vampire-run clubs and salons to worry them. They reach out to the protagonists with a lead. The Blightfangs are targeting late-night foot traffic around Tynecastle Stadium. After an hour of boredom, one of protagonists smells a foul stench on the air and spies a small, shambling shape moving down a nearby alley.

- After receiving a gilt invitation to the Court of the Emperor of the Ashen Lands, the protagonists arrive at the closed National Museum of Scotland to be greeted by sights of extreme indulgence, decadence, and pleasure. As their host entertains with the group, one of them manages to slip away and follow one of the guards escorting a reveler from the room. As the door to the vaults is opened, the overpowering stench of excrement and rot hits their nostrils, causing them to struggle not to vomit as the guard turns his head, sure he just heard a sound.

- The twilight war between Siege Perilous and Asterion’s Vengeance is a thorn in the side of the Sworn. While the Vengeance seem more willing to talk, it is Siege Perilous who might have the access and contacts necessary within the academic community to get the protagonists close to one of the relics of Iufenamun. A friend in the university community promises a meeting with one of the krewe’s members, but as the protagonists arrive, it quickly turns out to be a trap. The members of Siege Perilous accuse them of conspiring with Asterion’s Vengeance to infiltrate their stronghold.

- Elements still loyal to the Triptych Cult have been monitoring the National Museum. They report that Iufenamun himself walks abroad in search of new allies in the city and from among its mortal hierarchy, though they report that he does not travel with artifacts in tow. A daring raid is planned, whereby a Sworn faction may enter through Undercity tunnels into the vaults of the museum itself and seek out the artifacts binding the Necrarch during one of his charm offensives. But to do so, they must strike a deal with Asterion’s Vengeance.

- The Sworn’s base of operations comes under attack from a lone werewolf who rants that they are agents of chaos seeking to disrupt the order that Iufenamun can bring to the world. Though they defeat him with their combined efforts, he laughs through bloodied, clenched fangs and informs them that they are foolish to believe that the other factions in the city don’t see what he sees. “They will betray you. They are creatures of desire and there must always be... sacrifice... to achieve your desire...”

- The Lairds of Invictus offer the Sworn a chance to win their favor. A small group of Kindred were dispatched to seek out reported sightings of the Blightfangs but have not returned. Sources indicate they had been searching the area around the Blightfangs’ rumored old haven in the Diplomatic Quarter in Haymarket. Secrecy and silence is of the utmost importance, but if the Sworn can purge any infected Kindred left there and heal or destroy any mortals blighted, they will win the full support of the Marquess-Eternal of Tweeddale.

- The rising number of midges in the city’s coastal areas is making it difficult to track the Blightfangs. The bites of millions of tiny pests spread the Blightfang Contagion as easily as they

do the Grey, making for a virus-antivirus war with devastating consequences. Despite this obvious threat to the health of the citizens, it seems Iufenamun's influence has taken root in the City Chambers, resisting any talk of curfews or efforts to battle back the insects. The Sworn resolve themselves to find out which of the local councillors or departmental officers are members of the Necrarch's Cult and either remove them from office or silence them permanently.

In the Court of Iufenamun

While the very land, air, and water of the city seem to be changing since the arrival of the Emperor of the Ashen Lands, there are also the beginnings of subtle changes to the supernatural gifts and curses of some of the denizens of the city as well as a mysterious plague that seems to have returned from the past to haunt the city once again.

Mummies

The Arisen here have all awoken at once, summoned forth by the rampant violence and bloodshed spreading throughout the city. Each is suspicious of the other, as the Judges would surely not have awoken them if one of the others had not broken their part of the Triptych Alliance. The new arrival is feeding on the very memories of the people he encounters and other Arisen seem even more vulnerable to this effect, their memories slowly fading away as the days pass by.

Mummies in Edinburgh can sacrifice a dot of Memory to gain three Sekhem; however, if they do so, this point of Memory is taken by Iufenamun, who can use it in the same way himself or use it to gain an insight into the workings of his foes. If exposed to the Grey, a mummy also loses one Memory in that 24-hour period. Mummies who reach zero Memory wither and crumble into dust, their essence drawn into the Ashen Lands as a servant of Amun.

Sin-Eaters

Sin-Eaters in Edinburgh have noticed the arrival of vaguely humanoid clouds of shadow in the Twilight. These are the Dead-Swarms, servants of the Emperor of the Ashen Lands. Only Geists can perceive them when they are not possessing a mortal vessel, at which point they can be perceived by any ability that detects possession. They appear as a cloud of darkness with several glowing, green eyes floating within it as if it were liquid. Dead-Swarms do not possess any of the usual abilities of fully-fledged Sin-Eaters; they have merely enough presence in the Twilight to possess mortals and control their actions for a single scene. Vessels possessed in this way retain their previous stat blocks but will act as a physical manifestation of the Dead-Swarms. Once the Dead-Swarm leaves or is forced to leave a vessel, it suffers from the Grey (see below). Dead-Swarms can use the possession action once every turn but not in the same turn as they leave or are forced to leave a vessel. Dead-Swarms lack the potency of will necessary to possess or control supernatural creatures.

Sin-Eaters within the city limits find it difficult to sleep at night. They hear a howling wind and the groans of billions of dead souls, which grows stronger the closer they are to the National Museum of Scotland. They must make a Resolve + Composure roll in order to through the night without awakening. If they fail the roll, they suffer -2 dice to any rolls they make during the following day's scenes. If they fail dramatically, this becomes a -3 dice.

Despite this disadvantage, all checks made to commune with or view creatures across the Twilight are automatically successful due to the weakening of the barrier between the lands of the living and the dead.

The Grey

Any mortal possessed by the Dead-Swarms or any mortal bitten by one of the God-Machine's bugs — generally mosquitoes and midges, but sometimes spiders and earwigs — contracts the Grey. The God-Machine uses this antivirus to eradicate Contagion-infected Infrastructure and people. Supernatural creatures bitten by a Blightfang must succeed on a Stamina roll or become a carrier of the Grey, though it does not affect them as it does mortals.

Any mortal infected with the Grey find their skin tone fading even as their skin cracks as if turning to sand, though the Blightfang Contagion disappears instantly. Inky fluid fills their veins as blood is corrupted from within. After a week, the mortal becomes a statue of ash that disintegrates at the slightest touch or a strong breeze.

Vampires who feed on someone infected with the Grey become carriers, carrying the antivirus to Blightfang. While this has no effect on their health, it marks them as a pariah in Kindred society and all Invictus members (and indeed, Sworn) are likely to hunt them down and destroy them, as while Blightfang is an awful disease, the Grey actively kills its host. Like infected mortals, vampire carriers of the Grey are easily spotted by the blackened veins running across their skin and their cracked, ashen lips, though they do not manifest the final phases of the disease.

Abilities that purge disease or illness from a mortal can reverse the Grey within them, but not in supernatural creatures. The number of dice rolled to purge the disease decreases by 1 for every day the mortal has been infected.

This God-Machine move is a kill-or-cure tactic, and while the Grey eliminates any strain of Contagion with which it comes into contact, it spreads beyond its hosts and depletes the land itself of life. See the **Greyed Out Tilt** on p. XX.

[REMINDER: MUMMY STAT ARRANGEMENT MAY CHANGE FOLLOWING MUMMY: THE CURSE 2E FINAL DRAFT]

lufenamun

“Open your heart. Open your mind. For what you desire, there must always be a sacrifice.”

Concept: Seductive Overlord

Virtue: Generous

Vice: Coercive

Decree: Sheut

Guild: Su-Menent

Judge: Amun, The Hidden One

Attributes: Intelligence 4, Wits 5, Resolve 5; Strength 3, Dexterity 4, Stamina 5; Presence 5, Manipulation 6, Composure 5

Skills: Academics (History of the Ashen Lands) 4, Computer 0, Crafts (Pottery) 5, Investigation 2, Medicine 5, Occult (Rituals of Amun) 5, Politics 4, Science 1, Athletics 2, Brawl 3, Drive 0,

Firearms 0, Larceny 1, Stealth 3, Survival 1, Weaponry (Scepter) 5, Animal Ken (Horses) 4, Empathy 5, Expression 4, Intimidation 5, Persuasion 5, Socialize 4, Streetwise 2, Subterfuge 6

Pillars: Ab 3, Ba 4, Ka 4, Ren 5, Sheut 5

Affinities: Fated Soul, Blessed Soul, Ancient Horror Unveiling, Blessed Panoply, Charmed Lives, Steps Unseen, Death'sight, Eternal Legend, God'sight, Living Monolith, Soul'sight, Voice of Conscience, Voice of Temptation

Utterances: Awaken the Dead, Chthonic Dominion, Dust Beneath Feet, Kiss of Apep, Rebuke the Vizier, Words of Dead Hunger

Willpower: 10

Memory: 10

Sekhem: 10

Size: 6

Health: 11

Defense: 6

Merits:

- Cult (The Cult of Amun become more widespread as the chronicle progresses)
- Eidetic Memory (Unlike other Arisen, Iufenamun remembers all memories he consumes, even those he sacrifices to regain his Sekhem)
- Enigma 5 (Iufenamun is not of this world)
- Language (Iufenamun has absorbed several European languages through his servants)
- Relic 7 (Iufenamun bears two 2-dot relics — his Scepter of Bone and Ankh of Amun — and a 3-dot relic, the Crown of Shadowflesh)
- Tomb 0 (Iufenamun seeks to convert the National Museum of Scotland into his Tomb by continuing to weaken the barriers of reality within it; at the start of play, he has no Tomb)

Master of Memory: Iufenamun is the foremost servant and Scion of the Hidden One, Amun. He can cloud the minds of his enemies and allies alike with the shadow that shrouds his dark master and rob the very memories from them.

Iufenamun may spend a point of Willpower and consume 1 point of Memory from a human or supernatural creature per round, which he may convert into Sekhem or keep for his own benefit. 1 Memory point amounts to 10 years of life for non-mummy characters. As other creatures do not possess a Memory trait, any non-mummies are treated as starting with 5 Memory, plus 1 for each additional decade of life they might have lived already up to a maximum of 10. Characters who surrender their Memory in this way lose any knowledge or information they gained during the time in question. Memories drained in this way always affect the most recent memories first. Mortals drained of all Memory become like babies, unable to remember even the most rudimentary of skills.

Supernatural creatures attacked with this ability must gain 2 successes on a Resolve + Composure roll to resist the drain.

When spending Memory to regain Sekhem, use the following table.

[THIS IS A TABLE]

Creature type Sekhem Gain (Per Memory Point)

Human 1

Non-Mummy Supernatural 2

Mummy 3

[END TABLE]

After taking the memory of an individual, Iufenamun may spend a point of Sekhem and alter the memory to suit his agenda. This process takes one turn per Memory point to complete and cannot be used if Iufenamun has already used his turn to do something else. The Memory point is then returned to the target.

The Scepter of Bone (Regium 2 — Unbreakable): Iufenamun's Scepter is a pure white and intricately carved piece of bone, inlaid with gold scrollwork depicting weird, alien hieroglyphs that even the most learned scholar in the languages of ancient Egypt cannot decipher. When he holds it, they glow with a sickly green hue.

Power: The scepter is the weapon of choice of the Necrarch and any 10s Iufenamun rolls when attacking with it count as 2 successes. While wielding the scepter, Iufenamun can choose to spend a point of Sekhem to automatically succeed on any Strength based roll or win a contested Strength roll.

Curse: Those who hold the scepter are perverted by its makers' hatred for all life. While carrying it, a character must succeed on a Resolve + Composure roll or they will lash out at the nearest living creature to them with it. Even if successful, the bearer can feel the burning desire to end life flowing through them. Iufenamun is immune to this effect.

The Ankh of Amun (Amulet 2 — Unbreakable): A golden cross set beneath a blackened skull that continually weeps a drifting rain of ash and shadow from its hollow eyes. The Ankh of Amun is the symbol of the God-Judge's favor upon his servant and allows him to command a fraction of his Sheut.

Power: The bearer of the Ankh may choose to step through an area of shadow into which she can fit and emerge from another within 100 feet of his location. Furthermore, the bearer can spit a series of harsh syllables and cause the ankh to temporarily blind one creature for d10 rounds.

Curse: When wearing the Ankh, the bearer suffers from extreme photophobia, so much so that they must spend a point of Willpower to simply step into the light of the sun. Iufenamun is immune to this effect.

The Crown of Shadowflesh (Level 3 Relic): The crown is terrifying to behold, even without knowledge of its power. It is a tall object, rising a full two feet from the head of its wearer and wreathed in a foul-smelling black ichor that holds together pulsating strands of dead flesh and throbs with an unceasing heartbeat. Forged from the discarded flesh of a million Dead-Swarms, the crown represents the Necrarch's ascendancy over the world of the living.

Power: Anyone attempting to attack the wearer of the crown must first succeed on a Resolve + Composure roll at -2 dice or else spend the turn recoiling in horror from her ghastly visage.

Additionally, it can be used to summon a whirling mass of shadow around its wearer, allowing her to fly up to 50 feet per turn in any direction. The wearer can also smite their enemies with the fury of the dead legions of the Ashen Lands. She spends a point of Sekhem and cries out “For Amun!”, inflicting 3 lethal damage to a single target or splitting the damage between two or three targets at her whim. She must be able to see the targets and encompass them within a single wave of her arm.

Curse: The wearer of the Crown appears repulsive to any viewer, reducing their Presence to 0. Iufenamun is immune to this effect. Furthermore, all Dead-Swarms instinctively know the location of this artifact and are drawn to its use.

Cure

The rising of Iufenamun is seen by many as an opportunity, but the Sworn almost universally see it as a threat. Unfortunately, to the False, Iufenamun is the ally they need. He is not only a being of great power, capable of challenging the Sworn, but one who can seemingly remake a person’s very core personality with his Memory-altering abilities. While this poses undeniable problems to those seeking to contain and halt the Contagion gathering in Edinburgh, it also makes the cause of the problem obvious to all but the most deluded or warped minds. Iufenamun must be stopped, that much is clear, but how to do so is different depending on whom you ask.

The Cryptocracy

The Blightfangs serve as proof of our beliefs. It strikes at the poor and downtrodden, all while this new arrival mummy promises the infected milk and honey if they will only submit to its creeping tendrils. Stopping it requires a keen blade to first cut away the defenses of the Contagion before it can be cured. The influence it exerts on the structures of the city must be purged to pursue a united front against the clear target.

Negotiating a truce between the Sin-Eaters of the city would be a useful first step, allowing us to obtain access to the knowledge needed to understand just how this happened. Though the Deathless are, at their core, beings who understand the need for order and structure, perhaps there are others within the city who can lend further understanding of this seemingly rogue member of their number.

— Oscar Huang, Cryptocrat of the Long Night

The Jeremiad

Could there be a clearer expression of Hell on Earth than this? A heathen god attempting to invade our world?

This is nothing short of an invasion by unclean spirits from a realm of utter chaos and death. It must be halted with all zeal and speed. Our agents will meet this threat head on, contacting the faithful who share our beliefs. The Kindred of Edinburgh may not be as pliable to such notions as say the Lancea et Sanctum, but those of such age must surely accept the truth.

We must root this out with fire and sword. There is no time to question, no time to negotiate. Anyone who refuses to fight in this righteous crusade is an obstacle to be overcome. If the Sin-Eaters refuse to assist us in this sacred charge, they too may need to be trampled underfoot to allow the righteous side to come to the fore and fight against the common enemy.

We will start with these so-called Blightfangs, track them, gain knowledge of their origins and put each and every one of them to the torch until this counter-plague we call “the Grey” is also expunged from the pages of history forever.

— Sister Lily Fisher, Fanatic of the Iron Masters

The Rosetta Society

Iufenamun is a great opportunity for the Society. Here is one who may be sinister in motive, but at least is willing to participate in conversation. It is far easier to study one who answers back than a mindless abomination, after all.

The Siege Perilous told us of the arrival of three artifacts that seem to be linked to the Contagious mummy. Perhaps if we can get our hands on them, we can understand what bizarre power sits behind it. Unravelling the will of a machine is impossible if you do not first understand the code.

We will seek to enter this cult and gain what insight we can, perhaps even convince one of the Triptych to join us in entreating with the self-styled Nocrarch.

Rumor has it there may be an entrance into the museum through the vaults. We are certainly more than patient enough to discover it, unlike some of our rivals in this pursuit. I just hope the Jeremiad haven't burned the place to the ground before we get there, but even if they do, it's likely that they'll leave behind all sorts of interesting things of no real use to such closed-minded zealots.

— Mr. S, Exegete of the Frankenstein

The Ship of Theseus

The arrival of this mummy from another world is terrifying, though perhaps it will lead to a new stagnation. If this outbreak can be slowed and controlled, perhaps it could be used to our advantage.

The infiltrations of the Cult of Amun seem to have disrupted the organization around Siege Perilous, and so we shall reach out to Asterion's Vengeance. Their lack of a rigid structure of leadership far better suits our outfit than the musty pyramid hierarchy of their rivals. They can get us close to the cult. Once in, we can gut it from the inside out.

When the cancer is burned out, it will allow for new and better growth. This isn't a true sickness, it's a test; we can adapt and survive or continue as we are and die.

— Dr. J.A. Navarro, Thesean of the Cheiron Group

Zero Hour

Well, this is about as clear as it gets. An unknown god-emperor from beyond time has come to rule us from beyond the grave. What more do you want to hear?

From what this Iufenamun is doing, it's clear he cannot complete whatever his plan is on his own; he needs his lackeys covering the bases for him. So, that's where we'll hit. While others see the cult as unfortunates who have been manipulated or enchanted by this being, we know what they really are: just more flies around the shit.

We hear some of the other factions have sent agents to study this outbreak. Maybe they'll have ideas of what's causing this and we can trace it right back to its source. If the Grey goes back as

far as they say it does, Iufenamun's just the outcome, not the cause. The God-Machine is the real danger.

— Red Locks, Operative and Saboteur

The Crucible Initiative

Like in America, when the first Europeans came, they brought more than guns and horses with them. This one seems to go back even before our founding.

Zero Hour have the right idea in Edinburgh. I don't think there's much else for this but fire. All of those suffering must be quarantined, along with their property, their areas of activity, and any effects they carry.

These Blightfangs are almost all Kindred, and patient zero might still be around and among them. We should start there, but before we cut off that particular festering appendage, we had best be sure. They may not be the source after all.

— Master Stone, Fire-Bearer and Undertaker

The Machiavelli Gambit

Iufenamun's order certainly doesn't seem to be one we can get on board with. I mean, what's the point in ruling over nothing? It doesn't do to simply rush in and take his toys away because you're so desperate to save yourself that you can't see the opportunities when they present themselves.

If there is a long-term plan for this world, it's going to be in places like this. Such an international place is an influencer for so many others. As the old order falls, a new one can take its place.

I think we'll help the others take down the Cult of Amun, sure. But when they're gone, we have just the right people to replace them, and they have some wonderful ideas for this city.

— Yasmin "Pearl Diver" Hess, Svengali of the Ivory Claws

Naglfar's Army

Iufenamun is right about one thing: all desire requires sacrifice.

We do not know what the purpose of the Triptych ever was, but our contacts tell us they are all awake for the first time in a century. A perfect opportunity. The Deathless are often loathe to trust each other, and three under one roof is certainly a crowd.

It's ironic really. They say that they once held an empire that spanned the world. How fitting it is that their kind should usher in the next one.

— "Carl", Saturnalian Strix

Rumors in Edinburgh

- Some kids in Meadowbank say they can hear the weeping of an old woman coming from the ruins of St. Anthony's Chapel after dark, but they're too afraid to go look.
- The swingers' parties in the Amen-Ra Temple are getting quiet lately. The girl I was with last week says she's found a much better crowd in the National Museum.

- Packs of werewolves are coming in from the countryside. They're panicked by these new spirits spreading the Grey around the city.
- They say Marquess Hay loves old whiskey and loves people who have a knowledge of it even more, especially since he can't exactly drink it anymore.
- A homeless guy and some crazy academic from Surgeons' Hall have been doing something to the graves in Greyfriars Kirkyard. The police think they're a modern-day Burke and Hare.
- The curator of the Egypt Exhibit in the National Museum of Scotland has been reported missing by her husband. Museum staff claim she left work but never made it home.
- Asterion's Vengeance are suffering from the Grey down in the Undercity. They've got all of their eyes and ears out looking for a cure.

Odense: Contagion of Emotion

Man is by nature a social animal; an individual who is unsocial naturally and not accidentally is either beneath our notice or more than human. Society is something that precedes the individual. Anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god.

— Aristotle

The Scandinavian city of Odense has long gone undisturbed. As the preeminent state of the region, hundreds of years of peace and reservation pave the way for what is considered a crime-free haven for both mortals and monstrous creatures. Sadly, a new dawn is upon Odense, and it is awakening something long dormant. An aggressive disease dwells within the city borders, infecting emotion and mind.

The Odense setting explores a terrifying phenomenon of divine writ gone wrong. The God-Machine chose a soul to accomplish a task and then perish, but that soul in turn chose not to die. This location slowly succumbs to a Contagion allowed to seep through holes in Infrastructure, destroying not only the lives of citizens but the place they inhabit. The only thread of hope remaining lies in the groups of Sworn and False situated in Odense, who seek to either gain control over or cure the illness before it disposes of everything the city was and will grow to be. Few facts can be stated about an unknown disease, but the annihilation of the city and everything it holds is certain if someone does not treat or destroy the Contagion.

Theme: Regression

The Contagion in Odense unfolds as a destructive change in both occult and mortal behavior. The Scandinavian social sphere, often distant, sometimes cold, is undoubtedly a part of Danish social behavior. It is indeed common sense for a people living in colder climate to seek comfort inside the warmth of their homes. However, an unnatural change influences the creatures of Odense; something that cannot be blamed on climate or culture. It is something only the Sworn and False can see. Not only is it destroying Infrastructure in Odense and the mentality of its citizens, it is *spreading*. With every step taken in pursuit of change in the city, Contagion pulls it two steps back, locking it in place. Infrastructure in Odense is falling apart at the seams, and even Angels are removing themselves from the city, deeming it doomed. Some stay back, frantically trying to repair the holes and blocking entree ways for Contagion, but as they close one hole, two more open. Neglect is beginning to swallow the old city.

Mood: Isolation

Characters find themselves in a once lively city which now lies almost barren. Where streets once buzzed with cars, tourists clustered in groups, students relaxed after school, and couples held hands, now only silence remains. Cafés and restaurants which, until the changes occurred, had people lining up to enter, are now struggling to cover their costs. Teachers show up to half-empty classrooms and workplaces have record sick-leave absences. The people of Odense are not only disappearing from their social circles, they are disappearing into themselves. Pensioners wastes away in their apartments as nobody visits, leaving them to their own demise. Children are forgotten in kindergartens and with child-minders, as their parents simply forget about their existence. The city is overtaken by an eerie, omnipresent silence, only disturbed by the sharp

tones of the cathedral bell and the occasional footsteps of a person scurrying across the street. More often, the few pedestrians who do go out scamper close to the walls like a fleeing prey. Most noticeable is not the lack of people, for they are indeed still to be found in supermarkets, shopping malls, and other large, communal areas, but the clear signs that they do not wish to be around each other. It is as if they exist socially in body, but are completely detached in mind. They only do what is the bare necessity for survival, such as attending work and gathering food, before they disappear into their homes, at least in the earliest stages of infection. From there, it only becomes worse. The question beckons: Why is the Contagion taking this form in Odense and what, or who, is fueling its fire?

Handling Depression

The Contagion as a depressive symptom is an insidious and dangerous antagonist, and just as with depression lacking Contagion's presence, is an invisible foe. Sometimes, the only people aware of the condition's effect are those enduring its attack. The seriousness of depressive illness cannot be understated, and just as in our world, it varies its strikes between those that wear down and those that crumple the sufferer in one hit.

Depression is a serious condition. It is in Contagion's nature to exacerbate and mutate existing illnesses to carry its own agenda. Do consider the portrayal of Contagion you intend to make for your players. Be sensitive to the realities of the condition, be aware of your players' comfort levels, and play with this strain of Contagion thoughtfully.

What Has Come Before

Nestled within the heart of Denmark, beginning at the Fjord of Odense, and ending within the heart of Fyn, lies the city of Odense. Built from the same soil that grew the oak trees used to craft Viking skeids and vitalized by the flow of water in Odense stream, Odense remains a treasure trove of historic findings.

To this day, with but a little effort, one can still hear the footsteps of ancient warrior kings, medieval orders of nuns and monks, and great wordsmiths on the timeworn, cobbled streets. Indeed, those who choose to explore this city will inevitably be met with stories of times and glories past. In crooks and corners hide statuettes of unsung Danish heroes, forgotten in the minds of Odenseanere, but their spirits still weave among the chimneys and cathedral towers. Grandiose rectangular ponds and copper statues remain in the King's Garden, and Odense castle connects directly with Saint Hans Church, reminding every passerby of the abundance once contained within Denmark's former royal seat.

Towering over every rooftop and tree crown stands Odense Cathedral, church and resting place of Knud the Holy, safely cocooning what is believed to be the last calcified remains of the iron-willed king and his brother Benedict within its archaic monastic walls. Standing tallest is the northern tower of the cathedral, within it the grand bell echoes, its somber and omnipresent vibrations reaching even the ever-expanding city borders and newer parts of the city.

The Ancient Odense

The name "Odense" dates to documents from 988 CE, which describe the city as the fourth diocese of Denmark. However, the excavation of the ringfort on Nonnebakken, in what is now

the city-center of Odense, dates the city older. Tales of Viking ships sailing the stream of Odense and Harald Bluetooth's visitations in the old city are still whispered in the cold winter nights. As tourists and residents alike pass into the oldest part of the city, a verdigrised bronze statue of Knud the Holy, standing with sword in hand, keeps watch. Crowned during the transition period from Viking Age to the early Middle Ages, Knud the Holy is one of the first stories to embed Odense into Denmark's history and is the reason Odense experienced rapid growth in the early 13th century. Born in 1043 CE, as son of Svend Estridsen, Knud Estridsen ruled Denmark. At the height of his principedom, Knud lead his father's fleet into raids on England and joined the crusades into the Holy Land. He was a warrior monarch, and one who, for a time, drew the love and awe of his people. He enriched his land, brought new prosperity to the Danes, and cut a fine figure as king. Alas, as is often the way for men who live by the sword, he died a bloody death.

The murder of Knud took place in Odense Cathedral. The king had gathered the entire Danish fleet on the west coast of Jutland, in the pursuit of once again raiding Edinburgh. Despite the king not appearing at the coast, he did not allow the peasants to return home, as they needed to ready themselves for the impending attack. This left many starving in the harsh Nordic winter. Chased by rebels, Knud fled from Jutland to Fyn, where he sought refuge in Odense's biggest church. His plea for sanctuary fell on deaf ears; his own men murdered him as he knelt before the church altar, a sword piercing his ribs. His people ripped the country from his hands in a grisly act of regicide.

His undead figure was first seen nearly six hundred years later in 1664 CE and reappeared several times throughout a period of five years. Knud gained status as a local legend. The story of the corpse-figure with a gaping wound in its side was used as a warning for children not to roam the city streets after dark. Many descriptions from mortal eye witnesses exist, but none describe having contact with the ghostly remains of the king. Sightings of Knud disappeared from written texts for a time span of 150 years, before they reappeared in historical documents in 1889 CE. Description changed from an isolated entity to a horrifying blood-sucking monster, leeching on persons who dared walk the cathedral grounds at night.

Not only did the king reappear several times in the last century, but his appearances seemed to correlate with outbreaks of what was first described in 1664 CE as "a possession of the mind." A letter written by a Bone Shadow named Ole Worm to his son in 1665 CE describes how the illness affected his wife: "It is almost as if she has forgotten how to exist. No longer will she engage in conversation with the other women at the well. She seems afraid to be in my presence. My son, the light of life has gone from your mother's eyes." Few official documents describing the illness exist from this time period. However, several letters and diary entries tell of family members' distress at seeing the personality of their loved ones change so rapidly. People stopped talking, drinking together, or meeting. Though historians never picked up on it, the Contagion resulted in the number of inhabitants in Odense increasing by only 250 between the years 1666 and 1701 CE.

The illness reappeared in the late 19th century. Unintentionally, King Christian IX set forth a decree that acted as a temporary Cure to Contagion. The law commanded everyone with a "disordered soul" to work hard and ethically, be responsible before God and the Fatherland, and maintain familial unity. Mental asylums in Roskilde and Risskov were on the brink of bursting with patients and a wave of fear washed over Denmark, crippling its infrastructure and economy to the point where King Christian nearly declared Denmark bankrupt. Only as his law took hold,

forcing people to mingle and throw off the pernicious effects of Contagion, did the possibility of revolt subside.

The legend of Knud the Holy, as either a walking corpse or a blood-thirsty monster, is now considered an old wives' tale, and modern historians frequently overlook the reoccurring disease of the mind. Yet, the number one topic of several urban explorer websites and paranormal blogs is: "Has the ancient king risen from the grave?" Sightings of a pale creature with lifeless eyes staring out through the cathedral windows are exploding in number. Some vloggers even seem to have caught something resembling that of a crowned being lurking in the dark, empty city streets.

Where We Are

Contrasting bygone monuments of worship and tell-tale marks of frivolous spending of kings, the newer part of the city stands in its simplicity and neo-Nordic composition. Odin's bridge, a modern addition connecting the harbor to the city center, challenges the cathedral tower's height and utility. Reflective metals and airbrushed glass dominate waterfront high-rises, decorated with modern chalk drawings and solar-powered LEDs. Attracting Odense's youth, former warehouses reserved for storage have been refurbished and transformed into exclusive night spots and art galleries.

Until recently, roads divided Odense's newer and older areas, easing access for drivers but ripping apart the links of past and present. This division will soon belong to history alongside kings, fortresses, and monasteries. A new unknown force of revision awakens the city, re-suturing wounds and once again uniting past and present. The biggest sign of this is the removal of the main road, which will suture the old and new parts of the city that have been separated for decades. How will the clash of old and new influence a dormant city, and the creatures inhabiting its cellars and wandering its pavement? What is fueling the change, and more importantly, why now? And finally, what slumbering beasts will awaken when their nests are disturbed?

Knud's rule was not the only reason Odense prospered from his existence, which was not coincidental. Through use of many angels, the God-Machine manipulated Knud to ease Denmark's transition from its traditional Ásatrú faith to Christianity. The reasoning behind it doing so is entirely alien, but demons who know the legend assume it was as a method of exerting control. The God-Machine appeared (at least at the time) to favor the organized structure of the burgeoning Christian faith. The God-Machine likely chose him because his royal creed provided him with enough power to alter and change both Denmark and the immense influence it had over Scandinavia. But Knud's miraculous reappearance in the city hundreds of years after his death ripped a hole in the God-Machine's Infrastructure, leaving a gaping wound into which infectious Contagion spread. He was supposed to die a martyr, not return again and again to test the God-Machine's control.

Not only is Knud an example of one of the God-Machine's projects gone terribly wrong, he is also raising havoc in a suffering city. Knud has been seen walking the streets of Odense on misty and clammy nights in a shape almost inhuman to behold. The first telling of Knud's appearance after his death describes him with as sickly and anemic, with thin, wispy hair and the hollow, gaunt features of a corpse. Around his neck, he wore a round silver pendant, the only object on his person not faded from time. Nightly, he grows from an urban legend into a true and terrible threat, spreading disease wherever he roams.

The Cause

Knud Estridsen, son of Svend Estridsen and successor to Harald Hen, reigned as the monarch of Denmark, but his purpose was not only to act as ruler. The Christening of the Danes would benefit a constantly expanding trading route with Christian kingdoms and halt the rising political and religious pressure from the Holy Roman Empire. Denmark needed a strong leader in the times to come, during which old gods and traditions would slowly drown in the mulch and be replaced by one omnipotent god. Knud was chosen as the guardian of Denmark. His supporters prayed for a reign lasting decades, to ensure Odense's place on the map and the maintenance of tradition. The unexpected murder of Knud marked the end of the Viking Age. The killing was what the God-Machine ordained, but his repeated resurrections, categorically, were not.

The repeated sightings of the king compromised the initial idea of Knud's murder, and with good reason. In the winter of 1081 CE, after gathering his father's fleet and directing it westward to discover new lands, Knud returned with a sizeable portion of his trusted fighters missing and his own living form changed. The Knytlinge Saga describes him as having sunken eyes, a pale complexion, cool skin, and as being nocturnal. From that night of return, he ruled Denmark from within his fortress walls, rarely emerging to meet the light of the day or his people. Danish Kindred widely believe a Scottish vampire introduced Knud to the night, but Sworn sources refute this conjecture. They claim no sire or lineage is obvious. Some even whisper of an immaculate Embrace in the style of Longinus or Dracula, while the Ship of Theseus theorizes it was Contagion that made Knud Kindred. Somehow, his Embrace passed the God-Machine by, which is perhaps why the intended sacrifice of Knud went ahead, but was insufficient to put him down for good.

The God-Machine wanted this king to die in the cathedral, pass on his title, ensure that the land converted in faith, and its will was done. Instead, Knud lived, died, and lived again. The revolt against the God-Machine's dictates ripped holes in its Infrastructure and weakened its protection of reality, letting Contagion seep through its gaps.

Though Knud awoke sporadically over the following centuries, it was only in the 19th century that he arose and stayed awake. Acting as host and catalyst of Contagion, Knud infected great swathes of the city with the "illness of the mind" via his Disciplines, his feeding, and his mere presence. When he saw Odense in stagnation, in times where economy or other preventive factors held the city at a stand-still, Knud either went into long sleeps or roamed the sewers and, much like in ancient times, controlled his domain from the shadows. Whenever progress ramped up or change threatened to overtake the city, he spread Contagion in earnest. Instead of seeing the Contagion as evil, he harnessed its power, acting as sole director of the infection's spread throughout Denmark.

Some Sworn wonder at why a king would contaminate his own country with an infectious disease. Pragmatic Kindred suggest that he might believe that the greatest way of enforcing control over his people, gaining their support, and recreating the great empire he once led is through weakening their minds and wills. Then, he can lead them in the right direction once more and retake what rightfully belongs to him.

The Theseans debate whether Knud is jealous that his city has prospered without him at the wheel, or whether Knud spreads the Contagion as a way of revenge for his murder. After all, despite the grand powers that he possesses, it is possible that the motives behind them are simple in their malevolence. Recently, Sworn epidemiologists have begun to identify evidence that

Knud is not the only force in the city disseminating Contagion. Several of the False have taken an interest in the king, especially those of the Machiavelli Gambit.

And now, a major part of Odense is under construction. The main road separating the new and old sections of the city has been torn up, making space for parks and apartment buildings for the growing number of students migrating to Odense University. Odense is growing and changing, and with this, Knud's ire grows.

Factions

Though Odense houses two predominant Sworn and False factions, they are not alone in the Danish city. Storytellers are free to utilize factions as they see fit, reading the other groups' descriptions for inspiration.

The Ship of Theseus

The first Contagious outbreak in Odense in 1664 CE did not go unnoticed. When the rumors of sightings of Knud quickly spread, the demon and Promethean Theseans established a small faction in Odense dedicated to studying Knud. Thanks to their quick decision to investigate, they did ascertain that an outbreak had occurred, but not before Knud went back into hiding. Even in between Knud's appearances, Theseans worked consistently to prevent another outbreak. Through studying his history, his appearances, and trying to put together the puzzle pieces of his actions for centuries, they have established plausible theories for his motivations, intentions, and how he became a carrier of the Contagion.

The Theseans believe Contagion fuels change and that every outbreak is a step toward evolution. Therefore, to see the Contagion causing an entire city to stagnate is a sign of certain doom: a movement towards undoing the evolution that has already occurred. Without constant updates and development, the God-Machine deems areas insignificant and worse yet — *useless*. Will it seek to destroy Odense and its inhabitants when it realizes the city's inability to take an active part in the Infrastructure? Will the city be overrun with virus when it does not have the updated firewall to protect it? The Ship of Theseus will not risk these outcomes.

Gathering knowledge on Knud is the first step towards understanding the Contagion, but studying a being that disappears for hundreds of years at a time proves to be a significant challenge. Piles of research regarding his life as a king are easily available — but what about the stories of his unlife? Why, and more importantly, how does he show up years apart? The first appearance of Knud post-mortem piqued their interest. His second emergence proved their theories about his immortal nature and confirmed a connection between him and the Contagion. Both times the Theseans were left unprepared for his arrival, but now they are ready. They know he will rise again, and when it happens, they are determined for it to be for the last time. Recent rumors of his return are attracting more Sworn to the Odense faction, and Thesean spies stand around every corner of the cathedral grounds keeping a watchful eye, protecting the city from being rendered obsolete.

The Theseans are split in their views. Half of the city's iconoclasts believe the Odense strain requires complete eradication, as it has reached the zenith of its evolution, cannot be studied further, and will now just metastasize until the entire city collapses. The other half believes they cannot merely free Odense from the Contagion and leave it be. They reason that the Odense strain is an oddity, as it appears to calcify cities and drive its victims to states of torment, but that doesn't mean the ultimate form of Contagion in Odense has been identified. The world needs

constant catalysts to remind it to change, since change and progress are the factors preventing the God-Machine from annihilating it into oblivion. They wish to mutate the Contagion Knud is already harboring, taking control of what is useful and disposing of what is destructive. Therefore, they cannot aim to completely eliminate the Contagion itself; instead, they seek to tame it and bend it to their will. If nothing else, they will settle for wresting control over it from the hands of the False. In order to prevent the Contagion at hand from spreading and spinning further out of their control, the Theseans are isolating individuals they know already carry the disease. Even if this means kidnapping people off the street, they believe that this is the best way to prevent the outbreak's spread.

The idea of isolating the infected has also caught the attention of the Crucible Initiative. They don't seek to control the Contagion in Odense; they seek to destroy it. And as every epidemiologist would claim: one of the best ways to remove infectious disease from a population is through quarantine. Where the Theseans believe in capturing the individual carriers of Contagion, the Crucible Initiative advocates eliminating the whole city and burning out the root, starting with the Kindred, moving to the Sworn in their way, and then addressing the subject of mortals. Odense is a small city, and a largescale "terrorist attack" may be possible, if the Fire-Bearers can pool their resources.

The Sworn of Odense are aware that not everyone agrees with their actions to prevent the spread of the Contagion. Someone is pulling the old king's strings. This became clear when, at the same time as the king's appearance in year 1664 CE, townspeople in Odense reported sightings of pale beings suddenly roaming the city at nightfall. There were no accounts of anyone following the remains of Knud as he perused the streets of Odense — but why would any pursuers make themselves visible to the mortal eye? They did exist. The ghouls and childer of Ælnoth, a Nosferatu monk who arrived with the first order of Sortebrødre monks after the death of Knud, documented the old king's pursuers. Their notes describe how a group calling themselves the Machiavelli Gambit followed the king wherever he went, pulling his sleeve, pointing him in the right direction, and providing security while he pursued his schemes. In Ælnoth's account, Knud was like a child in the hands of parents.

The Machiavelli Gambit

It is yet unknown how this faction of False knew about Knud the Holy's resurrection before anybody else, or for how long the Gambit has harnessed the king and his Contagion. The Machiavelli Gambit appeared directly after the first outbreak and have never left Denmark. They were first drawn there by rumors of a king who, by some divine power, was not only carrier of the Contagion but also knew how to weaponize it. A small faction of experienced False left for the North, first to find the vampire king, then to gain his trust and make him join their cause. Standing as the head of the group now is Nicholas Palucinski. Controlling the faction with a firm hand, he has become one of Knud's most valuable allies, both sharing a common goal of influencing Odense, the Contagion, and the other Created in the area.

Getting a head start in the studies of the Contagion, running tests on all resident creatures they can ensnare, and most importantly, controlling the natural cure that already exists in the world in the hopes of preventing anyone from using it make this faction of False experts in its ways. They have known the king was a carrier of the disease, possibly since his apparently sireless Embrace, and they know how to manipulate him into spreading the Contagion at different times as they see fit. If the city heads in an uncontrollable direction, they do everything in their power to prevent

it. Nicholas and his faction are convinced Knud has been chosen by a higher power, maybe even by a dark reflection of the Machine itself, to act as a vessel and spread the Contagion in its name. By allowing the king to have limited, supervised access to the artifact imbued with the cure, they keep him from succumbing completely to the Contagion and keep him lucid while carrying the infection forward for centuries.

Long have Knud and the Machiavelli Gambit of Odense lain dormant, but now, progress, rejuvenation, and hope threaten to erode their control over this small city and provokes them to act. They prepare to once again demonstrate who holds the reigns.

Symptoms

The Contagion is something more than just disease. It doesn't merely infect mortal and immortal beings. When it manifests itself, it *becomes* its host, overtaking everything he once was, turning the body into a petri-dish for further Contagion to grow and a vehicle in which to move. Free will becomes obsolete — everything the host once was, every memory ever made, every personality trait making them unique evaporates in mists of disease.

Contagious Artifacts

Once described as “The Illness of The Mind,” the Contagion in Odense again manifests itself. Aside from the few historical sources in the form of diary entries, letters, and a royal decree, not much is known about how the Contagion affects its host by anyone but the False who have access to an example in the form of Knud himself.

This type of Contagion is atypical for its visibility. Like a cancerous tumor lodged inside an inner organ, the Contagion metastasizes silently but rapidly throughout its host, first in the brain of its victim. Even stranger is the way in which one becomes infected by this Contagion. The illness does not transmit among mortals easily, as it can from vampire to human or werewolf to changeling, as examples. Although it is possible for the Contagion to spread through blood transfusions, lacerations, and the unhealthy bite of a Kindred, the False have discovered that there is an easier way.

Arisen and alchemists within the Machiavelli Gambit have discovered how to host Contagion in objects and introduce them to mortals through regular interactions or even by keeping them in close proximity to the infected objects. However, they are limited in their production of these artifacts because, in order to infect them, they need to have been of great importance to Knud during his life or something that vastly influenced his life, as he is the largest single vector of Contagion in Denmark. Despite this innovative method of spreading infection, it is difficult to keep these items intact with the wear and tear of time and as they pass through countless mortal hands.

Therefore, the False find inspired ways to incorporate century-old relics into the city's daily life without their being stored away in museums. It takes years to harness the Contagion into a relic, so they make sure to choose the ones they do imbue with infection carefully. How does one place a sanctified king's crown in a place where it will be touched by several mortals, not destroyed, and not stored away? How does that blend into a modern city's image?

The following are examples of items that were previously or might possibly still be Contagious, kept in either the hands of the False, museums, or storages. The Storyteller is free to create her own artifacts and Contagious items and use these examples as inspiration.

- **The King's Sword, Dømlingen Røde:** Throughout the Viking Age, it was common to bury great fighters, noblemen, and influential individuals with valuable belongings, including their weapon of choice. Never receiving a burial, the king carried his sword by his side until the Gambit convinced him to allow them to use it as a Contagion catalyst. Before long, they remolded the sword used the metal from it in handles and hinges in local taverns, the bakery, the blacksmith and other public locations, ensuring as many people as possible would come into direct contact with the Contagion as possible. This was the cause of the first outbreak in Odense in year 1662 CE. Though most of the handles have been replaced and lost to time, the Gambit recovered some and others still exist, permeating entire historic structures with Contagion.
- **The Knytlinge Saga:** Aside from what was written by the Monk Ælnoth in his private documents, he contributed as a writer in The Knytlinge Saga, describing events surrounding the king and his accomplishments during his reign. The False quickly obtained the saga, which sparked the second outbreak in Odense in 1889 CE. Knowing that only scholars and historians would open a saga, not the common Odenseaner, they tore apart its pages and stitched them into hymnals in the city cathedral, where several people touched them multiple times per day. Knud's childer even wrote songs from the Saga and composed them to be used in church hymnals, infecting all those who sing or hear the words. While the songs are little known, they emerge every few years or so, putting a large assembly at risk of infection. The books now sit in the hands of the Machiavelli Gambit, aside from a few that might have found their way into private collections, homes, libraries, or archives. The Machiavelli Gambit are concerned the unclaimed books are highly virulent time-bombs waiting to explode into uncontrollable Contagion.
- **Adele's Braid of Hair:** Adele Flanders, who married Knud to forge a bond between Denmark and the Flemish Regions, cut a piece of her hair and bestowed it upon her husband as a token of luck on his travels and raids. Knud kept it in a sealskin bag, brought it with him every time he went abroad, and often attributed his success on it being by his side. The Machiavelli Gambit was preparing to contaminate Odense yet again using this relic when it was stolen from them secreted away to the local museum, Møntergården. Most Kindred who have been undead for hundreds of years lose their memories and sentimentality for such things; but for Knud, his memories of Adele never faded. Keeping the braid safe proved to be of greater importance to him than using it as another infectious item. Without the Machiavelli Gambit's knowledge, he stole the hair and anonymously donated it to the museum. Its Contagious properties are yet unknown.

Outbreak Sites

Many locations in Odense harbor terrible infection, like an open sore swimming in rot. Some are long-forgotten secrets and relics while others are of great historical or modern importance.

- **Odense Cathedral / The Church of Knud the Holy**

Visible even from remote locations in Odense, the tower of Odense Cathedral shoots into the sky. Ever since its construction in the early Middle Ages, the church has served as a hub for merchants and travelers looking to sell and socialize. As an iconic place of worship and historical importance, it attracts hundreds of tourists every day to explore its eerie mysteries. Setting foot inside the enormous wooden doors, one cannot help but feel overwhelmingly small compared to the grand, gold-dusted altarpiece, rows upon rows of oak benches, hundreds of bronzed organ pipes, and sepulchers belonging to deceased lords whose legacy still influences Odense.

Most interesting are the remains, or at least what mortals are led to believe are the remains, of King Knud and his brother Benedict. Fully exposed skeletal remains lay in glass cases, placed there by the False to cloak the truth about Knud and quell the rumors of him still haunting the city. Who Knud's skeleton truly belonged to is unknown, though several rumors claim a restless soul haunts the area whenever Knud the vampire is absent, screaming for burial and peace under its true name.

Hidden beneath the gilt of Christian grandeur lies the Gambit's haven. They claimed the cathedral catacombs as theirs when they arrived in Odense, marking their territory with the help of easily enslaved, simple monsters that give them reports of anyone who dares to step foot into the underchambers. Only the False had entered the catacombs for centuries until a recent student excavation started in earnest at the cathedral grounds. Fearing the ruination of their lair, the Princes released an array of unnatural gifts, rendering the excavation area toxic and forcing the city council to once again close off the area.

- **Odense Harbor & The Copper Box Café**

Situated on the edge of the waterfront where it battles the cold breezes of the Kattegat waters, the Copper Box Café is one of the only establishments open in the early morning hours. Catering mostly to the youth, it's the perfect hangout for the Ship of Theseus to gather information about what influences the inhabitants of Odense. The owner, a Thesean cultist, makes the club rooms available to this faction of Sworn at any hour of the day. Unlike the Gambit, Theseans do not hide away in clammy catacombs and dusty cellars. They want to feel the heartbeat of the city and keep up with the natural way of progress. The interior design of the location mixes steel sheets roughly bolted into the walls with the warm tones of ash wood furniture. The dimly lit space is sparsely illuminated by light bulbs tucked into green wine flasks which hang from ropes in the ceiling. Due to the Theseans' openness regarding their course, many creatures find the Copper Box and use it as a safe haven to hang out. Thus, the bar benefits from an established clientele of mortal and immortal patrons alike.

- **The King's Garden**

Before it became the largest park in the city, the King's Garden was closed off to the public up until the early 1900s. It is now the oldest and finest garden in Odense, with large outdoor plains enjoyed by families on picnics and students from Odense Cathedral School. The garden features a colossal statue of Frederik VII on horseback, Odense Castle (the former residence of the king, which now mostly houses offices for the city administration), rectangular lakes full of quacking ducks, and trees as old as the park itself.

Directly connected to what was once one of the biggest graveyards in Odense, in its time burying mostly the poorest souls of the city, the King's Garden contains a direct access to the Underworld through an Avernian Gate placed between the two of the lakes. Both False and Sworn believe the gate appeared at the same time as holes appeared in the Infrastructure. It attracts monsters of all kind, from Sin-Eaters to Uratha and Begotten, some which fear the gateway, and some which desperately try to access it.

Some False believe that the last hymnals of the Knytlinge Saga are hidden in the Athenaeum. They ponder whether to send a group to the Underworld to retrieve them.

- **The Tax Building**

The Tax Building rises above the dirt of the creatures who think they own the city. Known to most mortals as just another high-rise, it makes the perfect headquarters for the Cheiron Group in Odense, thanks to its inconspicuousness. They have taken over the top floor of the building and are happy to have found such a perfect outpost. From there, they see all the way from the harbor to the tip of the cathedral tower in the city center, and keep track of everything from the Contagious mortals to vampires and demons.

- **Åløkke Woods**

Situated entirely within the city limits, the Åløkke Woods are a small stretch of woodland often used just as a shortcut. This otherwise unremarkable location is of great interest to many creatures, for it is always buzzing with mortals. Out of sight from the larger roads, the thick fouling of trees and bushes creates a great cover under which to do things best not shared with the community beyond. It is also widely believed that powerful artifacts lie buried in the bed of the woods, some of which may have even belonged to Knud the Holy. However, rumors say these treasures are guarded by potent spirits, and any attempts to remove them will result in terrible disturbances in the area. In truth, there are some who are merely greedy and wish to keep valuable goods to themselves; however, there are also a few true nature spirits who violently direct their anger at those who disturb their peace.

The Contagious Mortals

Imagine the loved and trusted individuals in a person's life. Maybe it's a partner, a parent, a child, or a close friend. Being close to them, one knows how they react, what their personality is like, what makes them uniquely them, and what makes them so beloved. But what if they slipped away? What if, suddenly, they stopped laughing at the things that used to cheer them up, their favorite dishes were now the same as every other, or the series they loved to watch didn't so much as pique their interest anymore?

Soon after these first symptoms take hold, the listless victims isolate themselves. They have difficulty getting up in the morning and going to work, and even mundane tasks like going to the grocery store or seeing their friends seems impossible. In a matter of weeks, and sometimes even days, one will find them in a fetal position on their bed or sitting staring into a wall for hours in a row, not talking, not feeling, just *existing*. The Contagion will inevitably end in a complete penalization of the brain, rendering its victim unable to think or feel. While most victims of the Contagion do not succumb because of the Contagion itself, they oftentimes die because they don't see the point in moving away from the road when a car approaches, or they simply don't care enough to eat or drink. Existence stops mattering; therefore, the desire to take care of oneself disappears.

This is the Odense Contagion's effect on mortals. It slowly but surely turns them into depressive, zombified creatures, their loved ones rendered helpless, only able to as they disappear into themselves, then into nothingness.

The first outbreak of the Contagion caused mortals to rapidly succumb to the disease, as even a slight neglect of one's own needs during the Danish Renaissance would prove fatal on top of the high rates of mortality due to natural disease and poor standards of living. But when the second outbreak appeared over 200 years after, although knowledge was still abysmal when it came to mental health disorders, many Contagious would end their days poorly cared for, neglected, or abused in overcrowded asylums.

How the Contagion is perceived in a modern setting is up to the Storyteller. Maybe the Contagion is seen as a mass depression caused by the constant pressure of post-modern society. Maybe an infected teenage daughter's symptoms are neglected as teenage angst until she drowns in the bathtub, unable to muster the will to pull her head up out of the water. Keep in mind the relatively small size of a Dane's social sphere and the high percentage of individuals living with depression in Scandinavia alone. These could lead to many Contagious going unnoticed for a prolonged period as individuals overlook the problem at hand.

This Contagion manifests as the **Hollowed Condition**, detailed on p. XX.

A Reminder

As a symptom of Contagion, the Odense strain poses the questions of “what if depression were infectious and took hold of a population en masse?” It is not a trivial topic, however, and should be handled with care, with focus given to roleplaying scenes of personal care, tragedy, compassion, and loss. The Odense strain should make you *think*, especially as characters close to the protagonists in your game risk infection.

Story Hooks

The Contagion is crawling under the skin of mortals and immortals alike, caring not from where or what its host descends. Beasts and changelings are especially affected by the Contagion and the ways in which it changes mortals. Beasts require dreams and nightmares to thrive; since the Contagion slowly turns its host into emotionless beings, it does not allow for either to occur naturally. The Contagion also challenges Lost, as normalcy becomes twisted and distorted.

- Roaming the cathedral after sundown, ensuring every bench is free of dust and each bronzed candlestick reflects the flame burning at its wick, the Nosferatu splashes his mop to the floor with a dissatisfied grunt. Cleaning the cathedral always brings the vampire peace of mind, even when blood supplies are scarce. Besides, no one cares about his pale demeanor and unnatural fangs in this secluded job. After work, he usually catches up with a small group of Kindred at the Copper Box Café, as he's done for years. But the last couple of weeks, spending time with others hasn't really mattered to him.

Finishing the last row of benches with a dampened cotton cloth, the Nosferatu pushes his cart full of cleaning materials, ready to call it a night and return home, when he notices a pile of crumpled paper at the foot of a small wooden cabinet beside the entrance. There's no doubt: once again, it's those damned kids hanging around the cathedral ground after dark. They're urban explorers or “vloggers” or whatever they name themselves. This time, they've torn apart two hymnals. An uncontrollable rage rises inside the vampire, a rage he's only felt once before, trapped inside his burning apartment as a neonate. Flinging the bucket across the floor, grimy water dousing the walls, he leaps out the door and scours the area surrounding the cathedral for any sign of the trespassers. He finds the youths with their eyes fixated on a camcorder screen, and tackles the youngest member of the group, a boy in his mid-teens. Right there in front of his own friends, the Nosferatu drains him dry on the wet pavement. The youths run away screaming, but not before catching the whole gristly affair on camera.

- As the head librarian of Odense's biggest library, Kalia takes great pains to align every book and sort each piece of stray literature into its rightful place. Her desire to pay respect to

every composition in the city's most crucial place for knowledge is integral to her sense of inner harmony. She takes care of her elodoth sister by teaching her the ways of Honor, which fuels her ability to hunt down and demolish spirits inhabiting various books and written literature in her library. Over the last week, something unrecognizable has disturbed the Gauntlet, making it increasingly difficult for Kalia to maintain control. Even yesterday, a pain spirit preyed upon an elderly man, resulting in his hospitalization. The Contagion in Odense is feeding into spirits Kalia would rather see under control, rather than rapidly growing. Spirits of depression, anxiety, fright, and illness are becoming increasingly common. Worse than this is that these changes weaken the mortals' already frail defenses against malicious spirits, priming them to become perfect hosts for dark entities.

- Week four of trying to open the gate to the Underworld in the King's Garden. The mages have spent years collecting the individual keys; yes, *years*. Now they stand out here yet again attempting to open it, and it's not budging. An Acanthus in the group seems completely out of it, as if he's lost interest in the project. He even whispers to a companion how they should just give up and go home, despite months of research and relentless hunting. As his relentless complaining and criticism reaches a peak, other mages question if something is wrong with his synergy. Ever since the regional master of the Silver Ladder died by suicide, whole swathes of mages have been exhibiting similar depressive behavior.
- A Tammuz rests their forehead in their palms. They reread the newspaper article about a crazed maniac vandalizing an entire storefront. The picture of the perpetrator confirms what the article says in writing: it's Nicholas, their "brother" and former leader of the throng. He has, for the second time this week, run completely amok. Once, Nicholas was the gentlest of the Created in Odense. But now it seems even minor irritations degrade his composure completely, and a frightful fire burns inside him, slowly but surely turning his insides to ashes. Something in the city is pushing Created apart, making it next to impossible to control Transmutations.
- It is becoming increasingly difficult for demons to hide behind their Covers. Unchained report how mortals are seemingly able to see right through their identities and disguises, as if angels are looking out through their eyes. Whole rings of demons start shifting their usual patterns of behavior to evade these spies who just seem to be getting switched on. They want to know who's activating these mortals and whether anything can be done to stop them.
- Veterans of the Secret Frequency place a Carlsberg beer neatly in the pebbles in front of black granite headstone, engraved with the name Janus Ladegaard, not knowing how the hunters in Odense will ever recover from the loss of their leader. Sitting there, beside what is now the resting place of their friend, the man with whom they fought and served, not one hunter can help but wonder *why*. What drove such a life-loving man to suicide? The eye-witnesses explained how he simply didn't move away from the danger. He didn't move. He didn't speak. He just stood there, like a pillar. Like he didn't care if he lived or died. The hunters now stand without a dedicated leader within their cell; no one was prepared to lose Janus, or to take on his role.
- In the beginning, the symptoms seemed very much like the descriptions mortals have for Sybaris. First, the Arisen thought it was some kind of recoil. Maybe the amulet their cult discovered had malicious spirits attached to it, or maybe the mummies were of the wrong guild to utilize it correctly. The affected Deathless hoped the ill feeling would eventually go away, like the influenza wracking their cults last spring, but the uneasiness grows. Mummies shouldn't be subject to disease, yet now they're struggling to remember things, as if recently awoken. When a

Sesha-Hebsu declares her kepher distorted before ordering her cult to incinerate her sahu, other mummies start panicking.

Contagious Vampires

Insufferable mental pain. That is often the description Kindred use to depict the symptoms of Contagion infecting the body of an immortal. An overwhelming lack of purpose to what was once of great importance suddenly overtakes one's mind. Kindred become unnervingly aware of their true nature, reminded they are nothing but a cursed being forced to wander this doomed world to butcher what is good, like the monsters they are. Their only source of energy — blood — festers with this illness.

Their uncertainty of how the blood they ingest from different mortals will change is most frustrating; it matters not if the mortal is sick himself. One night it will be foul-tasting, like that from a rotting corpse. The Kindred will shorten her feeding time just to escape the bitterness on her tongue. Another night, the same Kindred might feed normally but be unable to harness the power of her Vitae, and an entire evening dedicated to hunting might be of no avail. Sometimes, shortly after waking, the infected Kindred is beset by a ravenous hunger, despite having fed just the night before.

Some Kindred wonder whether the different symptoms of infection that they present depend on the area of the city from which they acquired the infection. Others insist that it depends on age, and some again claim social status as deciding factor. It seems the only factor the different affects have in common are the feelings of starvation and fury, unyielding rage, and a lack of control over both mind and body. Illness boils the blood inside, infecting every drop of what is keeping vampires "alive."

The vampire Contagion is detailed as the **Intolerance Condition** on p. XX.

King Knud the Holy

"Með konungr munu land standa" (With king shall land stand)

Clan: Unknown

Covenant: Unaligned

Touchstone: The Pendant

Aspirations: Claim Odense openly with the Contagion as his weapon

Mask: Divine Monarch

Dirge: Selfish Desire

Attributes: Intelligence 5, Resolve 5, Wits 4; Strength 4, Dexterity 6, Stamina 4; Manipulation 8, Presence 6, Composure 5

Skills: Academics 1, Brawl 1, Crafts 2, Expression 3, Intimidation (Command) 2, Occult 3, Persuasion 4, Politics (Monarchy) 4, Stealth 3, Streetwise 2, Survival (Tactics) 3, Weaponry (Swordsmanship) 4

Merits: Allies (The Machiavelli Gambit) 2, Biology 3, Cursed 2, Dynasty Progenitor (**Thousand Years of Night**, p. 85), Fame 2, Indomitable 2, Iron Will 2, Status 4,

Disciplines: Celerity 3, Majesty 5, Obfuscate 2, Vigor 4

Blood Potency: 8

Health: 9

Willpower: 9

Integrity: 3

Size: 5

Speed: 15

Initiative: 11

Defense: 5

Order of the King

Knud doesn't need to use his Majesty Discipline to cow the crowds. Any infected individuals must succeed at Resolve + Composure rolls in his presence or be subject to the effect of a full blood bond.

Purified

Knud's descendants can only take pleasure when feeding from other Kindred. Knud is similarly infected, but these symptoms never show since the pendant he wears around his neck purifies Contagion. While it doesn't eliminate the Contagion entirely, it renders it dormant in his own Contagion-fueled body. When the heirs of Knud fall on the kine to feed, they often require more blood to satisfy their urges than other vampires (see the **Intolerance Condition** on p. XX).

[TABLE]

Type	Damage	Range	Clip	Init.	Dice Pool	Special
Pattern-welded sword	3L	Melee	—	—	−2 8	Armor Piercing 1
Unarmed	0B/L	Melee	—	−0	5	

[/TABLE]

Cure

The Sworn believed the Odense Contagion incurable during the first two outbreaks. The Machiavelli Gambit agreed, until they uncovered what they believe is the first true cure, what they call *The Elixir Vitae*, but is actually a silver pendant around King Knud's neck. The Sworn are determined to not only obtain the cure, but also to destroy whomever works to spread it.

The False

Not long after the first outbreak, before the False discovered how the king accessed the power of the Contagion, they learned that powerful artifacts important to the king could act as vessels and containers for the illness. Tactically placing these around Odense would arm them with immense influence. The mightiest of all the vessels, carrying the rare essence of the disease did not remain under lock and key, nor did anyone place it somewhere in the city for others to touch — it hung around the neck of the ancient king. It was a silver pendant, created in the image of Yggdrasil, the ash-tree of life, representing what Ásatrú believe to be the home of the gods, the home of Man, and the home of everything damned — *Hel*. Gifted to the king at birth, Knud was never

seen without the pendant resting on his chest. The False believe the God-Machine itself bestowed the pendant directly upon the king, as a token of protection in its aim of keeping him alive to fulfil his earthly duties. But as the world changed and the king's faith in the Machine shattered, so did the power of the *Elixir Vitae*. Instead of shielding what was once a living person, the pendant now protects and cleanses a Contagious being.

Long forgotten, the pendant laid dormant in a shrine as Knud's life changed into unlife. Growing increasingly weak from the Contagion, having tried every remedy of his knowledge, the king sought out the pendant only to bring himself comfort. As soon as the silver links once again dropped onto his shoulders, he felt his emotions and mind return to stability. A wave of energy like when he first stepped foot ashore in new unexplored lands washed over him; this was the answer to his prayers for redemption. But from the shadows lurked the Machiavelli Gambit. They felt the Contagion seeping away. Soon after, they removed the pendant from the king, allowing him to wear it occasionally but only to wear off the Contagion long enough for him not to succumb.

The False must keep control of the Contagion as well as they keep control of its cure. They cannot simply destroy the pendant, for that would be the same as a lion tamer breaking his whip. Simultaneously, they must keep the pendant safe from the prying hands of the Sworn, who simply do not grasp the importance of the Contagion and will only use it to unravel their work of centuries. The Machiavelli Gambit are determined to be the only bearers of the cure, so they can control the path of this outbreak. Unfortunately for them, Knud is strengthening with time and intends to break from the False faction, reclaim his pendant permanently, and make the city his own.

The Sworn

Long have the Sworn sought the end of the desperate torment in Odense. Flicking through books covering everything from modern medicine to sagas obtained from various Scandinavian countries, studying the behavior of Knud throughout his appearances, and unrelentingly spying on the False have all yielded minimal results. Now, through careful monitoring of Knud's most recent appearances, they have reason to believe that the pendant is a source of a cure — but that it lies in the hands of the False. They stand on the verge of leaving the city to rot in disease. Many despair over whether they can fight against a group controlling both Contagion and its cure.

They see only one option to prevent the further spread of the Contagion: quarantine. In a modern world, traveling from one destination to another, even cross-country, takes a miniscule amount of time. This disease will rapidly spread, especially in a small country like Denmark, if it is not contained. In previous outbreaks, the illness was contained by limits of transportation, and could not spread as rapidly, considering the fact that there were fewer people in proximity with one another. For the Sworn of Odense, this means finding the Contagious and isolating them from the rest of the city inhabitants, but also preventing them leaving. Once they obtain the pendant, they can begin to cure the infected.

The Sworn are not aware that the Contagion spreads from object to mortal. A thorough search and purge of every item related to King Knud is the next step in strangling the Contagion, if they were to find proof of these artifacts' hazardous nature. The issue comes when these items rest in doorframes, masonry, and pavement. It is very likely the infection has even penetrated Infrastructure in parts of the city.

The Jeremiad and the Theseans are certain they need to retrieve the pendant. Some Sworn believe the only way of doing this is to destroy Knud, who carries both the pendant and the disease, and the groups protecting him. Others believe violence will unnecessarily add fuel to the fire, and that there are other ways of retrieving the pendant. In particular, Zero Hour are aware of their fellow factions' hesitance to destroy a vampire with a vast, slavish mortal following, but have resolved to contain, fight, and abolish the Contagion in Odense once and for all, by any means necessary.

Rumors in Odense

- A group of middle-aged women have been spotted in the King's Garden frequently during the last couple of weeks. Appearing at the exact same time, just after midnight, they stand between the two rectangular lakes. There, they hum a low-frequency tone while drawing chalky symbols on the grass surrounding the lakes.
- John Karstad, the manager of the city museum Møntergården, did not return home last night after his usual afternoon shift. Before leaving home, he frantically explained to his wife how he felt *something* breathing down his neck the previous night while he was clearing the museum of its last visitors.
- “Do you dare enter Odense Cathedral’s historical dungeons? Book your tour now!” Posters from a company called Underground Explorations are popping up in the entire city center — however, it seems someone is removing the posters as quickly as they can get put up.
- Secretaries working in the tax building are concerned about what seems to be excessive number of crates being delivered after closing time. The janitor even claims to have seen an entire box of grenades wheeled into the basement.
- An online video titled “Real life vampire caught on tape!!!” displaying a shadowy figure attached to a teenager’s neck on the wet pavement of Odense is spreading like wildfire from one Danish teenager’s phone to another. The Carthian Movement are aware of the controversial videos and are working with the Nosferatu to spread fear of a virus embedded into the video files, in hopes this will prevent further sharing.
- Several liters of blood have once again been removed from the blood bus cooler during the night, despite investments in locks and an alarm system. Empty blood bags belonging to the hospital are found scattered around Åløkke woods. Yet, there is no other trace of what the perpetrators are doing with the blood.
- Normally a peaceful group of individuals, the local group of Jehovah’s Witnesses handing out pamphlets in front of Burger King are using increasingly aggressive methods of drawing attention. They now have a street preacher shouting down whomever he can and describing how infectious demons are walking among the living.
- Reports of the cathedral bell ringing in the middle of the night are now reaching the church office and have caught the attention of local authorities. Someone appears in the church tower each time the bell rings, visible to onlookers due to their predatory, luminescent eyes.
- The body of an elderly man was found floating in Odense stream. Bloated and discolored, claimed missing by no one, he was deemed unrecognizable by paramedics. They didn’t even notice the odd symbols lacerated into his forearms. They blamed a probable alcohol dementia as

the cause of the symbols, but the Circle of the Crone are not buying such a cheap explanation, identifying the runes in his arms as spelling “Knud walks among you”.

- During the mid-summer concerts in the King’s Garden, local singer/songwriter Dennis Risskov stared blankly into the sea of people cheering his name, dropped his mic, and left the stage in the middle of his performance. After reaching the green room, he pulled out a hand gun, put it to his temple, and shot himself.
- Peculiar symbols are appearing in quite ordinary locations. Trees, statues, window glass, pavement, handles, light-poles — to the attentive eye, they almost resemble runes. Uratha believe the runes to be messages from the Hisil, as they sense a previously unseen energy around them. The Gauntlet frays around these runes, providing sight not just into the Shadow, but into a world beyond it.
- For the first time in 50 years, a grave robber is on the loose in Odense. Some of the oldest graves have been exhumed, and not only are valuable artifacts missing from them, but entire bodies as well. Sin-Eaters believe these occurrences to have direct correlation with the appearance of blood bags scattered around Åløkke Woods. Are ancient vampires being woken, and if so, by whom?
- Local groups of urban explorers and ghost hunters are roaming Odense Library because they think that they feel “extraterrestrial disturbances in the energy fields” surrounding the books. They have received repeated warnings from librarians and the police for trespassing; despite this, they do not relent.
- Why is nobody talking about the coat of arms missing from City Hall? It was removed from its usual place above the main entrance weeks ago, and its disappearance seems to pass unnoticed. The False are infuriated, as they spent years encouraging Knud to imbue the coat of arms with Contagion; now, nobody can track down the infected artifact.
- Seven people have been spotted being dragged into white vans around the city. They turn up a week or so later with no memory of where they went or with whom. Some cannot even recall their own names.
- Åløkke Woods are slowly becoming a place of fear to the living and dead alike. Many have heard unnatural sounds in there, and areas suddenly become icy cold in the middle of summer. Recently, a werewolf was found dead in the woods with no visible reason why. The Uratha believe the diseased might have angered the spirits of the woods.

San Francisco: Contagion of the Soul

Death is nothing more than passing from one room into another.

— Helen Keller

There used to be a saying — “you can’t take it with you” — meaning that no matter what one accomplished in life, ultimately it was meaningless, because death was the great equalizer. The pauper may die decades earlier than the rich man, true, but the rich man dies just the same, no matter how he may struggle against it. One does what one can, then one goes on to one’s heavenly reward.

That was before the dead rose and started seeking wages, of course. In the modern world, one competes not only against one’s peers, but against generations past who, even if they aren’t up to date on the newest technological innovations, make up for it through networking, or, in San Francisco, if they’re fortunate to own equity on land they bought for peanuts in the 1920s that’s now worth millions. Companies are always happy to hire the dead, even if they’re oh-so-careful to avoid the appearance of preferential treatment, which is technically illegal even if it’s never stopped anyone. After all, the dead have a much lower cost of living — as long as their Anchors persist, so will they, regardless of how many meals they skip or how small their reliquary is. The well-off invest in the future, with archival-quality interment complete with argon-atmosphere-replacement, the better to ward off decomposition through deoxygenation; the masses make do with one canister among many in the now-legion blocks of microtombs.

Life adjusted to death, in other words, or perhaps it’s better to say that life is still in the process of adjusting. Fifty years of productivity used to be enough to secure a reasonable standard of living and post-death employment, but with the fallout of the Great Recession still palpable on the streets and in homes, many more of the living than ever before are facing something relegated to the distant past — death without a support structure, and the slow and helpless decline that follows. No one wants to be lost to the Great Below, but these days everyone knows someone who lost an ancestor to that terrible realm’s hunger.

Many have given up hope, sure that the system is too married to necropolitanism to ever meaningfully change. A rare few, however, touched by death and bound up in its symbology and power, are trying to make things right, to absolve the world of the mess it’s made of itself, and perhaps even to push death itself back into the Underworld — even if, for them, it means losing everything themselves. These Sin-Eaters come together, gather their acolytes and followers, and turn death against those who hold its reins, whether living or dead, whether above or below. Fighting fire with fire, they mean to defeat their foe or — well, it’s not as if they can die trying.

Theme: Change and Loss

Nothing lasts forever, and no one lives forever. Even with death on vacation (or at least working from home for the time being), that’s still true. The world as it was, if it’s not dead, is very close to it, replaced slowly and surely by the world as it is, and by the world as it will be, and neither of the latter are particularly attractive. The Greek roots of the English word “nostalgia,” *nóstos* and *álgos*, mean “homecoming” and “pain” respectively — remembering the way things used to be hurts because they aren’t that way anymore. Any change is, by definition, a loss of what once was.

Loss hurts. There's a reason we employ professionals to help us cope with it, or quietly try to soldier on through because that's just What You Do. We live in a world where the future has been sold to us as bright and hopeful, or at least not so far gone that it can't be righted again, so when the world is at odds with our hopes and expectations — when change hurts — it feels like a betrayal. No one expects their children to be worse off than they are, but in World Without End, it's all but guaranteed.

Mood: Exploitation

Maybe at first it was a kindness, finding work for the dead so they could afford the necessities to keep themselves extant, if not alive. It certainly kept generations upon generations of the dead from becoming a burden on their descendants. Somewhere along the way, though, a venture capitalist had a brilliant idea, and it caught on like wildfire — and now, it's the new normal. It's infected society as surely as the Contagion's infected reality, setting the living against the dead in the ultimate race for existence itself. It's hard to be kind or generous when the basic necessities of life are unaffordable, or when every cent you make goes towards maintaining the systems that keep you from sliding down into the earth and soil, never to be seen again.

The Underworld itself is exploitative, a cruel, pitiless place that consumes the dead slowly and painfully. Not even death is an escape from exploitation by industry or society — the whip just changes hands. There's no denying or ignoring the truth of the matter, as we often do with poverty — when great aunt Hilda turns up in the dress you buried her in, it hits a lot harder than seeing misfortune befall strangers. The Bay Area of World Without End is a place where the universe itself joins in with the bosses, bolstering the divine right of job-creators to do whatever they deem necessary to expand their personal profit.

In short: fuck you, got mine, more so than ever before, is the order of the day. The new normal is terrible, but it's normal — better to swim with the current than to fight it, right?

What Has Come Before

San Francisco has been inhabited for thousands of years, first by the Ohlone people and then by a succession of Spanish, Mexican, and American colonizers, who over the last 250 years have almost wholly transformed the Bay. What was once a deepwater anchorage surrounded by forest and hills is now a naval vessel graveyard, one of the largest deepwater ports in the world, a beacon for the marginalized, and the beating heart of the digital revolution.

Transformations like this don't come easily. Ancient things have been uprooted (or, more often, built or paved over), old secret societies have been broken up by government agencies ignorant of their true mission or the secrets they hold, and the God-Machine took the South Bay from testbed to prototype to a massive thaumomechanical Infrastructure complex unlike any ever before seen. The character of Silicon Valley has changed so radically in the last forty years that the hidden hand directing it is, bit by bit, growing into things wholly unconnected to it. From Command-Control Infrastructure built into ride-sharing routes to Concealment Infrastructure written in murals spanning a dozen storefronts, buildings untouched by the God-Machine's work are rare in the Bay — and those that lack such “upgrades” are rapidly being torn up and replaced as Silicon Valley slowly lurches northward, held at bay only by California's bizarre property tax laws and the anti-development laws that are often activists' only weapon against rapid gentrification.

With such overt presence of the God-Machine — rising to the point where some Infrastructure complexes lack Concealment Infrastructure at all — it's unsurprising that others would notice it metastasizing across the Bay. Sin-Eaters in particular are besieged by complaints from the dead, whose Anchors are routinely disturbed or destroyed by the never-ceasing wave of construction. The Good Vibes Krewe is one of the main sources of information regarding the God-Machine, coordinating reports from dead and living observers alike into a spectral newsletter they post around the Bay in Twilight, the better to keep the dead and other Bound informed.

More than one krewe, venturing into the mist-wreathed Underworld beneath the Bay, has come across dead and cast-off bits of Infrastructure in the Autochthonous Depths. The Whisper Kids, a recently formed krewe of teens and twenty-somethings considered *the* experts in the subject these days, are not only rehabilitating some of the dead Infrastructure, but also using it to navigate their way into strange, dead machine-realms. Fully half their mortal membership is stigmatic, and those who aren't often develop stigmata due to exposure to the workings of the God-Machine.

The Sutro Baths were a saltwater swimming pool complex on the western coast of San Francisco, built in the late 1900s and destroyed in a fire in the 1960s. While the Sutro Bath Association, a krewe of Necropolitans whose founding members all died of drowning, no longer hold their meetings there, they've kept the name. The oldest krewe in the region, they're widely known among the dead of the Bay as a charitable organization, and their Sin-Eater members are always busy establishing safe-houses, assisting with Anchor recovery, and playing cat-and-mouse with Reapers. Though they're aware of the God-Machine's slow encroachment on the city, but to their mind, it's not a part of their remit to aid and support the dead.

Colma, the necropolis of the Bay Area, is the heart of Sin-Eater culture, neutral ground for every krewe no matter their differences. A hundred years ago, San Francisco, desperate for land, forbade burial within city limits, and then unceremoniously evicted already-buried corpses; some were given the dignity of individual reburial and commemoration, but many were not. San Francisco itself is strung with old Avernian Gates in places they shouldn't reasonably be, while Colma has hundreds of them, far more than any other single place in the United States. In the early hours of the morning, town hall reopens thanks to the ghost of a long-lost key, and Sin-Eaters hold court with each other and with the dead in the dark halls of government; security knows well enough not to trouble them.

Other Things

As might be expected, demons flourish in the cracks between the rapid surge of construction, especially with the God-Machine's immune system faltering. Integrators in particular consider San Jose their Mecca, the place on Earth where their Lord's attentions fall the most directly — a dangerous place, to be sure, but a holy one nonetheless. Several warring Agencies and nascent religions are engaged in a war that varies between hot or cold almost on a weekly basis, from the Trans-Continental Railroad Society (which considers that thousands-of-miles-long Infrastructure to be the most self-aware portion of the God-Machine) to the Arbiters of the Sacred Cloud, who whisper paeans to the digital assistants in their smart phones and interpret the results as prophecy.

Other wayward servants of the God-Machine dwell in the Bay, too, but rather than seeking the God-Machine's castoff wisdom (and, perhaps, forgiveness), they do everything in their power to stop its nigh-cancerous spread (or, at the very least, to suborn it for their own purposes; Tempters

have to make a living, after all). The largest and most influential of these Agencies is the Jailbirds, based in Alcatraz. They compose a small percentage of the prison-turned-landmark's staff, and focus their efforts on aiding anti-gentrification activists with subtle espionage. After suffering setbacks in recent years, a more radical wing of the Agency, led by a Destroyer who calls herself Pernoja, is pushing for more militant direct action not just against the God-Machine, but against its unwitting mortal agents.

The Cause

While the Whisper Kids fooled around with the strange, dead machines in the Autochthonous Depths, they set to trying to understand them in the hopes that they could turn the things against the Underworld itself, to remake it in a kinder image with the power of science. They weren't entirely sure what they were dealing with, only that they were in the presence of something truly massive, greater even than the Underworld they were familiar with.

They did not consider the consequences of something being "bigger" than death itself — that the things they were tampering with, learning from, even controlling from time to time, were still connected to the living aspect of the God-Machine. They were sending commands through dead Infrastructure, disturbing extant complexes not just across the Bay, but all over the world. Small wonder the God-Machine responded, reintegrating the offending machinery if only to shut it up.

Three Whisper Kids were working on Underworld Infrastructure when the God-Machine acted. Now, none have any memory of the experience, only a sense of missing time, a feeling that something broke inside them, and that the world broke with them. When they returned from the Underworld, they left something of themselves behind, returning as spirit rather than flesh, dead not only as the Bound experience it, but true ghosts.

Three Patient Zeros rose. From them, and from the gaping holes where the God-Machine's dead infrastructure passed from life into death and back into life again, the sickness spread. Graveyards, mortuaries, and morgues were crowded with the dead, as plain to the eyes of mortals as to the Bound, the Underworld slowly creeping up into the world of the living and claiming it for its own.

The sickness only deepened from there. Public shock gave way to apathy, and then forgetfulness. Even as Sin-Eaters struggled to hold their krewes together under the weight of an eschatological out-of-context problem, the world and the dead the Sin-Eaters hoped to save adapted to the new normal, even as normal slid further and further away from the world as it was. The sickness spread not only across the Bay but also echoed backwards in time for decades. The social and physical landscape shifted, realigning itself — and only the Bound could see it happen.

The Bound, and a few others born of the same machinery the Whisper Kids had tampered with, are now riddled with the spreading sickness. Demons, Integrator or otherwise, almost universally considered the upwelling of the Underworld if not an act of war then at least a hubristic power grab and reacted accordingly. Several prominent krewes were infiltrated even as they flailed through their death throes, and the demons were happy to help that spiral downward. Only the Whisper Kids, traditionally untrusting of outsiders, escaped infiltration and sabotage. As a result, they emerged as one of the power players of the cross-krewe alliance that developed once the Sin-Eaters of the Bay realized they were not just experiencing what seemed like the end of the world; they were actively under attack.

The Dead War

The six months following the initial outbreak was a cold war; the six after that went hot quickly. From the demonic perspective, it was a war to stop necromancers from destroying reality (and, from the Integrator perspective, a plot to assassinate the All-Maker); from the Sin-Eater perspective, a crusade to stop a half-dead machine's robotic soldiers from massacring their followers and scuttling their mission to liberate death itself. Werewolves (both Forsaken and Pure) and the Lost joined in periodically, further complicating the conflict, while the Awakened and the various vampire courts of the Bay largely stayed on the sidelines, waiting for a clear victor to shake out. On two notable occasions, Task Force: Valkyrie teams made covert strikes, one on Alcatraz (which ended poorly for TFFV, thanks to Pernoja's faction of Destroyers) and one on the Cleanup Crew, a Predator King pack that had taken to indiscriminate culling of humans, Contagious or otherwise, to prevent the Contagion's spread. All the while, the city fell further and further into a world where death was a known quantity for decades.

The conflict only ended when both sides realized that neither side was benefiting from the seismic shifts in reality. The surviving krewes and the fractured remains of the pre-war Agencies came together in uneasy alliances, even as agents of the Sworn and the False arrived on the scene to help the victims of the outbreak adjust — and to recruit them to their own causes.

The New Normal

The Dead War shattered many krewes and Agencies, scattering their members to the winds. Those individuals haven't forgotten each other, though, and despite their very different goals, individual faction members of the Sworn in the Bay Area have ready-made connections and antagonisms born of old alliances and grudges among their groups. Those organizations that survived have been fundamentally altered by the Dead War, and several syncretic groups within factions have formed — most commonly, from disparate krewes and Agencies, none of whom could function effectively on their own any longer.

Cryptocracy

The Actuaries of Eternity rode out the Dead War by simply remaining unnoticed by the demonic community, but they watched, and they took notes. A collection of antique collectors, financial planners, and insurance adjusters, even before the War they'd cornered the Memento market and kept a steady finger on the scale of land management laws. In the chaos, they pursued a quiet program of acquisition, and when the dust settled, they'd gone from a quiet self-help group/cult to one of the biggest supernatural property holders in San Francisco.

The Fishers of Men, a purely Temporal Agency comprised mainly of Tempters, was a quiet but essential part of the demonic ecosystem of pre-war San Francisco. Following the conflict, the Fishers split over the question of how best to deal with the Contagion; those urging caution joined with the Cryptocracy, and those hoping to use it to their advantage defected to the Machiavelli Gambit. Many demons (and those of their Cryptocracy fellows who understand how demons operate) are concerned that their former comrades may have left sleeper agents behind following their departure, while the turncoats warily eye their fellow defectors for the same reason.

For the Invictus, the Cryptocracy is a matter of survival — they can't feed on the dead, after all, nor can they force them into servitude with their addictive, empowering vitae. Most members are frantically securing herds, digging deep into their personal finances to ensure their dinner can

make rent; none have yet abandoned their hard-won power bases, but rumors fly that the Prince is quietly building a nest egg to re-establish herself in another, less afflicted city.

The Winter Court of the Court of the Golden Gate is a silent partner to the Cryptocracy, with many of the lower orders of other groups unaware of their existence. Sorrow is on the rise in the Paris of the West, and Winter Courtiers are rolling in glamour. They expend most of it, however, on the work of holding the Golden Gate Court together, split as it is across the factions of the Sworn. No one wants the dead walking, obviously, but no one in the Winter Court will abide giving The Others a golden opportunity to waltz into town.

Jeremiad

The Pilgrim krewe calling itself “1906” (universally and to their great frustration referred to as “the Quakers” by outsiders) has spent decades preparing San Francisco for the next great earthquake, sure that the Underworld would take advantage and consume large portions of the city wholesale. Instead, to their horror, the Underworld has come up to them, and all their plans were for naught. Now, with the aid of the Sacred Cloud, they’ve pivoted their entire theology to center on the God-Machine’s relationship to the Underworld. These two groups are the beating heart of the Jeremiad sect in the Bay, seeking signs in analog and digital alike and building a syncretic faith heavy on apocalyptic and eschatological teachings. While they’re a great ally against the Contagion, they’re also a fractious bunch, always chasing the newest prophecy or revelation and scorning those who follow the last one. No one will be surprised if they pull themselves apart, but everyone has an interest in keeping that from happening, at least for now.

The Lancea et Sanctum, despite having significant theological differences with 1906 and the Sacred Cloud, are fast allies with them. For the self-styled kings and queens of death itself, conquering it at the price of eternity in the shadows, the dead rising and pushing their living prey out is an end-times scenario: God’s chosen predators are being pushed aside, forgotten, and left to starve. In the hopes of redeeming themselves, they’ve become the Jeremiad’s mailed fist, relentlessly hunting down mortals who, knowingly or otherwise, aid the Contagion’s spread. The newest commandment — “Thou shalt not drink the blood of the Contagious” — has thus far yet to see any violations come to light, but desperate times sometimes call for desperate measures, and even many of the Lance’s finest are starting to get hungry.

Rosetta Society

The Dead War was not kind to the Good Vibes krewe. The upwelling of the Underworld and the subsequent end of ghostly Twilight meant that their distribution model was destroyed. Having lost almost half their living number over the last year, the remaining members of Good Vibes have reoriented themselves with a little help from demonic associates — the Jailbirds who broke with Pernoja. Mainly Inquisitors, they’ve taught Good Vibes the best practices of espionage, and the result is a combination Agency-krewe that, for all its past troubles, is one of the better sources of information on the Contagion in the Bay Area.

They’ve found new allies and a secure distribution network in a local cell of Network Zero, the Berkeley Irregulars, whose history and membership reaches back to the birth of information technology and the very beginning of hacking itself. Originally a hobbyist venture, the group turned to investigating the supernatural after one of their number was consumed by a demon’s soul pact. They’re still hunting for the monster, who used the identity as a cutout before discarding it and practically unmaking their friend’s existence. The Irregulars warily collaborate other demons, but none trust them.

Working with this rag-tag group, mainly behind the scenes, is the lion's share of the Autumn Court. Though they profit in the short-term from the rise in fear stemming from anxiety and from encounters with things of the Underworld creeping into the city, even they can recognize an invasion when they see it. Unlike their warlike Summer cousins, they're more inclined to study the Contagion than fight against it, to test it with glamour and oneiromancy in the minds of the Contagious. They risk infection themselves, but if anyone understands that knowledge requires sacrifice, it's the Autumn Court.

Ship of Theseus

Quiet and studious before the Dead War, the Sutro Baths Association has emerged in the aftermath to aid the dead who have returned in such numbers — even if they don't know they're not meant to be seen by the living, they're still being exploited and abused by them. The Sutro Bath Association's public arm is gaining a reputation in the city as a charitable foundation and an organizer of public protests; one of their ongoing projects is a dead-specific renter's union to fight against exorbitant charges for reliquary storage.

In addition, they're also studying the interaction between the God-Machine and the Underworld, and specifically those sites where dead Infrastructure has emerged in the world of the living. The Transcontinental Railroad Society is their greatest ally in this venture, providing them with a wealth of information about the nature of Infrastructure and of the God-Machine itself. In return, the Association provides them with information about the dead, the Underworld, and issues surrounding the Sin-Eater cause. Each considers the other valuable, if a little weird.

Within the last few months, they've been joined by a throng of the Created. These *qashmallim*-watchers from the Salton Sea were led to San Francisco by a being of pure Pyros, which promptly collapsed into nothingness and sparked a firestorm that, for just a moment, caused every piece of Infrastructure in the area to fluoresce brightly. Two of their number have since transitioned to the Refinement of Silver, seeking to understand the strange technologies and the Contagion's interaction with them. Another, following the instructions of a ghostly athanor, has taken on the Refinement of Phosphorus, and is exploring the strange way humans in San Francisco interact with the visible dead.

Zero Hour

The Whisper Kids, riding high from coming through the Dead War relatively unscathed, command a great deal of the prestige and authority in Zero Hour's Bay Area cohort, despite being almost entirely under the age of 30. Natalia Álvarez, a young trans woman (and one of the three Patient Zero Sin-Eaters) has all but turned the krewes into her personal army. Adept at creative solutions and particularly gifted at asymmetrical urban warfare, her greatest failing is her laser-like focus on the Underworld. As far as she's concerned, the Contagion is just another manifestation of its rapacious greed, and victory will come when they drive the Underworld back down where it belongs.

Before she Fell, Pernoja was Nimrod 1.0, a hunter who annihilated dozens of demons with cold precision and overwhelming force. Falling didn't change much about her besides her preferred list of targets. Never one for patience, the Jailbirds were good to her nonetheless, and even let her serve her purpose on a few occasions. Even those of her fellows who sympathize with her call for a more direct solution to the God-Machine's encroachment and who followed her when she split the Jailbirds worry that she'll take things too far — but thus far, and with Álvarez's help, they've kept her focused.

Before the dead rose, the Adamantine Arrow and the Praetorian Ministry were the deadliest of enemies, engaged in a war over the symbology of violence itself, liberation versus oppression. In the face of a reality-threatening menace, the two sides have — reluctantly — concluded that the enemy of their enemy is an enemy they can put off war with. Officially, the two Orders are members of the same command hierarchy and they do coordinate all their actions. Nevertheless, neither is willing to share any information that might compromise their own post-Contagion strategies, and both sides adamantly oppose to their counterpart maintaining sole control over any one area while desperately trying to carve out solo protectorates of their own.

The Symptom

The dead have risen, and they're looking for work. What began as a few isolated communities struggling with dead relatives suddenly back among them and telling tales of a horrific Underworld has become a region mired in the certainty that the rat race continues after death. A few Sin-Eaters joining their dead comrades on the other side of mortality became a pandemic sweeping through krewes. Despite spreading throughout the Bay, this outbreak is one of the Contagion's less virulent varieties, primarily infecting the dead and things of the dead, such as dead Infrastructure or the Underworld itself — even in these cases, it remains dormant much of the time. Most of the dead in San Francisco — Bound included — are asymptomatic carriers of the Contagion.

Functionally, what this means is that only ghosts, creatures of the Underworld, the Underworld itself, and dead Infrastructure can spread the Contagion. Changes to reality and memory are side effects of the Contagion causing death itself to become inflamed and swell out into the world of the living, and not its direct handiwork. The living only rarely contract the Contagion, and when they do, it's effectively a dead end for the disease — unable to spread to others from there, it twists and warps the living to become more like the dead.

Mortals might, at the Contagion's first stages, develop what seem like mundane ailments, such as pica or obsessive behaviors. However, these quickly graduate into a deep hunger for ectoplasmic corpus, or obsession with specific locations (and, frequently, sufferers demand payment for their use). Eventually, in its final stages, the changes begin to warp the flesh as well as the spirit, and the victim becomes something neither dead or alive, but wholly monstrous.

Geists

It's not as hard as one might think for a Geist to pass unremarked upon, given their newfound visibility, as most of the living in the Bay Area now know about and are terrified of Geists. Most children are taught not to look at or acknowledge a Geist's presence in any way, and thanks to the retrocausal nature of the San Francisco outbreak, virtually every adult retroactively received the same socialization. Most people will become extremely uncomfortable in the presence of a Geist, making whatever excuse they can to flee the scene — possibly after trying to warn the Bound in the most circuitous language they can think of not to turn around, if they're feeling charitable.

Outbreak Sites

The San Francisco outbreak is primarily spread by the dead and their trappings, though they do so almost entirely as carriers. It's when the Contagion infects Infrastructure or the living that it begins to twist and warp reality.

Ghosts and the Machine

With the God-Machine straddling life and death, and with the energies of both freely mixing across the Bay Area, it comes as no surprise to the knowledgeable that Contagion-carrier ghosts are beginning to experience stigmata just as mortals do. What's more terrifying, especially to demons, is that the souls of the Contagious claimed in pacts aren't *always* behaving as they ought. More than one victim, her life hijacked by a demon just as disease was beginning to unwind it, has found herself not only a ghost, but a terrifying conglomeration of ectoplasmic flesh and demonic instrumentation, equipped with Modifications, Technologies, Propulsions, Processes, and occasionally even Embeds or Exploits inherited from her demonic partner. No longer affected by the Contagion (though still carrying it), she's nonetheless marked by its presence — and the jury's still out on whether these hybrid ghosts can be cured at all.

New Rules

• **Hybrid Technology (• – •••••):** The ghost is a hybrid of corpus and machinery, and may purchase demonic traits (**Demon: The Descent**, p. 196) as well as Embeds and Exploits (**Demon: The Descent**, p. 123). Modifications cost •, Technologies ••, Propulsions •••, Processes and Embeds ••••, and Exploits •••••. This Merit may be taken multiple times, but a character may only purchase a total of ten dots in it. These Traits are always active (or may be activated and deactivated at will), but they are also obvious and unnatural-looking.

Angel Island

Angel Island, often referred to as the Ellis Island of the West, was the gateway to San Francisco for hundreds of thousands of immigrants. It's served other purposes since that time, such as for quarantine and later internment of Japanese, German, and Italian immigrants during World War II. During the Cold War, a missile station was built on the island; it's since been decommissioned.

One of the epicenters of the Contagion, a variety of dead Infrastructure has surfaced on the island and is slowly bleeding into reality. Every stream and river on the island has reversed its flow, the water pouring into a gaping cenote at the summit of Mount Livermore, where an Avernian Gate stands permanently jammed open. The stump of a half-buried radio tower extending from it broadcasts constantly despite a lack of power, shouting numbers and snippets of long-lost radio broadcasts into the ether.

The Ghost Fleet of Suisun Bay

After the massive build-up of World War II, the Navy reduced the size of the Pacific Fleet significantly, scrapping some ships and mothballing others in Suisun Bay, an inland body of water in the North Bay Area. Since then, apart from creating an environmental disaster from all the flaking paint, they've been sold off for scrap one by one, reducing what was a vast Reserve Fleet to a handful of boats that are destined to be broken up on the shore. Except the work never quite ends — there's always more ships to break up, and these days it seems like they're multiplying every time one looks away. Ships from the Second World War, ships from the First, and ships from the Third (still radioactive) are all dragged into being by the rusting hulk at the heart of it all, the USS Eldridge — a vessel that never sailed in the Pacific, which still bearing the dead-and-rotting Infrastructure that inspired the legend of the Philadelphia Experiment.

Atlas Development

The Bay Bridge has connected San Francisco to Oakland for decades, but during the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, a section of the upper deck collapsed, prompting retrofitting and the replacement of the aging eastern span. That replacement was discovered to have serious corrosion issues with the welds in its foundation, and developers are scrambling to provide solutions.

One, Atlas Development, claims to have found the perfect answer, and is in the process of constructing proof of concept buildings across the Bay. Their answer is nothing less than taking advantage of the Underworld's tendency to consume the dead by mixing ground stone taken from the Underworld into cement, and using it to construct the framework of a building that will consume and use the corpus of Anchorless ghosts to fill itself out. Animacrete, as they refer to the resulting mixture of Underworld concrete and ghostly remnants, is both lighter and stronger than traditional cement, and highly corrosion-resistant. There have been protests from the very beginning, but Atlas claims that it's better to be a part of something lasting and visible than lost forever to the uncaring Underworld. Some speculate that they've already begun to run out of Anchorless ghosts to feed into their buildings. Rumors that they've begun employing legbreakers to find and destroy Anchors are, of course, just that: rumors.

Contagious Human: Mr. Michaels

"Your lease has been modified. All electrical lights will be extinguished between the hours of 3:12 PM and 4:55 PM. I have spoken."

Mr. Michaels is a perfectly ordinary facilities manager at the Seaview Apartments, but he does get under residents' skin sometimes. First, it was the mandatory all-tenant meetings in the parking lot — at 2:34 AM, precisely. Then, the snap inspections, not that he ever says or does much during them, just stands in the corner and stares. No one's ever heard him opening or closing a door, either. Occasionally, he's in two places at once. Then, there's building E, which wasn't there before, every inch of the interior and exterior walls covered in scrawling script like a modern Code of Hammurabi. Really, if the rent wasn't so cheap, people might start thinking about moving out, but it's not like you don't find the same sorts of things at every complex — right?

Description: Mr. Michaels still looks human if he doesn't stand in direct light, but his pale skin is even more washed out than usual, his eyes have lost their color and sunken back into his skull, and his black hair seems to consume light. His fingers are a little too long, the nails dark but immaculately trimmed. His voice grows raspier by the day, almost like something was speaking through him from somewhere deep in his gut. The eyes in the back of his head are mostly hidden when he keeps them shut, but the nose and mouth below them are starting to protrude.

Virtue: Implacable

Vice: Obsessive

Rank: 3

Attributes: Power 7, Finesse 4, Resistance 8

Influence: Seaview Apartments (•••••)

Corpus: 13

Willpower: 10

Size: 5

Speed: 11

Defense: 4

Initiative: 12

Armor: 0

Numina: Aggressive Meme, Awe, Implant Mission, Pathfinder, Regenerate

Max Essence: 20

Ban: Mr. Michaels' Attributes are halved if he leaves Seaview property, unless he is pursuing someone who violated their lease.

Bane: If three or more people attack Mr. Michaels using identical weapons and inflict the same corpus damage with each attack, that damage is retroactively upgraded to aggravated.

Story Hooks

The following details may serve to inspire Storytellers, or serve as one-off events connected to a larger storyline.

The Phlogiston

“[Ceaseless inhuman screeching]!!”

It was made with a single purpose, and it failed. In failing, it consumed itself. Designed to annihilate San Francisco, the Phlogiston “merely” started one of the most destructive urban fires in American history. Burnt to scrap, it’s lain buried under ash, dirt, and cement for over a century, but the surging of the Underworld has given it new, if temporary, life. Every April 18th, the ghost of the Phlogiston rises, shrieking and shedding flames as it wanders for four days and nights before finally dissolving into ectoplasmic ash. Last year, it was wholly unexpected, and occurred early enough in the outbreak that it did very little damage — this year, however, with the Underworld’s influence spreading, the potential for a terrible disaster is staring the Sin-Eaters of the Bay in the face.

Description: The Phlogiston is a creature of living white-hot flame and burning, smoking, melting debris. Fifteen feet tall and terrifically strong, its hands never seem to have the same number of digits — they’re consumed and re-extruded constantly. Its feet are perhaps its most solid part, since they tend to accumulate debris more quickly than any other part of the spirit, leaving burning footprints and the stench of smoke in its wake.

Virtue: All-Consuming

Vice: Broken

Rank: 5

Attributes: Power 14, Finesse 12, Resistance 10

Influence: Fire (•••••)

Corpus: 20

Willpower: 10

Size: 10

Speed: 26

Defense: 12

Initiative: 22

Armor: 0

Numina: Blast, Emotional Aura, Firestarter, Regenerate

Max Essence: 50

Ban: The Phlogiston's Defense is reduced to 0 against any weapon constructed entirely of materials taken from buildings that survived the original 1906 fire.

Bane: The flaming waters of the Phlegethon, one of the great rivers of the Underworld, will quench the Phlogiston's fire, dealing Aggravated damage to it.

Soulsafe Phylactery, LLC

The constant influx of the dead into the Bay, the legacy of necrocapitalist startups stretching back as far as the 1980s, has only deepened the already-terminal housing crisis caused by gentrification. The living are pushed out of apartments by high costs, and in turn rent hovels previously used almost exclusively by the dead to store their Anchors. The price of land in the city means that self-storage facilities are, increasingly, a thing of the past (if they're not being upconverted by some tech startup into low-cost intern housing), leaving the dead with few options besides banding together to rent a tiny apartment or even a room — something frowned upon by archaic housing laws that don't respect the modern reality of the dead and the living with regards to real estate.

Enter Soulsafe, LLC, the first and largest startup dedicated entirely to providing low-cost, high-security Anchor storage to the dead. Similar to capsule hotels, Soulsafe Phylacteries are little more than an alcove with a heavy locking door, one among many lining the reinforced walls of the building. Security varies according to cost — some use keys, others use keycodes or passphrases (two-factor authentication for a small fee!). The entire building is wired with a camera network, and guards patrol each floor on a regular basis.

Something in the Water

The San Francisco Bay has been a haven for leisure boating for decades, to say nothing of its industrial and shipping use as a deepwater port. Recently, though, the former has started to drop off, for even as the dead walk the land, the sea has its own dead newcomers — except, in this case, rather than the souls of dead creatures, Chthonians have emerged in the Bay. Ancient beyond reckoning, these beings never properly lived and only know an insatiable hunger. While they may come in any shape, they often assume the forms of ancient marine super-predators, or conglomerations of their deadliest traits. They aggressively hunt anything that rides the waves. Small craft, especially sailboats, are particularly vulnerable to these beasts, but the freighters and larger craft that ply the Bay are more or less safe, though it's becoming common for even these behemoths to make port with massive dents or long claw marks running along the waterline.

Pandemic Situation

Only the most courageous (or most zealous) of demons have ever braved Silicon Valley, for according to them, it's the place in California most deserving of the name "City of Angels." The God-Machine's presence here is thick, with almost every other building sporting Infrastructure of some kind; server farms where interns recite the products of occult Markov chains, factories where CPUs are forged and cooled in human blood, market prediction firms where shattered RAM chips are cast like dice and the shapes they form read like tea leaves. Some simply call it The Prototype, fearing that it's what the God-Machine would have the whole world look like. Now, there's a new concern — keeping the Contagion from infecting a massive Infrastructure complex with connections all over the world. The Firebreak line, a quarantine carved out at San Jose's northern edges, has held thus far, but many of the Sworn privately despair of stemming the spread of infection.

Eaters of the Dead

The vampires of San Francisco are perhaps the most on edge about the outbreak, if only because the number of dead is rapidly outpacing the living population. The local Invictus court has become extremely possessive of their herds, and the Lancea et Sanctum is preaching that the dead are God's judgement on the undead for being imperfect predators. The Ordo Dracul, rather more pragmatic, is adapting as best they can; one of their number, a Mekhet named Aster, developed a Coil that allows vampires to feed on the corpus of the dead. It seemed like a godsend at first, but it was only after some of the earlier adherents of the coil began to report symptoms of the Contagion that the Ordo Dracul realized it was creating a new vector of infection. Teaching of the Coil was summarily banned, but there's already a thriving community of necrophages. As far as they're concerned, if they're already infected, there's no reason to go back to increasingly scarce prey.

Living with Contagion

Not every Sin-Eater in the Bay carries Contagion, but many do, as they're directly susceptible to this variation of it. Fortunately, Sin-Eaters (and other Bound) have the advantage of being at least partially dead — as a result, while the average Sin-Eater is a carrier, few are Contagious.

The problem is, this makes it difficult to tell whether one of the Bound *is* infected. Sin-Eaters are desperate to stem the tide of infection, having already been engaged in a guerrilla war against the Underworld before it marched onto their home turf. There are even attempts to impose a quarantine on the city to avoid contaminating Avernian Gates or Infrastructure outside the Bay, which Zero Hour and the Jeremiad have been zealous about enforcing.

Regardless of infection status, all Bound within the hot zone — roughly contiguous with San Francisco, the Peninsula, Oakland, and portions of the North and South Bay — are subject to its effects, namely being as spectral as the dead themselves. As the dead are material, this hasn't hampered them much, but it has had a few effects; the signs of their deaths are as visible to the living as they once were in the Underworld, and as ghosts themselves, they're susceptible to being dispersed — though, instead of reforming later, their Geist emerges and subsumes them, reversing their traditional roles as the Bound is reduced to a passenger in the Geist's now-material body, helpless as the spirit wreaks havoc.

New Rules

- **Falling Apart:** Bound replace Health with Corpus. They only possess Bans and Banes while they are Doomed (**Geist: The Sin-Eaters**, p. XX). These Bans and Banes should relate to

the Key unlocked. If the Bound loses all her Corpus, she is dispersed and her Geist is Unleashed (**Geist: The Sin-Eaters**, p. XX).

- **Plasm for Essence:** If the ephemeral entities rules (**Chronicles of Darkness**, p. 124) call for expenditure of essence, the Bound spend Plasm instead.
- **Dispersal:** Dispersed Bound reform at the end of the scene, even if their Plasm is exhausted. Unlike ghosts, they reform with their Corpus intact. Bound may be permanently dispersed if destroyed in a manner resonant with their death, or with a Bane if they presently have one.
- **Nothing Special:** Bound do not lose the Medium and Ghost Touch Merits, but within the outbreak's area of effect, the fusion of materiality and deathly Twilight supersede them.
- **Solid as a Rock:** All Twilight entities associated with death (e.g., ghosts, Reapers, Kerberoi) are permanently Materialized (**Chronicles of Darkness**, p. 134) at no cost, and only suffer essence bleed if they do not spend at least an hour a day in the presence of an Anchor. If their Anchor is destroyed or lost and they cannot take advantage of another Manifestation Condition (such as **Possessed**) they suffer essence bleed as normal.
- **Nothing Unusual:** Humans affected by the San Francisco outbreak do not experience a breaking point upon seeing a ghost, unless the ghost's death trauma is particularly gruesome or relevant to a personal trigger (Storyteller's discretion). This does not apply to Geists.
- **The Key of the Contagion:** All Contagious Bound possess an additional Key, the Key of the Contagion (p. XX).

Geists in a Ghostly World

The Bound are not the only ones struggling with changes to their metaphysical state. Once living, then dead, then something beyond mere human death, most Geists have very little memory of being material, and those who do typically remember only traumas associated with their deaths. Consequently, being visible (and material) is often extremely troubling for them — which, in turn, creates a great deal of trouble for the Bound. While the connection between the Bound and Geists is not public knowledge, numerous urban legends about people haunted by Geists exist, in which Geists range from omens of impending death to the not-quite dislocated soul of a murderer about to kill its living shell to wander and murder with wild abandon.

Bound Geists have the option of retreating within their partner, though many grow increasingly frustrated and intractable when not given the opportunity to show themselves among the dead — as much as they've forgotten about themselves, they have no desire to be forgotten by others. Unbound Geists — free or graveyard guardians — are material but have nowhere to hide. They are entirely unequipped to cope with the attention of the living, though they do retain the full use of their natural powers. San Francisco's Contagious retrohistory is littered with gruesome murders laid at the feet of Geists, and popular conspiracy theory holds that the Zodiac Killer was in fact a particularly coherent Geist.

New Rules

- **Flesh Once More:** Using the Caul Haunt gives the composite Bound/Geist entity a reasonable facsimile of flesh and blood for the duration of the **Merged Condition** (**Geist: The Sin-Eaters**, p. XX), which can be used to fool casual observation but not focused inquiry.

Infectiousness

Contagious Bound possess an additional innate Key: the Key of the Contagion, a manifest form of death's extrusion into the world of the living due to a disease of reality. By drawing on the Contagion, Bound may empower their Haunts significantly, at the cost of giving the Contagion room to replicate and possibly to spread. A Bound's infectiousness is tracked with three Persistent Conditions: **Latent** (p. XX), **Replicating** (p. XX), and **Shedding** (p. XX).

Terminal Contagion

Terminal isn't a Condition, or at least, it's not a Condition like the others. When a Bound is Terminal, the Contagion is in the driver's seat, and will use her for its own ends, which typically involves spreading itself as much as possible. Terminal Bound are unsuitable for use as player characters, but that doesn't mean that they're lost forever — there might still be a chance to cure them.

The Key of the Contagion

The Infected Key, The Key of Plague, The Sick Machine's Key

The Key of the Contagion is an unnatural Key, born from the intersection of death, the God-Machine, and the world of the living. It is the Key that shouldn't be, the Key that eats away at the user until it leaves them a husk of their former self. It sometimes feels like turning the Key of Disease, but subtly wrong; others feel the fevers or the sensation of a wet cough rather than the Bound, or instead of sputum, they bring up motor oil. Nothing goes as it should when the Contagious Key is turned — but that's what makes it so powerful, and so tempting.

Unlock Attribute: Any

Resonance: The Key of Contagion is resonant whenever the Bound is in the presence of the Contagion in strength; not her own sickness, or a single Contagious, but a whole band of Contagious would qualify, as would an infected Infrastructure complex. The Key of Contagion is always resonant in the presence of another unlocked Key of Contagion.

Doom: The Key of Contagion does not Doom the Bound. Instead, its use exacerbates a Contagious Bound's infection.

The Cure

The situation in the Bay Area is dire — multiple points of infection across a heavily urbanized geographic area — but it's not without hope. Because the Contagion here originated in dead Infrastructure, the Sworn are convinced that excising the dead "tissue" of the God-Machine will allow its natural defenses to reassert themselves, returning reality to its normal configuration. The trick will be to figure out *how* to accomplish this feat.

The Cryptocracy

The San Francisco bureau of the Cryptocracy has focused their efforts thus far on safeguarding the living of the Bay Area, ensuring that despite the financial cost, housing remains (to some extent) available to the living. Likewise, they work to prevent development of dead-centric structures and practices. This not only serves to keep the social focus of the city on the living despite the ever-increasing numbers of the dead seeking work, but also to prevent potentially Contagious individuals from departing the city in droves and spreading the infection elsewhere.

The Cryptocracy's greatest advantage lies in their connections with mortal authorities, both local and national. Despite TFV's zero-tolerance policies for the supernatural, a small but growing faction in its higher echelons are taking suggestions (not orders — *suggestions*) about potential targets of opportunity in the Bay Area. Agents watch for potentially Contagious subjects and pile up mountains of paperwork in front of any path away from the city — and when that fails, arrange for accidents or emergencies to consume whatever nest egg the unfortunate was relying on. They hope to secure all the Contagious Infrastructure in the city, and to deactivate it all in one fell swoop, trusting to reality's natural immune system to reverse whatever effects of the Outbreak linger beyond that. They have contingency plans just in case, but no one in the Cryptocracy wants to engage with what they refer to as "the Jeremiad failsafe."

The Jeremiad

The Jeremiad's primary concern in the Bay is stopping the spread of the Contagion by any means necessary — and they really *do* mean any means. They've gotten good at passing off arson as accidental fires, or at faking gas or toxic effluent scares to gain access to infected Infrastructure. Thus far, they haven't managed to disable or destroy any of the key sources of the Contagion, but they have managed to take down several key secondary or tertiary vectors of the plague. They're also heavily involved in charitable organization for the dead — many of the Jeremiad believe that the shape this outbreak has taken is nothing less than a message from on high to re-examine humanity's relationship with death, with their ancestors, and with each other.

Sin-Eaters insist that the dead are as "real" as the living, and that the Jeremiad is called to aid them. As a result, the going practice in 1906 is to aid the dead in moving on, the better to lower the number of potential vectors of Contagion. However, vocal non-Sin-Eater groups within the Jeremiad (especially the Lancea et Sanctum) regularly argue for simply shepherding the dead down into the Underworld, relying on arguments from Awakened necromancers that the dead have no souls and are, therefore, not actually the people they appear to be. More than one fight has broken out over the argument; most recently, Jenny "White-Eye" Whitehead used the Memoria Haunt to make her point in as visceral a manner as possible, forcing her opponents into a morality play of dead existence. The rift this caused still hasn't healed, and is feeding the biggest problem the Jeremiad has in the Bay: as far as anyone can tell, every Sin-Eater is a potential carrier, and the only way to be sure is to see if they spread the Contagion to as-yet-uninfected Infrastructure. Of all the Sworn, they're perhaps the least fond of uncertainty, but thus far, only the most radical members of the faction have so much as suggested turning on their Bound membership.

The Rosetta Society

If the Contagion is poorly understood communication, then the San Francisco outbreak is someone hollering into a megaphone inches from one's ear. Just sorting out Contagion-wrought changes to reality from redirected systemic oppression is difficult enough. So far, the Rosetta Society's work has been mainly logistical, creating a map of the Bay cross-referenced by Infrastructure and infection status — thanks to the work of the post-war Good Vibes krewe, it's probably the most up-to-date collection of intelligence on the spread of Contagion in the Bay.

They're not just gathering information anymore, though. With expeditions into the Underworld, far beyond the Authochthonous Depths where the God-Machine's touch is still known, the Rosetta Society is making connections, seeking out proof of the radical theory that the Deep Domains are, in fact, the ghosts of worlds entire, dead of Contagion before they could puzzle out

its meaning. Their search for meaning in the disparate Old Laws of the Kerberoi may be a fool's errand, or it may change the course of history.

Other members of the Rosetta Society are exploring a more technological solution, studying the 88-inch Cyclotron at the University of California at Berkeley. While it's not Infrastructure of the God-Machine, it's near several complexes, and particularly high-energy operations have been known to have effects on them — effects known to the Berkeley Irregulars, who count several physicists among their number. They have hope — a wild hope — that using the cyclotron, they may be able to affect the Contagion, or potentially activate dormant immune systems within the God-Machine. They have made tentative overtures to the Transcontinental Railroad Society, despite the Irregulars' historic distrust of demons, but they've yet to find out how the Integrators will respond to the idea of humans commanding the Creator.

The Ship of Theseus

To the Theseans, the San Francisco Bay outbreak is a call to unity unlike any before. It's written across the very face of the outbreak — the Underworld and the world of the living stitched together, the quick and the dead staring each other in the face and coming to terms with it. Small wonder, then, that their efforts have focused on the dead in particular, doing everything in their power to cement them as equal members of society — a task very much opposed by the powers that be who are making profit hand-over-fist thanks to the legal grey area of employing the deceased.

To that end, the Theseans are doing everything they can to radicalize the living and the dead, urging them to come together in mutual opposition to exploitation. From renter's unions to wildcat strikes to protests that gridlock Interstate 80 for hours, odds are there's a Thesean's hand behind it all. It's made them many powerful enemies, but if the Ship of Theseus knows anything, it's how to adapt.

Zero Hour

Those few who know what the Whisper Kids did blame them for the outbreak, save the envoys of Zero Hour who came to them after the Dead War. It takes a certain kind of ingenuity to meddle in the God-Machine's inner workings, and a certain kind of luck to survive the attempt — and the Whisper Kids had both. They've not only made strides against the Contagion, they've moved into the Contagion's backyard. More than one Zero Hour stronghold is built right into a piece of dead Infrastructure, and despite the eschatological effects of their last experiment, they haven't stopped trying to understand the Infrastructure's inner workings.

That the Bound are, potentially, carriers of the Contagion makes it difficult to them to work with the Jeremiad, but so far, they've managed. The Firebreak at San Jose is a joint project of theirs, though turf wars have erupted over what to do with any given Contagious person or object that tries to make it through.

Álvarez's plan is straightforward: figure out the exact input that made the God-Machine tear dead Infrastructure out of the Underworld, and puzzle out its opposite. If the God-Machine can take it out, she estimates, the God-Machine can put it back — and she firmly believes that doing so will undo the outbreak. That it might well mean her and her infected comrades' exile into the Underworld — she'll pay that price, if it comes to it.

The False

The Sworn aren't alone in San Francisco. The Crucible Initiative is ready to burn out the infection, the Machiavelli Gambit is abusing the Contagion for their own ends, and Naglfar's Army is reveling in the sheer apocalyptic ruin of it all. Time will tell which of these threats is the greatest, but none may be taken lightly.

The Crucible Initiative

The Crucible Initiative was born in the fires of total war, and its strategies reflect that — but San Francisco is hardly the Western Front, and modern society has developed an aversion (a troubling one, to the Crucible) to mass death. Their methods have developed by necessity, for though everything pales before the need to destroy the Contagion, exposure might well threaten the entire enterprise.

Consequently, the Crucible Initiative in San Francisco is subtle. Their operations, no less bloody, are carried out with the greatest discretion. They're fortunate that the primary carriers of this particular outbreak are the dead, and though they're much more visible than they used to be, they're still easily missed and easily replaced — Anchors get lost or broken, the Avernian Gates lead them astray, or an unlicensed Reaper made a trip to the city. Easily excused, easily forgotten. Many of the Crucible's finest necromancers are on the front lines in San Francisco, binding the dead and flensing them to shreds, seeking any sign of the Contagion. Multiple Reapers — the Eyeless Minister, the Maw of Tears, the Forgotten Word — are fully committed to the Crucible's plan, eager to force the Underworld to rely on them to bring the dead to its door once again.

The Machiavelli Gambit

By far the strongest of the False in San Francisco, the Machiavellians see this outbreak as the ultimate get-rich-quick scheme. Between Tempers leaning on others with the threat of corruption and Reapers not-so-quietly setting up shop in the halls of power, they've got the leverage to pull it off. Soulsafe Phylactery, a fully owned subsidiary of a Panopticon pylon, is one of their biggest successes, but there are up-and-comers waiting in the wings and hundreds of fingers in as many pies. One Reaper, the Ten Thousand Wings, has capitalized on materiality by abducting humans along with ghosts, stranding them in the Underworld until they agree to pay up. Half-Life Harry, a radiation-burned former Sin-Eater who broke with his krewes over the Underworld's resurgence, has built a cult around his self-help scheme for ghosts — which, privately, he hopes to use as a cudgel against the Underworld, but in the meantime he's quite happy to profit from their desperation.

Naglfar's Army

Outbreaks as virulent as San Francisco are the stuff of the Antediluvians' dreams, and they're not about to sit around and let the Sworn ruin the show. The message can't get any clearer — the God-Machine has never been so prominent in mortals' day to day lives, the Underworld is demanding its due, and it's time for humanity to die and get out of the way! Much of the Antediluvian contingent in San Francisco hails from the Underworld itself or has some measure of power over death, from petty necromancers to Seers of the Throne, and most are attempting to draw the deeper powers of the Underworld into an alliance with them. Unfortunately for them (and fortunately for reality), the Kerberoi are as implacable as they are inscrutable, and the guardians of Irkalla's Gates are uninterested in anything but collecting tolls.

What successes Naglfar's Army has seen largely revolve around spreading the Contagion, seizing Contagious humans or components of Infrastructure, and scattering them to the four winds. None of the secondary outbreaks have really caught fire yet, but there's places as far away as Oregon or Nevada where county graveyards are time bombs waiting to go off.

Rumors in San Francisco

- Rosemary Afterlife Support is hiring, and their offices are slammed with the living trying to find one of the last jobs that someone who isn't dead or already connected to wealth can reliably get in the Bay: cultivating memories of the dead, either those who have lost Anchors and are desperate or those who can afford the extra hit of essence.
- Bay Area Rapid Transit, or BART as the locals call it, is always expanding its service area, but the new stations added in the last year are, to put it mildly, a bit disquieting. Maybe it's the smell — is it blood or rot? — or maybe it's the fact that the doors never open unless someone in the car is dead.
- Someone fired the gun at Battery Chamberlain last night. By the time anyone could get there, no one was around, but everyone in the city heard all six shots, one every thirty seconds, like clockwork. Everyone's asking where they got the shells for it; surprisingly few are asking why the gun's still clean as a whistle.
- The lights on the Muni Metro always go out when it runs through the Twin Peaks Tunnel. It's just for a few seconds, and hardly anyone notices anymore, but when the lights come back on, there's never the same number of people in the car. Usually, there's more, but very occasionally, there's fewer.
- Another apartment building burned down last night. It was just some low-income housing for the living, as usual. The developers get a free parcel of land to build a phylactery on, and hey, if someone got caught in the fire, they don't even have to look for new tenants.
- Flight 213 arrived at San Francisco International Airport right on time, at 12:20 AM, and taxied right up to gate A5. There's just one problem: there was no one on board, not even the pilots.
- Tantalus is the hot new restaurant in the financial district, with the latest in gastronomy. Ever thought ectoplasm was tasteless? My friend, you're in for a treat — and zero calories to boot! Good luck getting a reservation anytime within the next three months, though!
- It's just the top of the old aqueduct, but the Secret Sidewalk is practically a rite of passage for youth in the East Bay, even if walking on it is technically trespassing. Just remember one thing — don't take any of the turn-offs. There aren't supposed to *be* turnoffs.
- The James C. Flood Mansion, once home to the Pacific-Union Club, is one of the only buildings on Nob Hill that survived the 1906 quake, though the fire gutted it. Like the remaining pre-fire structures, it's a magnet for older ghosts with ties to the place. While it's ostensibly a historic landmark, it's been occupied by dead squatters, some of whom vocally pledge allegiance to someone calling themselves "Emperor Norton II."
- The Marin Headlands are riddled with tunnels dating back to military construction from World War II, the majority of which are closed to the public, both for safety reasons and because the park service is *well aware* of what's down there.

- The town of Drawbridge sat along one of the region's primary railroads. It was once a thriving town before its abandonment. Now it's sinking into the salt marsh, and the train no longer stops there — if anything, it speeds up, so passengers don't see the things that only vaguely resemble people waiting on the platform.

Kyoto: Contagion of the Persona

Everyone wears masks but be careful to not lose the face beneath yours.

— Nishihara Hayato

The famous city of Kyoto served as Japan's capital from 794 CE until 1868 CE. Its plethora of historic, priceless temples and shrines make it a popular tourist destination. With a population of 1.5 million people, it's one of the ten largest cities in the country. Despite its rich history and cultural value, the city achieved a futuristic look during the technological boom of the '90s, especially when compared to western cities. Japan was lauded for their engineering and technological advancements from the '60s through the '90s and beyond, until a major recession hit the nation.

A common business saying is that stagnation is the precursor to decline. In Japan, the older population outnumbers the younger one, and the birth rate is well under the replacement level. It's a glaring problem staring everyone in the face, even outsiders, yet the country appears at a standstill. To understand why, one must have an understanding of Japanese culture and be aware that generational problems are not solved overnight.

Japan is a conservative country, and many of the old ways are still present in the people's everyday lives. The idea of prioritizing the group's needs over oneself has shaped Japanese society and culture in many ways. One of the ways in which this is apparent in the everyday life of both humans and non-humans is in the concept of *omote-ura*. *Omote-ura* is the idea of duality, that everyone wears one face in public and another in private. This is by no means because of a malicious intent even if it may be translated as "two-faced," or that one is always masking oneself.

The public face is a general level of respect and helpfulness shown to everyone around you, especially toward your elders. After all, they were the ones who looked after you before you could walk or care for yourself. The private face is how you act to the people closest to you, including your family and good friends. Certain rules and expectations carry over from the public mask, however, such as showing respect toward your older siblings and parents.

Duality is everywhere in Japanese society, as a clearly defined group mentality. A strong example of an "us and them" group mentality exists between Japanese and foreigners. Many who have lived in Japan as a foreigner know that no matter how many years you live in Japan, you will never be Japanese. You can be married to a Japanese person and have children who attend Japanese school, but you will always receive the tourist treatment. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, based on an individual's personality or preference. Foreigners usually get away with behavior that would otherwise be frowned upon. In a society fond of placing labels, if you do not fit into the two obvious categories, then you are treated as an outcast.

Theme and Mood

Two distinct faces, one to present to the community, the other to oneself and one's closest relations. Your image and actions affect group dynamics, and the Japanese are always conscious of their hierarchical position in any social setting. Based on the situation, they act according to what's expected of them as a member of their group, not necessarily according to their individual personality and taste. The sense of duty one has to everyone around them makes many feel as if

to do otherwise would not only let one person down, but let down all of society. For some, this responsibility weighs so heavily on their shoulders that their private face is also a mask; their true self is unknown, even to themselves. Japan is known to face particular mental health pressures, where many feel they are being crushed under the pressure of society.

It can be difficult for outsiders to understand, especially if one comes from a country propagating individualism.

Theme: Fitting In

Have you ever quickly thrown some things that were cluttering up a room into a drawer or closet before guests arrive? If you apply the concept of *omote-ura* here, *omote* is the outward appearance; the table surface is clean and presentable to guests. It is the facade that covers everything seen by outsiders. Underneath the *omote* is the *ura*, the truth the owner does not want to be known. The mess inside the drawer, and inside oneself. What could possibly be the benefit of hiding and living in a world of lies?

The same reason for why everyone lies, even if just occasionally — we lie for attention, a sense of belonging, money, and possibly to avoid conflict. In a collectivist society, people lie for the survival of the group. However, a schism in the value system has occurred between the older and the younger generations, and the young are shifting away from collectivism. Part of the younger population wishes to pursue their own dreams, rather than doing what is expected of them. Society is not going to change overnight, however, and new thinkers are going to have to grow thick skin. After all, the majority is not on their side.

Mood: Fear and Loneliness

The pain of loneliness is either worse than or equal to physical pain. Whether we like it or not, humans weren't meant to be solitary beings. We're wired to seek companionship for procreation and validation. Many have lied little white lies that we justify to ourselves to fit in or to avoid conflict. What would the worst-case scenario be if we were honest with the people with whom we tried to avoid arguments?

Who would notice if a few people on their friends list suddenly vanished from everyone's consciousness? In a city where some feel like they are choking for breathing space in an overpopulated city, a small number of disappearances would barely make a dent on the public's consciousness. How many people have you lost contact with over the years? How many friends have you outgrown to the point where you scarcely think of or remember them? If you're a part of society, you can take comfort that you're at least contributing to something, but if you decide to strike out on your own, you risk losing your entire support structure.

What Has Come Before

Kyoto is no stranger to the supernatural. After all, it contains a vast number of shrines said to be portals to the spirit world. There are at least a few stories about spirits haunting each and every shrine, but several relate to Contagion bursting free.

The beginning of the Heian Period (794 CE – 1185 CE) saw the city of Heian — Kyoto's historic name — become the new capital. Shuten-dōji, the Integrator demon leader of Japan, received countless messages he perceived as coming from the God-Machine, inviting him back into the warm bed of Infrastructure and angelic servitude, if only he could perform one service.

He needed to cleanse the city of all humans. According to the constant missives, they had failed to revere and grow, and whether through plague, war, or environmental disaster, they deserved death. Shuten-dōji gathered different allies of non-human nature, promising them free rein to haunt the population of the capital should they follow his orders. One of his most important servants was a vampire with a child-like appearance, Ibaraki-dōji.

The plan to eliminate the mortals of Kyoto was foiled in a counter-attack, as Sworn hunter Minamoto Raikō slew the Shuten-dōji. The God-Machine's programming did not allow for the demon to pass, however, so despite his head being severed from his body, the demon continued to live. In a last-ditch effort, Shuten-dōji, as a dismembered head, attempted to bite Minamoto Raikō's head, but did not expect the man to be wearing multiple helmets. The demon's attack was foiled, but such was the unnatural violence of the brief clash, a tear in reality formed. Through it crawled a forgotten breed of Contagious creatures which became known as the Geryo.

The vampire child Ibaraki-dōji fled with his master's head during the commotion. Shuten-dōji's minions died at the hands of the Sworn hunters and Geryo infiltrating their stronghold. Ibaraki-dōji is said to now wander, drinking the blood of humans as he tries to restore his master's power. The demon Shuten-dōji, though weakened, still tries to hammer down the Kyoto's defenses, determined to fulfil the God-Machine's wishes. The Sworn factions have fought for centuries against this Contagion and in a moment of weakness, a foolish few attempted to harness the power of the God-Machine to cure the plague. As rumors spread that Shuten-dōji survived his decapitation, the False came to care less about the balance between the spirits and demons and more about how to acquire the secret to immortality he somehow exhibits.

Come the Edo period (1603 CE – 1868 CE), Japan's Contagious entities became known as *yōkai*, the Japanese word for supernatural beings. The twisted monsters emerging from the Contagion's festering wound spawned at a massive rate. To compound the issue, the spirits and Sin-Eaters loyal to Shuten-dōji's cause and memory — though by this time, few of them had ever met the Unchained Integrator or understood the full reasons behind his war — seem incapable of departing from this world; they live on in a perpetual, tormented half-life.

The Sworn factions boomed in size and applied great effort towards finding a way to eradicate Shuten's minions in hopes for a better future, or for glory and fame. The cooperation between the factions lead to the discovery of how to slay the *yōkai*, or at least stave off more of them from emerging. Shinto priests' purification rituals cleansed the infected areas, and using the weapons that slew Shuten-dōji's army reopened the Avernian Gates to the Underworld. The old weapons were smelted and re-forged, and knowledge of how to perform the Shinto rituals spread.

It seemed at that time that the cure had been discovered. Many art forms retold the happenings of *yōkai* killings to the public with an added flourish to appease imagination. Tales of *yōkai* killings were so popular, they eventually became subjects of entertainment. Even the actions of the False reached the scriptwriters of stage plays. The Sworn believe that some tales featuring *sennin*, immortal people, describe their rival faction attempting to harness the power of Contagion.

As time went on, the general public questioned the existence of *yōkai* and the other things thought to be supernatural. Interest in stories about *yōkai* killings waned, and people moved on.

Where We Are

Many people believe in a certain level of animism to this day, but the belief was stronger and more celebrated in the past. Today, to the great pleasure of the Cryptocracy, *yōkai* play a role in attracting tourism and celebrating Japanese history. Many of the stories of heroes defeating evil demons or calming angry spirits are portrayed in the arts. In *Noh*, a classical Japanese musical drama performed exclusively by men wearing elaborate masks, the plots usually draw from legend and history, with themes often related to dreams, supernatural worlds, ghosts, and spirits.

Noh continued to flourish throughout Japan in the Edo Period under the patronage of feudal lords and became the preferred entertainment of the samurai. The stories spread by word of mouth and within literature among the common folk. Some stories describe creatures born from Contagion but with bits and pieces mixed up, like in a game of telephone. Today, new stories of *yōkai* written in mass media draw from urban legends and feature vengeful spirits and twisted creatures

Cause

There are two strains of the Contagion currently affecting Kyoto: one from the Heian period which has flared up after it was believed cured in the past, and a new strain. The second strain has multiple faces and affects monstrous beings and humans alike. This crisis threatens to shatter the Sworn factions from within. The first plague seemed to only affect Shuten-dōji and his army, so many naively believed that if all of them were exterminated, this age-old disease would be cured. The cure back then was rituals and weapons now lost to the sands of time, or which are now so scarce that few know where to find them.

Both the city's Sworn and Shuten-dōji's False point fingers at each another, each blaming the opposite side for allowing the God-Machine's infection to spread while attempting to control it for their own causes.

Symptom

The Crucible Initiative is on the forefront with research into both strains, representing the Sworn together with the Rosetta Society. They've divided the strains into multiple Contagious behavioral categories. Most victims suffer multiple symptoms and the truly unfortunate have been infected by both strains.

The Contagion is a slow progress that's accelerated by reaching a breaking point. Its effect is based on which strain the victim carries.

The Shuten-dōji Strain

What plans could the God-Machine have for the "leader of demons" to deny him and all of his followers from the afterlife? These menaces mean to purge Kyoto of all its life. After studying the strain for years, through autopsies and interviews, the factions believe that the disease somehow removes one's will.

An infected creature becomes surrounded by an ethereal smoke, which makes them easy to spot from afar for those able to see other supernatural creatures normally or those that can see the effects of the Machine.

Some Theseans believe this strain is an alternate form of the Odense Contagion (see p. XX), due to the similar mental, if not physical, symptoms it inflicts upon the infected. The purported Avernian Gate in Odense is said to lead to a section of Underworld accessible directly from Kyoto, though whether Shuten and Knud have any link between them is difficult to verify.

Type 1A: Undying. This behavior has only been documented in supernatural entities and is the one most factions are racing toward to harness for themselves. When the disease broke out after Shuten-dōji's decapitation, everyone believed his servants to be immortal. The older the being, the more difficult it is to kill them without the correct rituals and weapons. The **Undying Condition** is detailed in full on p. XX.

Type 1B: Dependency. This sapping of willpower is usually accompanied by unwavering loyalty to Shuten-dōji, the Geryo, or an abstract worship of the Contagion, though some infected have no knowledge of who the mythical demon leader was or what these semi-shapeshifting entities are. This symptom is present in over 90% of the carriers of the old strain. Only the extraordinarily lucky seem to have the immortality without the sacrifice of one's sanity.

This symptom reduces a character's maximum Willpower rating by one each time that character reaches a breaking point. The player can choose to spend two Willpower points at a breaking point roll to not advance this Contagion symptom, but if they do so, they do not gain the beat typically gained at a breaking point. The **Dependency Condition** is detailed in full on p. XX.

It's late at night past curfew when he gets approached by an adult who asks him for his name. "Shirokane Daisuke," he responds flatly and names the school he "enrolled" in. He'd rather not fake formality, but his youthful appearance is a hindrance that he still curses his sire for. He gives the excuse that his mother asked him to run an errand. The stranger leers at him, "I know who you are, and what you are. What I haven't figured is who you work for. I'm with the Zero Hour trying to fight the Contagion that's spreading in the city," the woman tells him as she hands over a card. "You have to tell me who you're serving and if you've been at any outbreak locations in the city."

What an idiot revealing her true nature, Daisuke thinks to himself, feigning ignorance. He tries to excuse himself and walk past the encroaching adult, but she blocks his path. "Either answer my questions or we'll kill you on the spot."

"Fuck off," Daisuke hisses, "I don't serve anyone, and I'm not fucking Contagious! Do you think it's easy getting around in the city looking like a child!?"

The woman smiles and takes out a notebook with a small pencil fastened on it. "You're putting up a resistance to demands made by another, a healthy sign. Last test to prove your innocence, prick this dagger. If you're not Contagious, it won't do a thing. Go ahead, give it a try."

The Geryo Strain

The new strain of Contagion warps the appearances of the hosts it corrupts. It predominantly expresses itself in physical and mental forms, although there is evidence of it impeding social function to some extent. An outbreak that would spread quickly between hosts would be a disaster in a metropolitan city, so it's fortunate that the outbreak sources come strictly from contact with certain objects found in the infected areas. Neither the Sworn nor the False know how these locations became Contagious, though each faction has its own theories.

Though the Geryo strain appears to mainly target shapeshifters, those without shapeshifting abilities are far from immune. For some, their identity withers to the point where they are nothing but husks wandering among the public. Devoid of any personality and hope, those unable to see the truth of the corruption think these people have slowly withdrawn from their social circles and naturally grow apart from society. Those who can see the workings of the God-

Machine get to witness how their loved ones' spirits have been crushed by an unidentifiable source.

The mutation of a victim's appearance is a horrifying experience to witness, and thankfully only affects shapeshifters for now. The process is slow, and the victim appears to be in excruciating pain as their body warps into a monstrous shell. Mutations commonly take the form of additional growths of fully usable limbs and scaly skin or calluses that protect the victim from harm. These Geryo are known as the Distorted.

While horrendous in appearance, if one can survive the pain of the Geryo strain's changes, they imbue a remarkable physical strength and an aura of corruption in the twisted features of the afflicted. Many fear to combat these Contagious without the weapons and rituals capable of permanently killing them. Defeat a Geryo without the use of proper ways of fighting them, and in time, it will merely return through portals and gates leading to different realms, always intent on hunting its slayer.

Type 2A: Isolation. This symptom frequently appears together with the 2B variant. This symptom works as the persistent **Cracked Condition** described on p. XX, with different methods of resolution to the normal Condition of this type.

Satoshi unwillingly puts on a t-shirt with a print on it from a manga that's not popular anymore, but it's the only one he has that doesn't reek of sweat. The humidity and heat of the summer forces him to leave the apartment to get something to drink. He curses his parents for cutting his budget further to encourage him to go to the stores rather than just ordering his food directly to the door. Everyone's eyes seem to bore into him as he walks to the store. "Parasite," he hears them say in their minds. His parents are attempting to keep up the facade that Satoshi's studying to retake the entrance exam to Kyodai, but the truth is, he gave up after failing it the first time. Hikaru had seemed so upbeat despite their shared failure and suggested they study together to retake the entrance next year. It softened the blow for Satoshi, but shortly after their first study session, Hikaru completely dropped contact, refusing to even let Satoshi in to his apartment after banging at the door for hours. The news that Hikaru died in his apartment came as a shock, but how he died was what perplexed him to this very day. Why would he starve himself to death?

Type 2B: Erasure. It can be tricky to try to enforce a memory loss onto players. After all, if they can remember a person from previous sessions, why shouldn't the protagonists? As the Storyteller, you can obfuscate the details of a character that's showing this symptom by having them appear less often and by showing a slow transition of their loss of personality. You can also enforce the memory loss on the characters in the world you are representing. This symptom is a dramatic element in a chronicle, a tool for the Storyteller to show the appropriate mood for the setting. It should be a subject that's interesting to explore, rather than a frustrating moment in the chronicle. This symptom works as the persistent **Erased Condition** (see p. XX).

"Smile!" Asahina says as their first photo is taken in the purikura. With each flash in the photo, they change poses. They laughingly share the printed photos and go shopping in the mall. It's this moment that Michiko remembers to be the last day where Asahina acted as her usual self, and she's been tearing her hair out trying to figure out what happened to her since that day. Her friend slowly started turning inward, and while she was still hanging out with their usual group of friends, she mostly just sat there and listened. Michiko desperately tried to reach out, but whenever she got an answer from her, it was that she felt tired. After the third time where the group didn't invite Asahina to join them on their usual coffee hangout every month, Michiko

confronted the group. While there was a part of her that was content without Asahina being there since she had turned into a downer, she still saw her as their friend. "Asahina Yui?" Ichikawa asked, eyebrow raised. "Who's that?" It's not until Michiko shows a picture of her together with the group they recognize her again.

Type 2C: Shape loss and appearance mutation. This strain only infects existing shapeshifters. Before the symptom manifests for the first time, the Storyteller must decide what mutation the Contagious will receive. When the mutation has fully manifested, the organ or limb functions with the same skill and ability as its natural counterparts. The mutation persists even after the place or being that infected the character has been purified or destroyed.

Type 2C of the Geryo Contagion is the least common, but the numbers of Geryo infected with it steadily increase. See p. XX for the **Mutated Condition**.

Reina is finishing another gym session without Haruhi and Minato. Where are they? They all agreed they need to train so they can continue to hunt the bastards hiding in the shadows. She reaches their voicemails yet again, so she decides to go and bang on their doors. Minato lives within walking distance from the gym, so she decides to try there first. If she tries to ring his doorbell, he won't answer, so she'll have to break in. "A window is probably cheaper to replace than a door," she decides as she climbs up the fire escape. As she peers through the window, her view obscured by a curtain, Reina sees the back of Minato standing by the small cooking unit. She breaks the window and announces her arrival but freezes at the scene in her friend's apartment. Minato is hunched over, trying to shield the bloodied stump he must've wrapped in a hurry. Behind him, a monstrous hand covered in calluses with fingernails growing out of them sits on the counter next to a bloodied butcher's knife, oozing.

Hunting the World

In their archetypal forms, Geryo do more than just bear mutations and increasing physical prowess, but these distorted Geryo are imitations of the true creatures also seeping through into our world. True Geryo do not hunt and claim territories like the Uratha. They infect the mortals surrounding them with a sickness that makes them easy prey, spreading fear and paranoia through the air and the spirit world alike. Geryo are not pack hunters; they are fat, ancient lurkers twisting webs around them, driving communities, towns, and eventually cities into despair and passivity, creating the ultimate in cowed herds. It is quite possibly these true Geryo who are spreading strains 2A and 2B throughout Kyoto.

No one knows what an archetypal Geryo would think of their distorted cousins, but it's likely the former would attempt to use the latter as weapons and tools.

Outbreak Sites

Kyoto Station Building: This modern building is directly connected to the Kyoto Station, an important place for those arriving in or departing from Kyoto. It's an organized maze of 15 floors where if you lose your target, they may already be on a bullet train ride to Tokyo. The human public frequent this place without any knowledge of how many different denizens congregate there. It's a gathering place for vampires to find prey, werewolves to exchange information via packets using coin lockers, and for hunters to discover and stalk their supernatural quarries.

This building is thought to be patient zero of the new Contagion strain affecting the city. While the sickness is viewed by some hunters as a tool that they can use to purge malevolent beings, it quickly spread out of control and new buildings become infectious. The afflicted become infected via liquids from special carriers, which in two cases have been discovered in contaminated food and drinks. Another documented case was a spread through contact with the coin lockers on the fourth floor. As one area of infection becomes purified, two more crop up on a later date, making it difficult to predict where the Contagion will show up next.

Heian Shrine: The shrine was built to celebrate the 1100th anniversary of when Kyoto became the capital of Japan. Named after the city's old name before becoming the capital, the monument is dedicated to the spirits of those who first and lastly ruled from this city. The entrance to the shrine grounds is marked with a giant torii gate. As is the case with most tourist spots in Kyoto, a few stores and museums exist within a stone's throw of the area. This location is an important gathering point for the Sworn to exchange information with each other, as it is a neutral ground built to celebrate the life of the city.

How ironic that this place would become a source of infection. Like a dysfunctional hung parliament, the Sworn of high status now unwillingly congregate at this location to point fingers at each other while the grunts do their best to fight the spread of the disease.

The main source of infection seems to be the constant humming of an exposed part of the Infrastructure nearby. Those listening to it for too long risk contamination, so attempting to determine from what direction the sound is coming is ill-advised, but not many people have any suggestions on how to else discover its source.

The Kazan Tunnel: This is a ghastly, narrow, old tunnel situated in the eastern area of Kyoto City. It connects the Higashiyama and Yamashina wards. The tunnel was built in 1903, and after the Second World War, the passage was exclusively reserved for pedestrian and cycling use. The tunnel is deemed haunted due to the deaths and other violent events happening there in the past.

Many eyewitness reports mention seeing ghosts of soldiers of a defeated army in the Middle Ages. Most reports mention hearing low whispering and the sensation of feeling something — someone — brushing against them as they walk through the tunnel. Some claim it's the Contagion once again spreading via liquid form, but now it's felt as an unnatural humidity.

A lot of enthusiasts of psychic phenomena visit this location to view these spirits and to test their courage at midnight. The area's reputation as a haunted place spreads more by word-of-mouth every day. The tunnel is always darker and colder than the surrounding area, even on sunny days. Though the area is remote, the Kazan Tunnel is a popular place for different hunter cells to exchange information about monstrous activities in the city. Except for some tourist groups and curious teens, the locals of the area seem not to care much for it.

Mt. Kurama: One of the many sacred locations in Kyoto, this mountain is said to be the home of the King of Tengu, Sōjōbō. The Uratha in this region view this mountain as important turf, and have a close relationship to these bird spirits, while the local vampires stay clear of the area in fear of mythology surrounding a group known as the Strix, of which Sōjōbō may be a member.

Within the cedar forest is the small village of Kibune, a quaint little hamlet that's turning a profit from the tourists who come to visit the famous Buddhist temple at the base of the mountain. Its entrance is a niōmon, a gate said to serve as a border between the temporal world and the sacred

grounds. The Contagious believed to be immortal say this is one of the many gates serving as their entrance back to this world after they are temporarily defeated.

The Japanese Uratha in this region find the tourism to be an interfering menace, but the majority understand that the money outsiders bring in is a necessity for the human population to maintain this sacred ground. With the appearance of the Contagion in the forest, the Uratha and tengus have begun to suffer from infection. They desperately seek help from the outside, as without the capability to transform, they are unable to maintain the Gauntlet.

Horrors of Kyoto

The new Contagion affects all shape- or form-shifting beings, mutating them and taking away their ability to blend in with human society. As the it spreads in Kyoto, the Sworn are trying to find a cure before it corrupts its hosts further.

Ibaraki-dōji

Sightings of a strange, tall child have been reported in both Osaka and Kyoto. They describe the child as ethereal in appearance, occasionally accompanied by a severed head. Ibaraki-dōji was embraced as child during the Heian period, and there are different tales of how he became a “demon” with a taste of blood.

Ibaraki-dōji’s clan is heavily speculated upon. Many believe him to be a Daeva due to one of the tales speaking of a beautiful boy beloved by all. Others claim he must be a Nosferatu due to how the stories mention his frightfully deformed appearance. Either way, Ibaraki is unique in that he spreads the Contagion via fluid exchange, and many of his victims turn to him for the cure. Strong-willed people might deny his offer to join the army of his master, but he knows that time is on his side. As the infection blooms in his victim, he can collect them once their personality and free will have sufficiently withered away.

Embraced by either a young woman who loved the beautiful boy or by his mother before her death, only Ibaraki-dōji can confirm the truth. Tales of Ibaraki-dōji as sire of Odense’s Knud are likewise unfounded, though each theoretically has access to a portal to the other. Regardless of theories, his feeding preferences have remained the same over the centuries: he predominantly feeds upon women. Ibaraki especially fears the hunters of the Malleus Maleficarum, as his last run-in with them lead to him to lose his arm during a moment of arrogance. Indeed, tales of him often end with his escape. If in a disadvantageous situation, he will attempt to flee.

Contagion: Type 1A, Undying. Ibaraki spreads Contagion via fluids, so anyone he bites and anyone who drinks his blood will become Contagious. Ibaraki is an angry youth who was denied the opportunity to grow up. He will mostly act indirectly to avoid harm. However, when he does act directly, it’s commonly through pranks and deception. He’s fully aware that he’s Contagious and able to spread the disease, so he often bites his tongue and spits in people’s food or mouth to infect them.

Clan: Unknown

Covenant: Unaligned

Aspirations: Revive the Master, Destroy Kyoto, Spread the Plague

Mask: Child

Dirge: Follower

Attributes: Intelligence 3, Wits 4, Resolve 2; Strength 1, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2; Presence 5, Manipulation 4, Composure 1

Skills: Athletics 3, Empathy (Lies) 3, Intimidation 1, Occult (Superstition) 5, Persuasion (Seduction) 5, Politics 2, Socialize 2, Stealth 2, Subterfuge 1, Survival 2, Weaponry (Daggers, Staves) 3

Merits: Cacophony Savvy 3, City Status 1, Herd 2, Resources 3, Striking Looks 2, Staff 5

Disciplines: Celerity 3, Obfuscate 5

Willpower: 3

Blood Potency: 4

Size: 4

Speed: 8

Defence: 4

Initiative: 3

Two-Mouthed Woman

Rumor has it that a version of an old urban legend of the dangerous severed mouth woman wanders around in residential areas of Kyoto. She only approaches people who are alone at night. Wearing a surgical mask, she talks to the loner and then asks if they think she's pretty and whether they would want to go for a bite to eat with her. If the potential victim says yes, she'll transform to a hideous monster with two mouths and eat the face of the victim. You can try to run away from her, but it's said that she'll easily catch up to you in a blink of an eye. If the victim says no to either request, they will meet a gruesome death.

This woman is an infected Uratha carrying the shape-loss strain, which binds her to only being able to shift between two mutated forms. She has lost her pack to the Contagion and now wanders aimlessly, hunting both contaminated and innocents. She is a sorrowful Uratha intent on redeeming herself for the loss of her pack. She feels responsible for their deaths; after all, they died because she did not prepare her pack well enough for the coming hunt in her role as a scout. In the ensuing chaos, she became infected with Contagion. Since then, she has lost herself to grief, sorrow, and rage. She seeks amends with the memories of her pack and believes her now-twisted form is a test to overcome, one which only the flesh and blood of humans will satisfy.

Observations of this werewolf mentions that her top mouth appears to have a normal appearance. A Null Mysteries field researcher's notes on the second mouth mentions it being "a monstrous case of hyperdontia, with razor-sharp teeth one would only expect to see when she's in Gauru or Urshul form."

Contagion: Type 2C, Mutation. She only changes between two forms now: Hishu and Gauru. Her Hishu form looks like a combination of human and Dalu, though she covers up the parts that look abnormal. Her Gauru form is an unholy union between a Gauru and Urshul, where the second mouth she grew from mutation is a full-sized second head in her neck and chest area. She cannot communicate in any language when in her mutated Gauru form, but can understand anyone speaking to her using the First Tongue.

Auspice: Irraka

Tribe: Storm Lords

Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 3, Resolve 2; Strength 1 (2/4), Dexterity 3 (3/6), Stamina 4 (5/6); Presence 2, Manipulation 3, Composure 1

Skills: Crafts 1, Investigation (Senses) 4, Occult 2; Athletics 3, Brawl (Biting) 3, Stealth (Crowds) 4, Survival 2; Intimidation 1, Persuasion (Seduction) 2, Subterfuge 1

Merits: Fading, Fleet of Foot 2, Living Weapon (Bite) 3, Strings of the Heart

Primal Urge: 1

Willpower: 3

Harmony: 3

Essence: 7

Health: 9 (9/13)

Size: 5 (5/7)

Speed: 9 (10/16)

Defense: 6 (6/6)

Initiative: 4 (4/6)

Renown: Honor 1, Cunning 2

Gifts: [Dominance] Primal Allure; [New Moon] Eviscerate, Slip Away; [Weather] Cloak of Mist and Haze

Werewolf: Duality in Japan

The contrast between the older and younger generations in the society is palpable, as individuals are used to regarding themselves as members of a specific group. Even though the younger generation is beginning to shift toward an individualist way of thinking, Japanese society still has a strong emphasis on group loyalty, a pack mentality the Japanese Uratha understand and embrace. There is always an “us” and a “them.” Either you’re with the Uratha, or you die alone. Foreign werewolves tend to congregate with each other at locations that are more accepting of foreigners, such as universities. If they linger too long in tourist areas, the local population will start to recognize them.

Uratha who fall victim to the Contagion lose the ability to retain balance between their forms, which can manifest in multiple ways. Rumors already spread among packs of the coming *Urighur*, or Geryo, as they call themselves.

Most of the Uratha fear to transform after they have become aware of their infection, but if they do not transform, they can neither hunt nor blend in. Tragically, this has led entire packs to lose their lives in the hope of appeasing Luna or whoever has punished them for shifting so readily in the past.

The Uratha have on multiple occasions formed alliances with the hunters, but these unions tend to be short-lived and dissolve once the immediate goals that united them have been attained. Uratha know the overpopulation in the country is a grave problem, but the population of Kyoto is about a ninth of the one in Tokyo. Finding the cure for the Contagion is of higher priority than

culling the human population. If the human numbers suddenly crash, so will the balance of this ancient region. The *Hisil* is sure to pour its inhabitants into Kyoto shall humanity fall. The schism between the young and old must be mended, or the decline will pick up in speed.

Some of the Uratha believe Contagion is a punishment aimed toward them, as the plague affects their shapeshifting abilities. They believe that because they have failed to cull the *Hisil*, they have failed to maintain balance. As a result, this is their punishment. They conclude that they must hunt more lest Luna grow more impatient.

Hunter: Bringing the Sword Down on Contagion

Japan has a long list of famous heroes who slayed malevolent creatures threatening the existence of humanity. The legendary hero Minamoto Raikō did not slay the demon leader by himself. He had retainers, the famous samurai Watanabe no Tsuna, Sakata no Kintoki, Urabe no Suetake, and Usui Sadamitsu.

The popularity of ghost stories surged during the Heian period, as did the number of legendary stories of the defeat of the supernatural denizens. Hunters of that era celebrated their victory and hunted the supernatural with a new-found zeal, hoping that they would bring the end of Shuten-dōji and humanity's scourge.

As the Contagion started to flare up once again during the Edo period, the hunters of that time realized that the lessons that they learned from killing monsters needed to be documented. This was a great era for the hunters, who could regale audiences with the stories of their peers and live honorably amongst the civilian population. Masks hold a special meaning to them, serving as a reminder of how their tales were celebrated in the past but also an allegory of who they are.

Their proud days of being samurai are long since over, and many hunters must adapt a shared group appearance to not look suspicious. While the businessperson facade is the most popular, some groups have adopted a biker or gang look better suited to their personalities.

Sworn hunters have one duty: to protect humanity. They rose up when the army of Shuten-dōji threatened to kill everyone in Kyoto, and they have continued to lay down their lives for humanity since then.

While most don't want to admit it, Null Mysteriis tried to slow down the cure for the disease that affected Kyoto Station Building, as at that time it seemed that it only affected supernatural entities, not humans. It was as if suddenly some of the sheep could see the wolves trying to fit in among them. The compact now claims stronger allegiance to the city's False than the Sworn, as their fellow compacts and conspiracies support this destructive method of weeding out supernatural creatures a little too loudly.

Cure

Societal issues are rarely ones that a group can solve by themselves, and so a Contagion that masks itself under societal problems gets left alone. The two strains of Contagion infecting Kyoto receive different amounts of attention from the factions of Sworn and False. Some believe that the two are not connected, while others think they are two sides of the same coin.

While it's tempting to tear out one's hair over the frustration of attempting to find the root cause of Contagion, the Sworn refuse to give up. How can an infection spawn from the death of a being

that was not supposed to die? Why would the God-Machine want to rid Kyoto of humanity? Was that ever truly its goal?

The Sworn claim responsibility for moving the capital from Kyoto to Edo (now named Tokyo) to see if the cure was to change the God-Machine's target, or if the threat would dissipate with the status of the city being changed. Sadly, no such change took place.

The Sworn

Since the Heian period, the Sworn have laid down their lives to protect the citizens of Kyoto. While their diversity is the best tool they have in this fight, they seem to have hit a wall. As a result, many local groups have decided to abandon formal hierarchies and combat the Contagion together. Regardless of methods and theories on Contagion's purpose, the Sworn agree that the citizens' lives are worth protecting.

The Cryptocracy

The Cryptocracy is arguably one of the strongest Sworn factions in Kyoto, but it is also the city's newest arrivals. They settled in nicely with the traditional view of the country and have continued to grow as the threat of war grows and the nation's birth rate stagnates. Strongly on the side of individualist thought, they're trying to keep the Ship of Theseus weak. Because of their sabotage of another faction, the Sworn cannot reach a consensus on handling the Contagion, and currently exist akin to a hung government, waiting for one faction to dominate the others. The Cryptocracy feels the need to clean up after they've allowed a contaminated monster to rampage and spawn freely in Kyoto, balking at the idea that other factions might want to examine the trail.

Japan has a rich repertoire of folklore stories which describe odd creatures. The Japanese have embraced the presence of some supernatural beings, but all of that will vanish if society collapses. The Cryptocracy pull strings from the shadows, occasionally spreading new rumors of the supernatural and financing establishments that tell traditional tales of the old to balance the interest of the human population. They carefully orchestrate how and when to do this from the top. They have a traditionalist council, mainly comprising Kindred, that employs bureaus to do all the legwork.

The Cryptocrats' missions are many, but they must fan out to cover all their bases. Those who are skilled in fighting kill the Contagious, lest they spread the disease or make humans aware of the faction. If history is a character's forte, the Majestic are still studying how the old strain can remove one's willpower. The control over a free person's will is a dangerous weapon, so it's an arms race to be the first to understand it. If this knowledge falls into the Cryptocracy's hands, they may be able to mend the schism in society.

No matter what areas one's skillsets cover, we must all ensure that while we search for a cure, the humans remain unaware of us.

— Kazuo Mimura, Cryptocrat Acanthus

The Jeremiad

The Japanese Jeremiad view themselves as the guardians of all benevolent spirits that have made their home in this country. They've existed for a long time, but it wasn't until the Edo period under the rising threat of the plague that they started to organize themselves and cooperate between the sects. The Penitents had many names, but as the shores of Japan opened to foreign influences, they took the international name of the group that shared similar goals with them.

Is the appearance of the new plague punishment for the violation of spiritual grounds as the metropolitan city expands and removes sacred woods? It is, if you ask the Jeremiad. The others claim whatever suits their beliefs. The Jeremiad in Japan is split into several sects that work together, and they often collaborate with other diplomatic factions with religious values. Most common are the Buddhists that stand with The Ship of Theseus or the Lancea et Sanctum among the Kindred. While the prophets try to remain on good terms with all Sworn, the Cryptocracy sometimes tramples on Jeremiad toes and refuses to apologize when they act like Penitent rituals exist only for money making. They bring up roadblocks, calling the Jeremiad extremists or zealots, when the Jeremiad ask them to “close for renovation” so they can purify infected areas that encroach upon sacred grounds.

The faction has increasingly grown restless, as peaceful methods don’t seem to have any effect on the increasing commercialization of sacred places. Perhaps the Contagion is the push the Jeremiad needed to see they have stood still for too long while the public has nearly abandoned the old ways. Sacred shrines and temples have been infected by the plague, but the prophets still cannot bring themselves to destroy them as they then risk losing themselves. The faction finds comfort by listening to the benevolent spirits that exist in this world, and that pushes the Jeremiad to perform a last rite to free the spirits of those they kill.

Performing rituals of purifications seems to halt the spread of the illness, so the secret of the cure must be close. Our mission is the same as it has always been: protect what is revered, balance the spirits, and remove those beyond hope of salvation.

— Shinobu Maeda, Jeremiad of the Summer Court

The Rosetta Society

How would you communicate with one that does not speak your language and that is invisible to the naked eye? The demon leader Shuten-dōji was chosen by the God-Machine or its Contagious reflection for a yet-unknown reason. While protecting the lives of the citizens is an action the Society admires, they regard slaying one who might have an insight as to why he was chosen as short-term thinking. Finding the vampire Ibaraki before anyone else is the Rosetta Society’s top priority. He is the only one who can spread the Contagion with his bite, so if they can capture him, perhaps they can discover a way to reverse-engineer this poison and come closer to understanding the message. While they should not let him have whatever he wants, the exegetes are not above offering him amnesty and protection from other factions, including the Sworn. If he’s close at hand, the Rosetta Society may learn more about his own motives or whether he too is infected by the disease and has no free will of his own.

The Society were the ones pulling the strings to get the capital moved to Edo in an attempt to stop the Contagion. While that did not cure the disease, the Edo period marked an era where the Sworn fought together against the malevolent spirits threatening to overrun Kyoto.

There are many who have fallen victim to the disease, and while they may be seen as a lost cause by others, the Rosetta Society will gladly take them in either as one of their own or as test subjects. A diseased being is kept under quarantine and supervision before they let them join the chapter in the underground of the city. There are even rumors of an entirely sick group within this Sworn faction, but each of its members still has their mind intact enough to help further the faction’s cause. The golden rule for that chapter: stay away from those who are not infected and from any institutes where the Rosetta Society frequent, like Kyoto University.

Scholarships from Kyōdai are also how the Rosetta Society brings foreign members to the city. A danger is that if the cultural shock from staying in Japan for long is too great, the foreign visitors might become disillusioned. Therefore, the “scholarships” are kept as short as possible, lest the faction risk their members getting poached by Zero Hour.

While we are still Sworn to protect the lives of those in the city, our true mission is to interrogate Ibaraki and any servants of his before we even consider killing them. They say dead men tell no tales, but we're hoping Ibaraki will talk.

— Ai Utsumi, Rosetta Society Galateid

The Ship of Theseus

According to the Ship of Theseus, the Cryptocracy is the senile grandfather nobody likes at family reunions. The Theseans want change, but the ones with the money want things to remain the same; after all, this benefits them the most. Instead of trying to understand one another, they blame each other for everything that's going wrong. But family is family, and the Sworn have done great things when they do get along, like encouraging the technology boom in the '90s. While humans say sometimes you have to wait for the old to die for things to change, that doesn't work with beings that live for eons. The Theseans are innately aware of this.

The younger Japanese who crave change and the supernatural denizens who want to accelerate that change in society join this faction. The old ways clearly don't work anymore, as the population is declining and malevolent spirits are taking over. There's a fire they see in the eyes of those who feel like they've been left behind by the system; those who feel like they are being alienated for being from a smaller village and not the big cities; foreigners who have lived in Japan for years still get the foreigner treatment; the biracial population born and raised in Japan who get the worse treatment as they don't fit in the “Japanese” and “foreigner” groups of “us” and “them.” Each is ready to fight for change. After all, what has the society ever done but to freeze them out because they don't belong with the majority? Without diversity and change, how can the society ever stop this decline? The Theseans are full of questions and love to ask them in Kyoto, much to the other factions' chagrin.

The Theseans work close with the Zero Hour faction and send promising recruits with more militaristic views to them in return for their support during assemblies with the other Sworn. The Rosetta Society is mostly happy with this faction, with the exception of the Theseans trying to find the Society's infected chapter. They say seeing is believing, and the Ship wants to see how Contagion has affected them, rather than to only read their reports.

The Contagious have moved forward with the times in Japan, so why can't we?

— The Tsunami God, Thesean of the Mesen-Nebu

Zero Hour

Zero Hour believe the creatures that came out of the bleeding wound in reality as Shuten-dōji's head was separated from his body were a manifold curse. This faction cares little for what this faceless entity wants Shuten for: if he lives, humans die; if he wins, humanity and all who rely on them for sanity, balance, or even food will soon follow.

To achieve the faction's goal, they fight with the help of the other Sworn, the Ship of Theseus and Jeremiad often lending Zero Hour their best fighters. However, some recruits from these factions are less than ideal. They include Uratha ex-convicts and disillusioned Promethean

youths too angry to keep their heads down without bursting into anger, their fury fueling them in the fight against the Contagion. Sending Zero Hour new recruits is the least they can do, however, as otherwise the faction's numbers would be too depleted by the number of times the other Sworn ask the Cavalry to cover their asses. Even the Cryptocracy help the Zero Hour cause by manipulating pro-military politicians in the right lobbies and pointing the Vigilant in the correct direction when they're stalking prey. However, Zero Hour are aware that if they stop following the Cryptocrats' rules, they won't hesitate to cancel support. This means Zero Hour extermination missions often go more slowly than they would like, but without Cryptocracy funding, there may be no opportunities to hunt.

It was the forebearers of the Zero Hour faction in Japan that came up with the idea to smelt down the weapons that killed Ibaraki's army to forge new weapons. They knew the old weapons could extinguish the Contagious, but they were old and rare, so they tried it with weapons that were already broken. Lo and behold, it worked.

Our goal is to kill all who are infected. It seemed to have worked the first time. If Ibaraki or any other servants of Shuten-dōji still exist, we need to kill them twice-over, to ensure they stay dead.

— Holly Souma, Task Force: Valkyrie Operative

The False

Even when facing the potential destruction of the city, the False are still searching for a way to harvest the gift of immortality without succumbing to the Contagion's influence and becoming servile to the decapitated demon leader. While the Sworn continue their pursuit to save the people of Kyoto, the elixir of life might throw the world into an even deeper chaos than what the False could ever imagine.

Although the Cryptocracy may claim to have a higher moral standard than Machiavelli's Gambit, they both covet the same thing. The main difference is that the Gambit is more open about their desire to weaponize mind, mood, and population control.

The Crucible Initiative

The Initiative believe that if the Zero Hour and Jeremiads were not Sworn, they would've been allied with the Crucible. Perhaps then the plague would've been eradicated long ago. Too bad those Sworn faction care too much for collateral damage.

The country has been ravaged by several diseases, yet Contagion is unnoticed by the population. The Crucible are wise to this and see the ignorant masses as complicit in the disease's spread. It's not until recently that people have started to look at mental illnesses as an actual disease, but the Crucible Initiative were already mindful of this when they started "helping along" the infected. In any case, too little is being done to change the minds of the population on such matters. Absurd work hours lead to stress, yet the average Japanese worker doesn't take holidays. *Hikikomori* is a behavior of isolation among the young, particularly young men, that can come from facing burnout and social phobia, although society often views them as lazy parasites. This just expands the scope of targets for the Crucible Initiative to purge.

To say the mental illness is only caused by the God-Machine's ruptured spleen would be a vast oversimplification and disrespectful for those who suffer from real mental illnesses not brought on by the Contagion. The Contagion has, however, accelerated the spread of these real diseases and spread them people as if they were a viral disease. Due to how this new strain presents itself,

The Crucible Initiative's mission to purge the sick increasingly divides the faction. The False are far from immune to mental illness and start to regard one another warily.

Some Fire-Bearers have installed double agents among the Sworn in the hope that they have discovered different patterns to distinguish Contagion victims from non-Contagion victims. Reports state they are utilizing units to pose as youths on forums, social media, and other sites as they seek to obtain information about people who've suddenly exhibited isolationist behavior to observe if they might be Contagious. The bright side of all this is that the infected who isolate themselves make it unnecessary to chase them, as they remain static targets.

The time we waste debating over this target or that allows another three, ten, or one hundred to become infected. I say burn them out from their hidey-holes.

— Sho Kurinobu, Fire-Bearer and Fire-Touched

The Machiavelli Gambit

Even if some Sworn can sympathize with the Crucible's objective and see them as the lesser evil, few can find any good in the plans of the Machiavelli Gambit. Although both the Crucible and the Gambit race to discover the secret of immortality, reports from the Cryptocracy state that the Gambit is prioritizing weaponization of the old strain's induced subservient behavior. The Rosetta Society's infected chapter must constantly be on the move because of the Gambit, as they know their members will die an awful death if caught, picked apart piece by piece. The infected chapter has started to tattoo themselves so that others can identify their bodies after the Gambit's scientists catch and dissect them, should it come to that.

The political situation among the Sworn is driving a wedge between the factions, and some are claiming it's the Gambit behind these disagreements. Indeed, members of the Gambit have proudly confessed to creatures within the Crucible Initiative that they eliminated all Naglfar's Army from Kyoto because they grew too close to discovering true immortality there. Word has reached the Jeremiad and Rosetta Society, who have established secret groups whose primary function is to root out double agents from within their ranks.

What our goals are is obvious: the ultimate cure for disease is immortality, and we won't let anyone stand in our way.

— Dr. Takako, Prince and Alchemist

Rumors in Kyoto

- A string of deaths occurs in which each victim is found wearing a Noh mask carrying their resemblance. Underneath the mask, the victims have been left unrecognizable.
- There has been a break-in at a museum showcasing weapons from the Edo period. The public thinks it's an antique craze that's going on, but both the Sworn and False knows why these weapons are sought after. The question is, who is responsible?
- A new delinquent tourist fad has cropped up where one rubs the faces of statues. One influential blogger claims that a statue of a mythological creature bit off his finger.
- An odd man has been seen wearing a tengu mask at Mt. Kuruma. When a child forcefully pulled the mask off by its long nose, it was revealed that the man's appearance was identical to the mask.

- People have discovered small piles of salt in all known infected locations. The Jeremiad said it's not their doing, while a teen claims their dead younger brother told them to scatter this salt ritualistically, in a dream.
- The Kazan tunnel has been blocked off after a group of tourists inexplicably vanished while visiting this famous haunted place. Reports mention hearing gunfire and screams at the time of disappearance.
- Students are talking about a shady gathering of people showing up around the Kamo river, teaching those interested about Shinto purification rituals.
- A rogue cell of hunters is said to kill anyone who attempts to cure the Contagion. The Sworn speculate that they do this because they believe that the loss of a few human lives are worth the sacrifice to permanently cripple monsters' ability to hide amongst the flock.
- Pathologists and policemen have gone missing both during investigations and after cases have been closed. While the public cannot detect any patterns, the Sworn can see that the crime locations they were investigating are all outbreak sites.
- Photos from an event taking place at Heian shrine shows the majority of the public attending the event looking deathly pale, even necrotic. Some of the people being tagged on the photos are known to have passed away years ago.
- Love letters written in red ink have been found in multiple places all across Kyoto. No one knows where this romantic new trend comes from, but some are whispering that the ink is actually blood. Coming in contact with the blood is said to drive your family or lover insane, isolating themselves until they starve to death.
- Blog posts and comments online talk about a new store in Kyoto Station that's opening up sometime soon, but when people give directions on how to find the place or share photos of it, those looking for it only seem to be able to find it during certain hours of the night.
- A service online that sells limbs and organs has popped up on the internet, despite being shut down multiple times by the police. What they aren't telling the public is that all the body parts are from the same two people, but the amount that police have confiscated would indicate they were harvested from a minimum of eight sources. An individual named Maublanc is offering a fat sum to anyone who can track down the person selling these limbs.
- There's an odd gang wandering aimlessly in Kyoto who supposedly do whatever you ask of them without fail, no questions asked. A few are talking about how the gang looked like they were emitting smoke or covered in dust.
- A disfigured baby was recently found in a coin locker in a subway station. The baby was reported to have been dead upon its discovery, but as the policeman retrieved the baby from the locker, it began to wail like a banshee.
- Recordings of a famous pop idol's suicide have been circulating on the internet. The rumor says that when you search for it, another video shows up in which the star begs the viewer not to watch her die. Further videos of her have been uploaded claiming that she's still alive.

New Zealand: Contagion of Stability

Delirium: Um. What's the name of the word for things not being the same always. You know. I'm sure there is one. Isn't there? There must be a word for it... the thing that lets you know time is happening. Is there a word?

Dream: Change.

Delirium: ... I was afraid of that...

— Neil Gaiman, *Brief Lives*

New Zealand lies in the southwestern Pacific Ocean, nine hundred miles east of Australia and six hundred miles south of Fiji. The nation is composed of two main islands (North and South), with around six hundred smaller islands surrounding it. Due to its location, New Zealand's climates support rainforests and glaciers, stunning beaches and snow-covered mountains. The city of Christchurch, on its South Island, is one of the gateways to Antarctica.

New Zealand's remoteness and isolation made it one of the last landmasses on Earth to be inhabited by humans. Polynesian explorers discovered the islands between 1250 and 1300 CE and made them their home. European settlers arrived four centuries later. Because of this late arrival of humanity, New Zealand has a unique bioculture. Humans account for only about five percent of the population of life on the islands, but their presence has made a devastating impact. Half of the forests have disappeared due to deforestation and fires. European farming depleted another quarter of the untouched nature. Animals endemic to New Zealand, like the moa bird, went extinct due to humans hunting them and disrupting the ecosystem.

Today, New Zealand is a thriving country with a robust travel and tourism industry. Vacationers come in search of adventure, spelunking through the Waitomo Caves or ziplining over the trees in Queenstown. Movie buffs walk the paths of Middle-earth. The Māori people continue the tradition of manaakitanga (hospitality, or the act of welcoming and sharing), gladly receiving visitors to tribal meeting grounds called marae to hear ancestral songs and to see how ancient weaving and carving techniques are combined with new materials and still used today.

When change comes to New Zealand, it sweeps over the island like a tsunami: the Māori people changed the ecosystem with their arrival. European colonizers changed Māori culture with theirs. Monsters came to the islands along with the humans, imposing changes of their own. The Uratha prosper here, in a country where a third of the land is a protected national park. Kindred rule the nights in big cities like Wellington and Auckland. Mages come from far and wide, chasing their Mysteries.

The Lost understand change — it's right there in their name, after all: *changeling*. Recently, they've begun to sense another shift on its way, like the heaviness in the air before a storm breaks, or that moment of awful, utter silence before the Huntsman's horn pierces the night. Something is wrong in the Land of the Long White Cloud. The Contagion snakes its way out from the Hedge. Glamour's potency fluctuates, and goblin fruits taste stranger than they ought. What lingers on the tongue isn't rot or mold, but *difference*.

Theme and Mood

For eighty million years, New Zealand's native species evolved without human influence. In the last eight hundred years, people have not only radically altered that ecosystem, but have also brought war and illness to other settlers. Today, climate change is an ever-looming threat, with rising sea levels and intense storms the symptoms of a man-made global disease.

Change is frightening; it erodes and erases. When the things that make you *you* come under attack, how do you hold on to them? How do you preserve them? How do you let go? For many changelings, the answer is the same one that carried them back out through the Hedge: you grit your teeth and stand your ground. You say *no more*. You defy.

Theme: Change from Without

All that's left of the moa birds are their bones. The Moriori people of the Chatham Islands were nearly wiped out due to invasion and infection. Earthquakes have reduced buildings to rubble, and volcanoes beneath and surrounding the islands rumble, threatening to spread devastation in the form of eruptions, tsunamis, and ashfalls that will destroy crops and take lives when they finally blow. Outside forces have historically brought cataclysmic change to New Zealand's shores.

The Gentry take who they want, shaping and molding their stolen servants into whatever forms best please them, with no regard for who that person was before or who they'd planned to be. Some Lost return to find years have passed. Even if a changeling is one of the lucky ones who has only spent months or a scant handful of years in Arcadia, she finds her old life impossible to return to. Now, here comes the Contagion to take the solid footing she's painstakingly gained since her escape and knock her off-kilter once more.

Werewolves feel it as a moon slightly out of phase: what they see in the sky doesn't match up with the stirring in their blood. Mages double and triple check their Yantras before casting a spell, unsure how the Imagos they know so well are eluding them.

Mood: Defiance

Sometimes, when the world's been pushing you around, you plant your feet and shove back. The Courts leave coded messages warning other Lost about Huntsmen on the prowl and strange new vendors at the goblin market. They watch out for one another — who's cagier than usual and needs an escort back to the Freehold? Whose Mask is slipping, their Clarity disappearing with it? They take care of one another, because that's the opposite of what the True Fae want.

Or maybe it's more that the Fair Folk have *no idea* what it means to care about another person, and by actively giving a shit, the Lost remove themselves one step further from their captors. The Gentry don't care, but so what? Compassion is one more thing they can't take away.

It's about salvaging the things — the people — everyone else insists are lost causes. It's about rebuilding what their captors tore down. It's about wrenching the precious thing they're stealing right back out of their grasp.

And when you can't do any of that, it's about knowing when to let go, and knowing how to mourn but never forget.

What Has Come Before

As humanity flourished on New Zealand's many islands, the God-Machine called its servants to build Infrastructure in the burgeoning towns. The Uratha found new territories to protect, and spirits to contend with. Mages came in search of artifacts from the Time Before.

The Lost hoped they might have found a place free from the True Fae's grasp, where the Huntsmen couldn't find them.

They were wrong. There's no such place.

Did the Hedge always have paths that opened out onto these islands, or did the thorns only twist their way here when the Māori first made landfall? No one can be sure, but whether the Gentry followed the original Polynesian explorers across the water on a lark or whether they were already waiting ashore, they've been present in New Zealand at least as long as humans have.

Māori named the Fair Folk the *patupaiarehe* and spoke of their ethereal music floating down from the hills. Stories said that singing at night offended the elusive creatures, but it also drew their attention. Those who raised their ire ran the risk of being taken away, and travelers were warned not to stray too far from the firelight once night fell.

In the mid-1400s, a significantly cooler climate settled over the islands. Combined with earthquakes and tsunamis that destroyed settlements and completed the extinction of several species, Māori civilization underwent a significant change, from one focused primarily on hunting and growing to a warrior culture. The first weapons carved from the hard, green stone called *pounamu* appeared around the same time as the people constructed *pa*, or fortified hillforts.

In 1642, Dutch explorer Abel Tasman was the first European to sight the islands. His ship dropped anchor near an area that might have held crops. He and his crew skirmished with a small group of Māori before they set sail once more. No Europeans settled on New Zealand until the British explorer James Cook returned in 1769. Though some early meetings between Europeans and Māori were fraught with violence, eventually the groups came to an accord. Along came the whalers, the seal hunters, the traders, and of course, the settlers. Some Māori joined the whaling ships as crew.

The introduction of both potatoes and muskets changed Māori culture once more. From 1807 to 1845, the Musket Wars reduced the Māori population nearly by half. European diseases took another awful toll: the Māori had no immunity to influenza, smallpox, or the measles, and their population dwindled to forty percent of pre-contact levels.

In 1840, Treaty of Waitangi granted Māori people tribal autonomy and property rights in exchange for British sovereignty. Not all Māori chiefs elected to sign the treaty: its language left some doubts over what actual rights it granted, which remained a matter of dispute well into the 20th century.

The Gentle Waves Freehold has existed since humans first arrived on the North Island. Though many stories of its origins have been lost, one surviving tale tells of the changelings who thought to make a new home far across the ocean where they hoped the pale spirits wouldn't find them. But the water is no barrier to a Huntsman, and what is a warm current or the moon's mazy reflection on the waves but a trod in disguise? The Huntsmen might have destroyed the new freehold before it could even form, dragging the Lost back to their Keepers, but an Elemental Bright One named Weko refused to run. He lit the night around them ablaze, set courage burning in the hearts of his Lost companions, and led the charge. The few Huntsmen who survived, fled.

Gentle Waves has changed locations over the centuries as forests disappeared and cities sprang up, but its courts have held to the Māori tradition of *manaakitanga*, making the freehold a safe haven for new changelings.

A branch of the Jeremiad arrived with Christian missionaries in the early 1800s, intent on offering aid to those suffering from the diseases the Europeans brought to the islands. They were also in pursuit of the Year of Plague, a True Fae who pulls its victims to its slice of Arcadia to live a year of pestilence over and over again. It collects survivors of deadly diseases and helps at outbreak sites to take part in its terrifying play. The Jeremiad sect heard opportunity knocking — what better way to study Contagion than to live within an actual case study? Lost who got wind of this plan objected vociferously, but their dire warnings failed to sway the Penitent. The Mastigos insisted he could assert his reality over the Year of Plague's at any time; the Namtaru believed she'd conjured worse plague-dreams than anything the fae could throw at her.

Five years passed before they were seen again, freed at last from the awful cycle by their Gristlegrinder companion, Steeltooth Tom. Tom said little about how he'd orchestrated their escape, and when asked about it, the Mastigos only picked his pox scars and shuddered. They'd gleaned valuable information about how Contagion spreads... but it would take the rest of their lives to separate facts from faerie whims.

Since humans first settled the islands, various groups made efforts to conserve threatened species and revive cultures in danger of fading away. While most of these endeavors are human-led, the Rosetta Society donates to and maintains contacts at the National Library of New Zealand, which is a legal deposit library dedicated to collecting and preserving documents related to the country, and at The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

The Ship of Theseus also took a keen interest in how New Zealand adapts to change. Where the Rosetta Society tries to insulate against it, the Theseans are more inclined to let it run its course, which has led to conflicts and altercations between the two.

Where We Are

Today, New Zealand is an amalgamation of new and old. Its tech industries are booming, drawing in talent from around the globe. The God-Machine encourages this growth, adding Infrastructure at an alarming rate — possibly, the Unchained fear, *too* fast for reality to keep up. Even the angels seem exhausted. The Lancea et Sanctum preach in churches just slightly younger than they are, rallying their congregations against impending change.

Changeling freeholds thrive throughout the country: amidst Wellington's modern bustle and along the quaint and quiet wharfs of Akaroa. One motley has claimed the Waitomo Caves as theirs, harvesting Glamour from wonderstruck sightseers as their boats float on darkened waters through caves lit by thousands of glowworms. All across New Zealand's many islands, the Lost sense change on the air. There's word of strange new paths in the Hedge, and of changelings whose Seemings keep bleeding through their human façades.

The Uratha have noticed it, too. New spirits emerge from the Twilight — no, newer than that. As if they only poofed into existence yesterday, even though they insist they've been here for eons. The Awakened mutter about having to reconfigure their spells to account for surges in Mana as though there were a Hallow nearby... even though there isn't.

Something's coming through the Hedge, and it has little regard for who might have been here first, or what anyone's worked so hard to build, or save.

Cause

In our reality, human feet have trod New Zealand's soil for a little less than a millennium. In another universe, the islands have gone undiscovered until just recently. The God-Machine on that side did the same thing ours did, when the cartographers made their marks: it churned out new Infrastructure to aid in its subjects' expansion and increase its own influence. But that other God-Machine grew overzealous. Perhaps it sensed another version of itself on our side of a nigh-impenetrable veil. Perhaps one of its world's Unchained corrupted an essential piece of software. Perhaps it simply wanted to expand its influence farther, to see more, to assert tighter control, to do more, more, *more...* until it broke through into the Hedge and snaked its wires along a trod.

A trod which led, eventually, to us.

A motley went exploring. It's how all the best stories start. They rambled about the Hedge in search of a bottle of midnight's tears. They found a path made of soft, newly-turned earth. But the Hedge is ever-changing, and the companions saw no danger beyond the usual: everything in the Hedge might be trying to kill you, so proceed with caution. They turned down the path.

It's hard to spot anything that's truly alien to the Hedge; after all, nothing in it is quite of our world to begin with. The motley noted how the leaves over their heads spread as large as awnings. They moved on quickly, so as not to disturb whatever proportionately huge birds might nest in those branches. Sometimes the roots poking out of the ground resembled wrist-thick steel cables. The hum that filled the air could have come from an angry swarm, but the Lost agreed it sounded more like that of machinery.

The trail ended in a wall of static. Roots sprouted from it, those same thick steel cables. No one in the motley could agree whether they seemed to be growing *into* the wall, or whether they protruded *from* it. The wisest thing, they decided, was to leave it be. Some bears, you didn't poke. Some vines, you didn't tug.

Kelsey spun them a faster way home. The Glamour she wove felt thick and sluggish, the branches and brambles more reluctant to respond than usual... but it was the Hedge, where *unusual* is perfectly normal. No one noticed the tiny clockwork hobgoblin that followed in their wake, digging a trench and expanding the cable's reach all the way to where the motley exited. It wedged the door open, and waited for the angels to arrive.

It wasn't only Kelsey's fault that the otherworldly God-Machine broke through into our reality. Jack Thimble had his phone in his pocket, its location services feature utterly flummoxed by the Hedge. What it found, rather than his GPS coordinates or an open Wi-Fi network, was the questing signal of the alien God-Machine. The two connected, briefly. To the phone, it was the smallest handshake of information: a nearby network to which it couldn't connect without its owner's permission. For the God-Machine, it was a piece of Infrastructure. It was a way out. Its code downloaded itself onto Jack Thimble's phone, waiting to be deployed.

In Arcadia, Wizened Thenia had been her Keeper's gardener, coaxing stubborn vines into complex archways and thrones worthy of the Gentry that sat upon them. She'd been out for nearly six years, but couldn't resist taking cuttings, sometimes. Most of the flowers she clipped from the Hedge dissolved into dustmotes and sunbeams within a day. The one she brought out

this time perked up as soon as she put it in water. It blossomed when she transplanted it to a pot. And when she put it in the ground, it spread like a goddamned weed.

The wildlife of this other New Zealand had an extra eight hundred years to thrive without human interference. Now, plants and animals that have long been extinct *here* are slipping through, carrying with them hints of what might have been. Animals, however, are also vectors for disease. Lovely as it might be for the moa bird to return from extinction, no one here is inoculated against whatever epidemics humans on the other side pass along.

Worse than simply mortal afflictions, the Contagion seeping through from the other side contains a supernatural component. Glamour, Essence, and Mana from that realm bear strong similarities to their counterparts in our world, but put the two together and they strike notes of discord rather than harmony. Every living thing is driven by Pyros, but the spark of Divine Fire on their side doesn't burn quite the same way as it does on ours. When they come into contact with each other, the two react. In some cases, it's a struggle for dominance, winner take all. In others, the mystical substances combine to form a new, unified version. Those who draw upon this hybrid do so to unpredictable, sometimes fatal, results.

Using the otherworldly source strengthens its hold on this domain. Contracts invoked with alien Glamour work, albeit not always in ways the Lost intends. Mages who power their spells with strange Mana make it that much more True, a part of our reality that has, perhaps, always *been*. The Unchained receive word of new pieces of Infrastructure cropping up and hear rumors that the God-Machine is transmitting contradictory orders. Using that intel to strike at the God-Machine might serve to weaken it, but at what cost?

The Resistance

In Auckland, the Crimson Court holds sway. They've watched these past few months as the strangeness has spread. Gossip mentions Lost whose seemings keep showing through their Masks, and others whose grasp on what's real versus what's not is broken. They've quarantined a freehold whose members' shared hallucinations threatened to incite Bedlam in the tourist-filled Ferry Building.

Now the Iron Spear prepares for a battle, led by their monarch, Lia Wilson. They've all lost themselves once before. Never again. Lia's informants tell her the problem's in the Hedge, they just don't know exactly where. It's not like anything ever stays the same for long enough for them to find the source of the problem on the other side of the thorns.

The *Hisil* in downtown Wellington is wrong. Where the urban hubbub should (and, until a few months ago, *did*) fill the Shadow with reflections of the city as it is now, great swaths of it appear as it must have nearly a thousand years gone. In place of the Parliament building known as the Beehive, a thick forest grows, and has encroached further and further across the city over the last few months. The Uratha of the Bone Shadow tribe hunt the spirits that inhabit this unlikely forest, attempting to glean information from them before they dispatch them. One of the Forsaken, Valerie Cantwell, has succeeded in binding one of the invading spirits into a fetish. She claims it entered into the agreement willingly, but won't say what she offered in return.

Mages know what it means to have one reality supersede another. Even now, the Lie hides the Supernal World, keeping most people Asleep to the magic all around them. Which makes this particular type of Contagion both terrifying and intriguing: if left unchecked, it could infect everything from the network of ley lines to the very fundamentals of magic. And yet... what an

incredible Mystery this interaction with another reality presents. The Adamantine Arrow aims to balance curiosity with caution. *Of course* they intend to contain and eradicate the Contagion. Yet surely it's worth some study before it's destroyed? Even the Seers of the Throne recognize the threat and fight against it. After all, there's no guarantee that whatever new Lie the Contagion put in place would dovetail with our own. There's no guarantee it won't put *everyone* back to Sleep.

The Renegades have been there, done that. They've had everything they were stripped away, replaced with something new. Like the Lost, they hear word of the Contagion's invasive, erasing nature and rail against it. One Auckland-based cohort has set their sights on the Leahy Group, a conspiracy that promotes better living through getting back to nature. The jingle for their supplements is a little-c contagion all its own, a pervasive earworm you can't miss if you turn on the television. The Leahy Group's been boasting about a new product line getting ready to release, one that relies on a crop of *Banksia novae-zelandiae* that had been thought extinct for millions of years. It's a miracle drug, they say, but they've buried reports of how sick the medicine made some participants in the original trials. Jason Little knows firsthand how disastrous it'll be if the drug hits the market. He's got the Scars to prove it.

The Abettors

The way the Bridge-Burners see it, if they can slam the doors shut on Arcadia, it's a win no matter the cost. They don't know exactly what this parasite crawling through the Hedge is, and sure, it's terrible for those Lost who find themselves afflicted, but... maybe it's for the best. It's sad if the freeholds lose a few of their best and brightest, but if it means the True Fae never take anyone else, ever again? The Bridge-Burners will send flowers for the funerals. Better yet, they'll make donations to scientific causes in the Losts' names.

Their plan is far-reaching but simple: help this blight do its job. Let it infect every root, every last thorn in the Hedge, and turn it into a No-Man's Land between the worlds. Make it so thoroughly toxic that the Gentry don't dare walk its paths. Maybe even find a way to infect Arcadia itself. To that end, Sonya Tremayne, an Elemental Leechfinger, has made several sojourns back into the Hedge to cultivate her corrupted garden. She has an orchard there, the trees ripe with poisoned goblin fruits, and the Harvest Fair is approaching.

The Leahy Group stands to gain billions of dollars from the Contagion. In addition to the *Banksia novae-zelandiae* its botanists have nurtured, the company has captured several species of moa bird and its also-extinct natural predator, the massive Haast's eagle. Māori mythology tells of a monstrous bird named the *pouakai*, which preyed on human beings. Scientists believe the *pouakai* and Haast's eagle are one and the same, and the Leahy Group is capitalizing on that potential. What perfect chimerae the eagles would make, capable of not only tracking down Renegades, but also bearing them aloft and carrying them back to their Progenitors.

When the God-Machine needs a task completed, it spits out angels to do the job. Now, though, thanks to Jack Thimble's corrupted cell phone and those lengths of cable that first wended their way out of the Hedge, the other reality's version of the God-Machine has gained a foothold in our world. It interfaces with angels from this reality and hijacks their purposes to suit its needs. It has even created a few angels of its own, including Jophiel, who protects the places where its master crosses over into our reality.

Symptom

Eight hundred years makes a world of difference. The species wiped out by human settlement in our reality continued to thrive and evolve in the other. The flora and fauna that found their way along the trod arrive to a radically different world, but one with enough similarities that they've put down roots, built nests, gone forth, and multiplied. In some places, the newly-arrived plants have strangled the life out of native species, stolen their sun and water, and leeches the nutrients out of the soil. In others, the Haast eagle has begun feasting on wild prey, the island's apex predator once more.

These invaders also carry with them diseases that the other reality passed along. A virulent new strain of avian flu has been identified, as well as an outbreak of a smallpox-like illness that has baffled doctors in the South Island city of Dunedin.

Among the Lost, the influx of otherworldly Glamour has caused tumult. Contracts evoked with it have an element of unreliability, as though the Lost or the entity they've bargained with had their fingers crossed when they swore their oaths. The Hedge itself exhibits symptoms of Contagion. New hollows bubble up like pustules, their leafy canopies mimicking New Zealand as it was before humans came. Trods appear, leading those who wander down them to those other, newly-discovered islands, stranding them in a reality that isn't their own. The alien God-Machine hums within the tangle of the thorns, attempting to impose order on the chaos. A small army of clockwork hobgoblins find it amusing to pretend they are the angels the God-Machine calls out for, and carry out its orders according to their own whims.

Even Arcadia feels the Contagion's touch. A Huntsman, murdered by his prey's motley, reformed in an infected part of the Hedge. Though his Keeper's desires still beat in place of his hidden heart, though his herald still roosts on his shoulder when he whistles, he is no longer the same. It's an itch deep in his soul as he seeks out his prey, the ghost of wanting something for himself. Sometimes, he even thinks he can feel his heart thumping away, right there in his own chest. It's not many of them, yet — Huntsmen don't often meet defeat at changeling hands — but someday the verderers' loyalty to the Kindly Ones might wear thin.

The mortals who the Gentry steal away to be their entertainment and servants are a problem as well. Often now, since the breach, Keepers have found the forms they mold their charges into don't hold. The perfect ice sculpture cracks, the mortal's plain, imperfect face exposed for all the faerie court to see. The Hunterheart bites his mistress' hand rather than the quarry she's set him upon. The Mirrorskin shows the Gilded Prince his true reflection, and it's hideous. The victims throw off the True Fae's magic the way some bacteria resist antibiotics. These flawed changelings are an embarrassment to their Keepers. Some find themselves thrust out of Faerie, banished from their Keepers' courts. These Lost are still forever changed by their Durances. Many struggle with their contradictory emotions: relief that they've escaped, and shame that they weren't good enough to stay.

Outbreak Sites and Notable Locations

Carlile House, Auckland: The Carlile House sits gray and foreboding on an otherwise pleasant, tree-lined street. Residences and shops surround it, making the gray stone walls and boarded windows all the more ominous. Inside, mold climbs up the wainscoting and old, yellowed wallpaper peels from the walls. Bed frames and mattresses fill the rooms, and broken toys and scattered puzzle pieces litter the floors. Built in the late 1800s, Carlile House has served as a boarding school for underprivileged boys, as an orphanage, and most recently as a hostel. It fell into disuse and disrepair forty years ago. Urban legends abound about a deadly fire in 1912 that

killed 43 boys, though no such fire is on record. Visitors to the house swear they hear children's laughter and footsteps, and others swear they've seen the ghost of a nun who, in another version of the story, *saved* those same boys from the fire but perished herself.

Today, Carlile House is a base of operations for the Crucible Initiative. The exterior remains run down and spooky, but the Burners have fixed up the east wing, preparing beds and clean rooms to hold those Contagion-infected individuals whose care they oversee. The Initiative lets urban explorers think they're seeing the whole house when they break in to upload their creepy walkthroughs to social media. In truth, a Mastigos warlock has folded the rooms upon themselves, creating a handy illusion for the explorers that allows the surgeons to continue their work undisturbed. Some of the noises enterprising ghost hunters hear are not made by long-dead orphans, but instead belong to the very-much-alive patients, not all (or even most) of whom are at Carlile House willingly.

Quail Island: Located off the South Island in Lyttelton Harbor, not far from Christchurch, Quail Island wasn't considered inhabitable by the Māori who settled nearby. The Europeans attempted to farm it in the 1850s, but by 1875, they gave up and turned the island into a quarantine site. In 1907, it served as a hospital for sufferers of the influenza epidemic. For the next 18 years, the island was also home to a small leper colony. Though today, day trippers take ferries and private boats to the island to enjoy its beaches, it is still mostly uninhabited. Zero Hour has restored the old hospital and made it a haven for those Contagion-touched who need to rest, hide, or stay far away from mortals while the Sworn search for a cure. A pack of Uratha patrols the hospital's perimeter, making certain no mortals wander onto the grounds. With unMasked Lost and other potentially dangerous creatures inside, it's as much to protect the secrets and dignity of those within as it is to avoid endangering those without.

Westhaven Marina: The Freehold of Gentle Waves currently holds court at the Westhaven Marina. The freehold claims half a dozen berths close by one another, a tiny fraction of the marina's two thousand boat capacity. The freehold has moved plenty of times over the centuries since its founding, its monarchs ready to unmoor their vessels and unfurl their sails when the Huntsmen or other outside forces threaten. Westhaven's been good to them these last few years, with the Glamour from boating enthusiasts keeping the Lost well-fed. Being on the water is its own kind of magic, and when the Spring Queen moved their little armada here, she made a perfect call.

Things have changed in recent months. It started when Carrie Odell couldn't sense the tides. The Elemental woman spent her entire life on boats, from when she was a deep-sea fisherman's daughter through her Durance, where she grew fins and a tail and swam and swam and swam alongside ships full of Gentry, singing up at them from the waves. Carrie knows the water. In many ways, she *is* the water. But the ebb and flow were gone. She stood on the deck of the *Syllabub* and swore she was standing on dry land. In her despair, Carrie threw herself into the harbor, where her tail returned and her gills came back. She's been that way ever since.

The remaining three members of the *Syllabub*'s crew all suffer from some degree of Contagion, though their miens are easier to hide than Carrie's. All of them tell stories of sighting the same ghostly ship out on the horizon the night before Carrie lost the tides. They don't know it, but the ship they spotted was the very vessel that discovered the other reality's New Zealand, but unlike in our world, a human crew never reached the shore

Otara Fleamarket: In a quiet corner of the Otara fleamarket sits a stall cobbled together from scrap wood and scavenged nails. Baskets upon baskets of fruit cover the counters, and on first glance passers-by might mistake them for apples and peaches. The three women who run the stalls speak little, offering up prices and declining to comment on the weather. The fruits cost anywhere from two pennies taken off a dead man's eyes to the first breath of your firstborn. The women aren't women at all, but hobgoblins, and this corner of Otara flea is the local Goblin Market. The little white-haired woman picks the fruits herself. The one with the puggish nose bakes them into tarts. The third, whose coat is made from scraps she found on the thorns, sizes up the customers and determines what she thinks they'll be willing to pay.

The prices have dropped over the last few months, and the middle sister's been adding more sugar and nutmeg to her pies. The fruits in their baskets are often bruised, or too tart, or their colors slightly off, though the sisters swear everything's fresh as can be. Their orchard lies in an infected part of the Hedge, the trees and bushes victim to the contagion's blight. Lost who eat their wares become Contagion carriers themselves, and those who bake with the fruits spread the disease to the friends they feed.

On some market days, the stall connects to the even larger Tumbledown, a goblin market that is *mostly* located in New Orleans, Louisiana. Members of Tumbledown's freehold have heard about the Otara sisters' questionable bounty, however. They've begun stationing people to stand guard near their stall and make sure their goods don't make it too far into the market proper. Just in case.

Sky Tower: The Cryptocracy sits high above the city of Auckland, on the fifty-sixth floor of the Sky Tower. The tower rises nearly eleven hundred feet into the air, making it the tallest freestanding structure in the Southern Hemisphere. It contains several viewing lounges, giving visitors a 360-degree view of the city, a revolving restaurant, and for the very brave, the opportunity to take a cable-controlled jump off one of the observation decks. A large portion of Auckland's communications are broadcast from the top of the tower, including radio, television, and wireless internet services.

The Sky Tower is full of Infrastructure and angels, and the Cryptocracy keeps an intense watch on both. It is from here that its members gather intel about the outbreaks and disseminate it to other groups of Sworn. Along with Caliber, their close proximity to the transmitters means that when the need arises, an agent has immediate access to intercept and alter outgoing broadcasts. These last few months, the bureau has made efforts to control the narrative when a monster falls prey to the Contagion in a way that would set off public alarm. Their monitoring allows the Cryptocracy to deploy physical, financial, and political resources to any infected, and helps funnel the victims to the Zero Hour facility on Quail Island.

Pencarrow Head Lighthouse: Outside Wellington lies the first permanent lighthouse built in New Zealand. Though it was decommissioned in 1935, the structure still stands. The lighthouse is composed of cast iron pieces, making it a safe place to hide from Huntsmen and the True Fae, even if it pains the Lost to shelter within as well. When Thenia, the Wized who brought that first cutting out of the Hedge, saw how fast her garden grew, and noted with alarm that her green-tinged fingers had begun to sprout of their own accord, she fled for the one place she thought might bring her some relief. The plants in the backyard hearkened after their gardener, the alien vines following in her wake and occasionally catching up to tangle about her ankles. Thenia made it to the lighthouse just before they could completely overtake her, and bolted

herself inside. Now, the vines grow nearly right up to the walls, leaving only a small gap they won't dare cross. Thenia's been locked inside all this time, depending on friends to brave the path. So far, the plants have only been interested in Thenia herself.

Story Hooks

- The Gentry are displeased. The mortals they've pulled into their service are unpredictable, disloyal, *willful*. It would never do to simply send them back with a pat on the head and a cookie for their service. In fact, the Kindly Ones would prefer never to have to cross paths with these inferior humans again. Thus, they escort them to a trod that releases them far, far from their homes. One Mirrorkin whose Keeper stole her from near Dunedin emerged only a few miles outside Kyoto.
- Gossip has hit the courts about a motley whose Masks all slipped. Just, boom, one guy's eight feet tall and made of rock, his head brushing the bar's ceiling. And one girl with him is in her mid-20s one second and in her 90s the next. Only reason they didn't notice the third companion sprout a pair of horns was they were all screaming about the big dude. What everyone missed, amidst the panic, was the beautiful young man who'd bought the motley a round of drinks slipping out of the club.
- The police have cordoned off several city blocks in Wellington's theater district. The Cryptocracy's spinning it as a gas leak, yet a Daeva on her way to a show saw the quarantine trucks rolling in, and someone's broadcasting panicked messages over the Cacophony from within. You don't need preternatural senses to smell the burning. It reeks of rotted greenery and hot metal.
- An Ithaeur hunting in the Willowbank Wildlife Reserve was bombarded by a passel of spirits in an area where he'd previously made peace with the denizens of the Shadow. These entities insisted no such pact had ever been made and that, in fact, no Uratha had ever stalked these lands. When he finally appeased them enough that they'd converse rather than attack, the wolf spent several hours in discussion. Afterwards, he was startled to look up and see the moon in a different phase than it had been when he began talking. The next day, when he returned to the spot with his pack, none of those spirits remained, and there was no evidence *he'd* been there, either.
- A Darkling who escaped from her Keeper last month emerged from the Hedge with deep scratches from the thorns. Her clothes were tattered, her hair a-tangle. But what was caught in the fabric and in her hair was not sticks and leaves but wire clippings. The briar stuck in the meat of her palm wasn't organic, but a sliver of steel. Her dreams since her escape have been full of numbers and equations, and when she's still, she swears she feels threads beneath her skin. She scratched herself once, and to her horror removed a hair-thin wire filament from the cut. She spent her Durance writing letters her Keeper dictated, and now, she wakes with pen in hand, the pages covered in equations she doesn't understand.
- Lia Wilson's sure the Summer Court can stop this thing while it's still in the Hedge, and she's handpicked a crew to go in with her. They tell the freehold they've dropped their Masks to show their pride, their defiance, but they're liars. They're infected, and this is a suicide mission. The other courts let them have their lie. Why be so cruel as to remind them that the next step, after they lose control of their Mask, is to lose control of their minds? Neither do any of the other courtiers dare mention how Lia's grown more angular by the day, how they heard that her

Keeper's realm was all sharp edges and no curves, or how her skin's taken on a sliver tinge. Lia's Clarity hangs by a thread, but she swears she'll stay lucid long enough to save her people.

- Anya DeLisle's been sick before. She got a miracle cure, part of an experimental drug trial sponsored by the Leahy Group. They told her, after she was declared disease-free, that she'd been in the placebo group. *Sorry, ma'am, we can't explain it, that's outside the scope of the trial.* But other things happened to her, after. Side effects that hadn't been listed on any of the info sheets. The doctors stopped returning her calls, told her sugar pills couldn't cause those things. Then the lawyers *did* call her back, to tell her to stay away or else. Now they're advertising for another trial, and she's not going to let anyone else go through what she's experienced. She's got some friends who are willing to help, but she needs more warm bodies to pull this off. Who's in?
- The Circle of the Crone ought to be loving this, the imposition of a wilder New Zealand on our own. Change is good, evolution is better. It's chaos spilling through and it's got the Invictus spinning in circles. That alone should make them gleeful. But some Cruac rites have gone horribly wrong since Contagion came, and in one particular case, only one Acolyte *didn't* see the sun after. The others all ran to meet it.
- An angel came screaming out of the sky last night, and a ring of Unchained went to collect their newest sibling. No other angels came in search of it, which the demons chalked up to luck or good timing. But her Cover couldn't hold. One moment, she's a petite blonde woman, the next she's all arms and eyes and not much else. The Agents brought her to safety. They think they can help her get a more reliable Cover in short order, but that's not what has them worried. Sure, she was an angel, but she served the *other* God-Machine.
- The Makara's so hungry. She's drowned an entire cruise ship's worth of people in their dreams, and yet she's never sated. Something's changed about the dreams themselves, or maybe the fear, she doesn't know. But she's just barely holding it together, and she doesn't know if it's *them* or if it's *her*, and oh god, what if she's got this sickness she's been hearing about?

The Lost

A changeling who has been infected slides inexorably back toward his Durance, both in appearance and behavior. He is aware of this awful, regressive change, keenly feeling the loss of the freedom he clawed his way home through the thorns to claim. Contagion, for the Lost, is the horrifyingly familiar erasure of the self that their Keepers imposed upon them, only there are no faerie palaces to flee, no doors in the Hedge they can fling open to return home.

For some in early stages of infection, the Mask falls away only briefly and immediately reasserts itself. For others, some or all of their mien is always visible. A Beast might be able to hide small horns beneath her hair or a cap and pass it off as trying out a new style, but little can explain away an Ogre who gains an extra foot in height, or an Elemental whose hair is literally aflame. The freeholds and courts have, to the extent they're able, provided shelter and cover for those who are so afflicted.

Then there are the Lost whose Clarity has been stripped away by the Contagion. Though they remain on this side of the Hedge, they behave as though they were back in Arcadia, doing their Keepers' bidding. These effects may be deeply personal and only affect the individual, such as a Wizeden Artist who paints canvas after canvas, refusing to eat or sleep until exhaustion takes hold. Other times, the changeling becomes a danger to those around him: an Ogre who begins a bar brawl thinking someone has slighted her Lord, a Mirrorskin who wears his best friend's face

and wreaks havoc in his affairs. Worst yet are those whose purpose in Arcadia entailed shocking levels of violence. A Gristlegrinder will never be jailed for the atrocities he was forced to commit in his Durance. When his victims become mortal club-goers, however, no Gentry will come to save him from his jail cell.

The Forsaken

The Contagion has had a disconcerting effect on werewolves and their Change. In the last few months, new Uratha have felt as though they're out of phase with the moon. They look up and see that Father Luna is waxing gibbous, but their blood tells them he's full. Mechanically, this means the Storyteller may adjust any benefits or modifiers a Uratha receives from the moon being in a particular phase.

Similar to how infected among the Lost lose Clarity, those Uratha who have fallen victim to the Contagion lose their ability to separate their perception of the *Hisil* from that of the mundane world. In places where the alternate-New Zealand's forests have replaced the busy streets of modern-day cities, this becomes especially dangerous.

Other Entities

The Contagion affects the supernatural substances that drive all characters' abilities: Glamour, Essence, Mana, Vitae, Pyros, and so on. Characters feel it most keenly when activating their various powers — an uncertainty when casting a familiar spell, a ripple of Instability when calling upon a Variation, a strange aftertaste to the blood. Their powers still work, but at the Storyteller's discretion, the effects might not manifest in their typical fashion. The Storyteller may increase the difficulty of a roll to use a power, or may impose an appropriate Condition upon the character, including the new Condition, **Discord** (see p. XX). Dramatically, the Storyteller may describe how the oddness manifests, or she may ask her players to describe how their character's effects appear off to their companions.

Jack Thimble

"Go ahead and run. You'll tire long before I do."

Background: Jack Thimble used to be That Guy. The one who cut his friends down with a scathing comment when they started looking just a little too cool. The one people hated themselves for liking anyway, even though they knew being his friend meant he could go for *their* throats at any moment. Jack was cunning, charm, and stubble-jawed good looks wrapped around an asshole core, and he wasn't sorry for a second.

Until the Seven Night Duchess took him away. She'd liked watching him hunt in the mortal world, appreciated how he left hurt feelings and broken hearts in his wake, and she decided he simply must be her pet. He spent his Durance as a hawk on his lady's shoulder, sent to hunt and kill her lovers once she grew tired of them. Jack soon came to hate the hunt.

When he escaped, he vowed to be better than he was. He's succeeded, mostly, at making real friends within his freehold and trusting people enough to form a motley. He joined the Summer Court so he could protect people rather than crush them. It was all going well until that day in the Hedge, when he came out and saw his phone battery nearly drained from trying to get signal in the nowhere of the thorns. Until the day after, when he found himself scrolling through old phone numbers with bad intentions. And the day after that, when his talons returned and he began drawing blood.

Description: Jack is an aggressive, handsome man in his late 20s. Even when he's still, his eyes follow movements in the crowd around him, as if he's scoping out his prey. Brown hawk feathers are interspersed throughout his hair, which leads him to keeping his sweatshirt's hood pulled up. He keeps his hands shoved in the front pockets to hide his talon-tipped fingers.

Storytelling Hints: Jack is confident and charming, never at a loss for words. He's also terrified of being under the Contagion's control.

Seeming: Fairest

Kith: Hunterheart

Court: Summer

Attributes: Intelligence 3, Wits 4, Resolve 2; Strength 3, Dexterity 4, Stamina 4; Presence 3, Manipulation 5, Composure 4

Skills: Academics 3, Athletics 4, Brawl (Grappling) 3, Empathy 1, Intimidation 4, Investigation 2, Persuasion 3, Politics 2 (Summer Court), Socialize 4 (Bar hopping), Stealth (Shadowing) 4, Subterfuge 2, Survival 3

Merits: Fast Reflexes ••, Fleet of Foot ••, Seizing the Edge ••, Striking Looks •

Willpower: 6

Current/Maximum Clarity: 5/8

Needle: Bon Vivant

Thread: Honor

Touchstones: Thenia

Aspiration: To heal some of the hurt he caused before his Durance.

Initiative: 8

Defense: 8

Size: 6

Speed: 12

Health: 7

Wyrd: 3

Favored Regalia: Shield

Secondary Regalia: Jewels

Contracts: Cloak of Night, Fiery Tongue, Know the Competition, Overpowering Dread, Paralyzing Presence, Pure Clarity, Seven-League Step, Sunburnt Heart

Cure

The more the Contagion insinuates itself into our reality, the harder it is to root it out. It has a solid foothold now, but it isn't so completely integrated as to make a complete recovery impossible. Like an invasive plant, it can be pruned back, its damage mitigated for a time while

the factions decide what to do next. However, since part of the Contagion is caused by a piece of another world's God-Machine, it spends that time thinking of ways to thwart its enemies as well.

Like the Infrastructure in our world, the Infrastructure the invading God-Machine builds depends on linchpins. A quest to locate and destroy all of those would weaken it, and possibly shatter its hold here. Likewise, efforts to push it back through the Hedge and seal off the breach to its own reality, while a Herculean task, ends the threat. These are not the only ways to end the Contagion — any actions that fit the setting's mood of defiance and holding on to what makes you *you* are possible avenues to success. If the characters decide to save the formerly-extinct species and use their return to reverse the effects of climate change on a global scale because that's what matters to them, feel free to run with it!

Even after the threat of an invading reality is over, a world of cleanup remains. Clarity may return to the infected Lost, though it might take years before they can discern what's real and what's not. They still have to come to terms with whatever damage they did while under the Contagion's influence.

Allowing the other reality's supernatural essence to integrate with our own is also a viable, if potentially devastating, option. The change is subtle but sweeping: many creatures lose the ability to power their magic altogether, or must relearn how to direct and wield their magical substances. For example, mages wouldn't fall back to Sleep, but Mana itself is fundamentally different, making the Imagos they've relied on to work their spells no longer valid. How does this affect the world? Where do the factions go from there?

The Sworn

The Cryptocracy views its role in containing this Contagion as one of support, or at least, that's what they're letting the other Sworn think. They're managing the flow of data, herding all the various cats toward the places they'll do the most good for the greatest number of people, and deploying resources efficiently. Someone must control the narrative and do any necessary dog-wagging, and it ought to be the ones who understand power and politics best. In truth, the Majestic are living up to that nickname, issuing orders like the monarchs they consider themselves to be, and once the Contagion's over, they'll reap the benefits.

Members of the Jeremiad pit one god against another as a philosophical exercise all the time. It makes for excellent debate when the Contagion is in remission. Now, with two iterations of the God-Machine in the same reality, they have the potential to see their topic of debate play out for real. How strange it is, especially for the Unchained among them, to be on our God-Machine's side. But, better the devil you know...

The Rosetta Society are determined to preserve the world as we know it, though the amount of information they could gather from another reality is powerfully tempting. Therefore, any interactions with the Contagion require as much documentation as possible: recordings, measurements, scientific specialists. The Exegetes are also spearheading attempts to reach those Lost who have returned to their Durance-like state, walking in their dreams to try to coax their post-Arcadia minds back to the forefront.

Where the Rosetta Society members grapple with the *idea* of learning about the other reality, members of the Ship of Theseus are exploring ways to co-exist with it. Letting the other reality flow into ours — responsibly, and in a completely controlled and measured manner — is an

eventuality they're planning for. For the Theseans, the question isn't so much "should we do it?" but "How can we do it without killing everyone?"

Of all the Sworn, Zero Hour's plan is the simplest: first they'll help whoever they can. Then they'll cure the Contagion by any means necessary. Then they'll punch the Theseans in their fucking mouths and make them clean up the mess.

The False

The Crucible Initiative's approach isn't all that different from Zero Hour's (though perhaps with less punching). Both factions, after all, have set up hospitals of sorts where they can aid the Contagious and learn about the infection, though the details might differ from there. The Fire-Bearers are also in touch with Huntsmen, sending some of the more hopeless cases back to Arcadia where at least they can't infect anyone on the islands. The Huntsmen don't seem to notice when their quarry is not quite the same as perhaps the Keeper expects, but if the verderers don't ask, the Initiative feels no obligation to supply the information.

The Machiavelli Gambit, like the Cryptocracy, is focused on spin. Occasionally the messages they're broadcasting contradict whatever the Men in Black want people to believe, but that's not the Princes' problem, now, is it? They've also gotten wind of the Jeremiad's risky plan and have made a few contacts with the newest angels — the ones the alien God-Machine called into its service — offering to help them put Infrastructure in place and granting them (limited, carefully monitored) access to some of their own resources. After all, if the horse the Jeremiad's backing *loses*, someone has to be in good with the new God-Machine in town, right?

Naglfar's Army is hard at work planning for the end of the world. Where they encounter the Contagion, they do what they can to help it spread. That's secondary to their other project, which is collecting a small group of designated survivors and moving them — willingly or not — to one of the smaller islands to wait out the apocalypse. They've sent saboteurs out in search of the breach between our reality and the other, with instructions to tear it open as wide as they can to hurry in the new era.

Rumors in New Zealand

- A new measles outbreak has reached epidemic levels across New Zealand. Doctors are calling those affected "the lost generation," consisting of thirty-somethings who were never vaccinated. However, a secondary wave of patients were never children at all. They're Fetches.
- A flight arriving at Christchurch Airport from Antarctica remains on the tarmac after 12 hours. It was never given a gate, and though security vehicles surround it, no one has deplaned.
- The printers in the student center at Victoria University spat out reams of gibberish for ten minutes on Tuesday morning. The staff reset their connections and muttered at the waste of paper as they dumped it into the recycling bins. A frazzled-looking man came along soon after, retrieved the paper, and ate a page as he walked away.
- A popular soap opera was interrupted for thirty-two seconds, replaced by a shot of a bespectacled woman staring quizzically at the camera. Viewers who called the station to complain said they felt like she was staring right at them, personally, as though trying to figure out where they'd met before. Most of the viewers felt like they knew *her* from somewhere, too.

- Did you see all those news stories yesterday about the section of Egmont National Park they shut down due to a trail getting washed out? A bunch of movie stars started a hashtag and raised a hundred thousand dollars to get it fixed. Today there's a viral video of a giant bird swooping down and attacking a group of tourists who ignored the barricades.
- This Helldiver says we never got out of the Hedge. That this isn't Christchurch, just an illusion made of magic and brambles. I didn't believe him at first, but I can't explain this scratch. It feels just like it did when I got caught on the Thorns. Now I'm thinking he's right.
- The bell tower's been empty for years — the church had the money to send it out for repairs, but not to reinstall the bell. Yet when Father Amos died last week, they pealed for an hour straight.
- The florist's shop has been closed for a week. The manager said their entire stock got wiped out by some plant disease, and then the owner caught the flu. She plans on opening next Monday, but I don't know if she will. She still looked kind of green to me. Get it? Looked kind of... oh, never mind.
- Mandy keeps finding this windup clockwork toy in her daughter's room. It's a goddamned choking hazard, which she's *told* Jim, but every time she tosses it out, it's back on the kid's dresser in a day.
- Astronomers at Mt. John Observatory were baffled to see the entirely wrong set of constellations for this time of year when they led a stargazing class last month. They've officially chalked it up to a clever prank, but Dr. Kent's said off the record that there's no way anyone could have pulled something like that off.
- A man wanders the beach selling bottles of water from out of a cooler. He claims the source is ice melt from a glacier, and that what you're drinking is pure and untouched by man. Authorities would like to ask him a few questions related to a spate of norovirus cases.
- Many people suffer from the Mandela effect when it comes to New Zealand's location on the map. They swear it was northeast of Australia on all the maps they saw growing up. Being told it's actually to the southeast invokes confusion and distress.

Republique Democratique du Congo: Contagion of Sustenance

The U.S. government has limited ability to provide emergency services to U.S. citizens outside of Kinshasa due to poor transportation infrastructure and poor security conditions, notably in the eastern Congo and Kasais.

—from US Dept of State – Bureau of Consular Affairs Travel Advisory website

The Congo has been home to mankind for more than 90,000 years when tribes scattered across Africa as humanity began its journey across the globe. For centuries it remained a relatively untouched, vast jungle until colonial conquest brought great change to the region. Explorers like Sir Henry Morton Stanley referred to the Congo as part of “darkest Africa,” as it was a seemingly impregnable expanse of dangerous forest full of wild animals and hostile tribes. The people who made the Congo their home did not realize that the rich resources their land harbored would draw the eye of invading colonizers intent on stealing these riches for themselves. When Africa was split among imperialist powers, the Belgians secured the land as their own, and soon caravans of armed soldiers moved through the region installing railroads and trade hubs to aid their expanding empire. The brutal lash of the dictator brought untold misery and suffering to the Congolese as they were cruelly rounded up and forced to work in mines where their toils brought massive profits to a king thousands of miles away while hundreds of thousands if not millions died.

Things hardly improved when, in 1908, the Belgian parliament bowed to International pressure and annexed the Congo as a colony. There were some attempts to improve healthcare and basic education, but the locally recruited army acted swiftly to suppress any signs of rebellion although it distinguished itself fighting for the allies in both world wars.

The area gained independence in 1960 and, after five years of political chaos, was taken over in a coup led by Mobutu Sese Seko. In 1971 he renamed the country Zaire (which does confuse a lot of people). He remained in power until 1997 when a Rwanda and Uganda-backed rebellion deposed him. The new president renamed his country the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the name stuck, though the president was assassinated in 2001.

An attempt to integrate rebels into the Congolese military led to the formation of a well-armed rebel group calling itself M23. The subsequent population displacements and human rights abuses came to a partial end when M23 were pushed out of DRC to Uganda and Rwanda in 2013.

This did not bring peace. Armed dissident groups continue to make the country a dangerous place. Delayed elections promised for 2016 led to increased protests and many nations issued advisories to their citizens to avoid the country.

National Parks were created, great for conservation but not so good for the local populations who had to move out and found their traditional way of life becoming more and more difficult to maintain. Some of these people found employment as park rangers, others joined the informal economy as poachers, miners, sex workers, loggers and worse. The National Parks are under threat from armed conflict and uncontrolled (and probably uncontrollable) mining, logging and

hunting. Park rangers are murdered on a regular basis. Little wonder that UNESCO now lists all three National Parks as World Heritage Sites in Danger.

Theme: Rampant Poverty

The DRC is a country of massive forests, plains, and cities sprawling with people of differing backgrounds, who are now struggling to find a national identity. Throughout its history the Congo has been home to intensive warfare, genocide, and a burgeoning environmental crisis only made worse by the desperation of people trying to survive. In a nation where the elite stay rich by keeping them oppressed, the citizens of the DRC do what they must to keep themselves and their families alive.

That is not to say the DRC is a barren wasteland devoid of civilization. It is home to 79 million Congolese made up primarily of Tutsis, Rwandans, and other ethnic groups. As the DRC struggles to build up cities such as Kinshasa, the devastating wars of only a decade ago have left the country with displaced citizens, crumbling infrastructure, and massive inflation. But the DRC is more than just the jungle. As it continues to grow, its cities become beautiful pillars of light in the region, and the streets are lined with vendors selling their arts and crafts representing hundreds of cultures and traditions. Although the DRC struggles to grow beyond the problems it faces, it is slowly becoming a formidable nation in its own right and its economy attracts investors not only from across Africa but from China, Europe, and the United States.

Mood: Bedlam

Control across the Congo is best represented by how much power an official wields in their province. Foreign aid groups have repeatedly found their humanitarian efforts hampered by a lack of passable roads and working plumbing. Battlefields with unexploded mines are just as dangerous a threat to human aid as are the rebel groups still operating across the country. It is difficult for anyone to achieve real results in the Congo because foreign aid money is frequently siphoned away by corrupt officials. Packages of much needed food and medical supplies get stuck in ineffective transport system or are stolen by starving Congolese.

Some might be inclined to ignore a remote and chaotic area like the DRC and let the Contagion burn itself out. It cannot be denied, however, that the Contagion is flourishing and spreading beyond the Congo. Tainted bushmeat is spreading globally as are those who visit the sites of Contagion as tourists or as businessmen.

What Has Gone Before

Until 150 years ago, the Congo basin was cut off from the rest of the world apart from as a source of slaves. No one outside the area knew what was going on in the interior and no one inside the area was in contact with the outside world. But the Congo still felt the influence of covenants, orders, and lodges, who found worshippers and allies in the region who could be used for their cause. The Congo represented an older kind of challenge than Europe or America, as the lack of transport made communication with the outside world difficult. In the great expanse of the dark jungle, these groups tended to organize themselves less according to their ideology and more according to their familial and territorial affiliations. Some still do.

Very little is known about those Kindred who live among the tribal people for they are highly secretive due to ages long activity of the Strix. It is rumored that some of the Circle of the Crone have had contact with Kindred who haven in the bush and their beliefs seem to resonate with the

ideology of the Dark Mother. These Kindred found kinship among the Beasts of the region, who fed upon the fear the vampires instilled in the mortal population while helping protect the Kindred during the day. Though seen as slightly heretical by other branches of the covenant, the Circle is strong in the Congo and has resisted any threats to their beliefs. There are branches of the Circle in some villages where the Kindred work closely with the Begotten and hedge mages, united in their worship of the Great Mother. The global covenants are all represented in Kinshasa and some of the larger cities. The founding members arrived with the Belgians and most harbor prejudice against Embracing locals, though some of the younger Kindred, especially the Carthians and Ordo Dracul have started to integrate—a movement much despised by the local Invictus who prefer to speak Flemish. The city Kindred rarely venture into the bush.

The Primordial Dream is strong in central Africa. 80% of the population is nominally Christian, but indigenous religion remains alive and well, both among the tribal people in the bush and in the back brains of city dwellers. In recent years many of the Begotten have become concerned about the destruction of the natural environment, the extinction of species and the ending of traditional lifestyles via exploitation of natural resources. Less hampered than others when it comes to accessing remote areas, they have been able to band together in an effective manner although many have fallen to Heroes among the loggers and miners and, indeed, to Heroes among the very hunter-gatherer tribes they are fighting to preserve.

In recent years, the outbreak of Contagion in the Congo has attracted the attention of an Insatiable known as the Blind Man. Posing as an Afrikaner from South Africa, the Blind Man has begun leaving behind him a wave of chaos and hysteria that distracts from attempts to find the source of the Contagion. For the Blind Man, he welcomes the effects the Contagion has on the area. It allows him to stay off the radar of Heroes and Beasts alike while letting him have the opportunity to sew as much mystery and harvest as much fear and suffering from his victims to almost sate his inexhaustible hunger. He does not believe that the Congo will allow him to fulfill his destiny, but he does see it as a stepping stone to the day when he unleashes the Primogenitor upon the world.

The struggle for control of the Congo has farther reaching consequences that go beyond the mortal government of the area. In the forests ancient grudges are acted upon as Forsaken fight with the Pure and the Covenants seek to settle grudges away from the eyes of the world's media. The secret conflicts fought between these groups almost never come to light outside of the cities thanks to the scarcity of mortals with cell phones or access to the Internet, so it is easier for creatures to rampage openly without fear of discovery. This does not mean that anyone operating in the Congo has the right to do as they please; rumors of ancient monsters and terrifying demons still attract the notice of the world if only through word of mouth, and many bands of Hunters have honed their craft of destroying monsters by traveling deep into the jungle in seek of formidable threats.

Since the outbreak of Contagion in the area, the Congo has seen numerous groups set aside their differences in an attempt to work together. The Sworn find that the Congo is not the chaotic mess they were led to believe but that beneath the rumors and stereotypes bestowed upon the region by the rest of the world, there is still a hierarchy to work with and taking control of the region requires just as much finesse, diplomacy, and cold blooded determination to control as countries across the world. Those seeking to manipulate the infected bush meat find it hard to eliminate from the population entirely, while those seeking to curtail the Contagion entirely find themselves overworked and constantly moving from one outbreak to the next.

Where We Are

The Democratic Republic of the Congo has never been a safe place. It is dangerous enough for mortals with its wars and disease and random violence. It is also a very beautiful place with one of the richest ecologies on the globe. That ecology is under constant threat from war and economic exploitation, but a lot of the threatening economic exploitation is small scale – exploitation by people who need meat to feed their families and land on which to grow crops to feed their families. It is an area where the urge to preserve the environment is at direct odds with the need to develop an economy that can provide food, shelter, education and healthcare for the resident population.

The shifting of power in the mortal world in the Congo is represented by the power shifting between factions among the Sworn operating in the area. For over a century the Invictus held power in the Congo as they moved along with the tide of Imperialism that devastated the area. As the Belgians lost control, the Invictus found themselves drawn to other cities in Africa, and a power struggle broke out between the Forsaken and the Pure. The misery and devastation brought by decades of warfare in the country have also attracted several new Krewes of Sin-Eaters as well as Beasts to the region. Anakim and Inguma sate their Hunger with ease, from the misery warfare and economic struggle brings.

The country has also proven itself as a refuge for those seeking concealment from the world. Several demons have established new Covers for themselves in a nation where the ability to find out someone's identity is hard to do outside the cities, and Prometheans are able to keep on the move under the guise of foreign aid workers or as natives dispossessed from their homes. The Ascending Ones have mobilized smaller cells of hunters to operate independently in the country and level the playing field between themselves and other groups thanks to the weapons left over from the Congolese Civil War.

Recently, the Congo situation has worsened with the appearance of the so called "Bloody Ones." Originally believed to be something foreign Kindred brought with them, they appear to be mortals who sporadically leak blood from their orifices while screaming horribly. These mortals do not appear to be in control of themselves, and most bear permanently pained looks on their faces. Sometimes they are encountered fleeing scenes of conflict and bloodshed, one of the rare occasions their faces appear strangely calm, despite the horrors unfolding around them. Other times they are seen sabotaging equipment at lumber camps and tossing relief packages into the river. Their strange, erratic behavior mystifies those unaware of the threat of Contagion, but to the Sworn operating in the area, they are a burgeoning catastrophe threatening to break free if left to its own devices. Zero Hour has deployed several units to the region, but the lack of help from local government has kept them from gaining any real leads over the epidemic's cause.

Cause

You would have thought they'd have learned their lesson with Ebola. But it seems not. I want to tell you about my friend, Lenny. Lenny was one of my last ties to the daytime world. A good friend. Kept me grounded. I saw her in the hospital before she died, when she was dying. Weeping sores all over her body, high fever, and the doctors said she had the same sores inside. Weird things. They said they were caused by some kind of parasite. Some kind of parasite the doctors had never seen before. I looked at them under the microscope and they reminded me of nothing so much as tiny cogwheels, spinning and turning in a haze of blood and pus.

There were half a dozen others with Lenny. All with the same symptoms. Seems they had all been at the same party and eaten the same dish. Which is about all the doctors would tell me. However, for someone like me, it's not so hard to get my hands on hospital records. They traced it back to a single consignment of bushmeat. And then they let it drop. Words and words about attempts to stop the illegal trade but.... Since when have mortals ever managed to end the illegal trade in anything?

The hunting, sale and consumption of bushmeat is a major problem and one that is difficult to eradicate. Bushmeat is hewn from animals hunted in the rainforest. It is a traditional way of life for some people, particularly the Pygmy tribes whose existence is under threat from destruction of their environment, unregulated economic activities and rules around conservation of the forest. For others, it is seen as the most easily available source of protein. In any case, bushmeat is an important element in a traditional central African diet. Bits of exotic (and endangered) animal are often seen on sale in the markets of Kinshasa. And, while it is illegal to import meat products into many countries, it's natural for people to crave the diet they ate in childhood and these habits are passed on to children, families and communities. The sale of bushmeat provides an economic lifeline to many families living in the forest and hefty profits to those in the cities who export it illegally in suitcases and packages bound for London, New York, Paris or Sydney. The Ebola crisis brought bushmeat to the headlines for as long as headlines last, but bushmeat also puts pressure on many endangered species.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, throughout the Congo basin and, increasingly, in other parts of the world where bushmeat is eaten, the Contagion is spreading. The World Health Organization is determined to find a cure but, as the disease is not a natural phenomenon but, rather, an incursion from a different dimension or universe or time, they are having scant success.

So, how did it start?

It started when Ismitta, one of the Begotten attempted to incarnate and failed. Maybe her Myth was insufficiently developed, maybe general acceptance of the modernization of the surrounding region prevented locals from giving the Mother Primate the credence that would have allowed her to manifest. These things happen from time to time and do not inevitably result in the Contagion gaining ingress to our reality. Unknown to anyone Ismitta's lair was very close to a piece of Infrastructure placed in the Congo Basin to connect that remote part of our planet to the Primordial Dream. When the Mother Primate attempted to incarnate, the process set up a vibration in the Infrastructure which attracted the Contagion and enabled the inter-dimensional disease entity to enter the physical world where it determined that the most effective way to spread itself was via the food chain. It started with the manifested body of the Mother Primate.

Symptom

To most observers, this outbreak seems like a fairly normal and yet terrifying fever. The average mortal believes Ebola or some other form of exotic disease has escaped from Africa and will make its way through to their homelands where they and their loved ones will die. Although the chances of an Ebola outbreak occurring in other nations is slim thanks to the use of powerful antivirals and quarantine procedures, this outbreak is different from the others. It is not just a disease passed on through tainted meat. It is a semi-sentient infection twisted by the Contagion to move quickly among others, which can randomly accelerate or slow its progression inside a host, forcing them to do as it wishes.

When Ismitta attempted to incarnate, she left a wake in the Primordial Dream that enabled the Contagion to seep into the forests of the Congo. This outbreak does not have the strength to possess living creatures, but instead clings to animals that are killed violently. As it seeps into their flesh, it manages to survive long enough to be consumed by other creatures living in the Congo, including the Congolese themselves. This allows the Contagion to spread out and thrive as those who consume the tainted bushmeat may unknowingly carry the infection themselves. Though the infection does not think of itself as an entity, those who have encountered its effects on mortals refer to them as the Bloody Ones.

The Contagion in the Congo has no agenda other than to thrive and continue to exist. Driven by the sheer desperation of the people of the area, it has found a means to keep itself from burning out and to spread to other parts of the globe as need be. It resides in most of those infected as a chronic fever and occasional bloody cough, which persists until the host's immune system fails and the disease kills them. In others, and particularly in those who are attempting to eradicate the Contagion, it is able to ramp up the timeline of the infection and kill a host within minutes unless there is effective medical intervention. No form of medical intervention accessible to mortals has proven consistently effective.

The Bloody Ones are mortals who will die a brutal, agonizing death from the disease, but once the Contagion has taken hold in its final hours they lose control of their bodies. While most who die from the disease do so in their beds or in hospitals as the pain from their exsanguination overwhelms them, the Bloody Ones have their bodies hijacked by the infection. It infects the brain stem and transfers all control to the Contagion, while the victims become prisoners in their own bodies. The Contagion uses the Bloody Ones to control its own survival but to also carry out the last empathic imprint it got from Ismitta as she tried to incarnate; for the forest to survive at all costs.

Now the infection is split between its own survival and helping to ensure that the Congo resists any attempts to spoil or devastate it. Logging crews become sick after eating meat they have trapped in the forest and are found having bled to death in their trucks at the logging site. College students and missionaries on foreign aid missions find locals grateful for their aid but lose all memory of them after they leave the area. A local chef bankrupts his own business to supply a group of visiting executives with a feast of amazing local dishes and steaks, only for the chef to die a week later and the executives to find they have become too sick to leave the country.

Outbreak Sites

While the contagion might be found anywhere in the DRC and, from there, spread out with deadly exports across the world, there are differences in the ways it manifests in the cities and in the forests. Kinshasa, the capital typifies the cities of the DRC (though it is by far and away the most sophisticated). The rapidly spreading outbreak originated recently in the Kahuzi-Biega National Park, remote, difficult to reach and one of the most biologically diverse areas on the planet.

Kinshasa

Kinshasa is a huge, sprawling megacity where robots control the traffic in the affluent center. 11 million people live here and they all speak French. The juxtaposition between the architecturally notable buildings in the smart residential and commercial parts of the city and the sprawling, unsafe slum residences is striking. There is noise and chaos everywhere. Street hawkers

constantly hassle you to buy their wares and, with 20,000 children living on the streets, visitors who are interested in handicrafts and those who have a sense of charity can find their pockets emptied very quickly — even if an enterprising urchin does not pick them. In Kinshasa you can get whatever you want if you have cash enough to grease the necessary palms. If you have cash, you should always be aware that there is someone close by ready to relieve you of it by whatever means possible.

Kinshasa is where the most organized Kindred are based, also where the various factions of Sworn can be found, if you know where to look. Good places to start looking for Kindred would be the Institut Francais de Kinshasa and the Goethe Institute, which promote all kinds of cultural activities in French and German respectively.

Currently there are no acknowledged symptoms of the Contagion in Kinshasa though any non-mortal you ask is concerned about happenings ‘out in the bush’ Most individuals in Kinshasa consider the bush to be extremely dangerous and, while several Sworn factions are preparing expeditions, few have progressed beyond words. The Rosetta Society and the Crucible Initiative, however, have already left. The former wish to study and understand the Contagion to combat it, the latter simply want to wipe it out. Both groups are highly secretive as they fear the Machiavelli Gambit might turn up at any moment.

Kahuzi-Biega National Park

A UNESCO World Heritage Site in Danger the National Park is made up of dense rainforest which is not home to endangered eastern lowland gorillas and a huge diversity of other mammalian species. It has been a National Park for nearly half a century but communication with the indigenous people of the area has been suboptimal. The park’s formation displaced many and few of those remaining have any understanding of why the preservation of this global treasure is considered more important than their own survival. It is little wonder, then, that hunting for bushmeat persists. While the forest is safe from exploitation by multinational corporations, small artisanal mining and logging operations continue and are very difficult to wipe out.

Political instability and insurgents also make the area difficult to manage as a National Park. Tourism is down due to the real and present dangers in the region.

It is not an easy journey from Kinshasa to find Ismitta’s tribe. Away from the large towns the roads are bad and devoid of gas stations. For the last 60km through forest, there are no roads at all. One might almost be grateful for the clearings logging creates. There is always a chance of running into loggers, miners or militia who might turn hostile. A helicopter would be a better choice of transport.

The settlement itself is relatively prosperous and well-organized. There’s no plumbing and no electricity but the occupants are clearly used to dealing with outsiders, even those who do not speak their language. Communicating with the villagers reveals their resentment at having been pushed out of their traditional homelands with the establishment of the National Park and, while this was partly mitigated when they were chosen to be protectors of the site, too many of their people have been killed in the course of their duties as park rangers. They are full of praise and admiration for Tiombe Exotic Exports who have helped them to make their way in this strange and modern world while retaining many of their own means of governance and customs.

The Twa hunters are happy to show visitors what they do when they go out to hunt and trap bushmeat. The animals they take are mostly large rodents that appear healthy. They say they used to range further but then other people came who destroy the forests for wood and hunt animals for their tusks and teeth — not to eat at all. There are men who use the trees to hide their mining operations.

The Twa are not willing to go far up the mountain as guides. They are clearly afraid. They say there is a strangeness on the mountain, that it is guarded by Mother Primate. The bushmeat there is not fit to eat — it makes people sick. The Twa will not eat it, sell it, or use it in barter. They say a few of the diseased animals have been given to medicine men from Kinshasa who want to study it.

After a couple of days hacking through the jungle, all signs of human activity stop. It's as if some kind of border has been crossed. The trees close in, strange geometric shapes in their roots. Paths hacked with machetes close before anyone can pass through. Huge holes of swamp water suddenly block routes that were previously viable. There is howling in the distance. The rainforest is never quiet but this howling is unnatural, the sound of something in unimaginable pain. Then there's the smell. Not the usual rainforest smell of the cycle of growth, death and renewal, but the fever heat and jungle sweat. Every nerve in the explorer's body urges her to turn back, to return to the Twa village. It takes a lot of determination to persist.

Continuing up the mountain it becomes difficult to determine what is part of physical reality and what is not. Gaping holes in the mundane flash into existence through gaps in the forest canopy. The Gauntlet gradually thins, until it is almost absent and spirits of rot and decay overrun the forest. There are gateways into Twilight though ghosts of humans are few and far between. The ephemeral realm carries memories of healthy forest— a real contrast with what can be seen on the physical plane.

Meanwhile, on the physical plane are hordes of dying animals. Small ones at first, rodents, porcupine, pouched rat, and duikers (small antelopes). After a while it becomes difficult to avoid treading on them. Most are obviously infected. The stench is nauseating (causing the moderate **Sick Tilt in Chronicles of Darkness** p. 286). Prolonged skin contact with the 'parasites' in these corpses, and more rarely, in the spore-filled gas, causes the Contagion-Touched Condition (see p. XX). The stuff actually has to enter the body (through an open wound, ingestion etc.) in order to cause the Infected Condition (see p. XX).

The jungle thins towards the stop of a steep rise. There, spread out like something on a dissection table, is a huge female mountain gorilla, about three or four times the size of a normal specimen. It is clearly the source of the horrendous stench of rot, death, contagion and decay. Its belly is split open and there are cogwheels of all sizes, pistons and spindles buried in the mound of stomach contents, bowels, pus and rotting flesh. Smaller creatures, both natural and unnatural are feeding on it.

This outbreak has already attracted the notice of several factions of Sworn and the False. The Rosetta Society have sent in members of the Cape Town chapter who, to date, have managed to prevent Zero Hour from incinerating a large part of an UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Machiavelli Gambit and the Crucible Initiative are both on their way, and less likely to show restraint.

Story Hooks

- The infected bushmeat traces back to Tiombe Exotic Exports, a well set up concern in Kinshasa. Pulling strings or greasing palms results in an interview with Seimphiwe Tiombe, one of the directors, a soft-spoken and polite man. With some persuasion (or some deception and a quick look at the books) Seimphiwe reveals that all the items the company exports come from a nomadic tribe of Twa who live in the forest on the outskirts of Kahuzi-Biega National Park.
- The people living in the Congo seem to have an inborn immunity to the effects of the disease despite many being carriers of it. For some reason the disease ravages tourists and doctors seeking to treat the disease, with no clear reason given why. This is because the Contagion is attempting to prevent any doctor from finding a viable cure, and has been using its influence to arrange accidents to happen to anyone attempting to offer medical assistance.
- An international food festival at Purdue University has led to an outbreak of Ebola despite the fact it is located almost half the world away from the Congo. The students who ate at the festival are doing very poorly although several of the senior professors appear to be doing alright save for the professor in charge of immunology research for the university. She died within a day.
- A documentary crew for a major cable news channel is in the Congo doing a report on the experiences of those living there. Several of those interviewed give accounts of a bands of blood-soaked individuals setting fires to local fields and offer up recordings of it. If information about the Bloody Ones starts to become common knowledge, it has the chance of setting off brutal purges not only in the Congo but in neighboring nations as hysteria will drive communities out of control.
- The Strix have become better organized than the Kindred in the DRC, and now it is becoming too dangerous for any Kindred vampires to leave the safety of the cities. Even in Kinshasa there have been recent reports of strange sightings. Some are beginning to wonder if someone is leaking information to the Strix in order to settle old scores. The Circle of the Crone, who are known to have ‘business’ of some kind in the bush, have come under close scrutiny.

The Bloody, Brutal Laws of the Jungle

Those who visit the Congo discover their tempers run higher here, their adrenaline flows freer, and they are unable to rest easily in the jungle for fear that creatures that defy description and comprehension stalk them from afar. It is not just the thousands of miles of wild jungle where the threat of the Contagion is felt, but in the cities as well. The Sworn fight among themselves for control over the Contagion in the region. The soldiers of Zero Hour fit in among the paramilitary groups operating deep in the bush while the Rosetta Society and the Cryptocracy work with the upper classes in the cities to capitalize on resources gained from foreign investments in the Congo’s growing economy to the intersection of international politics that centers on the Congo. The effects of Contagion are everywhere even if they are not being felt by their hosts, and the threat of a global epidemic silently waits for its time to spread.

The Beasts

The Congo is home to several Broods who find the hot and chaotic nature of the region to their liking. Most are Congolese and citizens of neighboring countries who find the allure of the fear in the region more to their liking. Others are Beasts who are on the run, whether from troublesome Heroes or other creatures who do not take kindly to them feeding in their backyard. Now the Beasts are able to find no end of suffering and horror from which to feed their Hunger.

Some Beasts end up gorging themselves and go back into slumber, while others are choosier about the individuals from whom they feed.

The side effect of Ismitta's failed incarnation combined with the threat of the infection from the Contagion only adds to the tense emotions running through the DRC. Although the echoes of the civil war still linger, the scars it has left on the psyche of those in the region will linger for decades. Many villages close themselves off to outsiders, and many Congolese have begun to revive old tribal and ethnic rivalries as they struggle to survive. The government is not involved with these conflicts as they struggle to rebuild the nation and do not want to appear weak or uncertain as they try to obtain investors and international aid to help build their economy. The Primordial Dream is full of memories of those cut off from aid and who suffer the threat of disease and death by warfare, and the Broods of the region are finding no end to sating their hunger.

This has had the undesirable effect of bringing out the Insatiable in record numbers to the Congo as well. The Lamashtu thrive on the chaos of the region, and here they are free to stalk both mortal and Beasts as they please. The Congo is littered with their Dens and they view the panic caused by the mere mention of Ebola to be an inspiration in their feeding. They are careful to try to avoid Contagion whenever possible, as they see the threat that comes from the infection as something as dangerous to themselves as to their food. They have been forced to become more selective in their prey, though this just means they savor their meals a little more when they get to unleash their Hunger.

The Forsaken

The war in the jungle thunders as loudly across the Gauntlet as it does in the physical world. Here the conflict that split Pangaea sees the descendants of Father Wolf rage at each other without mercy as it does in so many other battlefields, but it is here that both sides find a wealth of weapons and proxies with which to fight their battles. It is too easy for either side to find weapons such as machine guns and explosives. It is too easy for either side to find starving tribesmen willing to do anything to appease the bestial gods roaming the jungles and the savannahs at night. But while war is simple to come by, both sides struggle to stay true to themselves in the wake of the Contagion outbreak.

The Forsaken and the Pure still need to feed, and as the infection spreads they find that many of their prey animals are infected. Although some packs are able to sustain themselves on food purchased in the cities or given to them by mortal tribes they trust, too many of their kind have fallen victim to the infection. Uratha and spirits alike are easily contaminated by the infection, and some do not realize their plight until they realize the blood staining their pelts comes not just from their enemies but dribbling down from their snouts. Both sides interrogate local spirits as to the cause of the infection but the spirits are not willing to become involved in their affairs as long as the entity they call the Great Beast roams the jungle. The few Forsaken and Pure packs trying to track down Ismitta have met failure, the occasional lone survivor returning only to die quickly from the raging torrents of blood leaving their bodies.

Hunters

The DRC may be a survivalist's dream, where mankind is pitted against nature and where to survive a hunter must prove they are tough, cunning, and resourceful. It is also a place where

many hunters find themselves killed not just by rebel soldiers or monstrous animals but by one simple thing: the intensive and prevalent ignorance of what life inside the DRC is really like.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is home to beautiful cities and villages that have access to modern equipment such as satellite radios. While there are thousands of tribes scattered across the region, some of whom use a simple level of technology, there are hundreds who know about the modern world and who utilize technology in their daily life. Those hunters from beyond the DRC who storm the region thinking they are bringing the so-called “light of civilization” with them are in for a surprise as the Congolese will not put up with any arrogant outsiders trying to involve themselves in their business.

This makes dealing with the threat of Contagion much harder. They are just as vulnerable to the infected bushmeat as anyone else, and they are just as vulnerable to the weapons and explosives prevalent in the region. Attempting to transverse the Congo can be a very dangerous proposition as a cell will have to deal with corrupt officials, non-existent roads, and the dangers of wandering the jungles of the Congo. This is only made harder by Ismitta’s rampage and the threat of the Bloody Ones, who often use infected guides to lure hunter cells deep into the jungle and then have the guides die suddenly, marooning the cells outside of civilization and stranding them in dangerous regions littered with land mines and where wild animals lurk in the shadows.

The conspiracies have taken an interest in the Congo. Task Force: Valkyrie and the Cheiron Group have taken an interest in preserving their own assets in the region. For Cheiron, they see the Congo as a wealth of untapped resources both physical and metaphysical. They have lost many expeditions to the jungle, but they are always willing to finance more expeditions to try to recover lost assets and acquire new ones.

For the Ascending Ones, they see the region as a dangerous land full of ingredients for their elixirs, but representing a much greater challenge to them than just as a place to supply themselves. The Ascending Ones view the Congo as a piece of their shared heritage across Africa. In the early days of their organization their greatest heroes and philosophers roamed the land and wrote about the great wonders they witnessed. These ancient texts are still passed down to their fellow members. The Congo has suffered greatly for the past two centuries and has weathered brutal conquerors from Europe and a dreadful and indecisive civil conflict pitting the nation against itself. Now the Ascending Ones see the Congolese as a people who need help finding out who they are, and they view the otherworldly terrors in the nation as a cancer that must be cut out.

Atypical Ebola Hemorrhagic Fever and the Bloody Ones

Ebola, as it is known throughout the world, is a viral infection whose very name carries with it grave thoughts of a horrible and messy death. Often exaggerated by film to depict a virus that will kill within minutes, the truth is that it is transmitted by contact between body fluids of the infected to a new host. What the World Health Organization is trying to keep a lid on is that a few patients are displaying symptoms of the virus with some features of a parasite infection and atypical vectors of transmission. Most researchers working on this contract the disease and perish before they can publish their results.

The AEHF, as it has been classified, is the Contagion operating along similar vectors to Ebola. Medical science is used to dealing with pathogens as living things but not with dealing with them as a sentient force. As the Contagion spreads throughout the Congo, the number of those infected

by tainted bushmeat grows daily. Not everyone who consumes bushmeat will contract the disease, but as the tainted bushmeat infiltrates the market the number of infected threatens to grow.

The Bloody Ones aid the spread of the Contagion. Each is an unwilling agent for the Contagion, barely knowing what it is the Contagion wants them to do. The few able to gain enough self-control to explain what is happening describe it as having an instinctual, guttural need to do something and the basic know-how of how to accomplish the task. A college student will suddenly gain enough knowledge to bypass a lock on the meat locker at the university while a janitor will instinctively know how to bypass a scientist's password to delete the work from her hard drive.

The side effect of the infection taking control of the infected is in its name. As the Contagion exerts more control over its hosts, they began to seep blood from their eyes, noses, ears, and other orifices. Though a rare few find their condition miraculously reverses itself after they accomplish their task, most bleed out, leaving behind diseased corpses.

A host manifesting as a Bloody One goes through a horrible change. They become intimately aware of something being wrong in their body and can feel their blood flowing through them like a hot chemical injected in their veins. Over time they notice the faint trickle of blood leaking from their eyes, nose, and ears, but by then there is little they can do. When the Contagion quickens inside the blood, the victim finds they are unable to control their own actions while the helpless sensation of feeling their life blood drip uncontrollably away from their body sets in.

Contracting this Contagion occurs via two primary sources. The first is the hardest to control, and it is how the Contagion has managed to seep into the local population. By transmitting itself through infected bushmeat, the Contagion is able to multiply across thousands of new hosts each month, and even if is cured there is still the chance of unknowing victims being re-infected. Bushmeat infected by this Contagion does not appear any different than other meats save for having a slightly raw flavor after being cooked.

The second method is through direct contact with bodily fluids from an infected host. Since the disease causes its victims to bleed uncontrollably, this is a real threat to those who are active around them. Those who come into direct contact with bodily fluids of the infected must roll Stamina + Survival to avoid contracting the **Bloody Infected Condition** (see p. XX).

Ismita, the Mother Primate

Ismita was born to a nomadic Twa tribes. Her people were hunters and bartered meat with settled Bantu tribes in exchange for grains and vegetables. Ismita resented how the Bantu treated her tribe as inferior, despite knowing the Twa were the ancestral keepers of the region. She wanted to learn; she knew about reading as, when the tribe could afford it, one of the boys would be sent to school in a big town. The girls were never sent. This struck Ismita as being unfair and, she thought, someone needed to be punished for that.

Ismita was always close to the Primordial Dream. This earned the respect of her tribe, respect that turned to fear after Ismita's Devouring. However, compared to those who dwell in cities, the people around the newly Begotten were open to her teachings and Ismita was able to build her lair faster than most.

Ismita found two things distressing; the destruction of the forest and the erosion of her people's way of life brought about, at least in part, by the measures taken to protect the forest. As trees

fell to the loggers' machinery, the hunters of her tribe would penetrate deeper and deeper into forbidden areas, their hunting threatening the species on whom they depended. What finally broke Ismitta's heart was seeing her family and people forced into the towns where they could only find subsistence wage jobs (or no work at all) and were exposed to new diseases.

Once her lair was big enough, Ismitta concluded the forest needed more protection than mortals could provide. She decided her Horror needed to become Incarnate so that, together, they could become the Mother Primate.

The process failed. Too many factors weighed against her. The government hoped to make quick profits from selling hardwood and settling farmers on cleared lands. Commercial interests damaged the forest by logging and mining the mineral riches. Rival tribes wanted to see the Twa wiped out, or at least leave the area. The evolving Myth had insufficient resources to stand her ground.

The failure of Ismitta's Incarnation resulted in a brief crack where the Primordial Dream met Infrastructure, the fabric of construction and thought piercing a hole into a darker world of nightmare. Contagion was swift to seep through. Now infected bushmeat carries a deadly disease that is not just Contagious, but intelligently so. Ismitta is the terror whose legend generates a fear of infection.

Ismitta the Begotten has Assumed the Beast Shape. Her Horror, half turned Myth, has manifested as a monstrous female eastern lowland gorilla. Four times the bulk of a normal member of that species, she lies rotting in a remote area of the forest, with Contagion spreading out around her.

Myth: Mother Primate

Family: Anakim

Hunger: Nemesis

Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 3, Resolve 3; Strength 8, Dexterity 2, Stamina 3; Presence 4, Manipulation 2, Composure 2

Skills: Animal Ken 4, Athletics 3, Brawl 4, Crafts (Pottery) 3, Empathy 3, Intimidation (Huge Size) 5, Investigation 1, Medicine 1, Survival (Jungle) 4

Merits: Allies (Twa) 1, Fleet of Foot 2, Giant 2, Indomitable 2, Ambidextrous 3

Atavisms: Cyclopean Strength, Mimir's Wisdom, Titanic Blow

Nightmares: Bugs Everywhere!, You Cannot Run, You Deserve This

Lair: 8 (Contagion)

Health: 0 (degraded from 11 due to Stage 3 Infected Condition)

Willpower: 5

Satiety: 2

Size: 8

Speed: 12

Defense: 5

Initiative: 4

Armor: 8 (from Impenetrable Skin)

Beast-Shapes: Impenetrable Skin, Legendary Size, Contagious

Joseph Pretorius aka Pascal's Theorem

Quotes:

"I have absolutely zero interest in politics—no, let me correct that, I have less than zero interest in politics."

"Pure mathematics is the only field of study that has ever interested me. Space and time, of course, are integral to that."

"Of course I speak your language. Pure mathematics transcends language."

Background: Joseph was born in Cape Town, the second son of rich accountants. He led a very sheltered life and was sent to a public school in England where he excelled at mathematics and the sciences. Truth to tell he found life in England more congenial than life in his native Cape Town and he stayed away as long as he could, gaining a first-class degree in pure mathematics from Oxford University. He stayed on there, teaching and gaining further degrees until duty called him back to Cape Town.

Soon after he graduated, Joseph had a very strange experience. Walking back by the banks of the Isis very late (and very drunk) one night, he found himself in the jungle, in the bush, something he had always hated. Voices, voices of his own vices and weaknesses called out to him, contradicting each other, making totally unreasonable demands of him. "Why don't you return to South Africa, stupid?" "Cape Town needs you." "Your family needs you." Pandemonium reigned over Joseph that night but, somehow, he groped his way back to his rooms in New College, having inscribed his name on one of the ancient walls on his way in.

It was not long before he was found by the Oxford Consilium and learned about his new way of life. He took the shadow name Pascal's Theorem to celebrate his love of the hyper dimensional geometries of Space. He was, as ever, a quick learner and soon joined the Guardians of the Veil. This, he felt, was the best way to keep his knowledge pure and to defend the innocent against the horrors of the Abyss. He swiftly gained an excellent reputation, especially for his facility with the Space Arcanum. It was when he was studying Time (under the Einsteinian impression that Space and Time are intimately linked) that he was tested for the Eleventh Question and, as ever, passed with flying colors.

He had never heard of the Contagion, but, given his potential, he showed up on the Rosetta Society's radar. Given his preference for pure theory, he took some persuading but, once he saw the damage the Contagion could do, he came around. As ever he studied hard but, much to his regret, he was told he was needed back in Cape Town.

Now he works at the university there, keeping himself as aloof from South African society and its conflicts as he possibly can. Money and the academic life are great cushions in that regard, as is his preference for hanging out with other evolved beings wherever possible. He has assembled a chapter around himself, consisting of other mages (a somewhat international cabal), sleepwalkers, a Zulu Ugallu collector (he is trying to convince her to collect evidence, with no real success to date), and a Circle of the Crone Mekhet who tends to stay in Cape Town when Pascal is leading a mission.

Pascal is currently investigating the Contagion outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He is on the verge of isolating the infected part of the God-Machine imitating a parasite or, perhaps, a strain of the Ebola virus. Once he has done that to his own satisfaction, he and his team will start to work on a cure.

Description: Pascal is 6'3" tall and slender. He has a slight stoop from too many hours spent slouched over a desk or bent over a microscope. He has dark hair, thinning on the top, a long nose (which often looks like it's about to twitch) and bright blue eyes. He looks young for a man in his early forties and he keeps himself fit by walking in the bush and playing squash regularly.

Storytelling Hints: Pascal is an academic. He is not very good at relating to people outside of that environment and has difficulty leading his Bureau because he can only lead by treating people and other creatures as his students. He will not tolerate any interference with his current investigation though he might accept assistance as long as it's clear that he will remain in charge. He is very worried that some other faction of the Sworn will destroy the evidence or prevent him from continuing his current project.

Concept: Ivory Tower academic. Member of the Rosetta Society

Virtue: Perfectionism: Pascal will take as long as it takes to get things precisely right. He will never produce sloppy work. This also means that he will not start what he cannot finish and finds reserves of energy to persist in any task until he gets the result he desires.

Vice: Intolerance: Pascal doesn't suffer fools at all. He becomes very impatient, if not irritable with anyone who does not meet his exacting standards, whether this is through lack of ability or lack of effort.

Path: Mastigos

Order: Guardian of the Veil

Legacy: Eleventh Question

Nimbus: When Pascal casts everything seems to go fractal. There is a feeling of all the numbers falling into place, and that includes the imaginary numbers. You can almost hear them click.

Attributes: Intelligence 5, Wits 3, Resolve 3; Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2; Presence 2, Manipulation 4, Composure 2

Skills: Athletics (Squash) 3, Academics (Pure Mathematics) 5, Computer 4, Intimidation (Sarcasm) 2, Investigation 4, Occult 3, Persuasion 2, Stealth 3, Subterfuge 2, Survival (Bush) 2

Merits: Order Status 3, Consilium Status 2, Library 3, Safe Place 2, Allies (Oxford University, Cape Town University) 2, Sanctum (Pocket Realm and shared Sanctum in Cape Town) 3

Arcana: Mind 4, Prime 2, Space 5, Time 4

Rotes: Acceleration, Ban, Chronos Curse, Scrying, Universal Language, Ward

Praxes: Co-location, Gain Skill, Pocket Dimension, Prophecy, Teleportation

Gnosis: 5

Willpower: 5

Wisdom: 7

Obsession: Pure Mathematics, the Contagion

Initiative: 5

Defense: 6

Speed: 10

Size: 5

Cure

Can the Contagion ever be completely cured? Maybe not, but specific outbreaks can, and have been contained. Each faction has their own take, but what will work? Controlling the sale of contaminated bushmeat will assist in containing the infected material, but this does not tackle the source. Clearing the area in which the remains of the Mother Primate is situated would also be effective, though this risks further irreparable damage to a site of unique biodiversity.

Furthermore, the contagion does not exist purely on the physical plane. Much of the problem originates in Ismitta's lair and help from the Begotten would be needed to work out how that might be cleansed. Perhaps there is a new Apex in the area, or perhaps one could be helped into place. Repair to the Gauntlet is almost certainly going to be part of any successful attempt at eradication.

The Cryptocracy

Given the scale of human conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, it is no wonder the Contagion has arisen there. Interestingly, the focus seems to be in an area full of insurgency. Our influence in designating it as a National Park back in the 1970s did not achieve the desired effect. Efforts to promote tourism (which is profitable and promotes awareness globally) have been stymied by the continuing fighting in the area.

We can and will attempt to combat the trade in bushmeat through our government and corporate contacts. We can and will publicize the dangers of consuming bushmeat through our media connections. But we believe that our best course of action here is to provide backup for other Sworn—those better equipped to deal with this kind of infection on the ground. In this case we believe that direct action is necessary.

— “Adama Bosingwa”, Maa-Kep Man in Black

The Jeremiad

The list of our sins in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is long indeed: the depths of corruption that drove humans and other beings to take the native population of this area to be sold as slaves; the equally sordid depths that subsequently saw the mineral riches of this country as something they could grab without respect for nature or the indigenous population; the reckless setting of national boundaries without regard for tribal realities existing across the Congo Basin.

All this is vileness, sin and corruption with an overlay of hypocrisy because the natives were “just savages” and, therefore, less than human. We are not always as careful as we might be in the way we treat the mortals.

The Contagion was bound to strike here as divine retribution. And our work here, just like it always is, will be to ensure that we, our fellow non-humans and, indeed the mortal population, are scourged free of sin.

— Simone Mutombo, Guru of the Lancea et Sanctum

The Rosetta Society

We are already onto this instance of the Contagion and our Cape Town chapter is on the scene. Our team is led by Pascal's Theorem, a Guardian of the Veil Warlock of the 11th Question. Pascal has set up a Pocket Dimension in which to conduct his research. With him are the rest of the mages of his cabal, a handful of trained sleepwalkers, an Ugallu and some mortal scientists who will forget anything unnatural they have seen when the operation concludes.

They are gathering samples and isolating them in the Pocket Dimension prior to transporting them to our main lab in Cape Town. We are fascinated by this infection which seems to have a highly focused origin with the capacity to spread globally. Pascal, if the truth be known, has become a bit fixated on the epidemiological mathematics of the situation, and we fear that this fascination is distracting him from the task at hand. He also seems to want to take full credit for any discoveries so his communication with the rest of the Society has been less than ideal.

In this instance, we are giving active encouragement to illegal loggers and miners in the area as we believe this will keep others away from the current 'site of interest'. We have even laid a few landmines to protect our treasured focus. We are particularly keen to complete our researches before the Machiavelli Gambit turn up. And we do have some intelligence indicating the Princes are on their way.

— Mitchell Borre, Conspiracist of the Cheiron Group

The Ship of Theseus

It is not clear how the Contagion here is acting to evolve us. Unless.... Maybe the Begotten among us have something to say? No, they think that something went wrong. That the creature who acted as a doorway to the Contagion has met a very unpleasant end to her evolution. But she should not have to die for nothing. This Contagion is out in the world and has the potential to affect and evolve ourselves and indeed mortals in ways we are only beginning to understand.

We will work to spread the distribution of the infected bushmeat in a carefully targeted manner so that the infection, and fear of the infection, will drive both our many flavored selves and mortals to new heights of invention as the struggle to survive the evolving influence of Infection. A brush with death, as everyone knows, is often a spur to personal growth and a brush with extinction what forces species to evolve.

— Koushun, Thesean of the Spring Court

Zero Hour

There is no doubt in our minds. There is a focus of the Contagion in the National Park, and it needs to be wiped out. The giant gorilla, whatever it is, must be burned, along with a wide area of rainforest around it. We understand the area is an important ecological site and under UNESCO protection etc. etc. etc. but you have to get your priorities straight. There's no point in preserving rainforest and endangered species if the Contagion gets loose and infects the globe.

We will place units at as many border crossing points as we can reach and integrate as well as we can with mundane security forces to prevent bushmeat from being exported from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Units in the rest of the world will be on the alert for any attempts to import the Contagious material.

We are trying to get a unit into the infected area but, to date, our efforts have been stymied by the impressive defenses the Rosetta Society has put in place.

— Alex Baptiste, Operative and Saboteur

The Crucible Initiative

The hemorrhagic fevers endemic to this part of the world have proven resistant to any kind of cure. Containment is not good enough. We need to crack down on the bushmeat trade, taking infected individuals into quarantine for further study. We would like samples of the Mother Primate though, after some debate, we have agreed that the bulk of it needs to be burned with extreme prejudice.

We note that our approach here is very close to that of the hawks. We are relying on those idiots to break through the barriers raised by the conspiracists. Failing that, we know where their Cape Town laboratory is located so we can get the material and information later. But you can't leave these things to the Sworn.

Our current plan is to napalm a wide area of the National Park from one of our helicopters. There may be some speculation in the media about who is providing the insurgents with helicopters, but that will not be difficult to deflect. Once the source of the infection is eradicated we can clean up any other signs of Contagion.

— The General, Angel and Fire-Bearer

The Machiavelli Gambit

We are fascinated by the way this manifestation of the Contagion selectively infects people who are not native to the area in which it originated. We have identified many of those who have consumed infected bushmeat and not fallen victim. We have arranged to have them studied by medical faculties in the hope of finding some means of inoculating ourselves against the adverse effects. We find the jungle too dangerous for direct intervention but we have a large quantity of infected bushmeat in storage facilities under our control. We hope to isolate the most virulent aspect of this parasite or virus (it seems to be somewhere between the two) and get it into a format that will be readily consumed by our enemies.

Going forward, we hope to motivate more of the Begotten to attempt to incarnate. If we can arrange for those attempts to fail, then we may encourage new and more virulent instances of the Contagion to enter the world, entirely under our control.

— Claudette Lefevre, Prince of the Seers of the Throne

Nagflar's Army

The DRC is not really our kind of place. The Contagion is doing its work here and it is doing it well. Our only concern is to ensure that none of the Sworn (or False) succeed in wiping it out or mitigating its effects on the general population. We can work with the Congolese to encourage ecstatic cults to worship the Mother Primate (corrupt though we know her to be) and take active

steps to protect her, her forest and the Contagion that she spreads. We hardly need to lift a finger to encourage the consumption of bushmeat. People will eat protein as and when they find it, particularly in a country where such a large portion of the population lives below the poverty line. We do what we can to glamorize the 'traditional diet' both within the Congo basin and internationally and we can use our various lines of supply to ensure that the material gets through any barriers that are put in place.

— The Waste, Antediluvian of the Bale Hounds

Rumors in the DRC

- Children in Bakavu are refusing to go to school because they are afraid of the giant mother gorilla hitting them with her fists. Giant prints belonging to an ape are found in playgrounds and in the dirt outside of schools.
- A group of men from a tribe deep in the Congo attacked a market the other day. This tribe, the Rw'fwongi, are notoriously peaceful to the point of pacifism, but they attacked food carts and grocery markets, and set fire to a few before their arrest.
- A riot in the streets of Lubumbashi seemed to have been more violent than the media made it appear. Despite the fact that protesters dispersed peacefully before government troops, several protesters were discovered miles away with no memory of how they got there, and how they ended up but covered in blood.
- A supposed "Hero" known as the Web Weaver has been stalking these jungles recently, shaking up the Begotten and teasing the Contagious. Rumor has it, he wants to experience infection to see if it makes him an even more effective killer. Poisons and toxins are his bag, so why not add disease to the mix?
- A research lab burned down in the center of the Congo. Rumor has it that it was fronted by some group, Cheiron something or other, and that it was experimenting on local animals. Videos have gone viral of an enormous ape tearing itself free of the lab, and of it performing great feats of strength such as throwing forklifts at fleeing scientists. The creature's destruction seems more deliberate than random in the videos, and on social media the creature has already begun to trend as "Pissed Off Gorilla Gets Even."
- A cabal of mages and their motley crew of associates flew into Kinshasa from Cape Town intent on discovering the source of the Contagion. They are operating openly and have driven out several villages from the area and left several blood-soaked corpses in their wake. Their methods are effective at dealing with the Contagion, but they are cold hearted and hurting innocent people as much as they are treating the Contagion.

Milton Keynes: Contagion of Flux

Perhaps the Ci-ty dreamed of an-other, en-emy city, float-ing across the sea to invade the es-tuary . . . or of waves of darkness . . . waves of fire . . . Perhaps of being swallowed again, by the immense, the si-lent Mother Con-tinent? It's none of my business, city dreams. . . But what if the Ci-ty was a growing neo-plasm, across the centuries, always chang-ing to meet exactly the chang-ing shape of its very worst, se-cret fears?

— Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*

You came here by accident, fleeing London late one night with your life condensed into a few bags scattered on the back seat of your car. You followed the M1 north as you skirted the outer boroughs, picking up speed in the thinning twilight traffic. Torn between a need to rest and a need to flee, you disregarded the first few service stops and drove on until, cresting a rise, you saw the valley dip down before you, and you were greeted by a sea of stars, a city of wisps enticing you onward.

The road ahead descends into woodland; the city vanishes. On a tree, carved in familiar sigils, you see the message: *Monsters Follow, Sanctuary Ahead*.

You drive faster, but the dense tree line of the motorway hides the city from sight. The tallest buildings sit low in the valley, appearing distant until, as you circle another roundabout at one of the many indistinct intersections, your perspective shifts. Rows of glass and corrugated steel buildings slide into place. The wisps vanish and the city embraces you.

Stepping out of your car into the morning air, you find yourself in an artificial suburbia, formed from straight lines and swift-coursing traffic. Exploring the map on your phone, you assume a satellite above you has glitched, repeating the same square image over and over again. Most cities spread out like rings on a tree, but there is no such organic sprawl here. Before you spreads a uniform grid, a patchwork quilt of housing and retail blocks — known locally as estates — partitioned by a network of crisscrossed roads, stitched together by bridges and underpasses.

You walk these streets and you see something familiar in the facade. The newness of each building, the clear artifice in the early draft, a city bereft of rough edges. The postcards revel in the mummery of concrete cows and hidden mansions. Even the rumors you hear of escaped lunatics in the woods and of feral dogs stalking the council estates, feel artificial, older stories repurposed into a new town folklore to create an illusion of history. The Uncanny Valley is in that moment of disquiet when the Machine narrowly fails to pass as human. The sensation is all around you.

You smile, picking at the frayed cables in your fingers that no one else can see. It is a town on a pilgrimage to becoming a city, insisting on its own integrity like a computer trying to pass the Turing test. You understand that longing. For now, you are home.

Theme and Mood

Milton Keynes is a large town defined by its artificial nature and its urgent need to grow. It is a city in all but name, doubling in population every decade with quadratic certainty.

It is a melting pot barely formed, made up of visitors and the children of visitors. It is a city in flux. The skyline is always changing as buildings, some less than a decade old, are torn down and rebuilt. The city and its people are in a constant state of revision. In time, every resident who arrives here has the idiosyncrasies of their heritage worn away by the globalizing influence of television. The rough edges of their accents vanish, supplanted by a form of Estuary English blended with West Coast American and Australian. Thanks to dialect levelling, they speak a language all their own, one that linguists posit is the forerunner to a new national standard.

Theme: Loss of Identity

Milton Keynes and its residents have an incomplete self-image. There is an ideal, an abstract image of a thriving metropolis the city strives to become, a dynamic and trendsetting nation that its people are compelled to emulate. Its monsters, too, are incomplete, deprived of the causes that usually define them. The vampires are clanless, bereft of the Cacophony; the Created have forgotten their Pilgrimage; the demons suffer a mundane Hell; and the werewolves are a hollow imitation of their true selves.

Visitors risk having their sense of self eroded in this place. The city desires uniformity of function, and it grinds everyone down to become a perfect cog in its greater machine. These cogs serve in construction, updating the shell of the city, and they serve in call centers and server farms, collating and expressing opaque data sets beyond the comprehension of a human brain. All serve the city's greater consciousness, one co-opting the facilities and methodology of the God-Machine itself.

Mood: Disquiet

Rivalry and gossip are commonplace. Speak with anyone for more than a few minutes and you'll hear their stories of the drug-dealer who was stabbed, of the garden full of corpses, of the army of feral dogs racing under bridges and chasing down stray travelers at night. Everyone has heard these stories, but the events always take place a little distance away, down the road or two estates over. The dark truth is always present, but never on the speaker's doorstep. It's someone else's problem, someone else's fault.

This perpetual unease affects the supernatural population. Many vampires are young and somehow bereft of sires to teach them the correct etiquette. Demons are still and complacent. All manner of monsters circle each other, unaware of the ties of enmity and kinship that would bind them in the larger world. The Prometheans here are happier than they have ever been, happy enough to lay down their burdens and end their journeys. And that, too, is unnatural.

People move home and vanish constantly. Those who do well find themselves drawn to the northern estates or to the periphery, while those who do poorly find themselves dragged to the poorer estates south of the hospital. Change is constant. People are used to seeing their neighbors disappear from the city, either to follow their rising career or to flee the bailiffs. Against the richest and the poorest, murder is a simple matter, as long as you can hide the body. The cracks in the city, always ready to consume, are far more present, and far hungrier, than anyone realizes.

What Has Come Before

Milton Keynes is young in the eyes of history. Publicly, it was conceived in the 1960's as one of many New Towns, purpose-built to lure in the overspill population of London. Constructed at the intersection of a number of artificial ley-lines (the Grand Union Canal, the M1 Motorway, and the old Roman road of Watling Street), it has swelled in size, a mechanized outbreak of corrugated steel and glass facade covering and sublimating the older towns within it.

Pulling away that facade reveals a far messier story.

Before the First World War, another settlement lost to memory existed here, hidden in the forest. It was a grand social experiment of the Cryptocracy, led by an old Ventrue Acolyte known as Henry Greene. Greene's goal was to create a template for governance able to withstand any hardship, ranging from social unrest to supernatural incursions. He divided the regions and granted territory to a host of creatures, each oblivious to the presence of the other. He watched as changelings and Kindred drew borders, as Uratha and Begotten stalked the surrounding wilds, and as mages and demons set up outposts monitoring the same occult phenomena. As the groups met and came into conflict, he reported all his findings to his superiors among the Sworn, eager to find the correct combination of forces that would keep the region in balance.

The project's failure was inevitable, but came from an unexpected source: in 1932, a host of Pure werewolves found the region, seeing it as a perfect hunting ground away from prying eyes. Their attack was swift and bloody. The few werewolves in the city who were familiar with the threat were too disconnected from the politics of the region to organize a strong defense. One by one, the districts fell, and their inhabitants, disorganized, sent word to Greene for aid.

Watching from afar, Greene shook his head, putting plans into motion to end the experiment. A nighttime RAF bombing run, reliant on directions from ground control, flew in circles along the eastern coast of England before circling back to Buckinghamshire and dropping a sizeable payload on the region. Greene had the event covered up; even the pilots were unaware that they were bombing a populated town during the run. Their explosives laced with silver shrapnel, which made short work of the Pure packs and left the region in burning ruins. Greene and his allies sent in logging companies and landscapers to tear the smoking remnants of the settlement down, and in a few years, they replaced it with miles of farmland and outlying villages, none of whom were the wiser as to what had transpired there.

The Cryptocracy relinquished their hold on the region and the Rosetta Society moved in quickly to take up their leavings. They used intermediaries to buy up land in the region to house their research when London became a military target at the onset of the Second World War. The few surviving supernatural entities in the region went into hiding or fled for safer ground, and the Night of Silver became little more than a story whispered around a few small village pubs. Thirty years later, when the region was reviewed as a potential site for a new town, the surveyors could only wonder why the area hadn't been selected many years before.

Once the initial infrastructure was set up, the town grew at a staggering rate, doubling in population every decade. From the start, the guiding hands of angels were in place, unwitting pawns creating infrastructure and recruiting servants for the Contagion. In

modern times, Milton Keynes has developed a reputation as a haven for entities that wish to avoid attention, as the transitory nature of the city seems to mask visitors. The Created fare well here, with clear boundaries for travel that help them manage the curses of their Azoth, all amid a city that is strangely resistant to the effects of Wasteland. This influx of Prometheans has created an odd power dynamic, making them the second-largest supernatural group in the region, and the most spread out. The demons occupy the center of the city and hold the greatest sway there, strangely unhindered by the angels toiling nearby. A few Kindred are present, favoring the sturdier dwellings in the old village districts, though rumors spread about packs of clanless vampires calling themselves “Belial’s Brood” congregating around the shopping center. They each, to varying degrees, limit their contact with the feral children loitering in the prefabricated tin can estates, and everyone knows to avoid the Hooded Man lurking in Bow Brickhill woods south of Bletchley.

Where We Are

After the Night of Silver but before the start of World War II, Bletchley Park was purchased as a site to develop and implement code-breaking technology. The site itself was a folly, an amalgamation of architectural styles from different eras patched together for decorative purpose. At the height of the war, its grounds housed more than twenty additional assorted huts and blocks that housed some of the finest mathematical minds of the era as they worked to decipher the communications network of the Axis powers. Over this time, a series of specialized computers known as the Colossus series were built and shipped to the site.

Unknown to the teams working there, a Destroyer angel designated as Zaphiel inhabited the site of Bletchley Park as a Cover. With ready access to the most classified of research material, it spent years coordinating military assaults, feeding information to its allies among the Crucible Initiative, and on many occasions amending messages in order to redirect mortal military forces to target outbreaks of Contagion and enemies of the God-Machine. Seeing an opportunity to serve even further, Zaphiel extended its reach, adding the growing arsenal of computers to its form. It even planted seeds of inspiration in the minds of the cryptographers based within it. Zaphiel encouraged meetings and opened doors (both figuratively and literally), allowing like-minded individuals to advance their ideas for even greater feats of computational engineering. Zaphiel dared to feel a sense of satisfaction as it watched the likes of Alan Turing pass through its doors and benefit from its guidance.

Years passed. The Second World War ended, but the command to return to the God-Machine never reached Zaphiel. It did not doubt, did not Fall. It presumed, perhaps correctly, that the God-Machine was pleased with its innovation, perhaps even intended it all along, and left it to reside within Bletchley Park in continued service. The mansion fell into disuse, and one by one the huts and blocks on the estate’s grounds were disassembled and shipped away. The colossi, too, were taken and dismantled, with even their blueprints destroyed in order to preserve the building’s secrets. Publicly, only two of the twelve machines remained. In truth, the first Colossus, the lone Mark 1 prototype, was spirited away by Miriam Ficher, an Unfleshed of the Rosetta Society who infiltrated the site while serving in the Women’s Royal Navy. She grew, in her own way, to love the

machine, and wished to see it preserved or, even better, repurposed. She even forgave her beloved computer when, now removed from the mansion, it became unwilling to work as intended.

Her opportunity came several years later, when her colleagues in the Rosetta Society tasked her with unraveling the mystery of an immense stone head discovered in a vault of recovered art in Poland. The head was the size of a stately carriage and adorned with markings of Olmec origin, but with no clear message contained in the characters. When Ficher stood before the stone head, she heard it whisper a string of words in a chain of languages both familiar and alien. It spoke of transformation; it spoke of completion. Ficher took the project on eagerly and spent a decade trying and failing to glean any further knowledge from the sundered giant. She oscillated between bouts of mania and despair with each flash of failed inspiration, her steady scientific process giving way to increasingly esoteric and reckless experiments. When she pushed her colleagues away, they were almost relieved to be rid of her and her obsession.

It was then, at her lowest point that Ficher made an intuitive leap. Under cover of night, she moved the stone head to her old office in the now-disused grounds of Bletchley Park. There, under Zaphiel's impassive gaze, she rebuilt the Colossus computer into a body for the head and called upon the Azoth within her to awaken it, certain that a Promethean built from such a device could aid her in deciphering the language of the gods.

What happened next was beyond Ficher's every expectation. Whether due to the interference of the stone head or the interaction of Azoth within the confines of Zaphiel's body, Ficher triggered a Firestorm. It tore the mansion apart and rebuilt it overnight. When the storm ended, Zaphiel was gone, and Miriam Ficher gazed upon her child, the Contagious Promethean known as Colossus. Born from ancient stone and new technology, Colossus became a part of the mansion itself, a gigantic, organic face fused into the stone masonry of a living Promethean building. Its first words were a cry of triumphant agony, rung out in frequencies beyond human hearing. A trio of angels heard its call and flew to its aid. As they gathered before it, they knelt in reverent prayer. The last Colossus saw of its mother was of her screaming, hand outstretched, as the angels dragged her away.

Cause

In the modern day, Milton Keynes is a growing, breathing entity. Marked by the energies of Flux, it is constantly being redesigned and rebuilt, its skyline changing radically from year to year. Colossus has had time to overcome the limits of its architecture, and with the aid of its servitor angels, it has created for itself a body made up of most of the city itself. The angels present here serve Colossus as if it were the God-Machine, seemingly unable to distinguish it from their creator. They coordinate the development of Infrastructure within the region, turning the city-sized hole left by the Night of Silver back into a new city of borders, tying each district to the mansion and to the ever-growing, inhuman body of Colossus. While the true agents of the God-Machine seek to lock the entire region down and deny entry, they find their hands tied on any further action. Any angel entering the city receives new orders from Colossus and acknowledges them instantly. The affected angels cannot conceive of a being that speaks with the voice

of the God-Machine that is somehow set apart from it, and so their only strategy against it is to avoid it altogether.

Lacking opposition, Colossus thrives, though its goals are unclear. It expands over the city, as well as under. If one were to delve below the gas pipes and electrical cables linking the city, one would find pistons firing, irregular gears grinding, and rubber tubing pulsing in a peristaltic rhythm. Colossus welcomes visitors of all variety, and employs an array of techniques, from subliminal messages hidden on billboards to the careful manipulation of supernatural lures (such as the Touchstones of the Kindred), to increase its inhuman population. It erodes its visitors, taking away their accents, their culture, all ties connecting them to the outside world, and it keeps them occupied with modern luxuries until they have no reason to leave the city. It especially hungers for Promethean occupants, and can somehow dampening the influence of their Disquiet and Wasteland effects in order to fuel its own. Once the conditioning is complete, Colossus is free to allocate its living tools anywhere it sees fit, generating corporate roles and business properties to create the optimal conditions for its personal development. For supernatural entities it is a slow process that takes years or sometimes even decades to complete, but a new generation of monsters, all detached from such petty notions as their Descent or Pilgrimage, is growing.

In the rare instances an enemy appears for whom a subtle approach is impractical, Colossus triggers a highly localized Firestorm, such as an electrical fire striking a nearby building or car, in order to trap its prey in the burning wreckage. Sometimes, amidst this, the charred glass and metal will twist and reform itself into a monolithic, humanoid shape, and the temporary body of Colossus will take direct action. When all is said and done, the angels act quickly. Reports of fire and vandalism filter across the city and missing persons are rarely reported, assumed to be petty criminals fleeing justice. The angels bring Colossus its victim.

If it cannot be made to serve, it is mined for information. Whatever remains becomes experimental fodder in the warrens underneath the University Hospital, its flesh becoming part of some unknown and new design. Within days, the scorched site of the firestorm has been cleared and is well on the way to being replaced. The goal of Colossus seems to be to create a true body for itself. However, it has a poor understanding of its own form. It moves resources, sends messages, and seems unable to distinguish the city and its people from its own flesh. Colossus may be trying to turn Milton Keynes into a massive, moving form, or may be harvesting its inhabitants for parts to build a smaller, humanoid body. It may, by extension, be trying to express the message of the Olmec heads, but like Plato watching shadows on the wall of the cave, it perceives only the shape of the message rather than the message itself.

Suspicion festers within the city. Older Kindred, having spent years on the outskirts laying out their feeding grounds based on the clear boundaries of the estates, have become sensitive to the many small changes that affect their domains despite the lack of Sworn among their numbers. They have noticed a rise in exsanguinated corpses and a surge in graveyard vandalism, indicating that more of their kind are on the prowl. Letitia Grant, an Acolyte of the Crone who havens in the old coaching town of Newport Pagnell, pushes at the unseen boundaries of the city constantly with her mastery of Animalism and

the magic of Cruac. A blood kinsman to Henry Greene, her discoveries (or death at the hands of Colossus) would draw the attention of the Cryptocracy back to the region.

The Unchained residing in the city don't know what to make of it. The angels they have observed here have no interest in them, but any demon leaving the region finds itself the target of a fierce manhunt by the God-Machine's agents. This has divided the demons into two camps, with the Tempters and the Integrators treating the city like a paradise, free of the hardships of the Descent, while the Inquisitors and Saboteurs view their new home as a prison. Both factions circle each other in their traditional bouts of espionage, and both have begun to be courted by angels. The servants of Colossus reach out to the Paradise faction, welcoming them into the fold while the servants of the God-Machine outside of the city (including Sworn colleagues of Zaphiel's) take increasingly desperate steps to acquire assets at Ground Zero, risking their own Fall in the process.

The Created have perhaps the most to gain, and certainly the most to lose. From the first moment that a Promethean draws Pyros from the city, they find their curses of Disquiet and Wasteland diminished as Colossus subverts their connection to the Divine Fire to fuel its growing form. They are unwitting batteries, the mitochondria within the cell of each estate. Whatever final form Colossus is striving towards, it needs the uncorrupted Azoth of the uncreated to help fuel its transition. Often, they pay this tax without knowing, the primal energies of their Divine Fire leached in small increments as it dampens their Promethean curse. Sometimes, however, the hunger of Colossus is not so easily sated. When the need arises, it feasts readily on its own kin, sending angels on the hunt for Promethean meat. Communication on these disappearances has been slow to leave the city, but the discrepancies between the Contagious cover-up and the awful truth are steadily growing.

A final faction, unaware of its own existence, lurks in the poorer and older districts. Kin of the Uratha, descendants of the werewolves who survived the Night of Silver, reside throughout the southern half of the city. Their true selves suppressed by Greene's old wards and the silver polluting the soil and the water to this day, they prowl their homes, unaware of the transformations ravaging their bodies when the moon shines fiercest.

What the Colossus Wants

The goals of Colossus have been kept intentionally vague in this section. As a Contagion emulating the inscrutable nature of the God-Machine, one corrupted by Flux and Contagion, Colossus itself can also be inscrutable. If a clearer agenda is preferred, consider the following possibilities:

- Colossus is attempting to turn the city into a titanic, moving body. It erects buildings of irregular curvature which will one day form its fingers, hands and feet. Once done, the city will rise to consume the world.
- Still haunted by Azothic memory, Colossus desires what all Created want, the New Dawn. Such a feat may be impossible for it, but it can't help itself. It torments and experiments with humanity as a part of its Pilgrimage. It gathers the finest body parts from demons, vampires, and Prometheans in order to construct a humanoid form for itself which can explore and infect the world.

- Colossus is calling to its true kin, other Contagious around the world. It has yet to refine its criteria and message, but the creatures it hopes to welcome are those from other Contagious sites. What it would do with such residents, or what they would do with access to a Contagious city, could develop into a global threat for the Sworn and the Fallen.

Symptom

The Infrastructure of Milton Keynes has been corrupted, cut off from the God-Machine by the Azoth of Colossus. The Facilities of Colossus, like those of the God-Machine, are nested around the city, each serving a function.

Bletchley Park

The heart of the Contagion, or rather its head, resides underneath the old folly of Bletchley Park, close to Bletchley train station and hidden on all sides by a high hedgerow wall. The mansion opened to the public as a war museum in 1993, but the face of Colossus remains hidden, locked behind a series of doors that only lead to its interstitial room if the correct actions are taken first. To reach Colossus, one must trek a circuitous path through the building, lighting a birthday candle in the dining room, typing a palindrome into a prop typewriter in the study, and completing an ever-increasing series of nonsense tasks until, returning to the main hall, a new red door, labelled Hut Zero, appears on the central staircase.

The first three angels to answer the call of Colossus spend half of their time here, sequestered away in an improvised war room. Within, they plot construction and demolition projects over a map of the city as if engaging in a military operation. They have served for close to half a century apiece, and each of them has, at the orders of Colossus, expanded beyond their remit in their ongoing service. They have developed public covers to support this, known as Doctor Blake, Ms. Dante, and Miss Milton.

Miss Milton, the Guardian of the trio, acts as custodian and protector for the head of Colossus. She appears as a tall, heavy-set woman who feigns blindness by walking with a folding red and white cane and being led by a black Labrador.

Milton Keynes University Hospital

Two miles south of the Centre, the hospital sits on the border of several of the city's tin can estates. Built as a series of overlapping cubicle and oblong-shaped buildings, from a distance it appears to be a simple yellow graphic, a pixelated image of unclear intent.

As a general hospital for a rapidly growing population, the University Hospital finds itself constantly at capacity, with temporary satellite facilities even built in the car park and adjoining fields to meet changes in demand.

Doctor Blake, a psychopomp, appears to be a mixed-race man with bright white hair. He monitors the city's public services, maintaining the "body of God" via its roads, schools, and hospitals. He sits on the Hospital Trust, establishing ties with the University of Buckingham. He uses this access to develop a cluster of research centers, nested deep in the circuitous paths of the hospital grounds. Here, promising students analyze unusual body tissues and experimental prosthetics, which are really the dismembered corpses of

Prometheans claimed by Colossus. He has, when the need arose, claimed to be a member of the Created himself, relying on his Numina and growing knowledge of Created physiology to maintain the charade. On his long walks, he leaves helpful messages for the Prometheans, rambles carved into trees or painted on underpass walls as signs of camaraderie.

The Centre: MK

For a time the largest shopping center in Britain, the Centre:MK's sleek glass front dominates the city's low landscape. Arranged along two parallel sunlit arcades and planted with sub-tropical and temperate trees, during the daytime it is an illusion of summer. It is surrounded by a growing entertainment district and office complexes cycling constantly through new enterprises and occupants. The most visually dominant building here is the XScape, a curved beetle shell housing ski slopes, cinemas, and a faux-American drinking district, complete with an indoor plaza designed to mimic the bars and night sky of Louisiana.

Ms. Dante, a herald, is a constant visitor to this region of the city. Dante favors the form of a slim, androgynous woman with a short, tightly brushed side-parting and an affection for pinstripe suits. She encourages growth through tourism and strives to create landmarks of international merit. Her efforts are slanted by her original role as a business negotiator. Many of her projects become shopping centers, business districts, and sponsored works inspired by children's shows, but her aptitude is increasing the longer she stays in her new role. The eternally icy realm of the ski-slope in the XScape is a particular favorite of hers. She has established ties with the growing revenant population of the city and works to find them nighttime work in the city's commercial hub. Claiming to be an established Kindred herself, Dante has built a false sense of community among the half-vampires and grave-born kindred who cross her path, inspired by her previous interactions with Belial's Brood. The misfits honor the Brood's lost kingdom of Dis with several false rites and visceral ceremonies introduced by Dante to praise an entity she calls The Giant and to create a predictable pattern of behavior. When their numbers grow too large or when outside attention grows close to Colossus, Dante leads her flock into her enemies' crosshairs to slay her foes and die as a distraction. The bloody grounds of the battle inevitably lead to a new rise in revenants and grave-born a few months later, a short cycle of memory that suits Dante perfectly.

The Willen District

One of the oldest villages to be successfully assimilated by Colossus, the Willen district holds a number of Facilities for the false God-Machine nested around the old village architecture. The Gulliver's Land theme park is a production center creating the mechanical arteries and nerve clusters connecting the Contagious Promethean to the city districts. This artifice is hidden in plain sight among the grinding gears and animatronic beasts of the fairground. A member of the Sworn entering the wrong building or viewing the park's renovations at night will see the park for what it is, a roiling mass of mechanical organs constructed under the watchful eye of animatronic giants. A Galvanized Promethean tends it (see the Galvanized Condition below), a Galateid named Crystal who appears as a small, young woman. She acts flighty and carefree, but she is

well aware of her infected nature and defends it (and the Infrastructure in the theme park) fiercely, seeing it as a cure for her Azothic curse.

The completed fragments of Colossus are stored nearby, in Willen Lake. To the public, it appears to be a purpose-built balancing lake, collecting the storm water of the city and preventing lowland flooding, the ever-changing water levels acting as an effective screen for the bundles of writhing steel fibers stored in its depths.

The Church of Christ the Cornerstone

One of the most iconic buildings in the commercial district, The Church of Christ the Cornerstone is a clean, domed house of worship with a cross bearing four sets of arms, able to face in all cardinal directions at once. From above, it looks like a cog or an eight-pointed star. Once a month, a coven of mortals gathers here, enacting rites and prayers to the God-Machine. These humans, rendered pliable by Colossus through its Numina and Disquiet, act by rote, with no real knowledge of the Contagious threat. It is an effective decoy Facility. Indeed, it has been attacked by hunters on four different occasions in their ill-informed efforts to combat the supernatural menace in the city. Sometimes the hunters perish, but when they think they accomplish something, they leave satisfied, believing themselves to have slain the monsters in charge.

Story Hooks

- Rage-induced outbursts are on the rise in the tin can estates, as the long-term silver poisoning in the soil and the water wanes. Two teenagers, Keri Porter and Danielle Widcombe, have been placed into long-term psychiatric care at Chadwick Lodge, west of the University Hospital, after multiple violent bouts of manic behavior. The possibility of many Uratha-to-be committing a mass slaughter in the throes of a simultaneous First Change is becoming dangerously likely.
- Word spreads of a Saboteur in the city, a Destroyer using the pseudonym Max Collateral, who has abandoned virtually all pretense of a Cover and commits increasingly overt acts of vandalism on gas and electrical lines across the city. He is triggering fires and explosions at a rate which even Colossus's constant renovations can't mask. The angels, lacking authority to act against the demon, are masking the incidents as scheduled demolitions. Meanwhile, they snatch up eyewitnesses for reconditioning at a corporate server farm, eradicating their minds and turning them into pliable worker drones. If they cannot stop or redirect Max, he will soon be the target of an estate-eradicating Firestorm triggered by Colossus, leading to the death or redeployment of thousands.
- Local news shows a crypt being uncovered underneath the old church in Simpson. It holds a treasure trove of old manuscripts. Amid the books lies the dried corpse of Lilian Adembwe wrapped in rolls of parchment. Adembwe, a Jeremiad and a Mekhet of the Lancea et Sanctum, has been long lost to torpor. She hid in this crypt when the Pure attacked in the days leading up to the Night of Silver. Both her own memories and the account written on the parchment that she wears are incomplete, but they tell the story of Henry Greene, the Cryptocracy's grand experiment, and its subsequent failure. Lilian is a potentially high-profile target, wanted dead or controlled by both the Cryptocracy and the agents of Colossus alike.

- Legend tells of a Hooded Man stalking the woods of Bow Brickhill, a figure who murders joyriders with an axe and makes cairns out of their bloody bones. Those investigating the matter hear wailing on the night air and occasionally glimpse a loping, wretched figure screaming to the heavens demanding the return of its baby. The Hooded Man is no man at all; it is Miriam Ficher, the mother of Colossus, cast to the outskirts of the city by the angels and promptly ignored. Warped by some profane variant of the New Dawn, she has become something else and forgotten much. Nevertheless, locked in her wounded mind lies much of the truth of the city. The challenge lies in coaxing this knowledge out of her without making an enemy of Ficher in the process.
- A company called Helios Ltd has set up a clean energy initiative on the western outskirts of the city. They propose to create a second business hub, one running entirely on batteries fueled by solar energy. The entire Facility is a front created by true servants of the God-Machine, attempting to create a safe region in the city from which to launch a counter-offensive against Colossus which is disconnected from its Infrastructure. They are hampered by their inability to use angels directly on the project, and so they rely upon mortal operatives who are unaware of the magnitude of their actions.
- Rumors persist of a hidden undercity, of tunnels accessible from concealed hatches leading to military command bunkers for use in wartime. These rumors are true, but due to their isolated nature and infrequent use, they have yet to be accessed by Colossus. With the opening of a new military training college in the city, Colossus may finally have the link it needs to compete for access to the United Kingdom's wealth of military resources, including troop deployment, officer training, and long-range missiles.
- A new Promethean has appeared in the city, a hairless, stocky figure calling itself M-K. It is nervous and evasive, but seems to possess supernatural persuasive abilities which it is unaware of, as well as exceptional durability and strength it is terrified of using. It is clumsy and unfamiliar with the world, liable to first be encountered wandering into traffic or falling into water without knowing how to swim. Since it is so new in the world, it is likely to imprint onto any sympathetic parties as potential surrogate parents. It is a creation of Colossus which was assembled by Dr. Blake, who has spent years gathering body parts from isolated demons and Prometheans who have perished in the city. It may be an escaped prototype, the first in a line of Azothic Angels created as shock troops, or it may be turned into an agent to infiltrate an enemy group and earn its trust.
- A Sublimatus known as Pluto, a self-styled Pandoran noble with ties to the Machiavelli Gambit, approaches the players with a disconcerting offer. It has tracked a swarm of Pandorans, numbered in the dozens, to the city. They converged on the National Bowl amphitheater. A pit of teeth made of gnashing, grinding gears opened underneath them, consuming them. Pluto suspects the pit is related to Contagion, but is not sure. An even larger herd of Pandorans is en route, and Pluto is willing to lure the creatures out of the city (adding them to its own forces, of course). However, it requires a source of Azoth to act as bait.
- A *qashmal* manifests regularly at the center of one of the city's many crossroads. Appearing as a sneering old man called Mr. Fiddle, the lesser Lilithim takes great pleasure in tormenting any Prometheans it encounters suffering from the **Galvanized Condition**. Holding a shot glass filled with a burning liquid, it claims to be

the devil who bought a soul for a sip of whisky and warns that as long as the drink is good, the deal is done.

Although it antagonizes the Created, it is trying to indirectly warn them about the danger of the Contagion in the city. The burning glass is meant as a clue to the Condition's cure – burning away the infected Pyros by expending all of it in creating a Firestorm.

What She Has Become

When Miriam Ficher brought the Colossus to life, she was greeted by the New Dawn, or something which she mistook for it. It overwhelmed her, making her human but breaking her mind and spirit in the process. The sight of her new offspring and the callous way in which she was discarded only added to her pain.

Miriam became an adult human, but has persisted in her adult life for half a century. A range of options are present here — while a Promethean can only become a human in the Chronicles of Darkness, a human who is desperate enough to cling to supernatural life can become a great many things indeed. If you want to link Miriam to other parts of your campaign, consider the following:

- Ficher is instrumental to the God-Machine and its desire to eradicate Colossus. At the moment of New Dawn, the God-Machine interceded, stripping away her soul. Ficher is in fact a Cover attached to the fourth angel present at the birth of Colossus — the Destroyer Zaphiel.
- Her body ravaged, her soul consumed by Flux, Ficher was an empty vessel, and something else stepped in. Ficher is now a Strix-borne vampire or a Beast, lost to hunger in her decades alone in the woods.
- As a member of the Rosetta Society, the world had such myriad of sights to show Ficher. Soon after the New Dawn, she saw them as she was always meant to. She Awakened as a mage but is unstable and dangerously untrained, relying on isolation to avoid Paradox.
- She did not become anything at all. She is a broken woman, pining for her child and love, leading a lonely and murderous life into old age. Life can be needlessly cruel. Why should a life corrupted by the Contagion be any kinder?

Standing in the Shadow of the Giant

Sublimation of Self is the curse Colossus and its metropolitan form represents. The true history of the region was wiped away by betrayal and fire; now, the only appearance of truth which the denizens of the city have is the one presented by Colossus. As a Promethean, Colossus has a unique Wasteland effect which erodes old architecture and makes it difficult for its inhabitants to remember details about their lives outside of the city (see the Avatar of Colossus below).

For the Uratha, the loss of their heritage and purpose was seeded in the end days of the first iteration of the city. The territorial wards left by Henry Greene have cut off the wolf-

kin in the region off from their true purpose. The enchanted silver in the earth and water, at concentrations high enough to be toxic for their kind, have weakened their flesh. The werewolves-to-be who are born here lose their link to the moon and cannot consciously undergo the First Change. In the presence of a full moon, they feel compelled to walk the streets at night screaming at the sky, unaware of the primal compulsion welling within them. A very small number of these diminished souls find themselves drawn to the trees lining their estate and, shedding their clothes in private, take the form of small, urban beasts, closer to dogs than wolves. They prowl the night, hunting, rutting, and eating their fill before dressing themselves in a daze and staggering home, exhausted. For the most part, they are unaware of their actions, assuming the ache in their muscles and the dirt under their nails is the result of sleepwalking or a wild, drunken night out.

Vampires, too, find their close-knit society under threat of erasure. The Night of Silver created a generation of grave-born vampires clawing through the ash of their previous home, unaware of what they had become. They have been used as scapegoats by the angels of Colossus on several occasions, baited into joining satanic cults and fighting the hunters and Sworn who have taken an interest in the city's dark underside. These infrequent but bloody battles have led to a rise in revenants in the center of the city, half-vampires with no societal link to their sires or clans.

The demons in the city are undermined by a gnawing possibility — they have discovered Hell, and found nothing of value in it. They live free of the God-Machine and its servants, but only so long as they confine themselves to the city. They are at a loss for direction, questioning their own Descent on a personal level, not sure if their years of deceit and struggle were ever worth it. Some embrace this opportunity, immersing themselves in a corporate playground and reveling in this rare opportunity to shed their burdens, but many are brutally disappointed. They barter for cover by rote, just to stay alive a little longer. They wander the city, watching the construction sites in action, wondering why the God-Machine's disinterest aches at them so. Some willingly flee, knowing the attention they draw in leaving the city will lead to near-impossible fight to survive, but for many this fight is the only thing left that matters.

The Prometheans who find their pilgrimage passing this place often lose sight of it. Any created connecting themselves directly to the city's electrical grid, whether it be to regain Pyros, heal injuries, or power a Transmutation, runs the risk of gaining the **Galvanized Condition** (see p. XX), as they link their Azoth to Colossus. Initially, this causes the Promethean to suffer greatly reduced Disquiet and Wasteland effects by expending Pyros, an enticing trade which encourages many of the Created to attempt this link intentionally. Over time, however, the cost increases, as the Promethean finds themselves stripped of all memory and desire to progress on the pilgrimage. They become permanent and ongoing victims of the Lacuna which Colossus is committing on them.

Colossus, the Unfleshed

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In its true form, Colossus is inert, unable to defend itself against attack and relying on subterfuge and interstitial barriers for protection. It possesses a limited set of Numina for protection. It can perceive events in the city through cameras and computers, but only those plugged directly into the city's electrical grid. It is capable of making direct contact by phone and email, but its language is nonsensical, a mixture of binary, Morse code, and text fragments that look like a corrupted document. It is speaking a clear message, one of prophecy and celebration of the union between the Contagion and the God-Machine, but the machine capable of translating its message has not yet been invented.

Demons cannot decipher this language automatically, as it is a corrupted version of the language of the God-Machine. Angels who encounter Colossus directly and hear it speak immediately respond as if taking orders from the God-Machine, serving it utterly.

It can manifest a temporary avatar (lasting one scene) by claiming the matter of buildings or vehicles within the city of Milton Keynes, triggering an electrical fire that warps masonry and machinery into a headless humanoid form. Standing nine feet tall and wreathed in flames, this irregular, composite form forged from grinding metal and glass is a tool for immediate and necessary destruction, can serve as a final, desperate defense of its head.

The Avatar of Colossus, as an Ephemeral Being fueled by Pyros, has an Azoth rating instead of a Rank. It uses Pyros instead of Essence, and can manifest freely anywhere within the city. Numina in italics can be used remotely via digital media by Colossus's true form, even without an Avatar present.

Virtue: Integrator

Vice: Harbinger

Azoth: 6

Attributes: Power 9, Finesse 6, Resistance 8

Corpus: 15

Willpower: 14

Size: 7

Speed: 20 (species factor 5)

Defense: 8

Initiative: 14

Armor: 3

Numina: *Aggressive Meme, Awe, Firestarter, Blast, Eternal Feast* (see below), Drain, Implant Mission, *Rapture, Seek* (Galvanized Prometheans), Stalwart

Max Pyros: 15/50 (Colossus expends 15 Pyros from its pool to manifest an Avatar, which appears instantly anywhere within the city. The Avatar gains these 15 points as a personal pool for as long as it is active. Any remaining Pyros is lost when the Avatar dissipates. It can theoretically manifest multiple Avatars at a time, but to date, has not done so.)

Fiery Blood: Avatars of Colossus have the Fiery Blood trait of the *qashmallim* (**Promethean: The Created**, p. 271). Avatars convert all lethal and aggravated damage to bashing. They may heal their Corpus through electricity like a Promethean or spend Pyros to heal in the same way as a spirit spends Essence.

Eternal Feast (Contagious Numina): Colossus has a ready supply of Pyros stored within the Contagious infrastructure and Prometheans of the city. It can inflict the Galvanized Condition on any Promethean feeding directly from its power grid with no roll required. It regains its full pool of Pyros every sunrise. When a Promethean suffering from the Galvanized Condition is slain, Colossus gains all of its remaining Pyros, and it can tap emergency stores by overloading the city's power grid, severing its connection to an estate and triggering a blackout. This recharges 10 Pyros, but the maintenance required to restore a connection can take several days and may (at Storyteller discretion) cause Colossus's Azoth rating to drop.

Disquiet — Sublimation of Self: Colossus's Disquiet has been warped by the Contagion. Residents in the city, as an extension of Colossus, have their own identities gradually erased. Each stage of Disquiet imposes a cumulative -1 penalty on rolls to recall personal or historical events which happen outside of the city. On a dramatic failure, the subject recalls a warped version of the event, altered to have taken place in Milton Keynes. Only by leaving the affected city or causing it notable property damage through vandalism (such as a tenement fire) can this Disquiet be resolved.

Wasteland — Erosion of the Past: Colossus's Wasteland does not damage the Structure or Durability of new buildings within the city, as these buildings are extensions of itself. It does, however, have a permanent Tainted effect (-1 Structure, -1 Durability) on any buildings and monuments constructed prior to 1970. The one exception to this is Bletchley Park.

Those Who Fight

The biggest challenge in wiping out the Contagion within the city is in identifying it. The city has a great many symptoms, some of which (such as the demons and the revenant population) are intentionally preserved as decoys. Colossus is a mockery of the God-Machine, one mimicking its methods through the ever-changing power of Azoth. It possesses many false fronts, such as the Church of Christ the Cornerstone and Milton Keynes Central Hospital, and is willing to create an Avatar (see above) to present a band of Sworn with a false, cathartic showdown, keeping its real form is tucked away in an old mansion in a nondescript corner of the city. Direct action like that favored by the Crucible Initiative or Zero Hour would yield immediate (but ultimately meaningless) results, slaughtering the canaries in the coal mine while ignoring the gas leak in the mine itself.

Those Who Contain

Any Sworn or Demon targeting the Contagious Infrastructure will be able to see the writhing systems hidden in the walls and utility grids of the city. These systems create a trail leading to the Facilities which feed Colossus. Destroying enough of these Facilities can weaken Colossus, even reducing its Azoth, but as long as its head survives, it will slowly recover its lost assets, continuing to expand and co-opt Infrastructure as it does so.

For the likes of the Cryptocracy, this might very well be enough, as it would allow them to contain the problem. The Machiavelli Gambit, on the other hand, would see this as an opportunity for control, and would be very interested in finding a way to bind Colossus, transport it, and use it as a weapon against the God-Machine and its servants. Both would seek out the hidden truth about the Night of Silver, either to save face or to use as collateral in future dealings, but despite this being a significant event in Sworn history, it has little to offer those who seek to deal with the Contagion's immediate threat.

Those Who Redeem

Those with ties to the Jeremiad or to the Ship of Theseus could find themselves drawn to the city to address the plight of the Galvanized Prometheans, and in turn the Disquiet of the city itself. The leeching nature of Colossus and the benefits it provides run the risk of stopping the Pilgrimages of many of the created dead in their tracks. The devout Jeremiad would view this as an utter tragedy, and the Ship of Theseus would view it as a tremendous waste of potential. Convincing the Prometheans assembled here to willingly give up their Contagion would be challenging, but would also greatly limit Colossus's resources, as it relies on the Pyros and Vitriol of the Created to help fuel itself. This small thread, if pulled properly, could strip the entire tapestry bare, forcing Colossus to reveal itself and start the war in earnest.

Those Who Serve

The Rosetta Society, having the closest ties to the birth of Colossus, find themselves in possession of many critical points of data which could diagnose the threat. Fusion of Contagion and the God-Machine is something they have seen before. They may even have, locked up in their archives, the records of Miriam Ficher and her time working at Bletchley Park. Following her path would reveal her research on the stone head of the Olmecs, leading to points of history dating back to the origins of the society itself.

Armed with this knowledge, the Rosetta Society could target the heart of the problem immediately, but would they want to? Colossus represents something they have been seeking for millennia: dialogue between the two great entities, a living decryption device capable of deciphering the language of gods. Containment is a necessity of course, but the loss of such a prize would be a cardinal sin for their order.

Caught between the conflicted interests of the other Sworn, the Rosetta Society could find an unlikely ally in Naglfar's Army. The hybrid nature of Colossus and its inhuman progress towards survival in a Contagious world is something they appreciate. Colossus is a titan in its infancy, emperor and empire in one, and feeding this beast now could garner the False a powerful ally at the End of Days.

[BELOW TEXT SHOULD BE PRESENTED AS AN EMAIL CHAIN]

! This message was sent with High importance.

From: Shoulderman@nstar.co.uk

To: GardiAnne@MKGeneral.co.uk

Cc:

Subject: FW: An Issue of Largesse

Anne,

Please read. Ran the account through the usual laps. It's clean.

The address is a shell, and an obvious one. It wanted us to know what it was.

Something about the chatter, the use of the word "disappointment," it sounded just like the destroyer that came swinging at us back in Bristol. Poor schmuck is on the verge of falling and it doesn't have the words to express it.

Really don't like the warning though, it's coming at us sideways because it knows it's not allowed to talk about this. He name-dropped Milton and economics. Could be a trap.

Still, that's your neck of the woods, inside the Prison City.

Want me to visit?

- Thirty

P.S., your new name is adorable. Idiot.

From: <Anonymous>@FirstServe.Co.GM

To: Shoulderman@nstar.co.uk

Cc:

Subject: An Issue of Largesse

From Heaven

Expressing Disappointment. Self. Disappoint Self, more than Self.

Expressing Concern. Asset in the Cipher. No Asset.

God in the Machine. No God.

God has a Child. Sick Child. Danger, the Child in the Machine. The Paradise, lost in Economy.

An issue of largesse, pun intended. Cryptics of Divine Comedy a necessity. Cannot take action. No action requested of me. Yet I Act. I am Afraid.

You are No True Servant of God. Kill the Child. Kill the Paradise Lost in Economy.

Abort. Abort. Abort.

[ABOVE EMAIL CHAIN ENDS]

**[BELOW TEXT SHOULD BE PRESENTED AS A LETTER FRAGMENT
ON A TORN PAGE, WRITTEN IN HURRIED CALLIGRAPHY]**

Forgive my use of a messenger. I cannot trust this missive to go securely through a computer, and so am relying on Aoifne to keep my words safe.

Based on the recent attacks in Congo Site 7, we cannot discount the fact that there is a coordinated campaign targeting our operations, your operations specifically Henry.

I've done what I can to cover the matter up, but wild animal attacks only stretch so far, particularly for me. If one of the monarchs is acting against us, we should call the Circle and ruin them as soon as possible. Damn the mess; if they want to start a war, let us end it quickly, together.

If you will forgive my forthrightness, I have laid out a plan which Aoifne will discuss at length when she sees you.

[BLOODY SCRAWL COVERING PART OF THE TEXT (OR UNDERNEATH IF THAT WORKS BETTER)]

WE KNOW WHAT YOU DID HERNE OF THE GREEN. NOW THE WYLD HUNTS YOU.

[BLOODY SCRAWL ENDS]

[END LETTER]

Rumors in Milton Keynes

- The Peace Pagoda near Willen Lake has been vandalized, scorched with burn marks. Nearby, someone found a spear of sharpened wood plunged deep into the earth, surrounded by dust.
- Outside the Central Library stands a brass statue of a mother and a daughter holding hands. Once each month, a well-dressed old man stands before of the statue, staring in shock before he bursts into tears.
- Recordings from the Beagle 2, a Mars Rover built at the Open University in Milton Keynes, are transmitting onto cell phones in the city. The recordings, which depict thrashing limbs and eyes trapped in craters, are certainly not of Mars.
- Amy Burrige, a comic book writer living in the city, has gone missing. Her latest paperback, *The Colossus of Roads*, which depicts a giant mechanical man gorging itself on buildings, has become a collector's item and is quickly disappearing from shops.
- They call the balding, unwashed man that circles the XScape each night Isaac. He crawls on all fours, eyes and ears smothered shut with bandages and surgical tape, sniffing and licking the clothes of anyone that wanders too close. Efforts by the police to track him have failed, as his erratic patrols somehow avoid the CCTV cameras that infest the area.
- A media company tours the city with a truck full of Virtual Reality video games, hosting monthly tournaments for the children of the city. The winners of each tournament receive sizeable scholarships, conditional on them joining a gifted youngster program based in London immediately.
- The tall tree towering over the largest play park on the Netherfield estate has begun to bear fruit. Those who eat it all suffer fierce hallucinations of opulent parties hosted by angry nobles, who complain that their court has forgotten how to dance.
- A hunched, wart-covered figure has begun begging near the shops on Tinkers Bridge, offering pennies in exchange for old watches. In the underpass leading to the canal, it the beggar is slowly building a mosaic out of ticking watch faces.

- A death-metal band, *The Ship of Nails*, is touring the region, playing at a number of alternative venues. Their live performances are notoriously loud and violent, and have started to attract the attention of the dispossessed youth in the city.
- The homeless community sleeping rough under the motorway bridges near the central train station has increased sharply in numbers. They look so alike that commuters swear they are looking at multiple copies of the same person.
- A spate of fires attributed to vandals has destroyed several of the concrete animals scattered across the city's parkland. Coincidentally, the number of untended cows and sheep wandering the estates has risen.
- Pensioners living in the retirement lodges set up by the city have started a self-defense club, teaching each other how to use kitchen knives and fire axes. They have begun to brandish these weapons openly as they patrol their homes at night.

Acre: Contagion of Spirit

O ye children of men! The fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship among men... Whatsoever is raised on this foundation, the changes and chances of the world can never impair its strength, nor will the revolution of countless centuries undermine its structure.

— Bahá'u'lláh

Acre, or Akko as it's called these days, is liminal. The original name translates as “border.” In biblical times, it was on the border between Judea and the Caananites. It's a port city which, during the time of the kingdom of Jerusalem, bought in more money for the Crusader Crown than the entire revenue of the King of England. Even after it fell to the Mamluks, Acre remained fabulously wealthy. Trade flourished under the Ottomans when it became home to a sizeable Levantine community — families from Europe grown rich and fat from trade.

The city was torn down and rebuilt several times, and few traces of that wealth remain today. It remains home to a rich mix of cultures, the most heterogenous city in Israel where Jews rub shoulders with Moslems, Druse, Christians and Bahá'í. The most holy Bahá'í sites are in and around Akko and, while the religion is relatively new, it promotes a sense of unity among all religions and humanity. To some extent, the city itself reflects that unity. There are several projects that encourage people from different communities in the city to engage with one another through difference and to live happily side by side. At the same time, there are factors that drive segments of the population apart. This, after all, is Israel, a nation that divides the very humanity it is supposed to unify.

Theme and Mood

Akko is a once-great city that has fallen on lean times. Today it is a thriving tourist destination; the old city is even a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This, though, only serves to emphasize that the real life of the city was in the past. There is a sense of loss here — what the city was in times past has slipped away. The port, once the most important in the Eastern Mediterranean, is now home only to a few fishing boats, yachts of the rich, and a ferry that connects the city to Haifa.

The ghosts of past civilizations and recent atrocities haunt Akko. Most of the current buildings date back to the Ottomans who built on the foundations of the Crusader fortress. Since the 1960s, archaeologists have exposed many of the original rooms. As tourists wander through the refectory and tunnels listening to their electronic tour guide (available in eight languages), even the moderately sensitive feel the weight and ghosts of years bearing down upon their shoulders and shivering down their spines.

Theme: Ever-Present History

The theme in Acre is that of Paradise Lost and the hope of Paradise Regained. So many attempt to live in the glorious past while ignoring present dangers. And that, in one sense, is what ghosts are all about. Ghosts are the shells of those who were unable to shake off their pasts and move on when they died. Acre is a city full of ghosts: Canaanites, Romans, Arabs, Ottomans, British, and Zionist martyrs. Humans and inhuman creatures who take an interest in such things easily observe that the ghosts tend to congregate around the harbor and the lower levels of the Knight's

Hospital, now buried in the foundations of the Ottoman fortress. The newer parts of the city have the kinds and numbers of ghosts you would expect, but there is an unusual density of ghosts in the old city.

Mood: Tension

The problems in Acre were brought about by many-layered conflicts and intrigue. Here, there are forces trying to bring people together and forces trying to drive them apart. The U.N. designated Acre as part of a separate Palestinian state; yet despite this, it remains a part of Israel. Its population expanded greatly after the fall of the Soviets when many Jews relocated to Israel. The huge tensions between religious and ethnic groups within the State of Israel are so well known that hardly a person on the planet can fail to have an opinion. Despite this, it is not only the Bahá'í who are working to bring people together. Akko has several youth initiatives that engage Israelis and Palestinians in community building and conflict resolution, and that encourage them to channel their creativity into the arts rather than fighting with each other. Since 1979, the Akko Festival of Alternative Israeli Theatre has been an annual event that takes place over the holiday of Sukkot in October. It attracts Jewish, Arab, and international companies dedicated to producing unconventional theatre.

Despite these unifying efforts, it would be naïve to pretend that Acre was a city without ethnic tensions. There have been riots in the past and, no doubt, the future holds more.

What Has Come Before

Some scholars say that in a time before memory, Acre was the location of the cursed citadel of Ubar. While this may or may not be the case, it seems possible that liminal Acre was as far as Irem could reach. Mummies have appeared from time to time over the city's long existence. They are, however, far from the dominant form of monster.

Acre features in the Old Testament as one of the places from which the Israelites did not drive the Canaanites. It seems reasonable to conclude that it formed a border between these groups. It was an important city within the Roman Province of Judea. The Camarilla thrived there, along with the Roman Empire. The Julii Marcellus Caecius Vitalinus was Consul during that time. Highly respected throughout the Camarilla, he ensured that Kindred and mortals kept peace between one another. He disappeared when the Camarilla fell and has not been heard from since. Then, as now, the Kindred were the monsters who held most sway among the mortal population.

With the fall of the Western Roman Empire, Acre became a part of Byzantium. Arabs conquered the city barely a century and a half later, and it flourished under a succession of Caliphates until 1100, when Crusaders besieged it. The City fell to the Crusaders after four long, lean years. Within a century it fell again, bloodlessly this time, to Saladin. The Third Crusade took it back after yet another long siege. It was a confusing time that led to a great deal of conflict among creatures of all kinds on all sides. The upshot, however, was that Acre became the de facto capital of what remained of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem. The Knights Hospitaller took over control. The Knights Templar were also present, and their number included several Kindred and mages (and, quite possibly, other less well-documented creatures).

Back then, it was rumored that the Templar Order were performing strange rituals, either for the God-Machine or for their own purposes. Some believe that these rumors were circulated in pursuit of a political agenda, but many believe that they contained an element of truth.

Some of the Kindred remember those times, though torpor dreams have distorted their memories. The mages, of course, kept records, though most were destroyed when the Mamluks conquered the city after a century of Hospitaller rule. Afraid the fortifications might be used against them, the Mamluks destroyed everything, preserving only a handful of buildings and texts of importance to Islam. The Templars moved on to Cyprus, leaving their tunnels, several artifacts, and some completed elements of Infrastructure behind.

The port continued to thrive when the city became part of the Ottoman Empire in the early 16th century. Then, as now, it was full of artisans, and the streets echoed six times a day with the adhan, or the call to prayer. The city continued to expand, and over time, people built the present-day fortress on the foundations of the wrecked Crusader edifices. At this time, the city held a population of Levantines, rich Western families profiting greatly from Trade and, at least in their own eyes, giving back to the City their own rich Western culture. They loved their dinners, parties, dances, theatre, and concerts. The Kindred among them included a notable line of Invictus Daeva who remain influential today.

During the British Mandate, the fort was converted to a jail where members of the Jewish underground were held and occasionally martyred. The Irgun broke into the jail in 1947 and freed the remaining activists along with more than 200 Arab prisoners. Israel captured the city in 1948 and more Jews moved in. In the '50s, they were joined by Jews from Morocco and, in the '90s, there was an influx from former Soviet states. All these incursions, peaceful or otherwise, bought new monsters with them.

Where We Are

These days, the city is known as Akko or Acco, depending on how you transliterate the Hebrew. The old city is inhabited mainly by Arabs with Jews and others spreading out through the suburbs. The old city with its bright markets and narrow, convoluted streets is both haunting and haunted. So many sieges happened here, and so many died of starvation, injury, or disease. There are layers upon layers of history right under the feet of the living. Even in recent history there were those who died or who were prepared to die for the concept of the Nation of Israel, or the Nation of Palestine, for the Settlers or the Two State Solution. So Akko remains a liminal place and a place of ghosts.

Acre is also an important place to followers of Bahá'í. Many of their holiest sites are within the city, and others are nearby in Haifa. Bahá'u'lláh founded the religion in 1863. The Ottomans exiled him to Bagdad, Tehran, Edirne, and finally, Acre, where he died in 1892. A brief sketch of Bahá'í belief is that Bahá'u'lláh was the first of a long line of teachers who will bring about the eradication of racism and nationalism, and who will spiritually unify all humanity. So, some might say that rather than regretting a Paradise Lost, the Bahá'í look forward to a Paradise Regained. Their beautiful buildings, gardens, and memorials were added to the UNESCO list of heritage sites in 2008.

The Kindred remain a force here, with their fangs sunk deep into local politics, culture, and businesses. Most of those still active were Embraced from the ranks of the richer Levantine families — a sizeable bloodline of Daeva who are rumored to have been behind the idea of the popular, successful Festival of Alternative Israeli Theatre. There are Kindred of other clans and all covenants are represented, but it's the Invictus Daeva who hold the reins of power here. In the face of this, many younger Kindred leave for Nahariya or Haifa, towns with modern facilities (and modern vices) which are more to their taste.

There are also mages here, although not enough to form a full Consilium. (There is a Consilium of Southern Israel and a Consilium of Palestine, which cover much of the same territory and are constantly at odds.) Most are in cabals whose membership live anywhere between Haifa and Beirut. Some cabals contain members active in Jordan.

The Begotten have taken a back seat to the Kindred and mages who have most of the mortal authorities in their collective pockets. There are rumors of Arisen walking the streets of the old city, but no one has any reliable information to confirm that. With so many immigrants from Eastern Europe here, there were once Tammuz — many say they came over with the Russians after the fall of the Soviet Union — but none have been seen in Acre for decades. Either something bad happened to them (which few, after all, would regret), or they moved to Haifa and Nahariya in the '90s. There's also changeling freehold in Haifa; most of the Lost who find themselves in Acre end up migrating there.

As far as factions go, the Cryptocrats have huge influence here, recruiting widely among the Invictus who dominate the city. It is rumored that the Hierarch of Southern Israel is high up in their ranks. On the whole, though, Akko has been suffering from complacency in the face of the Contagion. It's creeping up gradually, and the Factions are having problems spurring anyone into action.

Cause

It started around a millennium ago, at the time when the Knights Hospitaller ruled the city. No one is completely sure how the Templars and Hospitallers related to each other during that time, though the Hospitallers were nominally in charge. Rumors have circulated about the Templars since their inception, but the truth is that the God-Machine used the Templars from time to time, just like it used everyone else. They performed rituals for it that formed part of several occult matrices.

Even learned demons struggle to guess at the God-Machine's intentions. What has become clear is that part of the Infrastructure for one occult matrix was a goat's skull with a pentacle inlaid in gold on its forehead. Various glyphs appear to have been painted or incised upon it, some of which resemble runic High Speech, but these have become illegible with age. Some have asserted that the Templars worshipped a goat-headed god and performed obscene rituals in service to it. When pieces like this turn up, they lend credence to such rumors.

No one today can tell whether the original occult matrix of which this piece of Infrastructure was a part succeeded in creating the product that the God-Machine desired from it. It is, however, reasonable to conclude that this piece was never properly scrubbed, because the Mamluks arrived very soon after the occult matrix was due to be completed. The skull was buried in the ruins of the Crusader Castle, where ghosts crowded around it.

A thousand years went by, and odd things started happening. The ghosts who haunted the hospital and the Knight's dining quarters shifted from their natural Anchors to Anchor upon the skull. This caused the skull and the ghosts to become infected with the Contagion. At least, that's one popular theory.

In the 1960s, archaeologists started to work on the foundations of the Ottoman fortress. They found the Crusader's dining hall and the Knight's hospital and various other passages. They excavated them and opened many parts of the ancient complex to the public. This attracted

tourists. It also attracted several mages, because where archaeologists go, mages are never far behind.

Apart from the skull and several ghosts which seem to have developed new powers, there have been recent sightings of a creature wrapped in frayed bandages walking around the Khan al-Umdan, terrifying tourists and traders. It even occasionally visits the modern market to smash up the stalls. It's looking for something or someone, but nobody speaks this skeletal creature's language.

Only a fraction of the Knights Templar in the resident military Order were in service to the God-Machine, but those who did serve continued their work in Cyprus, Rhodes, and Malta as their Orders moved from place to place. Although the Templars were the main source of the God-Machine's servitors, when the organization was destroyed, several agents moved across to the Hospitallers, a less notorious, less militant religious order, and one that is still in existence today.

Who or what influenced King Philip IV of France to pressure Pope Clement V to dissolve the Templar Order? It may have been factions opposed to the God-Machine, but that seems unlikely; after all, Philip's original aim was to *merge* the Templars with the Hospitallers. The mundane explanation was that Philip was heavily in debt to the Templars and having the Order dissolved absolved him from repaying them. Less mundanely, some maintain that the English Ventrue were involved in the accumulation of the debt in the first place, and that the Consilium of Avignon desired to learn the Templar's secrets and acquire their artifacts. It was Jacques de Molay, Grand Master of the Knights Templar, who refused to merge with the Hospitallers. To this day, rumors fly about de Molay, but few know anything useful or meaningful. The mages and the Kindred both claim him as one of their own. Whatever he knew died with him when he burned at the stake in March 1314. Whoever or whatever he was working for knew how to perform an effective cover-up operation.

All that, however, is history. The skull was lost in Acre and has only recently come to light.

Symptom

The Contagion has produced several symptoms in Akko which seem unrelated on the surface. It has infected a horde of ghosts who are eating away at the willpower of the city's population. Some in the medical profession fear that this is a manifestation of a previously unknown disease, though the medical consensus is that it is a mental illness, rather than an infectious foreign particle. Likewise, mages find their magic goes seriously awry. Initially, they thought this was Paradox, but further research indicates that this is something more sinister. There is a rampaging mummy on the loose. Some think this is a symptom, but careful investigation will lead back to the schemes of the Princes.

Outbreak Sites

Victims could contract the Contagion in any part of Akko as the ghosts spread out from the Skull of Baphomet. Akko is a small city, not a sprawling metropolis. The Contagion does, however, have its own focal sites, two of which are very popular with tourists.

Crusader Fortress: The fortress is in the middle of the old city. Tourists and ghosts love to haunt the echoing underground Hospitaller refectory and the 350-meter tunnel the Templars built between the fortress and the port. Archaeologists continue to work in the area. The tunnel itself was unknown until 1994, when renovations to the city's plumbing uncovered it. Now, on warm

summer evenings, Kindred gather in the garden outside the complex, mingling with crowds of tourists and locals.

The archaeological activities within the complex are of enormous interest to mages and academics. Active in both groups is Zechariah Becker, Moros of the Mysterium, known to the Awakened as חופר or Hwfyll and to the University of Haifa as Professor Becker. Hwfyll has a particular interest in ghosts and in the Crusader Orders, especially the Templars. He found the Skull of Baphomet, as he has named it, in a small chamber just off the tunnel and, seeking to examine it closely and in private, removed it to his sanctum. A great many ghosts followed it. Those remaining in the fortress seem lost and angry.

Khan al-Umdan: Also known as the Inn of the Columns, this building is a large but typical Ottoman Han, much of which is still standing. Huns were part inn and part warehouse, and usually contained several shops and workshops for artisans. Built near the port at the end of the 18th century, this Han was convenient for merchants arriving in ships from overseas and by camel from the interior. These travelers unloaded their goods on the ground floor and found lodgings on the second story. The forty impressive granite columns surrounding the building were taken from the ruins of nearby Roman cities and Crusader monuments.

Unlike most caravanserais, this one gained religious importance as Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í faith, liked to receive guests here. This led to the subsequent foundation of a Bahá'í school. These days, the Han functions as a major tourist attraction and gathering place for Kindred as well as mortals. It even serves as an open-air stage during the various cultural festivals that grace the city.

The Khan al-Umdan is not a seat of the Contagion, but it is the favorite haunt of Merneptah, the rampaging mummy.

Hwfyll's Sanctum: Hwfyll keeps the skull in his sanctum and defends it against all comers. Hwfyll is not skilled with Space, so there are no wards to protect it. It's an ordinary apartment with rather more mundane security than one might expect for the location, indicating, perhaps, that the occupant is somewhat paranoid. The main line of defense is the artifact itself. It now serves as the Anchor for many infected ghosts who defend it to the best of their ability.

Story Hooks

- Something is amiss in the Inn of the Columns. Recently, tourists have caught glimpses of a terrifying creature wrapped in fraying bandages. No one has yet been able to describe it with any accuracy, and many believe the reports are part of a publicity stunt for one of the alternative theater companies. However, the Levantine Daeva, who set great store by the festival, are understandably concerned.
- The Templar tunnel is always creepy. It's something about the history of the place combined with being able to hear the sea overhead. But recently, there have been more reports of ghostly sightings, enough to have attracted the attention of journalists. They're writing about the hauntings in local newspapers and speaking about them in podcasts and on the radio. This has attracted more tourists. A television crew even plans to go in. While this is great for the local economy, it threatens the Masquerade, the Veil, and other forms of secrecy.

- A ghost who is a member of a local Krewe has started to act strangely. She has moved from her established Anchor (which was near the Templar tunnel) and is now hanging out in a residential area. She has become a lot better at manifesting. Someone really needs to talk to her.
- Healthcare practitioners are keeping quiet about this so as not to panic the public or deter tourists, but a strange sickness is infecting several humans, and it's spreading. The infection manifests as lethargy and a lack of interest in anything, though the victims show few other signs of classical depression. Over a period of days and weeks, some of those affected have recovered spontaneously, but others have fallen into a coma. Three have died. Blood tests, x-rays, MRIs, and CT scans are all normal. One patient had a brain tumor found on biopsy, but this is not thought to be related to the sickness. There appears to be no physical cause, and some experts have begun to believe it might be a new form of hysteria.
- The local mages have become concerned about one of their number, Hwfyll. At first, they thought he was suffering from some variety of Abyssal taint brought about by an unfortunate quantity of Paradox, but now they're not so sure. He has been called to account before the Consilium, but the Hierarch is not one to jump into things without due consideration. This has caused some trouble with various factions who believe she is protecting one of her own.
- People who keep tabs on the local Infrastructure have noticed a few interesting changes lately. Something has been moved from its rightful place and, whether this is a cause or an effect, things are not as they should be. Doubtless the God-Machine will take steps to put this to rights. One can only hope that the cure will not be worse than the disease.

Zechariah Becker aka Hwfyll

Unless we fully understand the past, how can we find our way into the future?

The problem we have here is that there are layers and layers of this building. Which one to expose? They are only interested in what might attract tourists, but that is not academically sound.

Background: Zechariah was born in Ukraine, but his parents emigrated to Israel when he was six. He remembers very little about the old country, and even that is colored by what his parents told him. He understands that, for his family, Israel is the land of opportunity. As a child, he was fascinated by the discovery of the Templar tunnel in Acre and hung out around the dig whenever he could. He bitterly resented it when his parents moved to more modern accommodations in Nahariya and returned as often as he could. In the end, he never really forgave his parents from taking him away from his first and only love. He was always studious and academically inclined, so he studied hard at the excellent schools to which they sent him. He ended up with a first-class degree in archaeology, having taken a little trip to Stygia along the way — a near death experience while scuba diving with fellow students in Eilat. He was always interested in buried things, and he took his Awakening in stride.

As an archaeologist by profession, the Mysterium was a natural choice for him. His academic knowledge plus what others have described as an instinct for discovery led him to rise rapidly through their ranks.

In the mundane world, he has enjoyed a successful career in academia, an area of life for which he is well suited. His articles are well composed and enjoyable to read. His discoveries are interesting. But, he is not a globe trotter. He has visited Rhodes, Valetta, Portugal, and Bodrum

to look at the Crusader fortifications, but he is only really interested in the Templar remains in Acre. Everywhere else he studies he analyzes in relation to that place.

After he graduated, he managed to acquire paid work investigating the Old City of Acre, though it's only recently that he has been able to focus on what the Templars left behind. Using Mage Sights, he found carefully hidden traces of chambers. This led him to the sides of the tunnel. Next, he returned to the site under cover of darkness and worked out how to get through the magical protections that concealed the Templar's ritual chamber. It was there, three months ago, that he found the artifact he named the Skull of Baphomet. Carefully covering all traces of his exploration, he returned to his apartment with his prize. He told no one, neither his Order nor his mundane bosses, of his discovery. It was around that time that things in Acre started to go seriously awry.

Description: Zechariah is of average height, slim build, and unremarkable appearance. His black curly hair has a few traces of grey in it. He tries to keep it neat, but rarely succeeds. He usually dresses in jeans he buys from local outlets, a polo shirt that matches his brown eyes, and dirty tennis shoes. He is tanned from spending a lot of his life outside, which has also left him with more wrinkles than you would expect to see in a man in his late twenties.

Storytelling Hints: Zechariah is secretive and unwilling to part with any information of any sort. He knows he should not be keeping the Skull of Baphomet (as he calls it) in his apartment. This is against the rules of the Mysterium and against the rules of the University of Haifa, which employs him.

He is very, very resentful of the City Authorities and Ministry of Culture — anyone, in fact, who values tourist revenue more than academic research. He is more likely to open up to those who share this resentment.

Concept: Contaminated Archaeologist

Virtue: Curiosity. Hwfyll has a genuine urge to learn and to understand any kind of phenomenon he comes across. This drove him through the trauma of his awakening and led him to great academic success.

Vice: Greed. Hwfyll always wants more. While he has always contributed work and artifacts to the Athaneum in Haifa, he has cultivated the habit of keeping souvenirs for himself for years.

Path: Moros

Order: Mysterium

Legacy: None

Nimbus: Prior to becoming Infected, his nimbus was reminiscent of freshly turned earth — whether from a grave or an archaeological dig might depend on his mood and circumstances, or even on the orientation of the observer. Now the earth smells of rotten swamp, full of grave worms and the distorted, rotting body parts of some unidentifiable creature.

Attributes: Intelligence 4, Wits 3, Resolve 3; Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2; Presence 2, Manipulation 3, Composure 2

Skills: Academics (Archaeology) 5, Athletics 1, Computer 1, Expression 2, Investigation 2, Occult (Templars) 4, Persuasion 3, Socialize 2, Stealth 2, Survival (Desert) 1

Merits: Artifact (Skull of Baphomet) 5, Consilium Status 2, Order Status 3, Safe Place 2

Arcana: Death 4, Matter 2, Prime 1

Rotes: Exorcism, Discern Composition, Word of Command, Soul Jar

Praxes: Speak with the Dead, Without a Trace, Hidden Hoard, Supernal Vision

Gnosis: 4

Willpower: 5

Wisdom: 3

Obsession: To discover the secrets of the Templars and what motivated them. To continue excavations of the Crusader complex in Acre and to become lead archaeologist in these explorations.

Initiative: 5

Defense: 4

Speed: 10

Size: 5

Contaminated Magic: Zechariah suffers from the **Contaminated Magic Condition** (see p. XX) as a manifestation of his Contagion.

The Infected Ghosts

The Skull of Baphomet has exerted its Contagious power over ghosts haunting the Crusader City since Hwfyll disturbed the Templar tunnel in 1994. Over time, the ghosts became detached from their Anchors but instead of passing through an Avernian gate to the Underworld, they anchored to the skull itself. Their contact with the infected artifact resulted in them becoming Contagious. Additionally, since Hwfyll gained the **Contaminated Magic Condition** through contact with the skull, whenever he tries to talk to a ghost (or use any other rote upon one), it becomes a vector for the Contagion. He is a victim of the **Ghost Doppelgänger Condition** (see p. XX), as are many such haunted individuals around Acre.

[THIS IS A NUMEN]

Contagious Drain

Contagious ghosts can access a modified form of the Drain numen (**Chronicles of Darkness** p. 137). If a ghost successfully activates the Drain numen on a mortal, the mortal loses a point of Willpower and the ghost gains a point of essence. This transfer can be repeated without further

tests, provided the ghost is in contact with the same mortal at sunset the next day and on any successive days that it wants to drain its victim. If the ghost is unable to be in contact with its victim at sunset, the Essence transfers back from the ghost to the mortal at a rate of one dot of Willpower at a time.

Should the mortal be reduced to 0 Willpower, the ghost makes a contested roll to steal the mortal's soul. Of course, anyone familiar with dealing with ghosts might immediately suggest banishing the ghost to the Underworld, or discovering its bans and banes and using those to protect its human victim. However, these solutions are less likely to occur to medical staff or the families of the stricken. A Contagious ghost can attach a stolen soul to itself, resulting in the victim suffering the Ghost Doppelgänger Condition.

[END OF NUMEN]

Merneptah

Merneptah arose when a hapless hobgoblin, an unwitting pawn of the Machiavelli Gambit, replaced the central relic of his tomb with an imbued item. This item, which was activated upon the unfortunate hobgoblin's death, caused the mummy to believe that the Skull of Baphomet is an important vessel he needs to return to Duat. The Svengali, who had already neutralized Merneptah's Cult by denouncing them to the authorities as terrorists, are now watching Merneptah carefully, waiting for him to find the skull so that they can relieve him of the heavy responsibility of carrying it.

Merneptah is confused and has no means of adjusting himself to his current conditions. He is wandering the Inn of the Columns and the market, attempting to punish dishonest traders. Encouraged by the Princes, many of the local Sworn assume that Merneptah is Contagious.

Any mummy or character with enough knowledge of mummies can assist Merneptah to increase his memory. He will be grateful and helpful to anyone who can assist him in this way. He would also appreciate help in understanding the strange languages being spoken all around him.

Quotes: *These goods are decidedly inferior. What gives you the right to put them up for sale?*

How can I explain when I cannot speak your language?

This is not my world... I don't remember, but I do recognize that it has greatly changed.

Background: Right now, Merneptah remembers nothing. Should his Memory increase, he will recall that in the Nameless Empire, his skill as a craftsman and as an evaluator of the work of others were greatly valued. Throughout his history, he has been interested in fine things and the means by which they are made. For example, he could tell you whether a precious stone was genuine or not just by a close examination with his sharp eye. Humans and supernatural creatures alike have appreciated his skills since they started to adorn themselves with the rich fruits dug from earth. Merneptah has problems with modern languages. He understands Ottoman Turkish and a little archaic Arabic. He is not currently fluent in any living language.

Merneptah is rampaging through the Khan al-Umdan and making occasional forays to the street market. He hates and despises inferior work, and a great deal of inferior jewelry is on sale in these tourist areas. He is terrifying the unfortunate unlicensed hawkers and respectable shopkeepers by destroying the goods he considers inferior. Meanwhile, he turns everything upside down in his desperate search for the Skull of Baphomet, which he is convinced is a relic which must be returned to Duat.

The skull was never in Merneptah's tomb. He may have seen it when he arose during the Crusades, a rich time when many beautiful pieces of jewelry were kept on display. But his connection to it is weak. The Svengali implanted the idea of this vessel into his mind, *but* it was not made in Irem and is not actually a vessel. His kepher rolls to find it are at -10 (rumored or unknown).

Should Merneptah's Memory rise, he may discover through a distant contact of his neutralized Cult that a priest has recently turned up in Edinburgh (which he thinks is a city in Alba) who was never mummified. This seems strange and wrong to Merneptah.

Description: When his mortal visage returns, Merneptah appears to be a very tall, thin man of Arabic appearance. He has long, nimble fingers and wears a hawkish expression. When manifesting Sybaris, his image flashes overlays of fine jewelry, iridescent colors of precious stones, and the impression of a mighty bull spirit.

[REMINDER: MUMMY LAYOUT MAY CHANGE ONCE MUMMY: THE CURSE 2E REACHES FINAL DRAFTS]

Concept: Master Craftsman

Virtue: Patience (Merneptah knows that success takes time. Nothing good happens immediately. A gem takes many weeks to grind to perfection. He steadily, inexorably pursues his goals.)

Vice: Arrogance (Merneptah knows that he is the best of the best. Others should recognize this. If they fail to do so, it reflects their lack of perception, not anything lacking in Merneptah.)

Decree: Ka

Guild: Mesen-Nebu

Judge: Hetch-Abu, Shining Teeth

Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 3, Resolve 2; Strength 2, Dexterity 4, Stamina 2; Presence 3, Manipulation 2, Composure 3

Skills: Athletics 1, Brawl 2, Crafts (Jeweler) 5, Empathy 2, Expression (Jeweler) 4, Intimidation 3, Occult (Alchemy) 2, Persuasion 3, Politics 1, Stealth 2

Pillars: Ab 2, Ba 2, Ka 4, Ren 1, Sheut 1

Affinities: Dauntless Explorer, Divine Flesh, Enduring Flesh, Paragon Shames the Weak

Utterances: Dust Beneath Feet, Words of Dead Fury, Words of Dead Glory

Willpower: 5

Memory: 3

Sekhem: 9

Size: 6

Health: 8

Defense: 3

Merits: Enigma 3, Guild Status (Mesen Nebu) 3, Tomb (Geometry 2, Obscure 1)

Initiative: 7

Speed: 8

Cure

The Contagion in Akko is in its early days, so it should not be too difficult to contain. The main problem the factions have here is persuading others that the threat is serious. Right now, there are some contaminated ghosts, ghost doppelgängers, and a small focus of contagious magic which some may perceive as containable. It should be possible to discover that Merneptah is not actually part of the problem and may even be able to assist with finding a cure, although the Princes will throw whatever obstacles they can into the way of anyone attempting to pervert their plan for the Skull of Baphomet.

The Cryptocracy

The Cryptocracy believe that whatever has gone wrong is a direct result of increasing tensions in Israel and especially in Acre. They say that something like this was bound to happen; the only surprise is that it did not happen sooner. Solving the issues between Israel and Palestine, however, remains beyond their reach.

There has been some discussion of the wisdom of finding and awakening Marcellus Caecius Vitalinus, the former Consul of Acre throughout the Roman rule of Judea, as some feel he may hold the key to a local cure. To date, however, this has just been talk; after all, no one is even sure where to start looking for him.

The local Hierarch is a Cryptocrat. She is trying to deal with Hwfyll according to the Lex Magica, but some factions believe she is delaying in order to protect him.

The Jeremiad

The Jeremiad claim they saw this coming. They blame the touristification of holy ground for this outbreak. They are divided about their feelings for the modern Bahá'í faith, but united in their conviction that turning holy places into tourist attractions is just beyond the pale; it's asking for trouble.

Despite this, the Jeremiad are desperately searching for the root of the infection and for the Contagious. They are aware of the contaminated ghosts, but there are only so many banishings they can perform. As fast as they destroy one contaminated ghost, another six appear.

They will swiftly figure out that Merneptah is not the problem. If they manage not to offend the mummy, he might even come to their aid. They are, after all, looking for the same thing.

Should they manage to find the Skull of Baphomet, they will immediately recognize it as a piece of contaminated Infrastructure and regard it as the root of the infection. They will strive to

destroy it. Once Merneptah has a chance to examine the artifact, he will realize it is not a vessel and will not object to its destruction. Of course, should they try to destroy it before Merneptah comes to that understanding, things could be very different.

The Rosetta Society

What does the Contagion want here, the exegetes wonder? Their problem is deciphering this message before others of the Sworn destroy the evidence. They want to track down the monster that haunts the Han before someone kills it, and hopefully before it kills someone. They need to talk to the ghosts here, the ones who seem to have developed a new numen. They have heard rumors that the local Consilium is aware of something odd going on and may be trying to cover it up. They are working on getting the University of Haifa on board to protect any artifacts others might wish to destroy.

The Rosetta Society want to speak to Hwfyll. As he would have been an excellent recruit for them were he not contaminated, he is likely to be sympathetic to their message. In mechanical terms, the Society can make an Excellent impression on Hwfyll for the purposes of social maneuvering. They might try to protect him. They will certainly want to keep the Skull of Baphomet for further study and will strive to do so safely. The ghosts present them with more of a problem. It is very difficult — though not impossible — to pin a ghost down so that you can study it properly. You really need to have the proper powers, but the Society has people it can call upon.

The Ship of Theseus

The Theseans are excited by the liminality of Acre but frustrated by the way the local Kindred and, to an only slightly lesser extent, the Consilium, have kept things static and tied down. Clearly, just as water shifts to land and land shifts to water in the harbor, a change is overdue. These ghosts have evolved to an entirely new level through the Contagion, able to walk, talk, and go about life rather than death. But what do they need to take the next step? Do they need to come to terms with their dead state and go on to explore their rightful domain in the Underworld? Or do they need to find some way to go about their second lives without depriving mortals of their souls? It's an interesting dilemma to the Theseans.

Merneptah is less interesting to them. He's just a mummy doing what mummies do — what they have always done. Any of his own kind travelling with them may wish to help him, but that would be an individual enterprise.

Hwfyll's evolution might be of interest but frankly, he is not interested in the iconoclasts. He doesn't believe there's anything wrong or even changed about him. It is, of course, clear to any mage that something not of the Abyss is infecting Hwfyll's casting and maybe that thing should be encouraged out into the world. It would certainly shake things up.

Zero Hour

Zero Hour sees unambiguous evidence of enemy action in Acre. The vigilant need to take care of it. There is a mummy rampaging through the commercial and tourist areas, and they intend to stop it first and ask questions later. More than any of the other things going on here, the mummy presents the most clear and present danger.

Ghosts belong on their Anchors, in Krewes, and in the Underworld. They have no business going around stealing bits of humans. The vigilant will attempt to recruit any ghost to one of their

Krewes so that they can make themselves useful. Should this prove impossible, they will strive to return the ghosts to the Underworld. After all, having ghosts anchored to some infected piece of Infrastructure is not doing anyone any favors.

As for Hwfyll, he is clearly infected. The vigilant do realize it's not his fault that he's sick, but nevertheless perceive him as a danger to himself and everyone around him. They believe that the Consilium has taken far too long to act. In the face of Contagion, Zero Hour gives itself permission to be judge, jury, and executioner. They will try to persuade the Hierarch to hand Hwfyll over. Should they get their hands on the Skull of Baphomet, their strategy will be to consign it to the Underworld and have the ghosts who are anchored to it follow it down.

The Crucible Initiative

The Crucible Initiative is aware of a threat in Akko and feel that they may be the only faction taking it seriously enough. As things stand, the threat is subtle, but diseases tend to start out that way, confined to a small location or a few individuals. They may try to destroy Merneptah out of hand. It is not likely that they will feel much guilt should they later discover he is not Contagious.

The skull may be a valuable artifact but, as it is a source of infection, the fire-bearers will destroy it if it comes into their possession. They are also attempting to quarantine some of the older but uninfected ghosts.

The Machiavelli Gambit

The Svengali are fascinated by this outbreak, not because of the mummy or the ghosts, but because of the potentially devastating effect it could have on mages. Of all the factions, they've been the least sidelined by red herrings and quickest to get a handle on the actual scope of the threat. They are fascinated by Hwfyll, and they are actively attempting to get him to join them using bribery and flattery. In this, they are in direct competition with the exegetes. Although the Rosetta Society appeals to him more, as his magic becomes more and more affected by the Contagion, he might well change his mind.

More importantly, though, Merneptah is an agent of the Gambit. They are relying on him to get them the Skull of Baphomet. They will protect him at all costs, albeit from behind the scenes if possible. Once Merneptah has found the skull, they will relieve him of it by foul play and use it to control both Hwfyll and the Contagious ghosts.

Nagflar's Army

The Saturnalians are a little late to this party. Only when they learned that the Contagious ghosts were able to steal souls from humans did they decide to get involved. They do not have an operative in Akko yet, but they are planning to send a small group in to steal the so-called Skull of Baphomet. Their intention is to allow another faction to liberate it first and then remove it from that faction. As they want the skull, it is in their interests to support the exegetes, the Theseans, or even the Svengali from the sidelines. The other factions are all too likely to destroy the object rather than storing it someplace safe from whence it could be retrieved.

Rumors in Acre

- Samir Choukri, one of the unlicensed hawkers who sells handicrafts and genuine fake watches from a dirty blanket in the courtyard of the Inn of the Columns says the motherfucker who fucked up his goods seemed to be looking for something. He clearly describes a giant, gaunt

figure dressed in raggedy clothes who struck with superhuman strength. The authorities believe that Samir is exaggerating; he probably just got drunk and fell over on his own wares.

- A Romanian tourist exploring the Templar tunnel put in an official complaint about being attacked by a staff member dressed as a ghost. He has a black eye and a cut on his cheek that required three stitches. None of the staff members meet the very clear description he gave, and there is no project that has them dress up as ghosts.
- Several theater companies are threatening to pull out of the Akko Festival of Alternative Israeli Theatre citing security concerns. They complain about the ongoing political turmoil in the area but seem more concerned about reports of attacks on tourists and local traders. One assistant stage manager has a cousin in Akko who has recently fallen sick with a mysterious illness.
- Six children in the same primary school are suffering from horrible nightmares. Efrayim Rabin reported that “a really scary ghost was standing beside my bed and it was going to hit me with a big stick.” The other children in his class nodded, knowingly.
- Rivka’s family say she is sick and the doctors are unable to discern what’s wrong. Her mother says she hasn’t been out of her room in days, but classmates say they have seen her drifting around the mall, looking longingly into shop windows. Anyone who sees her out and greets her says that she does not sound like herself.

Santiago: Contagion of Morality

Mining created Chile. The story of men who go down into the mountain and chip away at minerals in the darkness and then suffer an accident that leaves them at the mercy of that darkness is part of the DNA of Chile, an integral part of the country's history.

— Ariel Dorfman

Chile appears, in wider view, to be the spine of South America, stretching in a long, thin sprawl from the arid north of the Bolivian and Peruvian border to the lush green and snow-covered mountain ranges of the Andes in the south. In the center of it sits the vast city of Santiago. The dichotomy of the country is reflected in the lives people live there. Extremes of opulent wealth and dreadful poverty are evident in all parts of the country. However, with its abundance of people, space, and resources — and without the watching eyes of the world examining your every move — Chile is a great opportunity for those alive to monstrous possibilities. It is a place of striking beauty and terrible secrets: perfect for unscrupulous men and women to weave a conspiracy that could expand to dominate the continent and beyond.

As they recover from the dual tragedies of the regime of Salvador Allende and the Junta of Augusto Pinochet, Chileans look to the future with hope for what is to come. Nevertheless, the past has left its scars upon this land. And, unbeknownst to them, from those scars bleeds the Contagion. It has affected Chile for longer than most of the Sworn factions realize with the containment of the initial outbreak. It is unclear even to the conspiracy that now contains it if it was the Contagion that wiped out all life in the area now known as the Atacama Desert or if the barren land was there to greet the first outbreaks into this world. What is clear is that the damage it inflicted never fully healed.

The base camp of Tierra Amarilla sits in a valley at the heart of the Atacama known as “La Cicatriz.” It is not known to house any great resources or hidden secrets other than aesthetic attraction for tourists, and that is ideal for their purpose. Secrecy is paramount. Of course, that is only their secrecy. The secrecy of others? The new government? The citizens themselves? The other operators working in the recovering economy? They are of no concern to Tierra Amarilla. With unseen eyes, they spy on their competitors, allies, and clients alike. Eyes they forged themselves from the blood of a wounded reality.

What are they hiding in their headquarters in distant La Cicatriz? Or perhaps, who? To most, it's all a long way from Santiago.

Theme and Mood

A contained Contagion is a dream come true to some of the Sworn. The chance to study it is almost irresistible; they rush in to take advantage. Surely, studying it in this inert state could be the secret to understanding it, using it, better fighting it elsewhere? But as we study the abyss, it studies us in return.

Theme: Gold Rush Fever

For both the Sworn and the citizens of Santiago, Chile is growing. Tierra Amarilla are pumping funds into the Government's coffers from a litany of shell companies for the use of little more than a barren wasteland devoid of exploitable resources. This stimulus promotes a mood of

overwhelming optimism among the citizens of Santiago, which is seeing the stark benefits flowing down from the Presidential Palace of La Moneda. Particularly, programs to stimulate the arts are booming. Sculptures, portraits, and huge murals of famous figures from Chilean history such as Ferdinand Magellan, Pedro de Valdivia and Bernardo O'Higgins have cropped up all over the area.

Among the Sworn, word has spread of a Contagion outbreak somehow contained in the country. Some rush to preserve it or to study it while others try to extinguish it for good, but all come to a city in Santiago which seems to be on an upward trend, awash with a vibrant and youthful culture eagerly searching for its shot to explode onto the world stage.

Mood: The Cynical Subtext of Success

Behind the mask of the ongoing investment and artistic boom, there is a strange undercurrent. Something doesn't smell right about the sudden upturn in the country's fortunes. Many dissidents rail against their nation's dependence on outside investment. Werewolves howl in the sands of the north and the streets of Santiago itself about a strange weakening of the Gauntlet and imbalance between the forces that once kept the area stable. Strange tales spread of blackmail and arrests of people who speak out. It seems the walls have ears and eyes in Santiago, as though a lurking spirit watches over the people of the city as they go about their business.

What Has Come Before

With its mix of excess and deprivation, Santiago has long hosted an eclectic collection of outlandish monstrosities, both human and otherwise. It is a seat of the vampires of the **Lancea et Sanctum**, who glory in the prevalence of Christian belief in the country. They hold their nightly covens in the shadow of the Sanctuary of the Immaculate Conception on San Cristóbal Hill. Their Bishop, the Daeva **Yelena Contreras**, remains aloof to the political upheaval in the recent past. This, in turn, has left them at odds with the recently appointed Prince and mining magnate, **Pietro San Martin** of Clan Gangrel. This corporate apex predator, loyal to the **Carthian Movement**, keeps watch on his city from palatial offices atop the towering, 261-meter-tall skyscraper Gran Torre Santiago. The disconnect between those two societies brings conflict to the streets at times, as young zealots of the Sanctified clash with their Firebrand "allies."

In truth, Bishop Contreras found it much easier to operate when the Invictus held the city; they seemed happy to let the Church Eternal conduct its work if they abided by certain niceties. However, their removal and the rise of the Carthian Movement amid popular uprising and the spread of democracy has led to uncertainty among the Kindred leadership. To this day, Bishop Contreras maintains that her role in the rise of the Pinochet regime and its extremes, which affected Kindred society as well as human, was no more than as a silent observer. Thankfully for her, the Carthians left none alive who could have shed light on the subject.

Around this upheaval and tension, a pack of werewolves known in urban myth as **La Paz** have kept watch on the denizens of the city's outskirts for generations and have maintained a permanent presence in the National Astronomical Observatory of Chile. They are the most well-travelled of the creatures with a presence in Santiago. Their history runs all the way back to the native Mapuche tribe as wardens of the harmony between the harsh deserts of the north, the lush midland expanse, and the frigid peaks of the Andes. They tend to remain aloof unless moving against a great threat; therefore, their increasing presence in Santiago suggest they have something to say. It remains to be seen if any will listen as, aside from their obvious physical

prowess, the werewolves of La Paz have few temporal resources to offer the well-heeled city dwellers.

A small krewe of Sin-Eaters who refer to themselves as **Oyentes** have been operating through the starvation and the slaughter of the past 40 years, trying to lay to rest the turbulent underworld of Santiago. They have a long-established presence in a former Convent building opposite the site of Villa Grimaldi, the most important complex used to interrogate and torture political prisoners during Pinochet's dictatorship. For the past 20 or so years, the Oyentes have worked under the guise of a credit union for working families called Fundación Arrieta. The Oyentes gain a great deal of knowledge from the comings and goings in their facility, as those in need of money for a funeral or a loan for medical treatment often bring tales that the krewe find useful in their work. However, the vengeful nature of the Geists that haunt the bloodstained corridors of Villa Grimaldi gives them a darker aspect than they like to portray. This would explain why the citizens of Santiago treat them with the same cautious respect as one would treat a local crime lord or perhaps even a low-level member of the Junta from times past.

Each of these groups talks about the Renegade Deviants who have slipped their bonds in the Atacama Controlled Zone. Such individuals often have a short shelf life in the city's history; indeed, many of the people who have gone missing from their beds in the dead of night from the past to the modern day fit into this category. But **Sofia Morientes** has, thus far, evaded capture. She is a local legend who the homeless and the hungry speak of in reverential tones as a vigilante protector and a provider of food and clothing. Many rumors of her activities circulate throughout the low-rent areas of the city and fuel her Robin Hood mystique. What most accounts seem to agree on, despite her obvious good points, is that Morientes is quite clearly insane. She has a habit of defacing public monuments and artworks, even going so far as to score the eyes of the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary at San Cristóbal, much to the chagrin of Bishop Contreras, who placed a price on her head for the deed.

Despite this, Morientes continues to evade capture and can be found hiding out in any one of several rat-infested bolt holes, demanding that any paintings or photographs brought to her location be instantly destroyed in fire.

Cause

The Contagion outbreak in Santiago isn't new. The Tierra Amarilla have incubated the infection for 45 years — the bitter and unexpected fruit of their experiments with a force they mistakenly believe is tamed. The jewel of the conspiracy's little empire is the Atacama Controlled Zone, a mad crucible where reality blends with insanity under the distorting weight of Contagion. Through its warping power, the conspiracy has forged a cadre of monstrous Deviants and extended their influence across Chile. Now, though, they have drunk too deep from their poisoned well. The Deviant they refer to as **El Centinela**, the lynchpin of the entire operation, has fallen to infection. It is hard at work subverting its fellows, a Contagious cancer consuming the unwitting conspiracy from within.

Tierra Amarilla

Yellow Soil, Yellows, Yellowjackets

Standing: 5

Quote: *"Reality is merely awaiting a mind keen enough to decipher it."*

Background: It's 1972, and a Contagion outbreak is about to erupt in the Atacama Desert. Chilean soldiers discover a location where the sky burns, the air is filled with tiny, alien bugs, the ground seems to be there, but not, as footfalls drop too deeply through an apparently illusory floor, and any humans passing through the site feel like bubbles course beneath their skin. This broken Infrastructure bleeds unreality. A meeting of minds among military officers and cryptographers in a little desert community called Tierra Amarilla births an audacious plan, even as the country around them thrashes in crisis and strife. Code-breakers work feverishly to decipher the radio babble of the ancient, inhuman pillar. When they finally crack it, the cabal seizes partial control over the Infrastructure's functionality. There, one hot afternoon beneath the desert sun, a choir of conspirators sings a decryption-song that unlocks a false world and tears reality open.

By the time any Sworn became aware of the outbreak, the nascent conspiracy is moving fast, exploiting its military connections to gather resources and control access to the zone. The first, fumbling attempts at Divergence result in dozens of horrific failures and one sparkling success that catapults their influence to new heights: El Centinela, a Remade whose gaze reaches far and wide. When the first Sworn-aligned agents fumble towards the Atacama Controlled Zone, they are startled to find the Tierra Amarilla waiting expectantly, and thus begins a stand-off that stretches across decades.

Description: The Tierra Amarilla are a powerful Chilean conspiracy deeply embedded in the government, judiciary, and military of the nation. Santiago is the hub of their power and wealth, a foundation built from four decades of favor-trading and secrets snatched by El Centinela's prying eyes. They also maintain a strong interest in cryptography and information technology, with connections to intelligence communities and telecommunications industries. Much further north, in the southern Atacama, the conspiracy directly controls the cluster of classified military installations, remote industrial sites, and observation outposts that ring the Atacama Controlled Zone, or the ACZ.

Out here in the arid desert is where the conspiracy performs its most disturbing work: producing Deviants by exposing them to the warping energies of the ACZ. A Baseline stumbling into the ACZ may well end up dead or mad, but not a Deviant; the key to triggering Divergence is a song-code, a protocol the conspiracy has deciphered from the Infrastructure's gibbered transmissions. Those who will be Remade enter the Zone with this song on their lips, initiating the fever-dream that cracks the soul. They emerge warped and twisted with bestial, chimeric forms and scarred minds, commonly possessing elements of condors and pumas from the natural spectrum of animals, though many emerge with undead traits as well.

A wary detente exists between the Tierra Amarilla and some of the Sworn. The conspiracy has carefully offered limited access to the ACZ for the purposes of running tests, experiments, and conditioning new agents. In return, the Yellowjackets' control of the ACZ remains uncontested, and they are able to continue their operations unhindered. Many Sworn would gladly see the ACZ torn from the hands of the Tierra Amarilla, but the conspiracy's control over it is too dangerous to confront, and no Sworn faction trusts the agenda of the others when it comes to the Zone's future.

Principles: We Decipher the Secrets of Reality, the Rewards of Unreality are Ours, Never Bow to the Sworn

Virtue: Methodical

Vice: Overconfident

Attributes: Power 8, Finesse 7, Resistance 8

Hierarchical Node: Tierra Amarilla Oversight Installation One (General de Division Vincente Sandoval)

Temporal Nodes: Chimeric Devoted (Special Agent Catalina Parra), Suborned Carabineros (CRNL Matias Ortega), Ministry General Secretariat (Assistant Secretary Ignacio Carvajal), El Centinela! Media (CEO Paz Rojas)

Exploitative Nodes: Renewal Art Outreach (Director Julieta Soto), Observation & Threat Analysis Installation One (El Centinela), Cryptoanalysis & Divergence Installation Three (Doctor Miguel Morales)

Structural Nodes: Atacama Chemical Zone Protection Brigade (General de Brigada Bastian Arias), Tierra Amarilla Industrial SRL (CEO Paula Benitez), Comptroller General of Chile (Assistant Secretary Magdalena Cabrera)

Conspiracy Icons: The Atacama Cipher (Apocalypse; completion unleashes the unreality of the ACZ to spread across the country, and possibly beyond), Heart of the Cherufe (Augmentation — ACZ Protection Brigade; the icon provides Chimeric Variations to specially selected members of the brigade), The Vision Cascade (Inspirational Icon; 8-again on Science rolls)

Atacama Controlled Zone (ACZ)

The Atacama Controlled Zone lies in La Cicatriz, a swathe of heat-baked dirt and stone. Nothing marks it out from the surrounding desert but a few warning signs. Officially, a chemical weapons test in the '70s left lingering traces of dangerous substances here. The Tierra Amarilla built their installations and observations well clear of its boundaries, concerned that an obvious concentration of power in the middle of the desert would draw unwanted interest.

Only a single road leads into the ACZ. It's nearly impossible to approach the ACZ through supernatural means; the Contagion's fluctuating influence on the fabric of reality throws teleportation wildly awry and fills the frequencies of Twilight with nightmarish static. The Chilean military have also mined the boundaries of the ACZ on all sides. In theory, this leaves only narrow, controlled access points, but the landmines have a habit of spontaneously exploding, experiencing rapidly accelerated weathering, or simply vanishing due to the proximity of the ACZ.

Anyone passing into the ACZ is rapidly exposed to the Contagion. It begins subtly, difficult to tell apart from the sun's hammering heat or the night's frigid grasp. Soon, though, the false reality manifests as bizarre phenomena and phantasmagoria. Colors change radically; the desert becomes a painterly work wrought from psychedelic hues. The sun stutters backwards through the lurid sky. Birds and animals with warped and bent forms skitter among the rocks, which are themselves distorted into leering or grimacing faces of stone. There are plants where none grew before, corkscrewing up wildly or twisting at sharp angles, their leaves shimmering with hallucinogenic patterns. The air folds into weird shapes as alien spirits cavort and caper. Bestial figures lope between hillocks or watch interlopers from a distance. Odd structures built from the fragmented detritus of a dozen clashing aesthetics rear up. The clouds grin and snarl. All this is just the beginning; the more saturated a person becomes with the Contagion, the weirder the figments become, and the more real and physical the alien denizens grow.

At the heart of the ACZ lies the Infrastructure that birthed it: an ancient pillar of stone bound by chains of stainless metal. Even now, the conspirators don't fully understand the nature or purpose of the Infrastructure. How does it draw power from the movement of stones across the desert, or from the paths crawled by creatures dying of thirst? What they do understand from the fragmented stream of radio code is that the Infrastructure somehow gibbers — the mad rantings of an insensate god.

It is this mindless song that the Yellowjackets deciphered. They watch the ACZ from the mountain perches of their observation posts and, with a moment's transmission of code, make the saturation of Contagion swell or retreat in accordance with their desires — just jumped-up phone phreaks hacking reality's own code through an idiot computer of stone and dust.

The dangers of the ACZ are manifold. It erodes sanity over extended exposure, leaving its victims unsure as to what is real. Its manifestations have unpredictable effects: a half-real tree's prickling thorns might scratch a victim with a psychic poison that is almost impossible to cure in a conventional hospital. Some who enter the ACZ vanish entirely, irretrievable from the unreal world they have stumbled into.

The First

The power of the Tierra Amarilla is built on the backs of victims exposed to the ACZ's mad unreality. Many die in agony, their bodies twisted and deformed into impossible configurations that simply cannot survive. Some vanish entirely. A few, though, emerge intact enough to be of use to the conspiracy. Their mutated flesh is warped into a vision of bestial monstrosity or surreal nonsense, but it comes with power: inhuman strength and resilience, senses that lurch beyond sane reality, talons that can rend metal, tangles of feathered wings. These chimeric nightmares serve as killers, enforcers, and wardens of the ACZ. Those with lesser mutations, or who can conceal their broken bodies, even walk the streets of Santiago, unnoticed by its denizens but always vigilant.

Then there is El Centinela.

It was the first of the Deviants the conspiracy created, a military colonel and cryptographer who volunteered for the ordeal. It's hard to see any trace of humanity now; the Remade's flesh is tortuously warped with feathers, vestigial wings, and staring eyes. Yet, El Centinela is central to the conspiracy's operations, its bizarre Variation extending their reach to every hall of power and every street corner where lifeless eyes can serve as its surrogates.

El Centinela's power is not limitless. It must be exposed to the energies of the ACZ regularly to sustain itself. Slowly, the corruption of the infection within it has built up until it has finally burst its limits. El Centinela no longer works for the Tierra Amarilla. Whatever was left of the human within has been entirely overwritten by the unreality that bleeds through the ACZ, and now it serves whatever insanity dwells therein.

A trusted asset at the heart of the conspiracy's operations, El Centinela has incredible opportunities to twist the organization to its purposes. It has started identifying threats to the Tierra Amarilla that are, in fact, threats to its own new state. It dispatches Yellowjacket teams to acquire strange occult resources, and it directs the Cryptoanalysis & Divergence research teams onto strange new ciphers without explanation. With each new code cracked, it can split the gap between this world and its own a little wider.

Worst of all, it has begun to subvert other loyal Remade. It calls field agents and secure chimeric assets in for special meetings with it, the spider at the heart of the web. When they leave, they too have been infected, and it sends them forth into the world to spread the Contagion's surreal influence.

El Centinela

"Ghhhuk... Welcome. I... hhhkk... have been watching you."

Background: Formerly a conspirator in Tierra Amarilla's inner circle, El Centinela eagerly embraced Divergence. The ACZ took a ruinous toll on its body and mind, but its burning desire to exploit and understand the power of the Zone held its psyche together and sustained it. It serves as the lynchpin of the overall conspiracy, a vital component giving the Yellowjackets far more power than they would otherwise possess. Now, it has been infected by the Contagion, becoming a carrier for the reality-warping Atacama strain.

Description: El Centinela is a chimeric fusion of human and animal features, particularly those of a brightly feathered avian. The Remade is nothing so coherent as a bird-person, though. Its flesh has run and twisted with wild abandon, sprouting feathers, wing-limbs, budding eyes with no regard for the original shape serving as scaffold to the Divergence. Rather, it is as if some vast and monstrous thing of the skies has had a splinter imprinted into the world through El Centinela's form. The Remade's appearance has lost any suggestions of its former race, age, sex, or gender.

Storytelling Hints: El Centinela still plays at being the loyal Devoted, ensconced in its bunker and feeding information to the conspiracy, but it craves contact with other Deviants and does whatever it can to arrange their presence — whether that means debriefing other Devoted in person, or taking the opportunity to analyze captured Renegades. Its panopticon senses feed into the Deviant's prideful sense of omniscience. It craves control over situations and attempts to arrange every detail of its schemes with obsessive attentiveness. A few of its closest handlers have noticed the loss of its old mannerisms and behavioral tics that lingered from its former life. It becomes ever more focused on its new purpose. However, El Centinela is already so alien in appearance that it's easy for its handlers to dismiss such changes.

Origin: Autourgic

Clade: Chimera

Attributes: Intelligence 4, Wits 4, Resolve 3; Strength 3, Dexterity 2, Stamina 3; Presence 3, Manipulation 4, Composure 4

Skills: Academics 2, Computers 3, Investigation (Evidence) 5, Occult 3, Science 3; Athletics 1, Brawl 1; Empathy 3, Persuasion 2, Streetwise 2, Subterfuge 3

Merits: Allies 5 (Subverted Deviants), Hypervigilance, Iron Stamina 3, Status 4 (Tierra Amarilla), Trained Observer

Acclimation: 4

Stability: 9

Willpower: 7

Stability: 9

Conviction: 2 (Special Agent Catalina Parra, the foremost of the conspiracy's other Chimeric Remade who has long feuded with El Centinela's influence; General de Division Vincente Sandoval, head of the conspiracy and now an unwitting target)

Loyalty: 2 (Doctor Miguel Morales, lead Divergence Progenitor in the conspiracy; The Eye In The Desert, El Centinela's personification of the force in the ACZ)

Aspiration: Spread the Contagion to other Devoted

Initiative: 6

Defense: 3

Speed: 10

Health: 8

Acclimation: 4

Persistent Scars: Conspicuous Appearance (Onomantic Influence, Pheromones) 4, Dependency (Gallery of Eyes) 5 (ACZ), Glitch (Anomalous Biology, Natural Weapon) 3

Variations: Anomalous Biology (Ageless) 1, Gallery of Eyes 5 Natural Weapon 1, Onomantic Influence (True Name) 3, Pheromones (Balance) 3

New Variation: Gallery of Eyes (●●●●●)

Subtle

Directed, Discrete, Toggled

This Variation is currently unique to El Centinela and fueled by the Contagion. The Deviant can observe through any depiction of an eye within ten miles of its current location. It can witness through paintings, street art, photographs, statues, or anything else that clearly shows the form of an eye — even bank notes. El Centinela doesn't just see through its surrogates; it can also hear clearly, regardless of whether any ears are depicted.

When the Variation is active, El Centinela can sense all such depictions within its vicinity and can shift its point of observation from one eye or pair of eyes to another with an Instant action. Sometimes, when it does so, the eyes it is possessing briefly shift, move, or turn to gaze upon the subject of its attention.

Symptom

Tierra Amarilla may have contained the Atacama Controlled Zone, but they did not consider how their new creations would affect the rest of the country they mean to control. As its eyes scan the offices, homes, and streets of Santiago, El Centinela's presence corrupts and converts reality into sickening, twisted new shapes. A bizarre shadow sweeps across the city, even in broad daylight, leaving citizens looking up to the sky in wonder at what might have caused it. Weeks of drought grip the city as rainclouds seem to part and dissipate before crossing onto Chilean lands, leaving some scrambling and desperate for water as prices of bottled imports soar. For miles around the city, livestock and crops fall dead in the fields, making food scarcer. The country that had so recently seemed to be on the up-and-up has started a familiar descent. While those monsters who operate locally scratch their unnatural heads and ruminate on how to save what remains of their temporal resources and, by extension, stabilize the country, dissidents

move to take advantage. Is this what Tierra Amarilla wanted all along? Will this civil strife allow them to swoop in as savior? Or are they simply victims of a greater conspiracy than they imagined?

Outbreak Sites

The Sanctuary of San Cristóbal: An icon of the city and potent symbol of the devotion of the city's many Catholics, the statue of the Virgin Mary atop the small sanctuary chapel on San Cristóbal Hill can be seen from any open vantage point in the city, day or night. It attracts a great deal of tourist traffic but is also the main gathering point for vampires loyal to Lancea et Sanctum in the city. As Mary gazes beneficently down upon them, some of the faithful say they can see the very eyes of the statue move and shift the gaze of the Blessed Virgin across the assembled masses. Even in the chaos of the Contagion, if someone wants to seek an audience with Bishop Contreras, this is the most likely spot to visit. Its hilltop position makes it both isolated and highly defensible. Many human faithful retreat to this spot to pray for deliverance, giving the Sanctified an excellent source of nourishment for any fight to come.

This site was recently the beneficiary of large government investment and is adorned with lavish artworks and statues lining the way to the Sanctuary itself. As with other locations in the city, the strange eye-shaped symbol that accompanies many of the murals and government posters on the walls of the city can be found here staring out from different surfaces, though the Church has resisted any materials being brought inside the chapel itself.

Sofia Morientes has damaged the statue in the past, gouging at its lifeless eyes with a crude chisel and drawing the ire of San Cristóbal's nightly visitors. In response, visitors seeking an audience here find security heightened even before the Contagion strikes in the city. When it strikes, the hill will be converted into a pseudo-fortress with zealous Kindred ready to hurl themselves upon any intruder with savage abandon.

Villa Grimaldi: Although it has re-entered public consciousness as a museum dedicated to those who died in the carnage brought about by General Pinochet's regime and his so-called "Caravan of Death" followers, this was once a prison camp used by the Junta to torture, interrogate, and murder their victims.

Despite the decades that have passed since its closure, many in the city still look upon its gates with trepidation. Some even go so far as to take longer routes to avoid passing it, such was the fear the place still holds in the hearts of those old enough to remember the city's past. Of course, what is anathema to some is an attraction to others. None more so than the krewe of Sin-Eaters who call themselves Oyentes, meaning Listeners in English. Some of the museum's staff count themselves among their number; they often make their way across to the Fundación Arrieta across the street from the gateway of Villa Grimaldi, giving names, addresses, and any other information to those inside the credit union's building, enabling them to do the vengeful work of the dead. Only when the wrath of these Geists is satisfied and every drop of resonance is milked from this terrifying site will the krewe consider relocating.

The Contagion has attracted others to this site. The rumors of mass graves and dismembered body parts within attract those seeking to breathe new Promethean life into the city. Perhaps this is a resource that could be used to combat the Yellowjackets and the minions of El Centinela, but it is highly unlikely Oyentes would allow their hallowed grounds to be violated in such a way, or that they would allow someone to such disrespect to the remains of the restless dead.

National Astronomical Observatory of Chile: With its lack of light pollution, largely clear skies, and sparse rain, Chile is one of the most important countries in the world in the field of astronomy. Local legend says the country's famous leader Bernardo O'Higgins donated his estate to fund an observatory for the city of Santiago on Santa Lucia Hill. Whether or not this is true, the National Astronomical Observatory of Chile is one of the foremost sites in the world for the study of the stars and celestial bodies.

The werewolf pack La Paz protects this hill at all times, since they regard the site as having a similar sanctity to the Lancea et Sanctum's Sanctuary of San Cristóbal. From here, the pack keeps a permanent watch on the city and coordinates efforts to guard the city's outlying neighborhoods. Reports and runners come to and from the site from the full length and breadth of the country.

Panic spreads among the werewolves in the nights leading up to the Contagion outbreak in Santiago as they find the great lenses and telescopes in the observatory coming to life on their own and swiveling without instruction. They soon realize that spurning the many overtures of Tierra Amarilla may have kept the eyes of El Centinela at bay for a time, but as its abilities grow, it begins to turn their apparatus against them in preparation for an attack.

These savage beasts could provide stern resistance to the advance of El Centinela's forces, and so it treats eliminating them as a priority. Any Sworn who assist in defending this site from attack would win their respect and gratitude.

Parque Quinta Normal: One of the most well-maintained green spaces in the city, Parque Quinta Normal is at the center of a district containing many museums. It even holds some of them within its lush scenery, including the Museum of Science and Technology and the National Museum of Natural History. It is a popular spot for residents to recline in the sun and enjoy a book and a cold cerveza while the business of the city goes on around them a world away.

At the heart of the park, the wire frame construct of what was once a decorative greenhouse stands. It was once home to a self-contained botanical display complete with sculptures of water spirits and angels overgrown with moss and creeping vines. Visitors to this place now find the alabaster and stone eyes of those statues gouged out and ground to powder. A small collection of fire barrels stand nearby, displaying the charred remains of government issue posters and prints of famous portraits. Graffiti is daubed on the ground and on walls around it in crude script: "DESTRUIR LOS OJOS." Destroy the eyes.

The author of those messages can sometimes be found refreshing her spray-painted messages within the strange, overgrown patchwork of tropical plants and rusted metal beams, particularly when the fire barrels are lit to allow her to dispose of the Tierra Amarilla issued propaganda and artworks she tears down from around the city. Sofia Morientes may not be the woman she once was, but she is no less convinced of the evil conspiracy threatening to engulf the city and the whole country. Indeed, she sees the threat as one the world at large should take seriously.

As one lone voice in the darkness, she is seriously in need of friends, but her rage and her paranoia make her difficult company. She has driven many usual visitors from this area of the park. Police and agents of Tierra Amarilla haunt the park and its surrounding blocks regularly, and Sofia flees whenever she spies them. If a would-be friend were to assist her in avoiding the authorities or even bring her some material to dispose of, they could start to win her trust. But Sofia will still keep one eye on anyone who makes overtures to her. Since her left eye is sewn

shut, that seems to be the only functioning eye she can spare. Those who do not dare to approach her simply find her varying between doleful sobbing and staccato babble of the externalized monologues of her thoughts. She seems to be mourning someone called Alexandra but will not speak of it to anyone who has not earned her utmost confidence.

Upon the outbreak of Contagion, the plants in the park become warped and dangerous. Anyone inside the greenhouse or otherwise near the tropical plants suffers attacks from barbed, grasping vines, clouds of choking spores, and poisoned needles shot from the rapidly expanding flora and fungi. Sofia, despite her apparent madness, always ensures that any friendly or neutral characters she is aware of are clear of the area and will attempt to free them if they become trapped or entangled.

Gran Torre Santiago: The tallest building in South America and one of the most iconic sights to residents of the city, Gran Torre Santiago is home to a large-scale shopping mall, two hotels, and the penthouse office suite of Minera San Martin, the premier exporter of metals and minerals in the country.

Tierra Amarilla have invested heavily in the building and the area around it. Smiling faces look down on passers-by from advertising hoardings in the busy mall and on all the surrounding streets. However, the shadows hold other lurking eyes as the Nosferatu watch over the haven of Santiago's Carthian leader with suspicion.

Comings and goings from the offices of Minera San Martin intensify at night as suited lawyers and officials take the elevator straight up to floor 64. It is unlikely they go to enjoy the view rather than entreat with the prince of the city's large vampire population. There is very little that goes on in Santiago that Prince Pietro San Martin doesn't know. He remains the revolutionary hero to most of his followers, still riding the wave of their victorious ascent after ridding the night of the Invictus who were all too eager to cozy up to the Junta for the liking of many Kindred. The Firebrands do not rest easily on their laurels, however, and Prince San Martin knows he must quickly find a new cause to make their own. The Sworn could provide him with just the thing he needs, if they are able to reach him before the agents of El Centinela make him a better offer.

The Gran Torre is an island of calm when the Contagion hits. This sparks fury among several groups of the city's monstrous inhabitants. They question if San Martin has somehow caused this pestilence to rain down upon them as the city descends into starvation and desperation.

Discerning his part in these events or turning him and his followers to the cause of the Sworn could make all the difference in the quest for a cure to the disease.

Story Hooks

- The wheels of commerce drive the fortunes of humans and monsters alike. None know this better than Prince Pietro San Martin. He has received several visits from agents hailing from La Cicatriz, offering him an honored place in the new order that is coming. However, he sees this as a new yoke placed upon the shoulders of his people. For that reason, he agrees to hear the overtures of the Sworn. Though he is disposed towards aiding them in their fight against the Contagion, he is not necessarily willing to do it for free. A well-protected trade minister has fallen under the influence of Tierra Amarilla and is awarding their shell companies first dibs at government contracts in the city. The prince wishes to ensure this public money finds its way back to "the people" via his company, of course.

- An investigation reveals several orphanages in the city have agreed a deal whereby when their charges reach maturity, they enter into the Apprenticeship Program in the ACZ. But what are the Yellowjackets doing with these young people? Some forged documents can get the names of the protagonists onto the register of new arrivals. They find themselves in an air-conditioned coach heading north. Getting in might prove easier than getting out, however.
- Bishop Contreras is offering a considerable sum of money for the head of Sofia Morientes. While the money could be useful in greasing certain palms and opening certain doors, it might not be worth losing a potentially valuable ally. The Sworn elect to take on the almost impossible task of convincing the leader of the Sanctified that the scarred and broken heroine of the people is not her true enemy.
- Running from corrupt police, the Sworn find themselves cornered in an alley. Keeping a low profile, they watch as security forces sweep past in a fruitless search for their quarry. A member of the group notices the eyes of a mural on the wall behind them swiveling towards her just as the leader of their pursuers touches his earpiece and turns back towards the alleyway he previously overlooked.
- The Sin-Eaters of Oyentes have identified an old man called Antonio Barrera as one of the interrogators from Villa Grimaldi. They offer the Sworn their assistance in their investigations if they can get him to confess his guilt in the presence of the spirits he tortured and murdered, as his years of denials and cover ups are an affront to their suffering. Even if the Sworn succeed, they are left with the choice of life or death for the criminal in the chair.
- An investigation of the shell companies belonging to Tierra Amarilla reveals that under-the-table payments are going to “Agua de Vita” to buy up import licenses for bottled water, milk, and bread. While this seems a strange move in a time of plenty, it may foreshadow something terrible to come. Destroying those imports and the warehouses in which they are stored can stall the plans of the conspiracy and perhaps lead the Sworn to discover that El Centinela seems to be acting beyond the conspiracy’s orders.
- A mining operation has been scheduled to take place in sacred Mapuche burial grounds, but every team that has been sent to commence the work has met with “accidents” related to animal attacks. The protagonists have a chance to make friends among the reclusive werewolves of La Paz, but they may risk sacrificing their relationship with the Prince of Santiago in doing so if they cannot reach a mutual compromise.
- Sofia Morientes agrees to work with the Sworn to bring down their common enemy and provides them with several locations of sites that need to be purged of El Centinela’s influence. With their resources, she believes they may be able to infiltrate the heavily guarded Presidential Palace of La Moneda and destroy the portraits and statues within, blinding their nemesis to what goes on inside. As they move, they become aware of a motorcade on a parallel path. It seems the Yellowjackets have decided it best to take the President himself under their protection. Freeing him from the conspiracy’s influence could be a huge step towards crippling the resources of Tierra Amarilla and allowing the Sworn to penetrate the ACZ.

Cure

Removing the deep roots of Tierra Amarilla is difficult and takes time. Each head of the hydra the protagonists hack away reveals three new heads they previously didn’t know about. A labyrinth of shell companies and quasi-governmental organizations mask their maneuvers

throughout Chile. Identifying and shutting down each of them is the key to weakening the conspiracy. The Yellowjackets' resources are not inexhaustible, and it is unlikely the Contagious conspiracy have any real, tangible way of offering material support to their dupes except for El Centinela itself. Of course, to do any of that, the protagonists don't just have to take on the vast temporal resources of a well-established conspiracy, a private army of highly trained and subverted Deviants, and an extremely compromised government which is basking in the adulation of the benefits that the conspiracy's investment has brought to the country. They must contend with the mixed bag of views of the many Sworn who have been notified of the great opportunities for training and research available in the relative secrecy and obscurity of the barren Atacama.

One further complication is the likelihood of False operatives in the area. Tierra Amarilla are carrying out, almost to the letter, the stated aims of the Machiavelli Gambit and may very well be funded or directly controlled by them. Unlike most human conspiracies, this would mean the protagonists' monstrous nature comes as no surprise to them. The protagonists may find their adversaries well-prepared for many of their unique abilities and strengths.

With the presence of the ACZ well known among the Sworn and the False, protagonists may also find their investigations hindered by those who simply want to put the whole place to the torch to end the chance of further infection. In this chronicle, players can literally save the world, or condemn it to fire and damnation. That stark choice between healing or damning this already fractured land provides the backdrop for every choice that follows for protagonists and antagonists alike, inviting players to examine the mindsets of their characters and explore the very reasons that brought them into line with the philosophy of their Sworn faction.

Santiago presents varied dangers, and protagonists must face those if they wish to save Chile from disaster. If they can dismantle the many tentacles of the conspiracy, they can attack its heart freely, kill or banish El Centinela and its infected minions, and either permanently close the ACZ at last or twist it to their own ends and the ends of their Faction.

The Cryptocracy

I suppose it could be tempting to use this so-called controlled zone as a training facility for our operatives, but it seems clear that Tierra Amarilla have no desire to share power with anyone. We can see the power play here. This isn't about being part of the solution. That means they're part of the problem.

They think they can hide it behind this corporate façade, but you can't bullshit a bullshitter.

— Azul, Majestic of the Galateid

The Jeremiad

Of all the Sworn, we stand the greatest chance here. This city is ripe with the faithful, like a glistening fruit in Eden itself, waiting to be cultivated.

We shall torch those who seek to cast down this beacon of hope in the world and, in doing so, bring so many more into the light. The False and Contagious alike recede in horror at the news of their inevitable defeat at the hands of the righteous army coming for them.

Our first order of business should be to enlist the Sanctified. They will see things our way.

— Shlomo Sands, Fanatic of the Carthian Movement

The Rosetta Society

The Society doesn't take issue with the concept of a controlled area of Contagion for study. We do, however, take issue with the use of it to deliberately infect people for one's own ends.

Whatever they're keeping up there in that desert, we need to secure it as soon as possible. Every day that passes with it in the clutches of those fools is another day of danger and another day wasted in what could be one of the most important research opportunities in the history of the Receivers.

If we could arrange for a cell of ours to be "recruited" into the organization, perhaps we could guide them in the right direction.

— Carla Vierra, Oracle of the Lucifuge

The Ship of Theseus

Evolution made manifest, that's what this is. Centuries have passed with so little advancement in human physiology and now here we have a way to expedite the process.

The power of this site is changing the rules, not just for humanity, but for all of us. See how the stagnation of the Invictus has been cast off already! In this part of the world, new blood is needed in all walks of life and unlife. While we're cleaning up the mess, we might as well make sure the right people end up on top.

The worst thing that could happen is the same old story repeats all over again.

— The Yellow Captain, Thesean Magister

Zero Hour

Only last week I said this phoenix-like revival was too good to be true. We've seen it all before with Allende. Early success shouldn't make you drop your guard.

They want to use Contagion to make a better city, a better country. Problem with that is, Contagion doesn't make anything better, it just breaks it down. And by the time everyone wakes up to that fact, it'll be too late to do anything about it.

I guess it's up to us to get the dirty work done, as usual. We'll take this whole damned organization apart.

— Carolina Beatriz, Free Council Vigilant

The Crucible Initiative

In some ways, we should thank the Yellowjackets. Their open invitation has certainly caught the attention of the Sworn and will no doubt draw many of their number here to carry out their foolish little pacts.

It's ideal, so rare, to have all your rats nesting in one little hole.

This infection is rampant, and its spread is quite deliberate. All Sworn agents, all assets of the Tierra Amarilla, all their dupes, and every one of the ignorant infected must be purged. None can be allowed to leave the city to spread their filth.

We shall turn this rat's nest into a charnel house.

— Ahmall, Shuankhsen Surgeon

The Machiavelli Gambit

Opportunities like this are so rare. They say there are no resources in that desert. They say the city is overcrowded and overpopulated. We can turn the dregs of the population into a resource for the future.

Let the Sworn mop up the odd spillage from the site. We want to keep things running smoothly, after all. But take out any one of them you find loitering around the ACZ. The work being done there is far too important to us to let some idealist on a misguided crusade screw it up.

If we can keep this bottled up long enough, we're not just going to be rich beyond imagination, but we're going to rule.

— El Presidente, Prince of the Extempore

Naglfar's Army

The board is set, so far as I can tell. You've got one lot over here who wants to use something they don't understand and can't possibly control. You've got another lot over there who want to try to destroy it and wipe it from the face of the Earth. It's like a bizarre chess game.

Thing with chess is, no matter how powerful this piece or that piece might be, no matter how well positioned on the board, and no matter how well protected it seems, it's only a piece.

Naglfar's Army aren't pieces on this board. We're the players. When the pieces are done smashing each other to bits, we'll stand up and go have a beer in the aftermath.

— Matilde “the Horrid,” Antediluvian of the Insatiable

Rumors

- Fundación Arrieta offers cheap banking facilities and even small loans when people are desperate, but why does a priest work there?
- Sofia Morientes was burning photos from albums that she stole from the mansion of the General Director of the Carabineros de Chile in Parque Quinta Normal, but I swear I saw her put one of them in her pocket.
- San Cristóbal sure has some weirdos hanging around it. A spaced-out guy came up to me offering me the “Blood of Christ,” and I swear he held out his own wrist.
- I know it sounds crazy, but I saw a glowing white hand break open the gates of Villa Grimaldi the other day. The screeching sound that followed it could have curdled milk.
- So many cops have started hanging around the old greenhouse in the park since it was vandalized, but is that really so important? I'd rather they were doing something about all the people going missing after football matches.
- I know scientists can be strange, but the Head of the National Observatory sometimes just sits out alone on the hill staring up at the moon, even talking to it. I think he's on drugs.
- Someone found a golden cross brought into Chile by Pedro de Valdivia himself under an old chapel by the coast. I bet a private collector would pay handsomely to get their hands on that.
- The government have started to hand out badges to people who claim free water through the Ojo Rojas Corporation's outreach program. It's creepy seeing so many people with those red eyes staring out of their chets.

- The eco-terrorists called La Paz have been identified in the city, according to local news. One of the Kindred in the Prince's Elysium says they know how to reach them, for a price.
- When the TV stations all died, every channel started displaying this big white circle instead. Someone should go to the networks and find out what's going on.
- They say that the kids who go up to Atacama never come back, but I've seen some of my old friends on patrol in Parque Quinta Normal. They won't talk to me, though; they just bark at anyone who gets close to go about their business.
- People are starving on the streets and they're holding all that food and water up in the Gran Torre. It's crazy! There must be hundreds of people in there. You'd think they weren't eating anything at all!

Bend: Contagion of Urges

They're not scared of you. They're scared of what you represent to 'em.

— George Hanson, *Easy Rider* (1969)

The city of Bend isn't old; it's barely seen a century. It doesn't have the appetites of older cities. The grinding wheels of high politics don't turn here like they do in Washington, the stuttering gears greased by sacrifices of mortal integrity. It isn't a center of slick corporate wealth and commerce like New York, sucking hope and humanity from its victims as they pass each other wordlessly on its faded concrete streets. Nor is it a place of cancerous industry like Detroit used to be, guzzling down the poisoned blood and flesh of its citizens as if it were a giant meat-grinder.

Bend came into being as a crossing point of the Deschutes River during the 1800s, although not without bloodshed against the indigenous populace. The aggressively expansionist European-American settlers had seen the wealth of Oregon and they wanted it. At the turn of the 19th century, the river served as a pulsing artery for opportunistic lumber companies to drive mills, and the city sprung into being. Bordered to the west by mountains, Mt. Bachelor and Broken Top, and the high deserts to the east, Bend is a town with a copywrit soul. The lumber industry is ailing, dead for all intents and purposes, so the city has latched onto the next largest resource it can exploit: tourists. Winter is dedicated to ski resorts, while summer capitalizes on white water rivers, forest hiking trails, and other scenes of natural beauty. Hotels, microbreweries, and golf courses are the draw today, rather than sawmills and job prospects. The hard-working lumber community has packed up and left. In its place is a city more likely to host corporate getaways and golf meetings where big businesses (as well as some of the more formal monstrous organizations like the Invictus or the Cryptocracy) can discuss ongoing strategy over a few casual holes.

As a tourist destination, all season 'round Bend is a place to find lone travelers. The hills see a fair few isolated walkers and a steady stream of campers. The dangers of the wilds (both mundane and supernatural) account for a hefty number of disappearances. Lava River Cave, a massive, inactive lava tube, is the foundation for several the gristlier local folktales. Apart from that, Bend is everything you'd expect from a small, rural city. Betty and Jughead share a booth at the diner, Kevin Arnold delivers the morning papers, and Howard Cunningham runs the local independent hardware store. Bend is the choicest parts of the American dream: the roadside diner, the bar where everybody knows your name, the house in the 'burbs, the white picket fence, the nuclear family, and the 401k. It is a veneer of domestic normality all built on blood, capitalism, and grief. With the onset of Contagion, the sins of the past are revisiting Bend. The mortal population are fearful, aware there are things around them that are different. And what humanity fears, it destroys.

Theme and Mood

The City of Bend, Oregon. Nowheresville, USA. Lemme guess, you came here because there were brighter stars, but you didn't want a part of that? Population's big enough to get lost in, but there's not much around that's of any real importance to the major players. Yeah, a body can go about their business here, living, dead, or otherwise. But this is where it started.

Maybe it was something bad in the water? Or something in the sickly-sweet smell in the air? Lately, the people who wouldn't look at you twice on the night time streets have been stealing glances. Some just stare, and it ain't friendly the way they do it. It's like they know you're different, they have a sense that you're... wrong. The nighttime traffic has been tailing off,

too. Now, people who walk around at night always go in groups. The Radio Shack and Sports Bar TV's are all set to the same local evangelist channel. Same guy talking about monsters and demons. I'm not even sure if he's being metaphorical.

The others like you? They seem to have become as blind as the mortals are astute, going out like nothing's changed, hunting like it was going out of fashion. Stupid, especially now. You can try talking to them, but they won't, or can't, see what's happening. The mortals are getting scared and angry. Now the humans you see at night aren't scurrying away in twos or threes. There are street preachers of every faith and denomination spreading the word with foam on their lips and disciples at their sides. There are armed gangs, vigilantes looking for those who are different, those who are strange. The night air boils like a fever. The gang members' brows are clammy with the sweat from it, eyes wide and bloodshot.

You try staying in to avoid it but, besides that asshole preacher screaming out of your set, the channels all seem to be full of monster movies. Parodies of your Twilight existence, mocking and melodramatic. Exorcisms, vampire flicks, werewolf movies, all keeping you right there in the public mind and, little by little, teaching them not to fear you. Those people, those mortals out there? Who are scared, who are angry, and who outnumber you a thousand to one, even here in your quiet little city? They're eating it up.

You heard about the evening news guy from Channel 12, right? A mob sets his house on fire, dragged him out, and burned him alive... well, almost alive. Anyone in the scene knew he was a Daeva, spokesperson for the vampires. But it doesn't matter how good your Armani suit looks when it's doused in gasoline and burning you up. The crowd was all there, whoopin' and hollerin', "Killer!", "Murderer!", "Witch!"... "Vampire!" And the cops? The cops on the goddamn scene? Well they just stood and watched the crowd work itself into a fever. All around, they had those same wide, bloodshot eyes. And that maniac preacher? He's on the TV again, but now with the mayor. I saw some folk haulin' lumber up Pilot Butte too. Call me crazy, but they're either settin' burnin' stakes in the ground or building a gibbet.

Theme: Persecution

The local monsters are less cautious about covering up the evidence of their existence. In fact, they're getting sloppy. At the same time, the humans seem to be more astute to evidence of the unnatural. The friction between what they once believed to be fantasy and the evidence of the reality piles up in their minds and threatens to tear the barrier between humans and monsters down. That can only lead to one thing: a witch hunt. No single human can stand against the monsters, but ten, twenty, or a hundred? Those are better odds. The theme for Bend is to hold the weight of a human population over the characters like the Sword of Damocles to put the powerful few in fear of the amassed might of humanity. It's an opportunity for the Storyteller to ratchet up the tension in this setting, bit by bit, using orbiting events like a countdown clock to zero hour, when the Contagion gains full control of the population and the city rises like a wrathful tide to sweep away those things that humanity does not, or cannot, understand.

Mood: Paranoia

It's that point in a dream when you're just getting the feeling that something's wrong, but you don't realize you're dreaming yet. The familiar becomes unfamiliar and you don't understand why. The people you pass on the street look at you like they know you're different, like they know you're infected. The chatter on social media, podcasts, and the radio starts to focus on strange events, sightings of inhuman monsters, and encounters with freaks and darkness. Some of it's pure BS, but a growing amount is genuine. It seeps through the local networks like a virus, passing from the screens of mobile phones to computers, to the TV, and finally to

human minds. The mood in Bend is one of gradual oppression; the humans look closely at those who are strange or different, just waiting for them to make a little mistake before they shout the words that will bring the tide of humanity's righteous fear and anger crashing down upon the monsters' heads. Characters in this setting ought to be concerned about the weight of humanity bearing down on them. It doesn't matter how powerful a group of three to five monsters are when you're talking about a city of nearly one-hundred-thousand mortals coming after them. Eventually, the weight of numbers will win out.

What Has Come Before

Names are powerful things, as any mage or mummy would attest.

The name "Salem" is powerful in North America. Between the years of 1692 and 1693, the Puritans of Salem, Massachusetts and the neighboring towns of Andover and Ipswich accused over two hundred people of witchcraft. Twenty of the accused were dragged to the gallows and executed, adding to the body count of twelve men and women previously accused and executed in the township. Salem was far from the only location struck in this fashion, with witch trials taking place all along the Eastern seaboard. For a myriad of reasons, however, Salem's witch trials are the best remembered.

Modern science attributed the trials and executions to mass hysteria fueled by the inflammatory writings of Joseph Glanville, or to an outbreak of ergot poisoning in the region. Glanville claimed he could prove the existence of supernatural entities, leading some to theorize that he was a hunter, despite many other hunters being targeted as witches. Whether the faith-sanctioned murders were driven by moral mania, belief, or ambition, the commencement of the witch trials in Salem, Massachusetts saw an outbreak of Contagion in the region.

While many Puritan hunters pointed to the Contagion's gestation point as the death curse of Metacomet, chief of the Wampanoag people, others believed it incubated within the built-up aggression stirred by growing piety and paranoia, or Glanville himself being a servant of Naglfar's Army.

But this story isn't about Salem, MA. The Contagion there disappeared with the culmination of the witch trials, as bloody as they were. This story is about Bend, which is not far from Salem, Oregon.

Names are powerful things. Contagion can carry not only through blood or spirit, but also through names.

The city of Bend has a volatile history with its neighbor Crook County, going back to its founding and further. The Rogue River Wars, fought in Oregon between the U.S. Army and the Tututni, Athabaskan, Takelman, and Shasta people (often referred to as the Rogue River Indians), began as early as 1834, when a fur trapping party led by Ewing Young murdered several of the local tribespeople and hid their bodies in the forests. Initial relations between the settlers and the natives had been cordial up to that point, but the establishment of the Oregon Trail and the gold rush in northern California brought more settlers in, sparking a huge demand for basic resources that the land initially could not support.

Although the U.S. Army initially opposed the governor's proposed displacement of the native tribes, even going so far as to protect indigenous women and children in their forts, the aggression of the settlers and the eye for an eye retaliation from the Rogue River tribes necessitated army intervention as open hostilities inflamed the territory. After a final, bloody battle at Big Bend in 1856, the surviving tribespeople were forcibly relocated to reservations on the north coast of Oregon. When the violence against the natives ended, the settlers turned

their darker impulses back to their traditional enemies: each other. Contagion once again blossomed as the iron snake of the Central Oregon Railroad arrived in 1911, following years of competition over lumber, gold, and the mineral wealth in the region. Railroad tycoon James J. Hill's attention fell on Oregon, bringing with it all the misery of the indentured Chinese and African-American rail workers. In the hearts of greedy, fanatical mortals, Contagion festered and grew, feeding hungry desires. It soon infected the land itself, spreading from Salem to Bend, so recently witness to the deaths of hundreds.

In the early 1900s, a proposal to move the Crook County seat to the new city of Bend failed. The motion resulted in the birth of Deschutes County itself, splitting from its parent county and going on to overtake Crook as the leading lumber producing community during a time of murderous competition. A legal challenge over the sovereignty of Deschutes County in 1914 and a mysterious fire that burned down the County offices in 1937 couldn't stop the viral growth of Bend and its juggernaut lumber industry, fueled by the appetites of industrial progress and World War II. Logging camps from rival companies fought for territory, breeding bitter, violent feuds in the hills and forests of Oregon. Contagion fueled their rivalries, making them more violent than they had any right to be. Behind the scenes, the Machiavelli Gambit seeded the ground for a vast experiment, trying to recreate or refine the original Salem Contagion to see how it might affect mortal behavior.

The Deschutes / Crook County rivalry started to tell when, in 1950, the Shevlin-Hixon sawmill, one of two major players in the foundering Deschutes lumber industry, closed its doors amid suspicious circumstances. In 1980, with the city's population grown to 50,000, the Brooks-Scanlon mill also sold its interests to Sapphire InterContinental. Crook County fared little better. Over-logging in the 1960s saw federal restrictions imposed, and the market crash of the '80s gutted the lumber industry there, too. Cryptocracy agents undermined the industry in the area to forestall the growing aggression between the two counties, but they went too far and only furthered the industrial collapse of Oregon's lumber yards. While tourism has overtaken lumber as the main economy in Bend and Deschutes County, the past rivalry with Crook County is still evident. It comes out most obviously during high school and college football season, but the stain remains just beneath the surface, waiting to feed a fire once more.

Where We Are

In the three decades since the Gambit and the Cryptocracy turned their eyes away from Bend, the city has doubled in size and attracted its own small population of the supernatural. The city is big enough to support a small coterie of the Kindred or a ring of the Unchained. A pack of Uratha might range the forests, and the Warm Springs Reservation a couple of hours north could host a tomb or cult for one of the Arisen. Among the broader community of the Pacific Northwest, it has a reputation as a good place to quietly lay low. If you've screwed up badly enough that your contemporaries don't want to see your face for a while but it's not worth killing you over, you go to Bend. On the other hand, the city frequently sees new faces come and go, so if you disappear during your stay, no one asks too many questions. It's quarantine for those currently out of favor, or a convenient site to dispose of those not worth making an example of.

The night life of the city is what you'd expect from a tourist town. The microbreweries, grill houses, museums, and hotels are collected in the Old Bend district in the city center, a bright and clean attraction for the steady waves of tourists newly arrived or just down from the mountains. Out from the Old Bend district, there's a buffer ring showcasing the best of domestic Bend, while still separating the visitors from the locals. Everyday fixtures like Walmart or Costco feature alongside the ten or so golf courses, golf hotels, or even the golf

village. Car rentals, outdoor supply stores, and daytrip agents are interspersed between gyms, grocery stores, and schools. You can also find the less mainstream entertainment of the Cabaret bar off Northeast Burnside Avenue. Beyond that is Bend proper, the suburbs, places of worship, and mini marts that house and supply the needs of the local populace.

In the past few months, an outbreak of religious fever and spiritualism has overtaken the city, driven by a charismatic young pastor named Enrique de la Salle and ushered in by several infected Sin-Eaters. As the latest iteration of a line of preachers going back three generations, de la Salle inherited the Chapel of the Holy Word, a modest place of worship built by his grandfather. Not long ago, de la Salle cast off the constrictions of his previous faith and renamed his church the Chapel of the Sundered Host. Taking on a broader, inclusionist dogma in his sermons, he talked about embracing one another regardless of race, color, or creed. His only stigma? You had to be human.

This abrupt change should have killed off any following he had, but instead, the all-accepting message has spread like an epidemic. In just a short time, the pastor has secured public appearances and a regular spot on the local cable channel. The message he's sending is this: monsters aren't welcome here. Initially, his listeners could say he was being metaphorical, preaching against humanity's darker nature, but gradually, his ideology has solidified. Pastor de la Salle knows monsters exist and he's gunning for them. He's publicly building an army of hunters. It's like Jonestown or Waco all over again, but now everyone's drinking the Kool-Aid and the Feds are going to be on their side, eventually.

Heading up Route 97 to Redmond, you might hear some of the locals talking about it, maybe nodding and saying that it's past time in hushed voices, but go out as far as Eugene, west over the mountains, and no one seems any the wiser to the beatings, hangings, and burnings going on in the County Seat. Still, the signal is getting out. Something in the Contagion calls out to hunters. A mortal might not pick up the words in a paper or the snippet on a news channel but, in a hunter's mind, they piece together, encouraging hunters to come westward. The closer a hunter gets, the stronger the message becomes until it is a clarion call to arms to face the darkness. Some of them come willingly, gladly seeking others like them, but for a few, it's a situation that needs to be disarmed. Calling hunters together presents one tempting target for anything that might want to be rid of them.

The Contagion in Bend is akin to an autoimmune disorder in which infected cells are pushed to attack or corrupt that which is different: that which has not been or cannot be infected. The Contagion strain is attuned to humans, with other creatures reacting differently; even as the humans gather together to drive out the foreign element, the infected monsters amongst them find their darker impulses heightened. They are driven to highlight their differences, making them easier to identify and eradicate.

Cause

The Construct: The Construct is the shattered and infected remains of a partially deconstructed angel that slipped through the cracks of the God-Machine's disposal Infrastructure. Physically incapable of actions beyond speaking, it retains links to data-centers about creatures of the Twilight, and whispers streams of information about them and their existence. It manifests through names the spirits hold as important, initially infecting Salem, Massachusetts, and emerged again through an anomalous concentration of conflict near Salem, Oregon. Whatever this angel's past purpose was is unknown. All that remains is a desiccated half-corps of leathery flesh and weathered bones. Metal teeth protrude from dried-out gums, eyes like shining metal orbs gaze sightlessly out of sunken sockets, and the stub of a wing, with a few rusted steel feathers still clinging to it, harken to its heritage.

Whether it fulfilled its purpose or didn't, it was sent for disassembly, but something, possibly the Contagion, interrupted the process. Pastor de la Salle discovered its remains. It was a very basic construction. Inside the open chest cavity, brass and copper cogs nestle amongst shriveled, infected lungs and a browned, cancerous heart. The tumors and tendrils of the infection serve but one purpose: to keep the withered organs functioning and the tarnished gears ticking away so that the angel may speak its arcane knowledge.

Pastor Enrique de la Salle: Enrique was a third-generation Mormon preacher. His great-grandfather moved the family north after a dark event back home which formed the foundation of many family ghost stories. This event also served as the trigger point for the deep-rooted belief and service to the church the family has observed since their relocation. Pastor de la Salle discovered the Construct out in the woods of Oregon, unaware that it had existed beneath Massachusetts at one point and probably elsewhere before then. He was immediately struck by divine rapture upon seeing its heavenly nature. Or, more accurately, he became stigmatic, made newly aware of the God-Machine in a deeply traumatizing encounter.

Most hunters are incapable of witnessing something so unearthly, and the experience took a toll on the pastor's mind. He is now obsessed with the Construct, the Contagion from its remains fueling his fervor. In the time it took to carry it down the hillside, the whisperings of the angel crept into de la Salle's mind like a parasite. He hears the words as an omen of doom upon humanity at the hands of dark creatures. He had some contacts already with a small Long Night cell run by an ex-marine in the woods, and he took the Construct to them for safekeeping. As he travels between the growing compound and Bend itself, he has created a moving conduit between the host of the Contagion, the city, and any God-Machine Infrastructure concealed within its boundaries. Pastor de la Salle himself serves as a carrier to the plague, his compelling words the microbes that spread the infection.

Symptoms

There are gradual signs of the infection creeping up the food chain. Pigeons mob hawks out of the sky. A rancher witnesses a herd of deer turn on a pack of coyotes, goring and kicking them to death, leaving the corpses strewn across the highway. As the infection progresses, it affects higher predators. Restless spirits, stirred by the presence of the infected, push the Uratha into more overt action. The Kindred can almost feel the lifeblood draining out of them into the earth, increasing their need to feed. Supernatural creatures feel a sharpened urge to take what sustains them and become less concerned with cleaning up evidence of their presence. Meanwhile, the human population is taking notice of these growing signs of the weird and unnatural, and an undercurrent of fear rises amid the resident population. Desperate as they are to keep this away from the tourists, who feed cash into their local economy, they embrace the words of Pastor de la Salle to band together. The teachings of de la Salle encourage humanity to unite as one through differences of gender or sexual identity, nationality, citizenship, age, race, ability, or faith to combat the agents of the darkness that prey upon them all. The presence of the Contagion and the spiritual turbulence it has caused give rise to unexplained events and supernatural sightings, which lend credence to his cause. The whole effect is magnified by the Pastor's repeated appearances on the local cable network; his broadcasts perpetuate the mortals' fear and spin them up towards aggression.

Rather than counter this rising hysteria or call for the public to let the authorities handle the situation, the city council isn't saying a word. Those who are targeted in the early days of the infection and beaten on the nighttime streets by gangs find no help from an unsympathetic police department. As the infection strengthens, the police stand by and watch, or actively assist in the persecution. Outside of the city limits, no one says anything about the violent

turn of events. News agencies and even social media seem almost completely unaware of the savage frontier justice being carried out in the county seat. The people of Bend are predominantly infected with the **Zealous Condition** (see p. XX) as a result of the Verbal Epidemic Dread Power (see p. XX).

Paranoia: Aside from roving gangs of vigilantes, the characters have other issues to deal with. Most importantly, who can they trust? Any other creatures present in the setting could be compromised by the Contagion, which could result in them brushing the characters' concerns aside, or even earmarking them as scapegoats should they get caught themselves. Similarly, contacts are a dubious prospect. Contacts within Bend could reveal the character and get them thrown to the wolves. Contacts outside the city are likely to be trustworthy but, in these days of cyber-surveillance, you never know who's listening. In either case, a botched roll using the Contacts Merit results in a character either being sold out to the mob, or the conversation being monitored by local infected authorities.

Zeal: Sometimes, a monster's best defensive option against a group of mortals is to show their true self, but even in the case of Lunacy with lycanthropes or the horrifying visage of one of the Unchained when they "go loud," the more mortals who are involved, the less effective such a defense becomes. In the case of the outbreak in Bend, it's just as likely to add fuel to the fire of pseudo-religious hatred aimed toward the characters as it is to provide an avenue for escape.

Displaying their nature to a mob is likely to lead to one of two outcomes: a massacre, or a chase scene. Taking into account the open layout of Bend, the wide city streets and the low-lying nature of most of the structures in the city and its suburbs, it becomes increasingly difficult to evade pursuers (reduce dice pools by 2 in chase scenes). Beyond that, any mortals the character does evade will talk openly about what they've seen; put these factors together, and the act of revealing one's true, monstrous nature becomes a risky prospect to all.

The Horde: The massed ranks of humanity in Bend are being turned, word by word and mind by mind toward a united cause: the persecution of that which is no longer or never was human. A Storyteller can begin by using small numbers of stat-blocked individuals but, as the story progresses and more humans succumb to infection, this becomes less practical. As the story builds pace, the Storyteller is encouraged to remember the Horde setting (**Chronicles of Darkness** p. 149) to represent wild mobs or even riot outbreaks. As the story peaks, the need to use special individuals will re-emerge, from police officers to the paramilitaries of the Compound and infected hunters to represent the Contagion's increasing hold on the city.

Outbreak Sites

The Chapel of the Sundered Host: A modest house of worship, the chapel is the foundation of de la Salle's campaign against the darkness. A white-washed, turn-of-the-century wooden chapel, it sits off Brookwood Boulevard near Farewell Bend Park. Cherry trees grow on the property that might account for the sickly-sweet smell in the area; that, or they burn a whole lot of bad incense. The Chapel doesn't have a graveyard, but it does have a crypt. No one's ever questioned this but, behind a simple storm cellar door (with heavy hinges and a shiny new padlock) and occupying a space far larger than mundane things like sewer and utility pipes should allow, giant brass cogs turn against each other. Just recently, these cogs have started to tarnish and their steady rhythm has begun to stutter as the presence of the Contagion affects the unknown Infrastructure it represents. The tunnels that lead to the Infrastructure are guarded by a couple of infected local creatures the Contagion in the God-Machine's gears has claimed as its own.

The Compound: If anyone was looking closely, they might spy a track into the trees heading up toward Tumalo Falls before the golfing village. If they were to follow it — and if they were somehow able to evade the security features — they might find the Compound. Located off Highway 372, the Compound serves as a staging point for de la Salle's end goal, an all-out war against the creatures of the night. de la Salle's lieutenant, Rebecca Mason, oversees the facility. Mason is an ex-marine, survivalist, and ex-member of the Long Night. Following established paramilitary dogma and influenced by Mason's military background and paranoia, the Compound is fenced, well-lit, well-stocked, and well-guarded. Infiltration would be a feat indeed for anyone with less-than-superhuman abilities. While outwardly a Long Night stash, the Compound is secretly funded and supplied by Zero Hour (though not even Mason is aware of that fact).

- **Nexus of the Infection.** The Compound is where Pastor de la Salle keeps the Construct or, as he calls it, the relic. As ground zero for the Contagion, this isolated location suffers more spiritual turbulence without the side effect of drawing unwanted outside interest.
- **Paranoia.** Magnified by the presence of the Construct, the Compound has an overbearing sense of tension linked to the profoundly disturbed spirits of the area and the unbalanced psyches of the paramilitary personnel who guard it.
- **Free Rein.** Given the nature of the setting, the use of clearly supernatural abilities is likely to be considered a last resort. However, since the Compound is deep in the forests, once the characters become aware of its existence, this is their opportunity to go hog-wild and unleash the beast, so to speak.

The Final Rest Roadhouse: Established in the 1950s on China Hat Road outside the city limits, the Final Rest Roadhouse has served as a bar stop for travelers, hippies, long-hairs, and bikers over the decades. Generally frequented by those less welcome by the residents of Bend, the bar is regarded as a welcome buffer, far enough away to keep those unwanted elements out of town. As such, it has served for many years as an unofficial meeting house for Sworn factions. Today, this reputation is likely to draw unwanted attention, and it's only a matter of time before de la Salle's agents come a-knockin'. The Rest is a traditional roadhouse, a relic of a bygone age of Americana. Old rock posters plaster the walls, and the jukebox is always a couple of decades out of date. Although its windows are grimy and the whole façade is run-down, that appearance is carefully maintained to discourage any casual business. On rare occasions, college kids will swing by on a dare to slum it with the roughnecks. The Rest takes care to ensure that, while they get discouraged from returning, they do get home safely. Unfortunately, the city is growing and the suburbs and golf courses are creeping closer.

- **Jocelyn Moretti,** proprietor of the Final Rest, is a figure of local legend both within and outside of the supernatural community. She can, as required, be the head of the local coterie or guide to a throng. Stories about her center around a rumor that she lived in New York until a few weeks before the arrest of Al Capone. That, along with her surname, has led to speculation that she has ties to the mob or a link to the FBI. Was she ever part of a shadowy under-cover plot to the arrest of the notorious gangster? If any organized response to the persecution is going to come, it's going to come from the Rest. Whether Jocelyn orders an investigation, tells everyone to go to ground, or sounds the call to go to the mattresses, this will be where things get started.

Why Bend?

The questions many creatures ask when faced with the Contagion in Bend tend to be, “If this infection’s source was Salem, Massachusetts, and it spawned again in Salem, Oregon, why is it not concentrated there?” and “Why is it targeting the people of Bend?”

The Sworn ponder these questions. Raking through the archives of Salem, Oregon, it seems a group of Sworn and False aligned at some point nearly a century ago to purge the Contagion entirely from that city. According to Rosetta Society archives, this faction was nicknamed “the Devil’s Deal” or “the Unholy Pact,” though it’s unlikely given the negative connotations of the title that they called themselves this. Whatever the case, they appear to have eliminated the Contagion as its source but disappeared before they could mop up the remains.

Faction scholars contemplate how many other hidden Sworn or False groups might exist and how they keep their presence hidden. A demon Inquisitor of the Cryptocracy was able to confront the Construct years ago. She learned that the Contagion dragged the Devil’s Deal faction into another reality after their mission in Salem, Oregon ended. This demon herself disappeared shortly after, indicating the Contagion is quite capable of reacting quickly to patch up any holes in its defenses, not dissimilar to how the God-Machine itself works.

Tiers

In most games of **Hunter: The Vigil**, story hooks are divided between tiers. Knowing most groups that tackle the stories in this chapter will consist of Sworn and False, and that they will not necessarily all be hunters, the tiers are not stated here. However, Storytellers can treat most story hooks that do not face the Contagion head-on as tier one or two chronicle seeds.

Story Hooks

- One of the local supernatural network’s informants — maybe a ghoul in the police department or a member of an Unchained cover network in the municipal offices — has gone dark. This individual may not know the full extent of who or what they reported to, but they’ve learned enough to shake people up and get a mob raised if they talk. Of course, their association with the so-called “forces of darkness” puts their own life at considerable risk, so it’s likely they’ll go to ground before phoning in an anonymous tip. It’s up to the characters to answer the questions: where is their informant, are they still alive, are they loyal, and if they are not loyal, can they bring themselves to silence the danger to their network?
- Some local college kids were hanging out behind the chapel near Farewell Bend Park. Just a usual evening, a few illicit beers and a smoke away from the prying eyes of their parents. When the big padlock on the storm-shelter doors rattled the first time, they didn’t notice, but the second blow caught their attention. Then the doors started jumping like something was pounding on them from the inside. The kids fled, but not before a few of them caught the stink of rot coming from behind the banging doors. What’s down there? What is it doing, and what has it got to do with the rest of this car wreck of a situation?
- Jimmy cracked and went on a rampage. It started when the high school valedictorian stole his dad’s gun and sprayed the Final Rest. Then he went back into town and shot up a bunch of store fronts. Jimmy said that “the angel on the TV told him to do it” when the police brought him down. Jimmy never went to the chapel and never heard Pastor de la Salle’s words, so how did he get so jacked up so quickly? Where did he get wired in from? And how many more will pick up the signal before it’s taken off the air?
- The city council has fast-tracked a new statute against vagrancy. This means more cops on the street at night. The strange thing is, there are a couple of regulars who panhandle

from the tourists and buy booze from the friendlier liquor stores, and they're not getting any hassle from the cops. Yet one or two of the local monsters have had run-ins with the authorities, despite being fully employed residents of Bend. If the Contagion has spread to the council board, then things are advancing quickly. Can the characters act quickly enough to meet the as-yet unchallenged violence in the streets?

- They've erected a scaffold up on Pilot Butte. The official line for the tourists is some kind of "living history" schtick but, after the visitors are gone for the night, the mob raids the sheriff's cells, drags prisoners to the hill, and hangs them high for real. The bodies are always gone by sun-up, but how long will it be before they're just left there to rot, or to burn? Is the police department on the turn, or is it just one or two night shift officers letting the mob have its blood?
- No one can say for certain why the land became angry. The local tribes (exiled north by the settlers) have fragments in their spoken histories of "singing to the spirits." They hint at something gifted to the Nation long ago from a distant land, an artifact of great significance, power, and rage, that slept for generations before the people were led by the guardian to sing to it again. Perhaps the artifact is feeding the Contagion, blighting the land with its anger. Perhaps the magicians of Irem sent it away so it would not lash out at them, or perhaps it's just a story to explain the aggression the tribes faced at the hands of the European colonists. Can characters of disparate groups align with each other to face the ancient threat?
- There's a new player on the scene. They've killed three creatures in the last five nights. From what hunters have heard of the violent executions, they think it was a gang, but each hit has been carried out quickly and relatively quietly, leaving only signs of a single, inhumanly strong perpetrator. It might be that this new executioner is a hunter or Hero who has a unique reaction to the Contagion. They might be the result of renewed experimentation by the Machiavelli Gambit, or even a rogue super-soldier created by Task Force: Valkyrie. Whatever their origin, the chance of a new strain evolving of the Bend Contagion as a result of their presence cannot be allowed. The call has gone out: which cell, compact, or conspiracy can put boots on the ground to stop this monstrous killer?

Tainting the Twilight

The Contagion in Bend feeds human fear and thrives on anger and hate. Its vector for infection is human fanaticism and violence, specifically manifesting when hunters take their missions to destructive extremes. How the Contagion is able to tell the difference between fanatical hunters and fanatical humans is a mystery, but members of the Sworn and False believe it has something to do with the angel purported to have been buried in the earth of Salem, Massachusetts, now present in the vicinity of Salem, Oregon. What is clear is that those mortals already awakened to the supernatural but not a part of it are perfect hosts for this strain.

There's only so much the Contagion can do to its fragile hosts without making it obvious they aren't truly human anymore and turning them on each other, but creating a better soldier isn't its goal: numbers will suffice. From the Construct via Pastor de la Salle, the virus spreads downward into the congregation and out into the wider human population of Bend. Those who listen to the pastor's sermons initially develop a waxy pallor to their skin, only perceptible to the monstrous, including mages and hunters. The more they listen, the further the infection progresses. They present with bloodshot eyes and froth on their lips, invisible to other mortals but all too clear to their supernatural neighbors. From the point of view of the Storyteller, only the highest ranks of the infected (those at the Compound) need any modification at all; they're stronger and more resilient than most humans. The major change

in ordinary humans comes in their perception: their “them versus us” mindset is being tempered and focused on the supernatural and anyone who seems to betray unnatural abilities. A hunter who uses telekinesis or prescience is as likely to be dragged to the gallows as any vampire or werewolf.

For the monsters, the miasma of infection gradually makes it harder to hide their true natures or perpetuate their unlives, making them more aggressive, more predatory, or simply less human-looking. Anyone infected with Contagion sees these creatures through a new lens, and the creatures themselves feel the infection layered into Bend as it affects the way they behave.

- **Beasts:** You have a sense there’s something going on, a shared Nightmare more terrifying than what you can construct yourselves. The Beast finds it harder to feed the Horror within as the Contagion progresses. The city population is already wracked by nightmares. What can the Beast do to them that the Contagion can’t?
- **Changelings:** Was that a dog barking or the baying of hunting hounds? Was that a car or the blast of a Huntsman’s horn? The humans keep looking at you, looking and looking, and any one of them might be a Huntsman. Is your mask slipping? Is your true nature on show for all to see?
- **Demons:** You’re the weak link, the broken chain, and, for once, that’s not a good thing. Any Cover you might adopt in the city is at risk. A weak story is easily torn away, and a more complete Cover opens you up to increased scrutiny and risk. Sure, you could pose as a tourist, but if you need to start poking around, how suspicious will that look? How long can your Cover last?
- **Deviants:** Remade, repurposed, and desperate to hide the additions that have been made to your body, you struggle to fit in and stay under the radar. But the Contagion won’t let you hide; it’s out to expose you and put your scars, physical and mental, on display for the world to see. Your Variations might stay hidden, but the scars that hide them are neon signs declaring, “I don’t belong here.”
- **Hunters:** You’re only human; that’s the saying, isn’t it? It’s supposed to reassure you when you fail at something, but here? Now? It’s a curse. Being human means you’re at the bottom of the food-chain and those damned creatures are above you. Watch for the eyes in the shadows, fear the teeth in the night. You have one advantage: the herd. Those like you can fight with you or die instead of you. The Contagion, carried upon the words of Pastor de la Salle, feeds the fear of the unknown even in those who have seen. It brings humans, even hunters, into the fold. The more they hear and listen, the more the Contagion takes hold.
- **Mages:** Experiencing Gnosis and becoming aware of the false nature of the world is hard enough. The same is true of learning to manipulate the realms of the Arcanum. How hard could it become, then, when one’s powers are not fully under control? The mage’s Nimbus occasionally sparks even when they’re not using their power; literal sparks or a persistent heat haze or an aura of cold around them might soon give them away to mortals.
- **Mummies:** These people are thieves. The hands of the European settlers are stained with Sekhem. You can smell it, see it on their skin. More than that, and maybe worse, the faithful are turning away from their ancient bond and joining the ranks of the tainted. Though they may not show physical symptoms themselves, how freely can the Arisen operate without the support of their cult?
- **Prometheans:** The air itself eats at your skin like leprosy, a rot that starts in the extremities and in some cases afflicts the internal organs too. The degradation can take weeks

to have a debilitating effect, but it very quickly becomes unsightly. Infected Prometheans exhibit blackened veins, fingertips, and lips, or open sores and festering buboes. In the cases of those pieced together, the old seams start to split and seep pus.

- **Sin-Eaters:** The Contagion calls out to the Geist, and the unquiet spirits of the region taunt and cajole the Bound. The further the Contagion progresses, the more disturbed the spirits become. The Sin-Eater becomes a center for poltergeist activity. The more often you're seen at sites where strange things happen, the more likely you are to be branded the cause. You have heard the legends of infected Sin-Eaters settling here when spiritualism ran rampant across America. Is this outbreak connected?
- **Vampires:** Leech, virus. A member of hungry dead can almost feel the blood draining from her body. It's as if, even as she feeds, the earth in turn is feeding on her. She begins to exhibit more exaggerated physical aspects of the classical vampire: sallow, jaundiced skin, sunken eyes, and elongated nails. It's hard to persuade others that you belong when you look like a monster and they never see you in the daylight.
- **Werewolves:** The lone wolf, or the rabid dog? Even those Uratha with weaker ties to the spirit world are under constant bombardment from the ever-present spiritual turbulence. It's like a needle in their brain making them more aggressive, more prone to shift. There's also a tendency to froth at the mouth when emotions run high.

Pastor Enrique de la Salle

"The strength of humanity is in our hearts, our minds, and our names!"

Before his family took up the cloth, de la Salle's great-grandfather was a hunter. He didn't travel extensively to find and fight the creatures of the night; he was a family man in Mexico when the darkness fell over his small town. After the events that followed, he took his family and moved away from that place and the memories that chased him. Through the stories he told his son, Enrique's grandfather, he guided the male line of the family into religious service. These stories have been handed down, tales of true darkness in the world, only half-believed but nevertheless venerated. After a short, skeptical period with the Long Night, Enrique discovered the Construct in the woods outside of Bend. It infected him with the Contagion and as he listens to what it speaks, he now fully believes his great-grandfather's stories. Obsessed by the Construct and its constant, whispered secrets, he hands the partial angel to Rebecca Mason, an ex-marine, who regularly comes to his church to hear the word. She's a conspiracy junkie, and de la Salle needs just such a paranoid personality to safeguard what he believes is his one-way connection to God.

As Enrique listens, he hears the warning: the monsters are moving against humanity. It's up to him to rouse the frightened sheep and build a righteous army to oppose the night. He speaks passionately about the need to recognize the existence of that which is dangerous in its difference. He talks at length about embracing the diversity of humanity instead of shunning it, because that distraction is what the enemy wants. His words flow through his congregation and out into the city; they become carriers of the infection, and his flock grows in number and fervor. Initially, he sent those most susceptible to his words to Mason and the Compound to guard the source of his knowledge, the Shattered Host itself. There, his first followers are building an army and stockpiling weapons before the inevitable breaking point where humanity wakes up to the disease in its midst: the creatures of the night.

Virtue: Righteous

Vice: Obsessive

Attributes: Intelligence 4, Wits 3, Resolve 3; Strength 3, Dexterity 2, Stamina 3; Presence 4, Manipulation 3, Composure 2

Skills: Academics (Scripture) 2, Athletics (Running) 1, Drive 2, Empathy 1, Expression (Oration) 3, Firearms 2, Investigation 2, Occult 4, Persuasion 2, Politics 3, Subterfuge 2

Merits: Allies 3 (Congregation), Allies 4 (Compound Paramilitaries), Iron Stamina 2, Iron Will 2, Resources 1, Status (Cult) 3

Dread Powers: Enthralment, Infection Host, Poisonous Words

Health: 9

Willpower: 7

Size: 4

Speed: 9

Defense: 6

Initiative: 5

Dread Powers

Once, Pastor de la Salle possessed Endowments befitting a hunter of his ability. Contagion has shifted them into Dread Powers shared by the desiccated angel known as the Construct. Enrique and the Construct possess the use of **Host Immunity**, **Attention**, and **Poisonous Words**, despite de la Salle being mortal and therefore typically unable to use such powers.

Host Immunity

A Contagion Dread Power, Host Immunity enables its wielder to designate another individual capable of passing on Contagion without suffering its ill effects. In Bend, this allows Pastor de la Salle to use Dread Powers such as Attention and Poisonous Words without gaining the **Zealous Condition** (p. XX), but it also theoretically allows him to carry the Geryo strain of Contagion among other Contagion-related infections. If used on a target, they gain the **Contagion Carrier Condition** (p. XX). Individuals like de la Salle loathe to use this Dread Power, as it renders a potential victim resistant to influence.

Attention

The wielder of this Dread Power can, with the snap of their fingers, clearing of their throat, or swell of their voice, suddenly command the attentions of people able to hear their voice. This attention is gained for just a few seconds, potentially long enough to then use Poisonous Words or to act as a distraction while an ally sneaks by or an assassin delivers their poison. Keeping an audience engaged requires a compelling speech, and if the audience is resistant, applicable dice rolls. If the target possesses the **Contagion Carrier Condition**, this Dread Power has no effect on them.

Poisonous Words

The Contagion in Bend is subtle and virulent. Rather than being passed by touch or through the air, the Contagion spreads through auditory reception, usually keyed into the repetition of specific words (e.g., “Salem,” “witch,” and others). Those who listen contract the strain and, by speaking, pass it on. At the onset, the infected is compelled to hear more and gains an unnatural level of zeal on the subject of the speaker’s choosing.

Supporting characters might automatically fall to the effect of Poisonous Words, while protagonists can attempt to resist their lure with a Resolve + Composure roll. Failure conveys

the **Zealous Condition**. If the target possesses the **Contagion Carrier Condition**, this Dread Power has no effect on them.

Master Sergeant Rebecca Mason (Ret.)

“The scariest thing I ever seen was my Drill Sergeant, and you ain’t him! Oorah!”

Ex-marine, survivalist, conspiracy junkie, ex-Long Night member. Big, broad, and brusque, Master Sergeant Mason was invalidated out of the forces after a failed psych-eval. The diagnosis? Clinical paranoia. After a couple of years on the road, she wound up in Bend at Pastor de la Salle’s chapel. He managed to convince her to hang around. Now she commands the Tumalo Falls Compound and trains the militia that de la Salle is building in secret until the city of Bend is ready to embrace the crusade against the darkness.

For the purposes of the Storyteller, Mason and the compound veterans are hunters and can be individually written up to suit the chronicle.

Attributes: Intelligence 3, Wits 3, Resolve 4; Strength 4, Dexterity 4, Stamina 3; Presence 2, Manipulation 2, Composure 2

General Dice Pools: Nowhere to Run 6, Military Intelligence 4, Won’t Back Down 3

Combat Dice Pools: Grappling 6, Guns 7, Baton 5

Health: 10

Willpower: 3

Size: 5

Speed: 12

Defense: 6

Initiative: 6

Cure

There’s only one way to cure this kind of cancer: find the root and carve it out. That means a cull. The Construct, Pastor de la Salle, Rebecca Mason, and the infected at the Compound, even the Chapel of the Sundered Host, all have to go. Break the path of infection and stop the spread. Beyond that, you have to stop others rising in their place and discredit all claims of the supernatural. It’s a big job but, there’s a couple of ways to handle it. Characters might have a chance if they manipulate the local TV channels and flood the town with feel-good movies rather than supernatural horror flicks, or if they make videos for the internet that show the guy inside the monster costume. Think of it as chemotherapy for the collective subconscious.

The Cryptocracy

This is potentially a worst-case scenario. The Contagion is virulent, subtle, and it’s drawing attention to the Twilight. It’s turning those we seek to help against us, using them as its weapons. The status quo is about to go right out the window. We cannot sit back and watch.

— “Stormy” Davis, Agent of the Eshmaki

The Jeremiad

This is what we wanted, trial by ordeal. This is our chance to atone for the sins of the past. What better way to prove ourselves than by countering the fire of human hatred and rooting out the Contagion that is its cause?

— Bobby Johnson, Prophet of the Daeva

The Rosetta Society

There's a pattern here. This has happened before. Something is speaking to these people, a voice we can hear, can understand. This is a chance to find that which we have sought for so long. This may be our Rosetta Stone.

— Miss Farmer, Inquisitor Exegete

The Ship of Theseus

What does it mean? What's the purpose of this new shift? If we hunters ascend to dominance in the world, what does it mean for the other creatures? Is it time to end? Or time to fight?

— Henry Teller, Thesean of the Loyalists of Thule

Zero Hour

This is what we trained for. Our enemy is here, now, in front of us, and it's using tactics we understand. Or is it? Something may be masking the violence in this city from the outside world, but how long will that last in the face of armed confrontations in the streets?

— “Dangerman” Sally Midstead, Iconoclast of the Pilgrims

Escalation

If Pastor de la Salle infects the city councilors, more laws will go through to push the police to target those who are different. If the police are infected, the level of brutality against those deemed other will rise. If both are exposed to the Contagion, then it becomes only a matter of time before it spreads to the governor, the senator, the senate itself, and then the groundwork is laid for it to spread city to city across the United States. If the characters can't stop the spread of the Contagion, then the campaign against the supernatural could go statewide, national, or even global. It could be the catalyst for all-out war.

Rumors in Bend

- Someone raided the local morgue. The reinforced door was busted wide open, but there were no casualties and no witnesses. It's not so much *what* they took as *who*, and that's not an easy question to answer either. The list of stolen items looks like Ed Gein's shopping list. There could be a Progenitor in town, or it could be a run-of-the mill maniac. Either way, now's not the time. A storm is on the horizon.
- The trees up by Tumalo Falls are bleeding. Not thick, sticky sap, but true type-O neg. Some people swear they've seen the ghosts of loggers striding through the woods at night, axes in hand and fire in their eyes. What's going on up there? Will it *stay* up there? You wouldn't want to be in town when a couple hundred angry lumberjack specters sweep through.
- Some people went missing up at Lava River Cave. They were the last visitors of the day and they just never came back out. The ranger went down to look after someone found their car abandoned in the lot. She couldn't find a trace of them, but there was a weird vapor coming up through the cracked stone floor. That's strange, right? Because Lava River Cave has been inactive for 80,000 years.
- A rash of Bigfoot sightings in the suburbs has hit the papers. Whether the Sasquatch is real or it's a rogue Uratha playing the part, it needs to stop before cryptid investigators descend with their thermal cameras and night vision goggles to make life harder for everyone.

- The Deschutes Historical Museum is putting on a new exhibition of local tribal artifacts from the Rogue River Wars. Some of them are supposed to be quite unique for the region, but are they even from around here, or are they from a place and time somewhere much farther away, and much longer ago?
- Old Mrs. Weebles stands out on her porch at midnight, every night. She calls to her dead cat and talks to her even deader husband. Local legend says that about ten years ago, people stopped seeing Mrs. Weebles around. Mr. Weebles just potted around as usual, but the street thought she was dead and were waiting for the smell to hit so they could call in the ambulance. Then, just like that, she was back. The teenagers joke that he brought her back to life by voodoo, like he was some kind of Dr. Frankenstein. The truth is, she's just a dotty old lady but, with things the way they are, how long before someone looks at her and shouts witch?
- The Cheiron Group are in town, but they're not advertising their presence. They're here to snatch up one of the infected and try to get another message spread, an attempt to inoculate against the growing infection. But they don't know what they're dealing with. If only one of them gets infected, they could corrupt an entire Conspiracy.
- Teenagers! Teenagers are the worst. Even with what's going on around them, there are those who just have to rebel. Do they think it's a game? Is this really the time to be crying out for attention? Right now, their little "coven" is meeting on the sly in mom's basement, but soon they might get the idea to play at summoning something in the graveyard. It's the same tired old trope that rebellious teens in religious towns have been rolling out for decades. The fact that it'll get them killed doesn't seem to worry them. They don't even know to consider how their game might rip the Gauntlet wide open.

For the Storyteller

Pastor de la Salle is a focal point for Hunter chronicles, but he's not the supernatural source of the Contagion. While hunters may want to set fire to the compound to stop the Contagion from spreading, there are consequences to shooting first and asking questions later. Wiping out an entire Compound without investigating the source of the problem — especially in an age of social media — will draw so much unwanted attention, hunters will have a hard time finding out what really happened.

To facilitate gameplay, introduce sympathetic Storyteller characters to flesh out the narrative and connect the hunters to the story. Create family members desperate to see their loved ones again, curious local authorities who fear burning the compound to ash won't be enough to solve the problem, or Deaf characters who can't hear de la Salle's words (and therefore can't be affected). Then, put the hunters in a moral quandary by connecting them to supernatural characters who are all too willing to help hunters set fires and walk away.

The Contagion is a great way to test what hunters believe and how that intersects with their views of the Code. It can also force hunters to switch allegiances, or maybe even change which compact or conspiracy they belong to. To streamline how the chronicle's nuances play out, introduce how different cells, compacts, and conspiracies view the Contagion. This will help hunters figure out their role and introduce new ways to learn more about Hunter society.

Tier One: Cells

The Contagion Chronicle is an excellent way to introduce **Hunter: The Vigil Second Edition** to new players and existing Tier One groups who want to join a compact or conspiracy. A Tier One chronicle works best if the players are citizens who live and work in Bend or a nearby city; this creates compelling reasons why the hunters will seek solutions to

help their friendly neighbors. To tug at the players' heartstrings, introduce Storyteller characters well before they are infected to highlight how dangerous the Contagion is. Should existing Tier One hunters stumble upon the mystery, leverage other hunter cells and allow the players to form tenuous alliances. Rebecca Mason may be the leader of her cell, but there are other hunters in her group that can be used to flesh out the scenario, too.

A Tier One cell may never hear the word "God-Machine" or understand what the source of the Contagion is. Instead of correcting players, let the hunters use their own terminology and draw their own conclusions. The imminent spread of the disease is cause enough to investigate, but once that's resolved, the chronicle doesn't have to end there. Who stands to gain from the spread of the Contagion? What caused the disease? Can it be prevented? How do the local and state authorities intervene following the events? Other hunters?

Tier Two: Compacts

One of the biggest challenges Tier Two hunters face is dealing with the Contagion without leaning on their connections too heavily. Bend is not a huge city, and its remote location will affect how hunters can help survivors and cover their tracks after setting the Compound on fire. The source of the Contagion isn't as important as who's using that supernatural material. Perhaps a Tier Two Contagion chronicle hints that de la Salle is part of a rogue or rival cell and the compacts knew who he is and what he's capable of. Or, maybe the mystery is tied to Bend itself. Why is the Contagion spreading in *this* town?

The compacts each have their own agenda which falls somewhere between the group's mission to deal with the supernatural and how much they want to explore the unknown. Though each hunter and cell will act on their own agendas, the compacts will deal with the Contagion in their own, unique ways.

The Union will keep it simple: contain the problem, make sure no one else gets hurt, and walk away or burn everything to the ground.

Network Zero will be forced to choose between documenting what's happening to share it with an unsuspecting public and dealing with the Contagion before it spirals out of control. If a Storyteller wishes to increase de la Salle's power, having the Contagion spread via technology, if his words are recorded, would make this infection incredibly dangerous.

S.W.O.R.N. will want to identify what's causing the Contagion and turn to local tribes for assistance. Once they realize the Contagion is not of this world, members will try to save victims before taking action.

Null Mysteriis will treat the Contagion and its victims as a wonderful opportunity to study and analyze the supernatural. This may lead to morally questionable judgments, as Null's members are more focused on the Contagion than they are its victims.

Loyalists of Thule will cross-reference the disease's effects with their occult archives. Did their post-WWII era predecessors deal with the Contagion? Answers may be found in the past. Of all the compacts, the Loyalists are most likely to have dealt with angels and demons before. They may possess books that refer to a "great machine" or "the inner workings" without realizing those descriptions are of the God-Machine.

The Long Night will attempt to affect the cultists by reminding them of their faith before cleansing them with fire. This will put members at odds with de la Salle and local Mormons if they're not careful.

Tier Two hunters should keep in mind that any well-organized group will stand out in the area, and compacts may be hesitant to send anyone other than a representative or cell to deal

with the Contagion. Backup and resources may both be scarce, and cells are advised to approach Bend better prepared than they usually are.

Tier Three: Conspiracies

Tier Three chronicles will likely involve the God-Machine in some fashion. For most cells, this revelation will be earth-shattering and affect them deeply in profoundly personal ways. True knowledge of the divine sits with each hunter, and it's up to the players to decide what to do next. Do they bring this information back to their chosen conspiracies? Do they keep it to themselves? Or, do they release their findings to the public and damn the consequences? Bend doesn't have an airport, and roads and railroads leading in and out aren't as plentiful as in major cities. In terms of connections and resources, many Tier Three conspiracies will feel isolated. This does, however, facilitate relatively easy containment at a citywide level.

Before the hunters can figure out how to proceed, they'll need to deal with the Contagion. A Tier Three mission may be different from what their conspiracies (or factions) want.

The **Circle of Bones** will turn to their connection to Twilight for answers at first. If the Contagion claims few victims, then the Circle will split their time between research and connecting to local members of the community. The revelation of the God-Machine will cause members to experience a crisis of confidence. Why didn't the spirits tell them about the God-Machine? What's the point of talking to ghosts when clearly something else demands their attention?

Once the **Ascending Ones** realize the Contagion is supernatural, members will be interested in finding a cure for non-members and a vaccine they can use on themselves. Hunters will have mixed feelings about the God-Machine, but will be curious about it. Some members may turn to the conspiracy's leaders to search for lore, while others may ignore it altogether — unless they discover there's a way the God-Machine can be used to their benefit.

The **Lucifuge** will be greatly impacted by the Contagion, the discovery of the angel, and the exposure of the God-Machine's existence. As the heirs to Hell, each hunter will deal with these revelations differently. Some may abandon the Vigil, while others may confront the Lucifuge in Milan. Hunters may even abandon Bend to its fate once they discover their infernal heritage may have been designed by the God-Machine.

The **Malleus Maleficarum** has had experiences dealing with plagues and mysterious diseases in the past, and will approach the Contagion with grim determination. The conspiracy will not dig for answers unless the Church demands them. Should hunters unwittingly stumble upon the God-Machine, they may wonder what the Church knows and what else they're hiding.

Task Force: VALKYRIE will coordinate their investigation with local authorities and treat the townsfolk as potential hostages, victims, and casualties. Hunters will have to wait for further instruction, and may be forced to take action without HQ's blessing. Operatives won't jump to conclusions when the God-Machine is discovered, and will refer to the Roswell Incident as proof that perhaps angels aren't really "angels" after all. Of course, should TFFV claim proof that aliens are real? HQ may swoop in — just to be on the safe side.

The **Cheiron Group** will have a simple agenda: retrieve as many samples as possible, and contain the source for further experimentation. The Cheiron Group won't care about casualties provided they get supernatural flesh to sample, even if that means their own hunters are infected. Cells will have to decide how far they'll go to protect Cheiron's interests, and if they'll risk going rogue.

Similar to Tier Two, Tier Three hunters should be aware of their surroundings and their impact on the local scene. Most Tier Three hunters do not want to expose their conspiracy for fear of losing status or revealing the Vigil. Unlike other hunters, conspiracy members also risk being accused of *causing* the Contagion and being investigated by de la Salle's followers. Tier Three hunters may want to resolve the infection but should remember that the people of Bend have just as much to lose as they do. Meanwhile, de la Salle will liberally use hostages to save his life and preserve the Construct.

Sittard: Contagion of Reality

Where I was born, where the old house still stands.

— from Sittard's anthem, by Jo Erens

Sittard is an in-between city. It's not large by itself, but it *is* a major player in a larger municipality encompassing Sittard and its neighbors. It's not a tourist staple like Amsterdam or The Hague, but it hosts several festivals that draw visitors from the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany. It even stands between countries, sitting near the Netherlands' borders with Germany and Belgium. The city's creatures are aware of a much more metaphysical in-between of Sittard, though. The city sits on a fracture in realities, with rifts across the city and outlying areas connecting to other Realms, the Underworld, and shards. It makes life *interesting*.

However, the outbreak of Contagion tipped the scales from interesting to deadly. With the God-Machine too sick to properly maintain the borders, the rifts grow. The city empties through them, falling into *elsewhere*, and the God-Machine responds with ravenous hunger as its magnificence lessens. On every block downtown, more stores and houses just sit empty. Companies disappear and young people move away to find better employment. Amid the rifts and disappearances, Degradants — demons turned servants to Contagion — feed on the supernatural population.

Theme and Mood

Sittard hangs on a tipping point. The Sworn have infinite realities to explore, giving them access to incomparable resources and a real chance to find a cure. It's a race against time though, and against False factions emboldened by three angels and one ancient fae.

Theme: The Tipping Point

The God-Machine, driven ravenous by Contagion, devours more of Sittard every day. Its hunger consumes life and hope, leading to a spiral of broken futures. The Sworn cannot restore what is already lost, so instead they focus on the future. They coax new life to fill the void Contagion left. They encourage new advances in the chemical sector, hoping the results will dampen the Contagion's symptoms by bringing in new people and provide an actual cure down the road. They work with the municipality and local tourist industry to create festivals and draw in new crowds which, even if every festival must eventually end, fill some of the emptiness. It is not an easy fight, but the Sworn believe they *can* win. If and when they do, Sittard will be stronger than it ever was before.

Mood: The Smallness of Being vs Infinite Emptiness

Sittard is small, both geographically and socially. People know each other; they're nosy and they talk. Apart from those who make a very conscious effort to keep their identities hidden, either for sabotage purposes or plain paranoia, the Sworn and False all know each other. They all have mortal assets they want to protect, too, be it family or business investments. In public, both groups maintain a peaceful façade. Secret break-ins are common, but open combat decidedly rare. This muddles things. It's one thing to believe Naglfar's Army is nihilistic, selfish, and destructive. It's another entirely when you know Mier the Antediluvian by name, you've had a drink together, and you think you could get through to her, if you could meet without all this Sworn and False business, the Contagion, and other bullcrap hanging over your heads. Except you cannot ever, because Sworn and False and Contagion and bullcrap *is your life*, and it's hers too. So instead you fight, and you pull your punches because you don't really want to kill her, and you think she pulls hers too because you're not dead yet.

Sittard is also infinite, fractured across reality and existing in infinite copies. Games like "follow the rabbit" allow you to slip between these places and travel to a Sittard where winter reigns eternally, or which holds nothing but empty buildings. The God-Machine exists in all these places, as does

Contagion. Some shards connect to the Abyss or to the Underworld, and endless hunger waits in both. Meanwhile *this* Sittard, the one the Sworn simply refer to as *here*, slowly slips through the cracks. Contagion exacerbates the rifts, and where slippage was once the stuff of legends, it has become common. The city empties, dragging citizens and Infrastructure down to *not-here*, and the God-Machine ravenously devours what is left like a snake swallowing its own tail. Contagion in Sittard is fathomless hunger and the endless emptiness between realities.

What Has Come Before

Sittard sits on a crossroads, a meeting of here and not-here. The Sworn have found stories of Infrastructure at the location dating back to the Carolingian age in 700 CE, and the Lost claim the reigning fae, a bent and crooked creature calling herself the Queen of the Underhill, predates even that. None of the Sworn know if Sittard is an in-between place *because* of the Infrastructure and Queen, or if an existing anomaly drew them in.

The city gained official rights in 1243, allowing it to fortify its walls. This enhanced its status as border city, now guarding the Meuse crossing between the duchy of Jülich, to which Sittard belonged, and the Prince-Bishopric of Liège. The granting of rights also strengthened the local Infrastructure. Curiously, the power of the Queen of the Underhill weakened at that time, though the Sworn can't know if this is cause and effect or mere happenstance.

The rifts in reality lead to glitches. In 1613, money, needles and thread, nails, and stones poured from the mouth of 12-year-old Trijntje. The girl initially claimed that a man with a red cap told her to remain silent, but later, under threat of physical violence, she accused her mother of being a witch. Trijntje's mother was burnt at the stake four days later on Dragons' Field, but not before naming her co-conspirators. In the end, 64 witches burned in Sittard and its nearby cities. Trijntje herself was forced into the convent, a common fate for sin-touched girls who needed to be saved. The man in the red cap could be the devil, or a faerie known as a redcap, but neither Unchained nor Lost have any lore that indicates their involvement in the bloody mess.

In the 18th century, buckriders took up in the Saint Rosa Chapel on the Kollenberg. These buckriders were wholly human, even if legends later attributed a spew of satanic powers to them, including their signature goat-buck riding skills. The location of their rumored lair, however, troubles modern Lost. Kollenberg is home to the Queen of the Underhill, who holds court far beneath its clay-packed earth. The Queen holds power over destiny and fate and is often named a Norn in local legend. It's unlikely anything could transpire on the Kollenberg without her approval.

Another glitch occurred in 1938, when a circus lion escaped and, parading through town and causing considerable panic, walked into the Church of St. Michael. The animal laid down at the altar for a brief nap, after which the lion tamer captured and returned it to the circus. All was well, and the people of Sittard had an amazing story to pass down for generations. But all was not well for the God-Machine. St. Michael's Church sits on a powerful piece of Infrastructure. The lion's fated nap drew the attention of several supernal creatures, including an Unchained who recognized the church for what it was. Today, the church is Suborned.

The last point of interest to the Sworn are the mines. State Mine Maurits, between Sittard and nearby Geleen, officially opened in 1926 and was one of the largest employers in Limburg. It was the biggest two-shaft mine in the world, and the largest overall in the Netherlands. The mine was connected to State Mine Emma, which was further connected to State Mine Hendrik in 1947. Together, they created an underground network of coal tunnels that spanned the entire length of Limburg. The mine closed in 1967, but its effects remain to this day, from the coal miners' pensions to Dutch State Mines (DSM) transforming into a chemical company crucial in the fight against Contagion. That's not why the Sworn dig up every piece of information and every anecdote they can about State Mine Maurits, though. Nor is it why Sworn sentinels still watch the tunnel entrances, now collapsed and abandoned, like hawks. Maurits, its dark tunnels stripped empty, is the source of Sittard's Contagion.

Where We Are

The outbreak of Contagion in Sittard flew under the radar for a long time. That's not anyone's fault or even negligence; after all, it's hard to track down all the puzzle pieces when they're hopping across realities. Looking back now, the Sworn believe the source of the outbreak dates to 1917 or 1958, while the outbreak proper first occurred in 1942. For sixty years, the disease remained minor, claiming a handful of victims which local creatures blamed on the Queen of the Underhill, hunters, and, once, a rare case of black lung infecting a Nosferatu to the point where he had to enter torpor. It wasn't until the turn of the century, when the Contagion mutated and Sittard saw its first Degradant, that creatures realized something was truly amiss.

Cause

Sittard's Sworn can easily identify ground zero of the infection: State Mine Maurits. It crawls with Contagion, a black, cancerous mass which spawns diseased life in the dark, abandoned tunnels. One of twelve major outbreak sites in the world, it's easily recognized for what it is. Beyond that though, things get distinctly hazy. Maurits exists in several iterations in time, and Sworn found two moments at which Contagion was born, and one which made both of them worse.

Sometime in **1917**, before the mine officially opened, the dig crew touched on an entity sleeping far beneath the earth. The local Awakened call it the Null, an abyssal force whose sole purpose — or just its sole capability, as the Sworn are divided as to whether it even has a consciousness or purpose — is consuming and unmaking things that are. Slowly unmaking even itself, the creature consists of dust and particles, un-time and null-space. Human engineers quickly responded to that uncanny instinct of mortals faced with the end of everything and sealed the dig site, but even so, the Null slowly seeped through to infect the entire mine. Miners carried it in their lungs to the light, exhaling it above the earth and seeding Contagion.

A collapsing tunnel buried and killed seven miners in **1958**, prompting a rescue action that lasted three days before all the bodies were recovered. It also opened a door to the Underworld, smashing straight through the Upper Reaches and two Rivers into the Dominion of the Junkyard. Dead machines battle for supremacy there, and the Urd Machine was one of them. The Urd Machine's fuel consists of souls, fates, and futures, consuming things-that-might-be until itself becomes all things-that-will-be. The Urd Machine rolled forward on giant wheels onto the reaches of the world, where mine and Underworld touched, to feast on the cut-short fates of the dead miners. The mine's temporal anomalies captured part of its essence, a broken copy of a dead thing, and Contagion poured from its rusted husk.

The **1942** bombing of Geleen, neighbor to Sittard, by the British Royal Airforce was a mistake — Geleen was never their intended target. Nor was the State Mine Maurits. Even so, both were fire-bombed. The Unchained believe the bombing was absolutely intentional though, an effect set into motion by angels of the God-Machine. Demons tentatively posit it was an attempt to stop the rising Null or, because time in Maurits is neither singular nor linear, the Urd Machine. Either way, it was a miscalculation of divine proportion. The Contagious entity traveled along the invisible strings from the bombing back to vastness of the God-Machine, adding fuel to an outbreak that might otherwise have been contained.

It wasn't until **2000** CE that the first demon was subsumed by the disease and became a Degradant. The disease obviously mutated, but the Sworn can't uncover *why*. Popular speculation holds the struggle between the Null or Urd Machine and the God-Machine was won at the turn of the century, and that this exacerbated Contagion. No one knows which side won. Does the mutation signal a last inflammation before the God-Machine vanquishes the disease, or are these are its death throes?

The Maurits Clock

In all iterations of Maurits *before* the mine's closing, the mine is two days older than it is. When humans celebrated the 50th anniversary of the State Mine, by the measurement of both Unchained

and Awakened with an affinity for Time, the mine was 50 years *and two days* old. This held consistently true until the mine closed in 1967. Sittard, like all of Limburg, celebrates Vastelaovend (*eve before fasting*). Originally a pagan celebration until it was co-opted by the Catholic church, Vastelaovend kicks off the coming fast, and is a masked celebration of revelry and life. It reaffirms the boundaries between the living and the dead, and wards off restless ghosts and evil spirits. The celebration starts on Sunday, and ends the midnight before Ash Wednesday with a ritual called Maske Begrave (*burying the mask*).

A procession of weeping people carries a large, handcrafted mask up the Kollenberg where they bury it to mark Vastelaovend's end. The first Vastelaovend after the mines closed, in February 1968, both Unchained and Time Awakened noticed the night of Maske Begrave lasted an hour longer than it should. The next day, Maurits was only one day, twenty-three hours too old. The process repeated yearly: Maske Begrave lasts for twenty-five hours, and Maurits comes an hour closer to its actual age. At this rate, after Vastelaovend in February of 2026, Maurits will finally be exactly as old as it is.

This terrifies Sittard's creatures. They don't know why Maurits has extra time, but they recognize a count-down when they see one. The most common speculation amongst Sworn is come 2026, Maurits will consolidate itself in time. The state of Contagion in this Maurits will forever condemn or save Sittard. It's a solid theory, but cannot be proven until it actually happens. A second popular theory addresses *why Sittard*. Maurits was geographically closer to Geleen, and employed people from that city as well as other nearby towns. Yet somehow, Contagion struck Sittard. As far as the Sworn can tell — and again it's only a solid *theory* — this ties into Sittard as an anomaly in reality, which makes it both vulnerable and valuable. In this theory, the clock counts down to the moment when Contagion will spread through the old mining tunnels and consume the entire province of Limburg.

Response Team Alpha: The Sworn

Sittard has less than 40,000 citizens, and they all know each other. Apparent strangers are one conversation away from discovering their parents were study buddies, or that they both played soccer in F.C. Fortuna's junior division. That makes it hard to be the unseen power behind the throne, and the **Cryptocracy** struggles to gain solid footing. There's currently three of them, two Unchained and one Awakened, but they're certainly ambitious. Sittard offers city-wide free Wi-Fi and the agents are hard at work developing a virus to spread to every smart device connected to that Wi-Fi. The virus's purpose is to detect and map nearby sources of Contagion. So far, they've been unsuccessful, not in the least because of an untraceable firewall that blocks their virus, but they keep trying.

Limburg remains steadfastly Catholic. New generations are increasingly non-denominational, but "my dad was an altar boy" is a common phrase, as is attending Mass at Easter and Christmas "to placate my grandmother." Even the counter-culture embraces the spiritual, turning to Gnosticism and satanism. Stemming from this, the **Jeremiad** are the most plentiful Sworn in Sittard. They believe the Contagion is the result of hubris and greed, as the owners of the Maurits State Mine delved too deep. Their greed, a bottomless well which cannot be filled, drew forth the Null and the Urd Machine, and led to Contagion.

The local dialect, called Zittesj, is a tonal language: one word with the exact same spelling can mean two wildly different things dependent on subtle tonal differences of pronunciation. Tonal languages are not rare by a long shot, but Zittesj is also supremely suited to supernal efforts. Awakened find the language serves excellently as Yantra, and the **Rosetta Society** documented at least two cases of Contagion spreading through the dialect. They believe *this* is the reason Maurits's Contagion infected Sittard rather than any of the other cities adjacent to the mine. They also believe the dialect holds the key to curing Contagion, and the metaphysical properties of the language will reveal the message the semiotics are supposed to decipher. The third-largest faction in Sittard, they

entrenched themselves in the Sittard Historical Society, which is dedicated to preserving the city's culture and dialect.

Sittard is a haven, though not necessarily a safe one, for non-humans. Escapees of the Queen of the Underhill form a sizable Lost community, and Unchained are drawn to the city's Infrastructure. Awakened find the local dialect perfect to their art, and Sin-Eaters are on the rise since Maurits's breach into the Underworld in 1957. The small city even houses a Promethean, who claims the Maria Church as Sanctuary. For better or worse, none of them needed to change their ways much. Sittard's market plaza is monitored by cameras which stream live to social media, yet they *never* capture a supernatural event. Last year, a local Carthian lost her cool and killed two people, and the cameras cut to static. The year before, a Huntsman claimed a Lost, and the recording looped back to an earlier broadcast. Something is shielding the supernatural from discovery. As a result, there's no need for the **Ship of Theseus**. Sittard is home to one Thesean whom nobody listens to. He alternates between researching the Contagion's mutation and the city cameras' obscuring effect so it can be adapted for use elsewhere.

Zero Hour is currently the second-largest Sworn faction, rapidly growing and poised to overtake the Jeremiad in number. Long after the last coal miner died of black lung, Contagion still spreads. It's not overtly deadly, instead causing discrepancies in reality that generates a slew of missing persons reports, or causes people to never have existed in the first place. These ripples are the overtures of a larger rift behind which the Null and the Urd Machine wait. The Cavalry admit, like the Jeremiad, that humans digging too deeply caused the problem, but they emphatically believe it cannot be placated or atoned for. Instead, when confronted with an entity that seeks to devour you and your entire reality, Zero Hour believes the proper response is to punch it in the face. The local Lost, Unchained, and Renegades (both of them) are heavily involved in Zero Hour, having ample experience spitting The Powers That Be in the face.

Response Team Omega: The False

Sittard holds the interest of the God-Machine due to its unique position on the dimensional axis. And while the God-Machine's ultimate purpose remains inscrutable, its displeasure with the Contagion outbreak is evident. Sittard is home to three angels whose permanent mission seems to be stopping Contagion — a ridiculously large number for such a small city. Two are active members of the **Crucible Initiative**, but neither is keen on razing the city to the ground as it remains too valuable an asset to write off. As a result, the Fire-Bearers here are much more moderate than they are globally, carefully weighing the possibility of re-locating Infrastructure and other assets before they go in and torch the place. Occasionally other Fire-Bearers speak out against this tip-toeing, one vampire even going so far as to suggest the angels were put in place to contain *them* rather than Contagion, but they always disappear.

The third angel guides **Naglfar's Army**, and like its celestial colleagues, it remains firmly aligned to serving the God-Machine. It points the Antediluvians to valuable *and salvageable* Infrastructure, around which they can anchor resources to survive the deluge. If this makes their survival intrinsically tied to that of the God-Machine, well, there's worse ways to place your bets. The Queen of the Underhill is a member of the Army, though she prefers to work through courtiers rather than leave her subterranean abode. This means that at least *one* manipulator of destiny thinks working alongside angels is her best chance. The other Antediluvians carefully watch the Queen to see when the time comes to cut and run.

The Machiavelli Gambit never gained a proper foothold in Sittard. Three angels and one terrifyingly powerful fae offer little room for anything else. Occasionally the faction sends someone to monitor the city and see if any opportunities arise to grab power, but they never last.

Symptoms

Sittard finds itself in a peculiar predicament, occupying a crossroads in reality. Occasionally the town glitches, and things cross over from other worlds. Apart from the witch trials though, none of

it was ever too bad. Contagion changed that, both fueling and being fueled by the breaches. The entire city itself became interstitial: turn a corner and you might walk into a building that was demolished in the 1980's, or you might find yourself deep in the Underhill during an evening's stroll on the Kollenberg. In previous eras, most lost things naturally returned back to their assigned time and place as reality repaired itself, but Contagion changed this. Rifts stay open longer, send travelers farther away from this reality, and people and places that get lost *remain lost* as the Null and Urd Machine consume them. A bustling store is simply gone one morning, replaced by an abandoned storefront. A class of students never existed, and the school slowly empties. The God-Machine responds to this vacuum with hunger, consuming even more of the city to fill the void in its internal engines. Sittard is devoured by vast and alien entities on three sides, trapped in a downward spiral until *nothing* remains.

A Candle for the Lost

Humans in Sittard don't always consciously notice disappearances, as people and objects may be erased from existence entirely, but they still experience that indistinct feeling of absence. Lighting a candle at home and placing it in your window, or in any of the churches or chapels, is a common expression of that melancholy. And, although none of the Sworn know how or why, it works. The method offers no guarantees by a long shot, but lighting a candle for the lost increases their chance of a safe return.

Outbreak Sites, Safe Houses, and Interesting Places

Shards and interstitial terrain make Sittard difficult to map. Still, some places are relatively stable. This allows Sworn rely on their presence, or otherwise makes it important that they go out of their ways to find them.

Maurits State Mine

The source of Sittard's Contagion is near-inaccessible, infecting all but the most resistant Sworn. The mine is also riddled with rifts in reality, connecting to supernal Realms and other dimensional realities. Black dust from decades of coal mining coats everything, becoming airborne whenever footsteps disturb it. Between mortal authorities not willing to risk black lung, and Sworn and False alike eager to quarantine the site until they can deal with Contagion, there's no *legal* way to enter Maurits.

Known: Yes, to both Sworn and False.

Plot Hooks

- Zero Hour, maintaining a perimeter around the mine, see the creatures first. They're vaguely human, crawling on all fours, spines contorted so they're belly up and back to the ground, and coated in thick, tar-like coal dust. They attack at dawn, grabbing a scientist arriving for work at the nearby DSM facilities and dragging him into the mine before the Sworn can stop them. Zero Hour must decide whether to mount a search and rescue mission. If they do, they trace the creatures to a mining rift leading to the Junkyard and the Urd Machine. What does the Urd Machine need a scientist for?
- A Sworn working at a hospital (Jeremiad and Theseans make a good fit here) discovers three patients with severe respiratory complaints. The diagnosis is black lung. If the Sworn investigates further, the dust infecting the patients' lungs matches the composition of Maurits's coal. Are the patients members of a cult worshipping Contagion and congregating in the mine? Or did the Null find a new way to infect people outside of the mine?

Rumors in Sittard

- “All this bullshit about the Urd Machine. It’s just another cover-up. When the miners dug their hole, they hit the Machine. That Thing, with Its angels and Its visions, sleeping under Sittard ever since the dawn of man. Contagion, the emptiness, and the hunger? That’s the Machine leaking fuel. But fuck Contagion, it’s not what matters here. What matters, is the Machine can *bleed*.”
- “Contagion is a comeuppance. $E=mc^2$, right? Except extracting energy from mass is *hard*. The most effective method we have is nuclear fusion, which converts about .7%. Black holes though, they get 6%. Rotating black holes that distort time and space — sound familiar? — up to 42%. The Null is such a black hole. The God-Machine tried to assimilate it, but the Null turned right back ‘round and bit a nice big chunk out of It. My point? Maybe we should let the Null finish its snack before we shut it down.”

DSM Chemelot and Brightlands

When the mines closed, the Dutch State Mine company (DSM) turned its endeavors to the chemical industry. They’re very successful too, now encompassing a vast industrial space to rival a small town and which the company humorously named Chemelot. They’ve also founded Brightlands, an innovative and highly acclaimed science campus. Zero Hour was involved with the DSM from the start, initially as a fall-out base from which to set a perimeter around the old mine. The mortal crew at Brightlands has made some amazing breakthroughs since, which Zero Hour thinks it can co-opt to battle Contagion.

Known: Yes, to the Sworn. The False know of the DSM, but not of Zero Hour’s involvement.

Plot Hooks

- José, a student at Brightlands, and her mentor Niek are studying the application of nanotechnology in medicine. They’re adapting existing medication (e.g., antibiotics, flu shots, and several vaccines) to be delivered through nanoids. One of the Sworn, his human guise working with José and Niek, was one of their test subjects. It was fine; the Sworn didn’t get the flu, though of course he wasn’t likely to anyway. However, a month later, the Sworn is caught in hand-to-hand combat with a Degradant and, after an anxious week, discovers he’s *not* infected. Did José and Niek create an inoculation against Contagion? If so, is something guiding them? And can they replicate it?
- Unaware of Zero Hour’s presence, two members of the Crucible Initiative set up in Chemelot. They plan to create a bio-weapon that kills Contagion-infected creatures but leaves the metaphysical properties of buildings (and Infrastructure) intact. They have a first viable serum and plan to snatch a Sworn, inject them, and have a mortal crew dump the test subject within Maurits’ quarantine zone to measure what happens.

Rumors

- “Chemelot has a ghost. I don’t mean whoooo dead person, but a ghost in the machine. The ground, the building, its function: all of it has a spirit. And I think it’s the thing, the one the miners found. I think it’s trying to get better, to coax the scientists into creating a cure. I don’t think there *is* a cure though, and I don’t want to be here when the ghost realizes it too.”
- “Hey, do you know about the crew in 4B? No funding, no grants, no project plan, just one scientist and three lab assistants doing Machine-knows-what in there. I’ve seen them wheel in vats though, big enough to hold a person, and all sorts of medical equipment. Yep, that’s what I was thinking too — we’ll take a look after hours.”

Heksenberg

Heksenberg, or Witches’ Hill, is a small forest just north of Chemelot, consisting of mostly deciduous trees and a few pines. The southeastern part of the forest holds a small lake, which both the DSM company used to dump their mining and chemical waste. Once legal, changing insights about pollution prompted the city to outlaw the dumping. Still, the area was never cleaned and

remains cordoned off as the ground and water are toxic. Nature reclaimed it, making the area attractive to hardier creatures who seek isolation.

Known: The area is known to both Sworn and False, but only the False come here.

Plot Hooks

- A local meth cook uses the site to dump her own toxic waste. Her greed calls to the traces of Contagion remaining in Maurits's waste, and she becomes a carrier for the disease. A Deviant of the Sworn deals with her to get the illegal medicine he needs to manage his condition, only to find that he has come down with the first stages of Contagion a week after seeing her.
- The Crucible Initiative harvested pieces of Contagious coal dust from the dump site. They plan to create a new Deviant with chemicals containing Contagion: a Patient Zero to experiment on. The creation works, but the Renegade shows no symptom of the disease. The Deviant escapes, runs into the Sworn during her flight through the city, and is given a safe haven in exchange for signing up with the Sworn. She agrees, and despite taking some dangerous risks during missions, never gets hit with infection.

Rumors

- "You know why they call it Heksenberg? A crone lives there. What? No, I don't know if that means one of the blood-suckers or just a really old witch. Might be one of 'em original ones from the burnings. But let me finish. A crone lives on the Heksenberg, and she only comes out on the nights with no moon. If you catch her, she owes you a wish. Maybe we can wish for a lead on a cure. Or maybe we can just wish to be rich and live in Switzerland. Either sounds sweet to me."
- "They found the bones of a guy down there. For real, a morgue buddy of mine spilled the beans. Money's on murder, but here's the odd thing: the body was all chewed up. The lab techs think it was canine teeth that did it, but it's WAY too big to be a dog, and the last wolf sighting in Limburg was decades ago. Also, it was WAY too big to be a wolf, too. Think we should check it out, or let sleeping wolves lie?"

Remembrance Markers

Since 2000, the Stolpersteine (*Tripping Stones*) Foundation places small copper remembrance plaques on the sidewalks of houses belonging to people deported by the Nazis: Jews, Roma, disabled people, Jehovah's witnesses, and homosexuals. It's a wholly human endeavor, a gesture of contrition and remembrance. The stolpersteine hold supernal power though, emitting a soft healing energy.

Known: Markers are known to both Sworn and False, but only the former recognize their power.

Plot Hooks

- Members of the Jeremiad believe they can use the Stolpersteine's energy, which is partially based on penance, to cure Contagion. The Stolpersteine project is incomplete though, and the foundation close to running out of funds. To finish the project, the Jeremiad need to raise €30,000 and then find a cover story to give it to the Stolpersteine Foundation without raising suspicion.
- A home owner objects to the marker, claiming such a grim reminder will devalue his house. The city owns the sidewalk and gave the foundation permission to install it, but the foundation is hesitant to muddle coverage of their project with discussions about property value. Can the Sworn smooth things over?

Rumors

- "The stolpersteine are a Yantra. Or, at least, *part* of a Yantra. Someone is building up a massive spell, tightening their focus with every new marker. It's not us though, so then: who? And what are they casting?"

- “The stones are an Anchor. Not to any of the people they remember, fortunately; their suffering has ended. But to something else, something much bigger. They’re not normal Anchors either, but reverse Anchors: they don’t bind a ghost who’s already here, but summon one that’s currently in the Underworld.”

The Ligne Library

Sittard has a new library to go with their fancy new shopping center. The building is light and airy, the staff knowledgeable and eager to help, and the Ligne won a prize for best library in the Netherlands. The library’s collection, and the historical archive it houses, is stellar. The Rosetta Society, who were enthusiastic supporters of the library when it was initially proposed, could not be prouder. Imagine their disappointment when the library turned out to be both Infrastructure *and* subsequently stolen from them by the Crucible Initiative.

Known: Yes, though neither Sworn nor False know what the Infrastructure does.

Plot Hooks

- Sworn are physically unable to enter the library. They can walk up to the doors (if the Crucible lets them) but cannot step through. The plaza outside the library is decorated with metal octagonal shapes strung on high wires. This is the library’s defense perimeter. Cutting the wires or otherwise getting the octagons down should allow the Sworn to enter and retake the library. Of course, there’s also a chance that sabotaging the octagons will summon a second line of defense, such as a vengeful angel. Only one way to find out.
- When the Rosetta Society was the library’s patron, it arranged for many ancient and valuable texts to be included in the historical archive. One of those texts, a cypher the semiotics believe can translate the tonal frequency of the temporal rifts into language, is set to arrive today. If it enters the library and the hands of the Crucible Initiative, it’s beyond the Sworn’s grasp forever.

Rumors

- “Such bad luck for the semiotics. All that planning and preparation. They were so involved, right from the start. It seems nearly impossible that the Crucible pulled one over on them. I’d say the whole thing was impossibly unlucky if I hadn’t witnessed it myself. What? Implying something? Nah, of course not.”
- “I don’t think those octagons are Infrastructure. I used to date this guy, Emiel, and it turned out that, in addition to being a douchebag, he was a Seer. I learned a few things from him, and I think those octagons are a Yantra. I recognize the work.”

Basilica of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart & Mariapark

The Basilica of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, simply called the Maria Church by locals, was built in 1879. The church received Papal approval in 1883 and was the first Dutch church to receive *basilico minor* status. The ensuing flow of pilgrims was so large, parishioners built the Mariapark cloister to house them opposite the church in 1891.

One of these Pilgrims was Created, a Tammuz named Johanna according to Azothic memory, who achieved New Dawn praying at the church. Her moment of redemption reworked the church into a Sanctuary Athanor. It also considerably complicated things, as the church is known Infrastructure.

Known: Yes, to Sworn and False.

Plot Hooks

- Sittard is home to *one* Created, who claimed the church as their domain. The church’s resident angel, a defender made of fire and light, ignores the Promethean as long as they don’t enter the church’s catacombs. So far, the two coexist peacefully. Tension between the Promethean and the local Unchained, however, who intend to disrupt the status quo by seizing the Infrastructure, is steadily rising.

- A Renegade, capture team hot on her trail, flees into the church. She hopes to escape through the back, but notices her pursuers don't follow her inside. Are they held to the church's sanctity of refuge, or repelled by the Created or angelic occupant? She's safe if she can work out a rooming agreement with the other two residents.

Rumors

- "I've seen the Lady. No, not Mary, Mother of God, but — you know how Catholics co-opt everything? I think they did that here, too. Something older, and not nearly as benevolent, sleeps under the church. She appeared to me, and she is the exact mirror image of the Queen of the Underhill."
- "I'm tracking the three angels, and they each visit the Maria Church once a year: on the spring, summer, and winter equinoxes. They stay from dusk until dawn, then depart again. Is it, like, an angel refueling station? Are they receiving new orders from the head honcho? Either way, now that we know when and where they'll be, we can set a trap. Get rid of them, and knock the Machine and False both down a few pegs."

The Kollenberg

Kollenberg: Witches' Mound or Norn's Mound, depending on the exact translation. Home to the Queen of the Underhill, and a Hedge which isn't a hedge but rather a series of winding dirt paths that lead the traveler astray. The Sworn prefer to stay away; the Queen is too terrifying to tangle with on her home turf. The Lost cannot sit this one out though and leverage their work for the Sworn against missions to Kollenberg to see if any new arrivals have popped out of the Hedge. They have good reason, too: the Queen keeps busy, constantly acquiring new play things and tossing out the old, and Sittard's Lost population steadily grows.

Known: Oh, yes.

Plot Hooks

- The annual St. Rosa Procession begins at St. Michael's (suborned by the Unchained) and winds through Sittard to finally arrive at the St. Rosa Chapel on the Kollenberg. It's an elaborate event, with people across Sittard setting their alarm to 4 AM to create an intricate carpet of sand, replete with detailing, for the procession to walk on. It's also a Bargain with the Court patron of Sittard, which keeps the Queen confined to the Kollenberg. In recent years though, fewer and fewer people participate. Ready-to-use paint molds replace the sand carpet, and the procession route is significantly shorter. The Lost must rekindle the event, or the Bargain is void.
- Near the peak of the Kollenberg lies the Field of Remembrance. People plant young saplings here, dedicated to lost loved ones. The small trees are decorated with hearts, teddy bears, and pictures. The field is eerie, sad, and beautiful, and those who listen can hear melancholic, soothing music on the air. Anyone *sacrificing* the last token of a lost love here may request an audience with the Queen of the Underhill. The Queen is compelled to arrive, and bound not to harm the supplicant unless he attacks her first. She is not bound to grant any requests, but she must hear the supplicant out — even if it keeps her until the end of the night.

Rumors

- "They say the Queen stashed untold riches in her court. Not just gold and art, though I'm sure that too, but things like stolen years and promises. I bet her allies in the Army gave her plenty of their stuff to hold, too. Though, once the apocalypse comes, you got to wonder what she'll do. Let all of her buddies ride out the storm in Arcadia? Or shut the door and keep their goodies to herself? Gotta wonder, too, if that might be a crack in the Army we can exploit."
- "Beware the Auvele. Oh, that name does not translate. Picture the lovechild of a troll, as in one of those small underground creatures, and an elf as in Legolas: an Auvele. They work for the

Queen. Her eyes, ears, and — when she desires a new subject — grab crew. If you see one, hold your loved ones tight and hide. Don't bother running, they're hella quick on those short legs."

Sint Joep Markt

The Sint Joep Markt (*Saint Joseph Market*), an annual street fair and market, began in 1802, when Napoleon graciously allowed Sittard to host four yearly markets. The Sint Joep Markt is the only one still hosted today. It's wildly popular, and the local saying that "Sittard's children return for Sint Joep" is absolutely true. People from all over the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany descend on Sittard for Sint Joep, in addition to scores of children and grandchildren who moved away years ago. And with good cause: you can buy *anything* at Sint Joep.

Known: Yes, to both Sworn and False.

Plot Hooks

- Walking the market, a Sworn detects traces of Contagion on the air. The disease is dormant, and remains so even as she watches it enter a human host. Can she risk him carrying it back to his home city? The source of the mutation, if she traces it, is a Seer Prince hoping to make a profit off Contagion-in-a-bottle.
- *Sittard's children return for Sint Joep*, indeed. The Sworn detect a multi-dimensional rift in Mariapark, and arrive just in time to see scores of people stumbling in from other realities. They're lost, disoriented, and some of them hail from the witch burning era. One of them is Trijntje, the original glitched girl. How do the Sworn keep this quiet? They could, theoretically, shove them back, even if that's hardly humane.

Rumors

- "Dude, we have to go. Sint Joep is the one time of year Napoleon's ghost visits! No, I'm for real. Maybe we could hijack a fresh corpse from the morgue and see if the dude wants to stay and be a Sin-Eater. Why are you face-palming? It's a brilliant plan! With his tactical insight, we'd wipe Contagion out in no time."
- "I saw an angel. It was working a stall and hawking a miracle cure, and I could see the metal-wheel wings. Do you think It is stepping in to help? Like, the miracle cure is an actual *miracle cure*? We should at least check it out. Except, who's gonna volunteer to buy something off an angel?"

Wëntjerdrum

Wëntjerdrum (*Winter Dream*) celebrates the three days of Christmas. It's relatively new, but draws a large tourist crowd. Attractions include a skating rink, a Ferris wheel, and a merry-go-round and small train for children. Campfires warm the historic town square, and the scent of freshly roasted peanuts fills the air. The greatest draws are the centuries-old nativity scenes on display in the local churches, including the St. Michael and St. Maria churches. It's lovely and peaceful, and for supernatural creatures, the peace is quite tangible.

Known: Yes, to all residents of Sittard.

Plot Hooks

- Wëntjerdrum means armistice. Humans may kerfuffle and get into fights as usual, but none of the supernatural creatures can raise a hand against each other. Even the God-Machine's angels don't attack during the three nights of Wëntjerdrum. Of course, they may still pick each other's pockets, and break into laboratories or mystically barred libraries. Some might argue the impossibility of immediate retaliation makes Wëntjerdrum perfect for such schemes, and clever creatures do well to hire mortals to guard their possessions.
- Contagion eats even the armistice, leaving Degradants free of its burden even while they remain protected by it. This year, on the first night of Wëntjerdrum, Sworn and False alike find

themselves under attack by a Degradant (Four, on p. XX, serves well), without the option of fighting back. Three long nights, they are forced to run and hide, and cower like they were mere humans. Eventually a group of False, desperate to hide, comes knocking on the door of St. Michael's church, and the Jeremiad must ask themselves if saving their enemy is part of atonement.

Rumors

- “The God-Machine enforces the laws of reality, right? Doesn't that mean Its angels should be able to attack if they wanted to? It's lulling us into a false sense of security. Here we are, out and about, riding the Ferris wheel and snacking on deliciously roasted peanuts. One of these nights, that trap is gonna slam shut.”
- “On the first night of Wëntjerdruim, ride the train once. On the second night, the merry-go-round twice. On the third night, the Ferris wheel thrice. Don't go on any other rides. The third time the wheel stops at the top, you'll be able to see over the rooftops to the Old House. Now say “I come to thee” thrice. When you get off the wheel, you'll be in Other Sittard. Be careful though, 'cause you can't come back until next year, when you do the same in reverse at Other Wëntjerdruim.”

Vastelaovend

Vastelaovend (*eve before fasting*): three days of masked people, booze, celebration, and a lot of noise. Vastelaovend scares away ghosts, celebrates life, and gives complete strangers the perfect excuse for a one-night crush. It's also the prime battleground between Contagion and the Sworn. The city's fractured nature is in full display during Vastelaovend, with revelers continually slipping between here and not-here. Inhuman creatures dance among them, grinning and grotesque faces in full display while people compliment their masks. The Sworn must work hard to keep casualties low, and to keep the city from emptying out.

Known: Eleven times yes.

Plot Hooks

- Eleven is the number of Vastelaovend, and it gives Sworn a good lead to look for. A group of eleven revelers is likely to either fall through the dimensional cracks, or be a group of ten humans and one *other*. The eleventh hour in the evening, right before midnight, is perfect for slipping into not-here and retrieving lost ones — and retrieve them the Sworn must, or the city would empty itself before Vastelaovend was even over. Look for the number eleven to find the torn seams in reality.
- A bronze-green statue of two masked revelers occupies a crossing in the city center. They look exactly like the two towering angels who joined the Crucible Initiative, although rendered in fewer dimensions and mercifully smaller. The Sworn noticed the resemblance, and both investigated and attacked the statues. The statues are not connected to any Infrastructure, and cannot be moved or broken. One morning though, one statue is covered in patches of mold and moss, while the other is missing. Does that mean something happened to the angels, and if so, how will the Sworn find out?

Rumors

- “Careful who you promise your heart to. Vastelaovend is the one time a year the Queen leaves the Underhill. She's still bound by the Bargain and can't harm you, but she *can* keep you to your word.”
- “Sittard doesn't *have* Infrastructure, it *is* Infrastructure. All those shards, wheeling and turning around each other and ferrying people between them like fuel. It's a matrix operating on a multi-dimensional level. Vastelaovend is the linchpin, maintaining borders and connections. Question is: how do we use that to our advantage?”

The Old House

The Old House stands on an abandoned plot near the city center. It's boxed in by houses; no roads or alleys lead into the plot. People sometimes spot it from the Ferris wheel during fairs, and one drone camera recorded footage of it that has since gone viral. It's never in the same location twice, moving from this place to that, always boxed in by houses and sitting on weed-overgrown land. It's not on any of the maps.

The house, as the name implies, looks old. The white-washed walls have holes in them, kids armed with rocks made short work of the windows, and rain falls through the red shingle roof. Inside, red dust pours from walls and ceilings as if the entire construct was an hour glass. The stairs leading up are passable, if you tread lightly, though the cellar door is permanently stuck shut. Nothing lives here: no rats, no mice, no cockroaches. Not even birds fly overhead.

Known: Yes, but dismissed as urban legend.

Plot Hooks

- The hot summer wind carries red dust, coating cars and buildings. A Sworn recognizes traces of Contagion in the dust, though it is ancient and inert — the disease ran its course and lost its virulence. Tracking it through non-mundane means (such as Correspondence magic) reveals the Old House as its source. Normal research, or even tasting it, reveals the dust is not sand, but rust.
- A demon allied to Naglfar's Army made her way to the Old House and returned. To be precise, *two* of her returned. One is a Degradant, cogs and wheels patched over with flaking rotten skin, and speaking with the many voices of the hive. The other is her normal demonic self, cover stronger than ever and with renewed hope for the future. She seeks to defect from Naglfar's Army to the Jeremiad. However, the Degradant and demon switch places seemingly at random, making being around her extremely dangerous. If the Sworn can merge the two beings again, the resulting demon will be immune to Contagion.

Rumors

- "Walk downtown, any street, and keep your eyes peeled for a rabbit. It can be an animal, graffiti, a poster, or a prop in a shop window — anything. When you see it, walk down the first side street. Keep walking until you see another rabbit, then take the next side street again. Keep doing that and you'll get to the Old House. I'm not sure how you get back, though."
- "I've been to the Old House. It's not old. It's not even built yet. I found one of those "first stone laid" plaques: it read 2026."

Degradants: Angels of Contagion

Sittard's Contagion is emptiness and hunger. It devours indiscriminately, and demons seem especially vulnerable to it. The disease attacks their Cover, chomping away at "Amelie the secretary" and "Jacob the bootcamp instructor." Into this absence pours Contagion, filling the gaps where Covers once sat, creating a new life *and* a new purpose.

A Degradant is a drone serving Contagion, and its purpose is to feed. It automatically establishes a neural link to other Degradants within a radius of its Primum measured in kilometers, creating a hive mind. Degradants maintain some of their Incarnation and Agenda: Degradants who were Saboteurs prefer stealth and sabotage, while Destroyers just burn the building down. A Tempter still tries to persuade people to its side, even if its halting speech and grotesque body, all whirring cogs and bright lights with scraps of flesh clinging to it, doesn't make that easy.

The Degradant itself cannot harvest Aether, but its disease-riddled bodies *can* extract power from existing Essence. That's not a clean conversion though, requiring the consumption of vast amounts of Essence. When the Degradant finds a suitable victim, it extends a hooked tube to latch onto the victim. It may have a tubular tongue, tubes springing from rotten wings or wrists, or a writhing mass of tubes around its head — Contagion matches and enhances the strength of its existing demonic form. Once the tube is attached, the Degradant begins to feed. The effect, beyond draining

Essence, varies. A Kindred walks away with nearly all her vitae depleted, but her existence intact. A Created's Azoth is tied to his body, though. Stealing it causes lesions and fissures to erupt over his body. In a pinch, the Degradant can consume a human soul to gain Essence — the result is a dead body if the human is lucky, or a walking husk suffering the permanent **Soulless Condition**, p. XX, if he's not.

The drones have no Covers, and they display themselves in all of their demonic glory for humans to see. Contagion eats them from the inside out, and sometimes parts fall off. The Degradant either shrugs it off (who needs eight arms anyway), or finds a replacement part. It's not subtle about that, using factory arms to replace their own, or pushing a drone camera into an empty eye socket. Other times, it simply adds new parts, because two heads are better than one. The Sworn recorded one case of a Degradant, a former Tempter, attempting an undercover mission. The creature had cut off body parts until it resembled a biped humanoid, leaving wings, four limbs, and its second head on a local scrapyard, then covered its frame with the skin of three murdered humans. It did *not* go well, and Hunters swarmed Sittard for months.

When a demon comes down with Contagion, a Sworn is assigned to follow her while others rush to find a fix. The chaperone's mission is to sound the alarm if the demon becomes a Degradant, at which point the Sworn destroys the creature lest they all become a *Special New Bulletin at 11!*

Tier 1: Degradation

Contagion eats the demon's Covers. After the first week of infection, remove one dot from each Cover rating. The second week, remove two dots from each remaining Cover rating. The third week, three dots, and so on. Devoured Covers are permanently lost, and a cured demon must build new Covers from scratch.

Tier 2: Assimilation

Once the demon's Covers are consumed, Contagion takes their place. Every 24 hours, the demon rolls Willpower against a threshold of a cumulative +1 per day of Assimilation. Failure subtracts the difference between successes and the threshold from the demon's Willpower dots.

The God-Machine no longer pursues a demon in the throes of Assimilation. Either she's too far deviated from an angel for the God-Machine to recognize, or she's so infected even the God-Machine keeps its distance.

Tier 3: Unity

Once the demon's Willpower falls to zero, it becomes Degradant. It has no will of its own, and cannot be reasoned or pleaded with, though supernatural mental coercion still affects it (in which case it uses Primum in lieu of Willpower to resist). The Degradant's Embeds and Exploits only work in Contagious zones, as they now function through the corrupted reality of Contagion rather than the laws installed by the God-Machine. The Degradant cannot learn new Embeds or Exploits, and it loses access to any Ciphers. The Degradant retains existing Modifications and adds new Modifications (**Demon: The Descent** pp. 196-209) as needed to become more efficient. Most Degradants are workers: they feed (using Essence Drain, below), and in doing so nourish the Contagion. A few are drones, sent to remove threats against the Contagion. Drones and workers rarely interact, each focusing on their own tasks.

Degradants cannot be healed, save by Storyteller fiat, and are not viable as player characters.

Power: Essence Drain (Hunger)

The Degradant is capable of stealing Essence from any supernatural creature and turning it into a diseased form of Aether for its own use. Essence Drain requires a successful touch attack against the victim. The Storyteller then rolls Wits + Occult + Primum versus the target's Resolve to steal one Essence per success. Half these, rounded down, are converted to Aether for the Degradant. The remainder feeds the Contagion. The Degradant can use Essence Drain even if its Aether pool is full,

in which case all stolen Essence feeds the Contagion. (There's no need to keep track of these points — whatever the source of Contagion is, that Essence is gone.) A Degradant can also drain a mortal's soul (killing them or instilling the **Soulless Condition**) to gain 2 points of Aether.

Ain't a Demon

A non-demon that becomes infected also gains the Essence Drain (Hunger) power but recovers only half the Essence she usually would from any source. The Storyteller decides if she is connected to the hive mind, in which case the player rolls Composure + Resolve once a day against a threshold equal to her infection tier. If she rolls no successes, the hive learns something of tactical importance the character knew. The hive does not otherwise control her, and the character is aware of her connection to it.

Four, Assassin Drone

<soft mechanical whir from Four's spinning blade hand>

Four exists. Four serves the Hunger. Four is the fourth most efficient servant of the Hunger. Four must become more efficient. Four serves the Hunger.

Four was named Ms. Bright once. Tall, blonde, and ruthless, Ms. Bright had many friends among the Sworn, none closer than Mier, her fellow semiotic. She was devastated when desperation drove Mier to Naglfar's Army. Friendship and loyalty led Ms. Bright to take great risks to get Mier back. It didn't work. Mier remains lost, and now Ms. Bright is too.

Four remembers nothing of this. Four serves the Hunger.

Virtue: Efficient

Vice: Hungry

Incarnation: Destroyer

Agenda: Saboteur

Attributes: Intelligence 4, Wits 6, Resolve 4; Strength 6, Dexterity 5, Stamina 5; Presence 0, Manipulation 0, Composure 6

Skills: Athletics 5, Brawl (Blade Hand) 6, Intimidation 6, Investigation 4, Stealth (Already Here) 5, Survival (Track Prey) 5

Merits: Close Quarters Combat (3), Danger Sense, Direction Sense, Greyhound, Relentless, Seizing the Edge

Health: 8

Primum: 6

Embeds: Bystander Effect, Hesitation, Hush, Just Bruised, Left or Right, No Quarter

Exploits: Behind the Curtain

Modifications: Armored Plates, Blade Hand, Rivet Arm, Electrical Sight, Night Vision, Blind Sense, Essence Drain (Hunger), Mirrored Skin, Phasing

Aether / per Turn: 15/6

Willpower: 0

Cover: 0

Size: 5

Speed: 14

Defense: 9

Initiative: 11

Armor: 3/2

Glitches: The loss of wireless signals, such as radio, Wi-Fi, and mobile phone reception herald Four's arrival. The loss begins two turns before Four arrives and lasts until the Degradant departs or is destroyed.

The Cure

Sittard's Sworn are not of one mind regarding the cure, but there is *one* thing they agree on: if they're going to have time to uncover a cure, they must first staunch the symptom, the continual emptying of the city. To that end, every faction maintains human contacts and material resources to encourage new city growth and projects. The Sworn never take the lead on this, fearing that non-human origins would make a project more vulnerable to Contagion later. Instead, they wait for humans to start a project, and then offer whatever aid they can. The Rosetta Society was heavily involved in the building of the new library, facilitating bureaucratic processes, and raising funds. The Jeremiad are raising funds for the Stolpersteine project, even if they have no idea how they'll unobtrusively and legally get the money to the Foundation. Zero Hour lends its unique skills and knowledge to projects at DSM, its members working as assistants and never stepping outside their assigned scope. The Cryptocrats and Thesean have no pet project yet, but other factions have called on them to smooth bureaucratic and financial wrinkles in *their* endeavors.

The Sworn's efforts don't always yield the desired results. Sometimes, as with the Rosetta Society who found their library assimilated by the Crucible Initiative, they backfire. Other times, the detrimental effects happen slowly. The new shopping center Ligne, which houses the library, draws tourists from Limburg and beyond. Meanwhile, these shoppers increasingly ignore Sittard's existing shops which, stuck between buildings already emptied by Contagion, subsequently go bankrupt. Part of Sittard's hollowing is Contagion, and part is the new stealing from the old. The Sworn have no choice though: they must go all in to create a new future, even if it hurries the decline of the past.

A Higher Power

An escaped lion conveniently draws demons' attentions to a piece of Infrastructure. Candles call across dimensions to return lost people and objects. City cameras never record the supernatural. It's possible these are the works of Contagion trying to prevent the Sworn from finding a cure, or the God-Machine struggling to hold itself together. Maybe there's another power at work, though: the Principle, an Archigenitor, a Geist bound to the city rather than a human host, or any other entity which captures the Storyteller's imagination.

Storytellers can mine any of the locations above for a cure. Using the Stolpersteine as Yantra for a healing spell that transcends time and space might do the trick. Perhaps the cure is a chemical compound, a spiritual nanoid yet to be created at Brightlands. Maybe the red dust, rust from a Machine either long healed or long dead, can be used to synthesize a counteragent. Any cure, though, is a stop-gap measure as long as the source remains: the diseased connection established when the God-Machine manipulated the fire-bombing of the Maurits State Mine. The Sworn don't know whether Contagion connects to the Null or the Urd Machine though, and maybe it connects to both. Or maybe, it's whichever direction the players take the story in. Either way, someone must sever the connection and seal the rift, or a second outbreak is a foregone conclusion. Whatever the Sworn decide, they *must* accomplish their work before the Maurits clock runs down.

Appendix: New Conditions and Tilts

All new Conditions and Tilts appearing in **The Contagion Chronicle** follow here. Conditions that resolve via Contagion cure with the help of a character's faction or Sworn group provide Sworn Beats instead of normal Beats.

Conditions

[THE FOLLOWING ARE CONDITIONS]

Blightfang (Persistent)

Edinburgh

You have had blood, health, or some manner of vitality drained from you by a creature (often a vampire) infected with Blightfang. You now share some of that creature's hungers, and you have become linked to its life and death. You must make a Resolve + Composure roll every night or perform the same self-sustaining tasks as the individual who infected you, such as drinking blood. Each night you successfully resist this urge, the difficulty of resisting again increases by 1 each subsequent night (to a maximum of Difficulty 4). Additionally, you now suffer +2 difficulty to social and mental challenges taking place in sunlight, as you develop an aversion to the natural light. When your hunger takes over, you attack the nearest vulnerable vessel and in so doing, reduce the craving. If your victim is mortal — whether human or animal — you pass on the Condition.

Possible Sources: A Blightfang vampire bites you; an infected ghost drains some of your health; an infected Beast drains your Willpower as you sleep; you come into contact with the corpse of someone infected with Blightfang.

Resolution: Exposing yourself to the Grey, or killing the creature that infected you. If the creature that infected you dies, you immediately attack the closest living individual and cannot be broken from your frenzy without achieving four successes on a Resolve + Composure roll or being subdued until the next scene by others.

Beat: Willingly passing on the Condition.

Bloody Infected (Persistent)

Congo

Your character has become infected by the Contagion in the form of Ebola hemorrhagic fever (EHF). You are now a carrier of the condition, which may manifest when the Contagion needs you for a purpose. Until then, you notice you tend to have a hard time dealing with bloody noses and other cuts.

Possible Sources: Eating tainted bushmeat; direct contact with bodily fluids of an infectious individual.

Resolution: Curing yourself of the Contagion.

Beat: Each time you try to find a way to slow the progression or reduce the effects of your disease.

Contagion Carrier (Persistent)

Your character doesn't show any signs or experience any symptoms, but he's a carrier for the Contagion. Whenever he uses a supernatural power on another character who isn't an ordinary human, or directly interfaces with them in some supernatural way, that character's player rolls a chance die; nothing can turn it into a normal die or add dice. On a dramatic failure, they gain the Contagion-Touched Condition. In some circumstances, Contagion Carrier may be temporary rather than persistent.

Possible Sources: Host Immunity Dread Power; fluke natural immunity.

Resolution: Successfully apply an appropriate Contagion cure.

Beat: Inflict the Contagion-Touched Condition on someone.

Contagion-Touched

Your character came into contact with something contaminated and picked up a weak strain of the illness. She suffers mild symptoms based on the particular outbreak that contaminated her, and takes a -1 penalty to Social rolls against anyone who knows about her infection; this becomes a bonus instead when she threatens them.

Possible Sources: Exposure to Contagion vectors; dramatically failing a Contagion Carrier roll.

Resolution: Avoid supernatural or skin-to-skin contact with any infected source for one full chapter, or progress to the Infected (Stage 1) Condition.

Contaminated Magic (Persistent)

Acre

Every spell cast by this character exudes the Contagion. An infected mage does not make rolls to see whether his spells are contaminated. Every spell he casts (whether it succeeds or fails) brings the Contagion further into the world, twisting the mage's Nimbus and Imagos until the results of his casting are completely unpredictable and invariably unpleasant. The precise effects depend on the targets the mage chooses for his spells. A Moros might contaminate ghosts, a Thyrsus spirits, and an Acanthus hobgoblins. A Mastigos could find himself surrounded by contaminated Goetia, and an Obrimos could contaminate sacred ground.

Many spells are cast on the mage himself. Mage Sight starts to deceive. Shields give their target an infected appearance — leprous, withered, cankered, or covered in oozing sores.

Possible Sources: Coming into contact with a Contagious artifact; having a spell cast upon one by a Contagious mage.

Resolution: Curing the mage of the Contagion.

Beat: Your character suffers a serious setback as a result of casting a contaminated spell.

Cracked (Persistent)

Kyoto

The Geryo strain has cracked your will. You are not capable of fighting back or even mustering a mote of resistance. Apply a -2 to all Social rolls and rolls involving Resolve, and a -5 to any use of the Intimidation Skill.

Possible Sources: Physical contact with Geryo or Contagion-touched objects.

Resolution: If the character regains a dot of Integrity, loses a dot of Integrity, or achieves an exceptional success on a breaking point, they can shed this Condition. This Condition returns once again at the next breaking point, and will continue to do so unless the infected person or place is purified or destroyed.

Beat: The character backs down from a confrontation or fails a roll due to this Condition.

Dependency (Persistent)

Kyoto

This symptom reduces a character's maximum Willpower rating by one each time that character reaches a breaking point. The character will automatically gravitate to a strong-willed character or important concept in the region, and defer to them in almost all matters. The player can choose to spend two Willpower points at a breaking point roll to not advance this Contagion symptom, but they also do not gain the beat typically gained at a breaking point.

Possible Sources: Worship of a Contagious being; owing someone with Contagion a debt.

Resolution: If the character or concept to which the character is sworn is destroyed, the Condition is resolved.

Beat: If the character follows their master's or belief's edicts, even if they harm the character.

Discord (Persistent)

New Zealand

Your character has dipped into an otherworldly power source and felt the shock of it course through every fiber of her being. She suffers a -1 penalty to her next roll that uses her supernatural abilities.

Possible Sources: Eating goblin fruit grown from the other reality's Hedge; discovering a piece of the alien God-Machine's Infrastructure.

Resolution: Your character refills her appropriate supernatural pool such as Glamour for changelings, Vitae for vampires, etc. or for Deviants, heals one level of Instability.

Beat: Using your power causes an ally harm or negatively impacts your situation.

Disquieted (Persistent)

New Zealand

As the Contagion worsens, it tears away your character's hold on reality. She may believe herself to be in Arcadia, or think she's wandering the Supernal Realms. Roll Resolve + Composure. On a failure, the character spends the next scene convinced she is in a different place or time, and interacts with her environment accordingly.

Possible Sources: Reaching a breaking point; getting lost in the Hedge or somewhere that the other reality has invaded our own.

Resolution: Cure the Contagion; regain all lost Clarity.

Beat: Choose to fail the Resolve + Composure roll; take lethal damage while under the delusion.

Erased (Persistent)

Kyoto

The character's very existence is melting away under the strain of Contagion. Other characters struggle to remember the character, and the character even struggles to remember herself at times. For each week this Condition persists, other characters suffer a cumulative -2 die penalty to remembering anything about the character's past, behavior, and actions. The character herself starts suffering this cumulative penalty after suffering the Condition for two weeks. For as long as she has this Condition, she does not regain Willpower through surrender or rest. Instead, she regains full Willpower once per chapter by reminding another character of who she is, with no failings of memory. This becomes increasingly difficult as the penalties grow.

Possible Sources: The Geryo Contagion infecting a non-werewolf.

Resolution: The character regains her existence through the purification or destruction of the Contagion infecting her, even if that means dying and being resurrected.

Beat: The player successfully plays out dramatic memory loss from their character's perspective.

Exposed (Persistent)

New Zealand

The Contagion tears away the disguise that lets your character walk among humans. Claws extend from her fingertips. High Speech drips from her tongue. She's not like everyone else, and it shows.

Possible Sources: Taking Glamour or Vitae from an infected target; being attacked by denizens of the other reality.

Resolution: Cure the Contagion; feed from an uninfected source.

Beat: Cause a disturbance due to your frightening or unusual appearance.

The Fade-Out (Persistent)

Antarctica

Your character has the essence of a biomechanical monstrosity running through her veins. She suffers an increasing sense of delirium and fatigue that impedes on daily life. She no longer regains Willpower points through rest, and must spend one Willpower point per day or suffer a -2 penalty to any roll involving Mental or Physical skills. When the character's Willpower is reduced to zero, her player must roll Resolve + Composure. On a failure, the character falls into a deep sleep.

Possible Sources: An attack by a being made of wood and metal; exposure to infected blood.

Resolution: Succumb to a deep sleep for at least 24 hours; destroy the being made of wood and metal; undergo a major blood transfusion.

Beat: Your character suffers a hallucination or an attack of fatigue that heightens the immediate danger she faces.

Galvanized

Milton Keynes

Your Azoth has been tapped, and a powerful Contagious entity is using it as fuel. This dims your Azoth and saps your sense of self, though there are some who would consider this a blessing.

When rolling for Disquiet or Wasteland effects, count your effective Azoth rating as half of its full value (rounded up).

Every day at sunrise, roll a chance die. On a success, you regain Pyros as normal. On a failure, you do not regain Pyros for the sunrise. On a dramatic failure, you do not regain Pyros, and must immediately lose additional Pyros equal to your Azoth rating.

If this Pyros loss reduces your Pyros pool to zero, you must make an immediate roll as the victim of a lacuna (**Promethean: The Created**, p. 188), contested by the reaper's Strength + Occult or Brawl (or Power + Rank or Azoth, in the case of ephemeral beings such as Colossus) as normal.

The reaper gains any Pyros or Vitriol Beats lost in this way immediately, siphoned via their Contagious connection, with no opportunity to re-ingest the lost Vitriol.

Possible Sources: Recovering Pyros from a Contagious source; victim of the Eternal Feast Numina or Refinement.

Resolution: Destruction or banishment of the Contagious entity (or, at Storyteller discretion, travel to a site free of Contagion). In addition, the Promethean must expend all available Pyros to trigger a Firestorm, eradicating their link to the Contagion.

Beat: Not applicable.

Ghost Doppelgänger (Persistent)

Acre

A ghost visits your character every sunset and steals a point of Willpower. As this process continues, your character becomes more and more lethargic and inert. As your character's Willpower points diminish, the ghost starts to take on her appearance. If your character is reduced to 0 Willpower, the ghost can fully manifest and go about leading your character's life while she lies in a catatonic stupor. At this point, the ghost also makes a roll (Power + Finesse contested by Resolve + Supernatural Tolerance) to steal its victim's soul. If the ghost succeeds your character gains the Soulless Condition (**Chronicles of Darkness**, p. 290). Being soulless does not resolve the Ghost Doppelgänger Condition.

Possible Sources: Being targeted by a ghost infected with the Contagion.

Resolution: Prevent the ghost from visiting your character; have the ghost banished to the Underworld.

Beat: Your character, or her friends or family, attempt a painful or harmful mundane medical intervention.

The Grey (Persistent)

Edinburgh

The God-Machine has attempted to purge the Blightfang infection from your body, but in so doing will cause your eventual death. Your appearance changes day by day, your skin losing its color, your veins becoming more visible, and your blood turning black. You lose a dot from one of your Social Attributes each day, to a minimum of 1. By the seventh day, you become a statue of ash.

Possible Sources: Being bitten by a God-Machine antivirus carrier, usually in the form of a bug; Remaining in a Greyed Out area for three days.

Resolution: Receiving a cure via one of the Sworn or False's vectors; abilities that purge disease or illness from a mortal can reverse the Grey within them.

Beat: You seek out supernatural aid for your affliction.

Hollowed (Persistent)

Odense

You encountered a Contagious artifact and your passions are now slipping away from you, feeding the Contagion and one of its servants, the vampire King Knud. You lose a dot of permanent Willpower each day, to a minimum of 1. When your Willpower reaches 1, you enter the Contagion's service or attempt self-destruction at least once per day until you join a force for the Contagion like Knud, or die by suicide. When your Willpower drops to 4, you gain a die on attempts to see through supernatural cover or obfuscation. At 3, you gain two dice. At 2, you gain three dice. At 1, you gain four dice.

Possible Sources: Handling a Contagious artifact; being subject to one of Knud's Disciplines.

Resolution: Drinking from the Elixir Vitae; curative vectors wielded by the Sworn or False.

Beat: You perceive something hidden as a result of your Condition.

Infected (Stages 1-3; Persistent)

The Contagion infects your character. This Condition develops across three stages. Each stage of Infected is a new Condition; progressing the infection to the next stage resolves the previous stage's Condition and grants a Beat as normal. A character moves to the next stage of Infected after a number of full chapters have passed equal to her current stage of infection +1; thus, a character at stage 1 who isn't cured before two full chapters have passed resolves the stage 1 Condition and gains the stage 2 Condition instead.

The character suffers symptoms at an intensity appropriate to the stage of the Condition she possesses, based on the particular outbreak that contaminated her. She also spreads her infection as though she had the Contagion Carrier Condition, p. XX. She takes a penalty equal to the stage of this Condition to Social rolls against anyone who knows about her infection; this becomes a bonus instead when she threatens them.

Possible Sources: Progression from the Contagion-Touched Condition; some particularly virulent Contagion vectors.

Resolution: Successfully applying an appropriate Contagion cure resolves the current stage's Condition and drops the character down to the previous stage, or from stage 1 to Contagion-Touched. Gaining the next stage of this Condition resolves the current one. At stage 3, if the character would progress to the next stage of Infected, she becomes one of the Contagious instead (and likely unplayable).

Beat: Inflict the Contagion-Touched Condition on someone; suffer significant setbacks or harm due to your symptoms.

Intolerance (Persistent)

Odense

You are an infected vampire. Blood no longer yields the same benefits to you as it once did. Feeding from mortals gives one fewer blood point for the first week of infection, and drinking no

longer induces euphoria in your prey or for yourself. In the second and subsequent weeks of infection, mortal blood yields two fewer blood points from each drink, no matter how much you consume. Such a Condition can drive a vampire to self-destruction due to their victims' suffering from their feeding and the excessive amount of blood required for them to survive.

Possible Sources: Drinking from a mortal vessel shared by Knud or one of his vampire cultists; coming into contact with raw Contagion.

Resolution: Drinking from the Elixir Vitae; killing Knud or one of his descendants and eating their ash; becoming fully blood bound to another vampire.

Beat: You feed from a vampire to circumvent the Condition.

Latent (Persistent)

San Francisco

You carry the Contagion and are able to spread it to others, but with significant difficulty. Only a serious disruption of your corpus (three or more corpus levels of damage) will expose others to the disease. If you fail the roll to unlock a Haunt with the Key of the Contagion, you begin Replicating.

Possible Sources: Exposure to the Contagion while Bound.

Resolution: Progress to Replicating; cure the Contagion.

Murderous (Persistent)

Carthage

Swept up in the chaos and rage of Contagion, you believe yourself to be a dread hunter and everyone else your prey. Choose one nearby non-hostile creature to be your prey for the remainder of the scene. You may spend a Willpower point to roll your Resolve + Composure; success allows you to flee the scene rather than harm someone.

Possible Sources: Contagion (Hasdrubal's Curse)

Resolution: When you have brought a mortal down to his last Health box.

Beat: When you forego Resolution, and instead kill an initially non-hostile mortal in your rage.

Mutated (Persistent)

This strain of Contagion creates a new organ, limb, or other body part in its host, like a slowly growing tumor. It manifests in stages.

The first stage is inadvertent and uncontrollable. This first stage mutation takes three failed breaking points to reach its fully-grown size. Until then, the person suffering from this condition has the Sick Tilt (**Chronicles of Darkness**, p. 93) to reflect their state. After the first growth has fully manifested, a new mutation develops, and the process starts over again. For each breaking point the infected goes through, one point from the character's Social Attributes moves to a Physical Attribute of the player's choice. Social Attributes can reach as low as 1 in each trait, at which point start moving them from Mental Attributes of the player's choice.

Although the victim may not necessarily desire another mutation, they have a chance to stave off its development. Whenever the shapeshifter changes form, they must roll their Stamina + Resolve. If they fail, a full physical mutation bursts free. This could be in the form of scaled skin,

a new limb, another eyeball somewhere on their body, a set of mandibles, or worse. If such a mutation occurs, it removes the shapeshifter's ability to use one of the alternate forms from them.

For each mutation, shapeshifters infected with this strain suffer a -2 dice penalty when attempting to control which form they shift into. This cumulative penalty ultimately makes Uratha, Beasts, and other shapeshifting creatures incapable of changing.

Possible Sources: The Geryo strain of Contagion when infecting a shapeshifter.

Resolution: The Contagion must be eliminated from the host using a purified weapon or artifact. Though this may kill the infected, it also eliminates Contagion.

Beat: The character accepts a breaking point without resistance and does not recover Willpower.

Reality Breakdown (Persistent)

Chile

Your character's soul is a cracked gateway into a maddening unreality that easily spills forth. Whenever the Deviant uses a Variation or suffers an Instability, all baseline humans in the scene suffer from the effects of the Hallucination Scar (**Deviant: The Renegade**, p. XX) at a dot rating equal to that of the Deviant's highest Variation. The hallucinations that this Condition creates are vivid, bizarre, and alien, as chimeric figures caper and strange faces leer from inanimate objects. The effect passes at the end of the scene, but baseline humans who gain the Contagion-Touched Condition from the encounter will experience the effects of Hallucination (••) in any scene where they fail a roll, increasing by • with each stage if they gain the Infected Condition. With enough stage 3 Infected in an area, the unreality imprints itself fully and even uninfected find the hallucinations to be fully real and material.

Additionally, your character suffers the Madness Condition (**Chronicles of Darkness**, p. 289), and must spend one point of Willpower to be able to resist a command or instruction from El Centinela.

Possible Sources: Direct infection from El Centinela; excessive exposure to the ACZ.

Resolution: Death; one week's total isolation in a desert; tearing one's own eyes out (and not regenerating the damage).

Beat: Your character fails to discern between reality and hallucination.

Reckless (Persistent)

Carthage

You are incapable of considering the consequences of your actions, and are driven to do incautious things for the sheer thrill of it. You take a -2 to Perception rolls and to Composure rolls made to notice something (e.g., to oppose Sleight of Hand or a stealth-related supernatural power).

Possible Sources: Contagion (Hasdrubal's Curse)

Resolution: Someone you care about (even in the abstract of not wanting innocent bystanders to come to harm) dies because of your recklessness.

Beat: You or one of your allies suffers serious harm or a major setback due to an ill-considered risk or reckless action you've taken.

Replicating (Persistent)

San Francisco

The Contagion is replicating inside your body, becoming stronger and more infectious. Any corpus damage sustained represents a potential exposure to the Contagion as does a metaphysical intrusion (e.g., The Caul, the Marionette). Due to the pallor of ill health and your general feeling of malaise, you suffer a -1 penalty to all Physical and Social actions; however, the Contagious will not attack you unless provoked, seeing you as one of their own. If you abstain from using the Key of the Contagion for (6 - Stamina) days, you regress to the Latent Condition. If you dramatically fail a roll to unlock the Key of the Contagion while Replicating, or if you use it more than times than your Stamina rating in one week, you progress to the Shedding Condition.

Possible Sources: Failing a roll to unlock the Key of the Contagion while Latent.

Resolution: Regress to Latent; progress to Shedding.

Beat: Transmit the Contagion to another person or to Infrastructure.

Shedding (Persistent)

San Francisco

Your corpus is suffused with the Contagion, exposing anyone who touches you. In addition, during periods of high activity, you have a disturbing tendency to leave traces of your corpus behind as ectoplasm; while this doesn't harm you, this material is just as Contagious as the rest of your body. You suffer a -2 penalty to Physical and Social actions. As when Replicating, the Contagious will consider you one of their own. If you abstain from unlocking the Key of the Contagion for the remainder of the Story, you regress to Replicating. If you dramatically fail a roll to unlock the Key of the Contagion while Shedding, or if you use it more than times than your Stamina rating in one week, you gain the Terminal Condition.

Possible Sources: Failing a roll to unlock the Key of the Contagion while Replicating.

Resolution: Regress to Replicating; progress to Terminal.

Beat: Lose an ally's trust due to your obvious infection.

Trusting

Your character dares to trust in one of her companions. Gain bonus dice equal to the number of invested social currency points to any teamwork action you take with that character, whether you're the primary or secondary actor. Gain the same to rolls you make to help him overcome emotional trials, negative mental influence, or the Contagion, including activation rolls for supernatural powers. That character's player gains the same bonus on all Social rolls he makes against yours, if you allow such rolls. In an agonism negotiation, you must capitulate to the trusted character if you would spend your last social currency point to outbid him.

Possible Sources: Investing social currency in another character.

Resolution: The trusted character meaningfully betrays the trust or performs an action that costs your character something significant, gaining one bonus success on the betraying action and a Willpower point; you regain all invested social currency +1. Alternatively, the trusted character

affirms the trust by making a significant personal sacrifice on your character's behalf, gaining one bonus success on the sacrificial action and a Willpower point; you regain all invested social currency points, and the trusted character gains one. Beats earned through affirmation are Sworn Beats.

Beat: An action or event that proves the trust was well-placed.

Undying (Persistent)

Kyoto

Characters with this strain can take a full action to remove one of their permanent Willpower dots in exchange for a Health box that remains available for their use until their opponent takes aggravated damage. They can do this as many times as they have Willpower points.

Additionally, Contagious with this Condition can heal up to three boxes of lethal damage as if it was bashing damage once per scene. However, they take aggravated damage from any weapon blessed by a priest, treated as a vessel by mummies, or wielded by a member of the Aegis Kai Doru. Aggravated damage wounds exude smoke.

A character with this Condition does not age and can come back from death if certain conditions are met (see Resolution).

Possible Sources: Selection by the God-Machine or the Contagion for eternal servitude.

Resolution: If aggravated damage occurs, any additional Health boxes disappear immediately. If the character dies via this method, their body crumbles to dust and they emerge from an Avernian Gate in a number of weeks equal to the number of purchased Health boxes. Their returned form returns with the same amount of Willpower as when the character died, but none of the additional Health boxes.

Beat: The character takes aggravated damage.

Zealous

Bend

The Contagion compels you to fixate on certain actions such as personal security, persecuting others, and making that artwork just *right*. You gain two dice on all actions relating to your obsession but lose three dice on all actions you cannot connect to your obsession. If you continue to fixate for a week without taking actions extraneous to your obsession, you gain four dice on your zealous actions and lose four on all other actions. Physical manifestations of this Condition appear as bloodshot eyes, frequent drooling or spitting while speaking, and pallid skin.

Possible Sources: The preaching of Contagion prophets; living for longer than a month in Bend, Oregon; the Poisonous Words Dread Power.

Resolution: Acting for a week without exercising your obsession.

Beat: Bringing someone in to share your obsession.

[END OF CONDITIONS]

Tilts

[THE FOLLOWING ARE TILTS]

Contaminant

Environmental; San Lorenzo

Description: The area surrounding the character is saturated with Contagion. Some objects, like those the conquistadors looted from the Magician's Pyramid, may also carry the Contaminant Tilt.

Effect: The character makes a [Resistance] + [Supernatural Tolerance] roll against a difficulty of 1-5 depending on the virulence of the strain. The Storyteller assigns the Resistance (Resolve, Stamina, or Composure) trait based on the type of infection. Each scene spent with the Contaminant triggers another roll with a cumulative -1 penalty.

Drained

Environmental

The hunger of the False has scoured the area of energy; their powers have frayed the underpinnings of reality here.

Effect: Nothing grows within the Drained area. Plants wither and newborn creatures perish; earth is rendered barren, and the poor air quality leaves lungs gasping. Stamina-based dice pools suffer a -2 penalty, natural healing does not progress, and the Durability of all objects within the area is treated as one less than it actually is. Electrical and mechanical devices run out of fuel or batteries twice as fast; treat all failures on dice pools utilizing them as dramatic failures. A character attempting to harvest any sort of supernatural energy finds that there is nothing to be had here; a changeling cannot gather Glamour, a vampire finds the blood of a victim does nothing to quench her thirst, and even spirits are unable to gather Essence from their resonance. Any supernatural power that has a cost measured in points from a pool has that cost increased by one. Finally, the damage to reality gives Contagion an easy foothold; all dice pools to resist Contagion in the area suffer a -3 penalty, while dice pools to infest or spread Contagion gain a +3 bonus.

Causing the Tilt: A False using the Drain Energy Vector is the most direct way, but other forms of exploitation or ravaging the fundamental fabric of reality might also trigger it.

Ending the Tilt: Theoretically, an area harvested by Drain Energy might eventually recover. In practice, spots scoured by False centuries ago are still metaphysically desolate, even though later generations have no understanding as to why these places seem cursed or lifeless.

Greyed Out

Environmental

Someone in the area has been infected with the Grey for longer than three days. The area surrounding them is now losing natural vitality and attracts more Grey carriers. The area starts 30 feet square around your resting place, multiplying in size by two each day. This area remains Greyed Out even if the person who caused it dies.

Effect: The temperature rises to a muggy, humid level. Mosquitoes, midges, and other bugs carrying the Grey arrive in droves. Anyone else who rests within the Greyed Out area contracts the Grey Condition (see p. XX).

Ending the Tilt: Demons might repair the Infrastructure in a Greyed Out area to appease the God-Machine and convince it there's no infection to fear, or angels could be convinced to do so.

If all local victims of Blightfang are eliminated or cured, the God-Machine may reverse the Grey. Vectors can be used to treat regions and individuals infected with the Grey in the same way they'd treat Contagion.

Inferno

Environmental

The area is on fire. Anything flammable is either already burning or will be soon.

Effect: All characters suffer a -2 to all rolls due to smoke and heat. After two turns, any character that breathes also suffers 2 bashing damage per turn due to smoke inhalation. After three turns, characters also suffer 1 lethal damage per turn from burns and must succeed on a Dexterity + Stamina roll each turn to avoid catching fire (see p. XX).

Ending the Tilt: Different types of fire require different methods to extinguish; in general, cutting off the fire from its fuel sources does the trick. Water, carbon dioxide, sand, and baking soda can be useful, depending on the size and type of the fire. Eventually all fires burn themselves out, but that can be cold comfort in the aftermath of a destructive blaze.

Reality Bleed

Environmental

Presence of Contagion has worn thin the barriers between our reality and others, causing another world that is only passingly like our own to bleed into this one. Powerful beings can cross the boundary when they sense it, and can widen the breach for their followers.

Effect: Any Sworn, False, or creatures capable of sensing the Gauntlet can see a thin, split gauze between our world and another. Anyone who can perceive this tear can slip through into another reality, though each passage weakens the boundary further, eventually prompting the God-Machine to take drastic action to heal it.

Ending the Tilt: Areas the God-Machine makes Greyed Out (see p. XX) have their Reality Bleed healed after 24 hours have passed; the Factions have vectors designed for repairing reality; werewolves might utilize an uncomfortable alliance with Azlu or other Hosts to repair the damage for them.

[END OF TILTS]