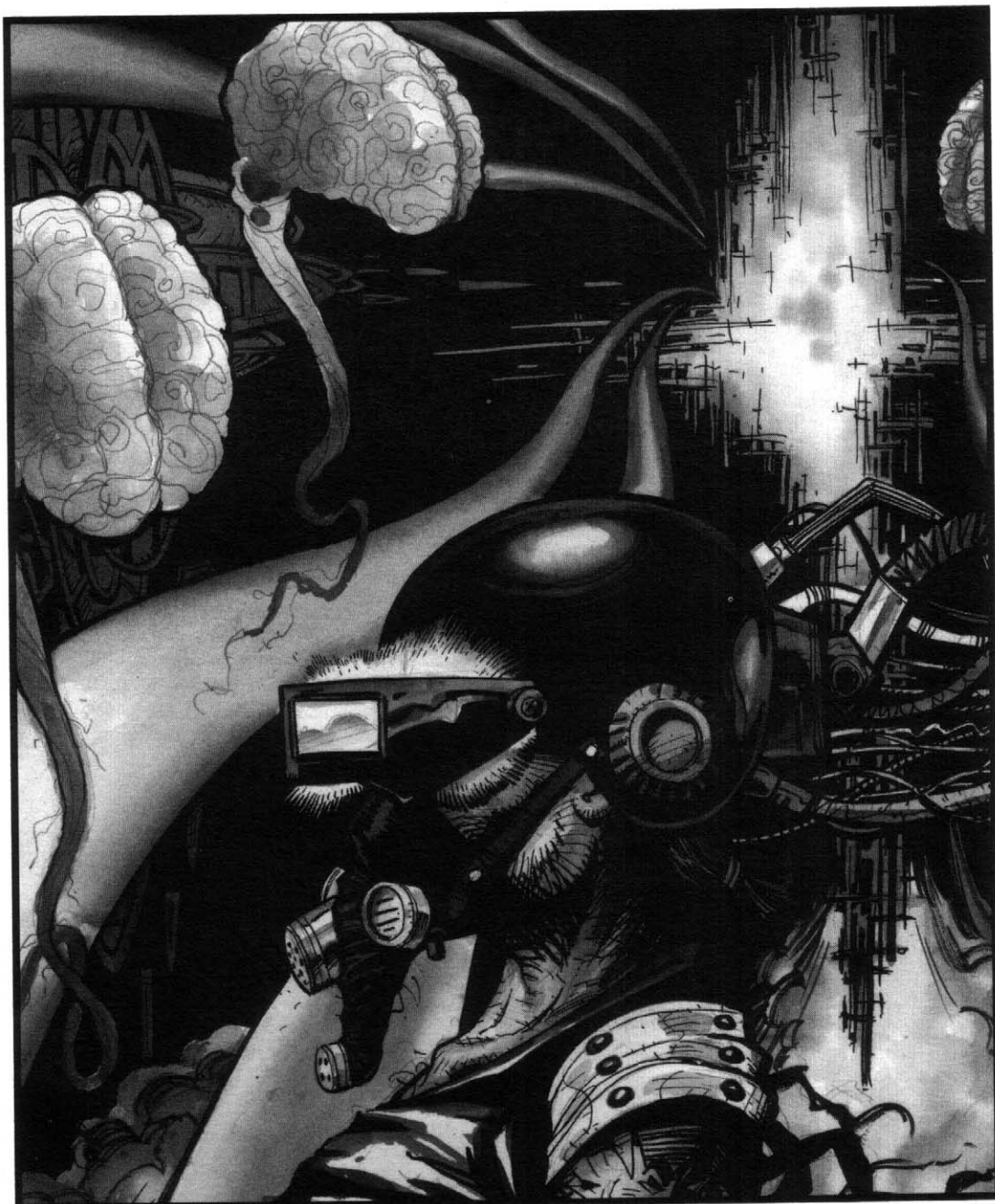


THREATS™



THREATS™



FASA CORPORATION

INTRODUCTION	6
How to Use this Book	7
Using Threats	7
Designing Threats	8
THE THREATS	
Alamos 20,000	9
Afraid of the Darke	17
Winternight	23
The Vampire Conspiracy	31
Halberstam's Babies	38
KSAF	45
The Atlantean Conspiracy	51
Here There Be Dragons	59
Bugs	64
Blood Mage Gestalt	70
The Black Lodge	76
The Human Nation	84
Tutor	92
Strain III	99

THREATS

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SHADOWLAND V2.0

"I have taken all knowledge to be my province."—Francis Bacon

"Humankind cannot bear very much reality."—T. S. Eliot

A WORD FROM OUR SPONSOR:

Just when you think things can't get weirder ...

Regarding life, the universe and everything, we at Shadowland have maintained a dignified neutral stance. We have allowed almost everyone with an opinion to grace our little semi-illegal forum. But I must express shock at the staggering number of apocalyptic cults, madmen, and just plain loonies that have crawled out of the woodwork in the past few months—some of which grace the download titled Threats. Can it be election fever? Do people finally realize the Awakening ain't going away? Or maybe that guy who keeps saying they poisoned the water with fluoride is right

THE BACK STOCK

New Magic Download (The Awakened World all spelled out)
Cybertech Download (Man, Machine and Magic ...)
California Free State (From Tir to Aztlan and everything in between)
Campaign 2057 (Vote early, vote often!)

GO TO COMPLETE LIBRARY ARCHIVES

THE DAILY SPECIAL

Threats (Paranoia, conspiracies, and secret stuff)

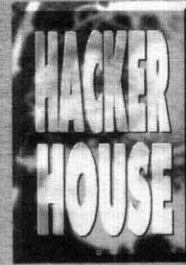
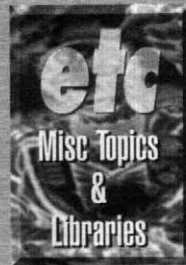
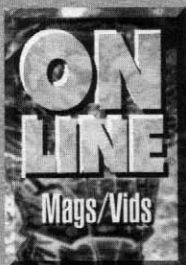
This one would be funny if it wasn't so scary. Are these the scrawlings of paranoid conspiracy theorists with chips on their shoulders the size of the Ute Nation, or is there some truth buried in the rantings of these nutcases? A year or so back, when we got a post about the bugs infesting Chicago and the government's plan to geek them with tactical nukes, we didn't believe it. Who knew ... ? Maybe this time we'll be prepared—for whatever.

GO TO COMPLETE LIBRARY ARCHIVES

COMING SOON

You get what we got—this election is eating into our free time. When the heat dies down and we can put together another download, you'll be the first to know.

GO TO COMPLETE LIBRARY ARCHIVES

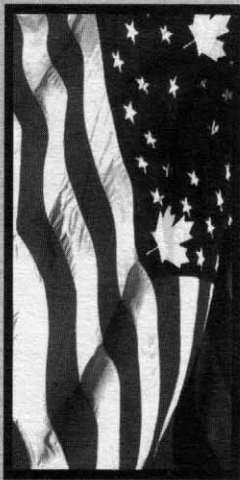


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ABSENTEE BALLOTS

The UCAS bigwigs are urging everyone to vote. And what better way to vote than by absentee ballot— isn't it about time you got some use out of those extra SIN numbers? Heck, you might even win prizes! Click here for the UCAS press release.



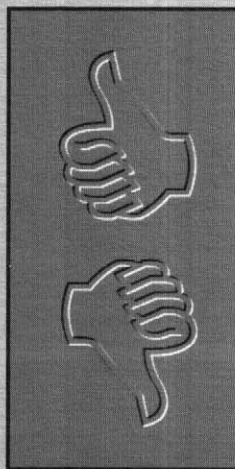
THE BUZZ ON THE STREET

From Seattle to Minneapolis to New York City, the word on the street is violence. Shadowrunners are busier than ever as corps wage their wars. Now that politicos and poli-clubs have joined the fray, life's even more interesting. Click here to see the war zones.



POLL RESULTS

Anne Penchyk's passionate plea for those on the wrong side of the Chicago Wall vaults Yeats to a tie with Dunkelzahn at 21 percent. Vogel follows with 20 percent, Brackhaven 19 percent, Hernandez 12 percent, and Booth a laughable 1 percent (well behind the 6 percent vote for Undecided). Click here for all the breakdowns.



WEIRD STUFF

Tir Tairngire has announced the indefinite postponement of its Rite of Progression ceremony. No reason was given. Anybody think it has anything to do with a wyrm running for UCAS President? Just how worried *are* our elven brothers over the election? Click here for elven paranoia.

It's 22:35:06. Do You Know Where Your Meat Body Is?

CANDIDATES PAGE



ARTHUR VOGEL

Democratic
"One World" Party
VP: Gary Grey

Slogan: Save the Earth
A dwarf eco-lawyer and a troll Eagle shaman—now *there's* an image! Seriously, folks—these two aren't your usual crackpot tree-huggers. They're smart, savvy, articulate, and just might have a shot at the

Big Chair—assuming no nasty skeletons come popping out of Lawyer Vogel's closet.



GENERAL FRANKLIN YEATS

Republican Party
VP: Anne Penchyk
Slogan: Rebuild America

"Rebuild America" on the backs of the Native American Nations, the Confederate American States, and the California Free State. Nothing like a hot war to prop up a sagging economy ... with a savvy ork veep in pin-

stripes to make sure metahumans get their slice of the pie. Will the UCAS's favorite hawk lead his troops to the White House?



DR. ROZILYN HERNANDEZ

New Century Party
VP: Ramsay McMulkin
Slogan: Our Magical Future

Revenge of the nerds, anyone? Magical goom-bahs and techno-weenies have a home in the New Century Party, dedicated to better living through electing mage-o-crat Roz and her gorgeous simstar

veep to be our Supreme Leaders. (He's pretty, but can he type?)



KENNETH BRACKHAVEN

Archconservative Party
VP: William Ager

Slogan: A Holy War for the Soul of the Nation

Respectable businessmen ... or Monsters From the Id? Only their speechwriters know for sure! Meet the new poster kids for Traditional Values—they're rich, they're reactionary, and they want all

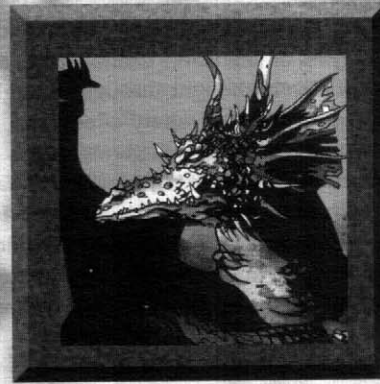
the mages and metahumans out of the clubhouse. Race-baiters-R-Us goes to Washington?



JAMES BOOTH

Technocratic Party
VP: Brandon Ekimatsu
Slogan: The Status Quo

Slick Jimmy and the Suit—a ticket only their mothers could love. Special message to Mr.-former-Veep Booth: your status is ZERO and nobody wants your (quid pro) quo. Give up, go home, take up flower arranging. Just get off the fragging stage, 'kay?



DUNKELZAHN

Independent
VP: Kyle Haefner
Slogan: A New Golden Age

A new-minted UCAS citizen, and *already* he wants to run the place? We'd say more power to him, except that a great dragon doesn't need any. With a human philanthropist veep to make nervous

voters feel comfy, the Big Wizworm might take the prize—but can he deliver?

INTRODUCTION



Threats is a supplement for the **Shadowrun** game system. It describes the Awakened world's players who, for better or worse, can change the status quo of world power. Threats are not street gangs, organized crime, the deckers who run the Denver Data Haven or even the megacorporations. Threats are those secret organizations, hate groups, astral entities and power blocks who wield the magic, weapons, influence and/or nuyen required to bring their schemes to fruition. The real threats of the **Shadowrun** world pull the strings of the megacorps and runners alike—they are insidious and anonymous, and they dream of power on a global scale.

Like previous **Shadowrun** sourcebooks, **Threats** is formatted as a collection of electronic documents from that fictional world. Scattered throughout each document are comments and additions from readers who seek to correct, expand, corroborate or contradict the information it presents. Because this “black” information comes from the characters within the game universe, players or characters cannot safely assume these comments are truthful, accurate, considered or clearly thought through (though they may be all of those things). The material in **Threats** comes from a variety of sources, most unofficial and all carrying built-in biases. The multiple points of view give gamemasters greater scope to decide how much of the information presented is accurate, misleading or false in their own games.

The **Threats** sourcebook is intended for use with the **Shadowrun, Second Edition** rules and the **Grimoire, Second Edition**. Specific threats also refer to rules presented in the following **Shadowrun** sourcebooks: **Awakenings: New Magic in 2057**, **Virtual Realities 2.0**, **California Free State**, **Bug City**, and **Aztlan**.



HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Threats provides details for fourteen individuals, groups and other entities striving to change the face of the Awakened world—almost always for their personal benefit, but occasionally for what they consider to be the good of mankind. Far from representing the only menaces in the **Shadowrun** universe, these fourteen entries offer a diverse selection of possible threats and types of threats, allowing gamemasters to choose the villain with whom they want to plague their players (this week). From the fourteen presented here and from the threats produced by his own devious mind, the gamemaster should determine the biggest threat to the universe and the threat that will have the greatest impact on the lives of the runners—and those two need not be the same.

Each threat begins with a fictional download from the Shadowland BBS. The Shadowland download provides information from the point of view of the street and the shadowrunners, who either believe the download or dismiss it as the ravings of an

unbalanced mind, a corporate trick, an elaborate mind game or any number of other ruses designed to make them less determined and effective. Each of these accounts offers enough basic information in the form of facts, rumors, advice and warnings for players to arm their characters against these threats' global power plays. As always, the gamemaster decides what is fact and what is fiction. The gamemaster can use the documents presented as BBS download as the actual information player characters find during the legwork searches for clues in their current adventure, or he can photocopy the downloads and hand them to the characters to serve as game hooks for a new campaign.

Following the fictional download, the gamemaster section provides adventure hooks and gives rules and guidelines for incorporating the threat into an ongoing campaign. Based on these suggestions and the type of group he runs, the gamemaster can decide which threats are making serious bids for power and which are nothing but crazy conspiracy theories hatched by the lunatics of the Awakened world.

USING THREATS

The concept of world-spanning threats addresses one of the basic contradictions of the **Shadowrun** game: how to make the large-scale machinations of the powerful matter to and affect the player characters. In most cases, the threats described in this book carry out their plots and plans at a level far beyond the grasp of the player character. All threats, however, no matter how global or local, whether an individual or a group, at some point rely on street-level muscle and talents learned in the school of hard knocks to accomplish their goals. This is where the runners come in.

Threats offer various levels of in-your-face. Groups like the Humanis Policlub make no effort to hide their activities and agendas, and shadowrunners may encounter them nearly anywhere. While *Alamos 20,000* pursues a similar plan, that organization is far more subtle, and runners may only meet a member of that group by chance—and may not even realize what they're up against. Though the Black Lodge deliberately places members in every city in the world, the player characters are very unlikely to ever encounter one. Even if they become involved in the Lodge's activities, they will never know the name of their real employer. Last, but certainly not least, are those threats that suddenly and dramatically touch the runners' lives, turn their worlds upside down, then bow out just as quickly, leaving the characters bewildered and more frightened and paranoid than before. Harlequin's adventures commonly have all the characteristics of this last type of threat, as do conflicts between powerful enemies, especially two threats with similar or conflicting agendas, and anything to do with the immortal elves.

The gamemaster can use the player characters as pawns, cannon fodder, innocent bystanders, unwitting advocates or protesters, or in any number of other roles in relationship to the threats. A threat may be nothing more than a constant, annoying presence that the runners can never encounter or escape. A threat may pursue a personal vendetta against the player characters or even attempt to recruit them. A threat may serve mainly as a background story, only occasionally touching the player characters' lives and then disappearing for months or years, its influence so subtle that the characters may never grasp the scope of the force affecting them or the fact that a pattern exists. Threats may be game hooks, one-shot stories that draw the runners into an unfamiliar world, or a campaign concept, a story element that influences the direction of the entire game, determines the villains the runners face, and creates the mood and atmosphere of the players' **Shadowrun** universe.

The gamemaster chooses what threat seems to be calling the shots for his players' characters at any time. A gamemaster may decide to have multiple threats simultaneously vying for control of the Awakened world or to concentrate on the ultimate villain determined to rule the universe. Those threats the gamemaster decides are nothing more than the rambling of conspiracy theorists and paranoid lunatics provide excellent red herrings for runners on the trail of the real threat. Other threats cover their tracks so thoroughly that no one even guesses they exist—until they achieve their master plan!

DESIGNING THREATS

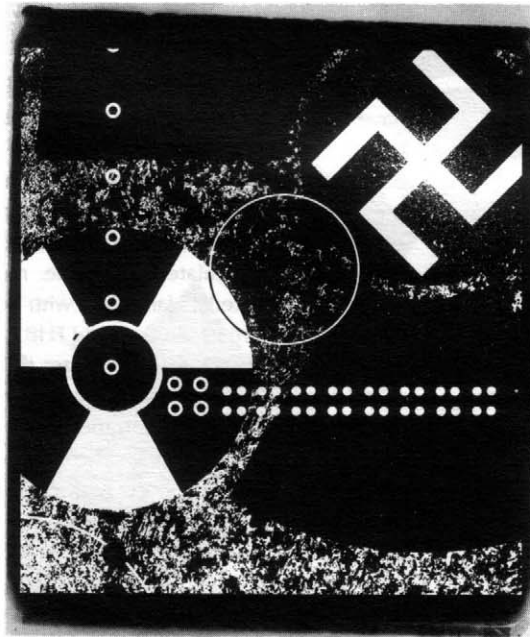
Some of the threats described in this book will be familiar to players and gamemasters who have been enjoying **Shadowrun** in the years since it was first published, such as *Alamos 20,000*, the dragon Lofwyr and the bugs. Other threats are new. The runners' most frequent enemies—Lone Star, organized crime syndicates, gangs, corporate goons and governments, to name a few—do not appear here. By definition, a threat in **Shadowrun** must have the potential to change the world, and these groups simply do not possess such power or influence. That being said, the fourteen threats included in this book serve only as a representative sample of the possibilities: gamemasters can elevate any minor or major player, any group that was only mentioned in passing or was fully fleshed out, to the status of a threat.

In addition to wielding global power, effective threats should work on multiple levels. They should have a plausible organization, a manageable operating procedure and an achievable goal—though the reason for their existence may be completely nonsensical. A threat's goal may be to take over the world, but it's anyone's guess whether he, she or it has thought about what he's going to do with it once he has control. The threat needs to make sense in the world of 2057, but does not need to be sensible.

Finally, a true threat can never be defeated. In much the same way as the super-villain organizations in comic books always rise from the ashes of apparent defeat, threats have too many levels, subgroups, divisions and followers to ever be crushed beyond resurrection. Someone will always step forward to take up the fight—it's in the fanatic's nature. If the runners don't see the body of the person they think they killed (and sometimes even if they do), they should not assume that person is really, truly dead.

Though all threats have common characteristics, they can be roughly divided into three types: "secret" organizations, Awakened threats and "good" threats. Secret organizations include groups such as *Winternight*, *Alamos 20,000*, the Black Lodge and the Human Nation—humans and metahumans working together to achieve an end for personal gain or worldly power. Vampires, dragons, astral entities and the bugs represent Awakened threats, those menaces that only came into being with the rise of magic and who strive to achieve goals that others cannot understand. The Awakened threats generally act in a way similar to a force of nature rather than according to a grand, detailed plan. Good threats offer something of a contradiction; though they seek global rule or worldwide influence, they claim to do so for the good of humankind. Both *KSAF* and the *Atlantean Foundation*, while they pursue a worthy goal, still represent threats according to the definition of having the potential to change the world. If they succeed and their purpose remains pure, they are the heroes—their way was right. If they fail, or become twisted by the means to their end—well, then they are no better than the *Blood Mage Gestalt*. Regardless of their motivation or methods, however, all threats believe theirs is the only true path.

ALAMOS 20,000



"we are the real man - the man the ork skum luvverz wanta keep down but cant. they gonna die an burn in flamez like in hell like god sed all demunz gonna burn. Ohyo just the begining. Its the bomb made them. the big bomb like the fraggin injunz got a bomb too and they give it to the injunz so they gotta burn like in hell. twenty thouzund soljerz all got flameing swordz like anjelz and the orkz an elfz and other mettaskum all will burn like in Ohyo. we are Alamos like the bomb come from. ALL rememeber the Alamos. twnty thouzund."

>>>>>(Everyone remember that? Not your everyday piece of chest-beating by some post-literate net-nut with a modem. It popped into 187 major media orgs' mailboxes simultaneously, two hours after the napalm strike on New Visions, Ohio, on June 23, 2036. That was the first time anyone had ever heard of Alamos 20,000.

You know that shot from a bomb-mounted camera, shows the ork baby in its cradle getting closer and closer? Every time someone does a trid show on anti-meta violence, they run that shot. Well, that was attached to this mail item. No way to get it unless you were there.)<<<<<<

—History Bits (19:27:03/05-13-57)

>>>>>(C'mon, chummer, old news, deader'n ... well, than those poor bastards who got fried in New Visions. There's been nothing tyin' Alamos to a real hit since then. Another flash-in-the-pan bunch of goons with military-surplus tech and a load of hate. Part of life, ain't it?)<<<<<<

—Voice of Reason (02:49:12/05-14-57)

>>>>>(I wish, believe me, I wish I could agree with you.This download came to our BBS from a timed mailer drop. The envelope code said it was set to deliver to a bunch of people if it went 72 hours without a NoGo code. It was pretty corrupt by the time we

got it, and our experts say it came under heavy viral attack before it completed delivery. But the pieces we CAN read ... drek, I hope the woman who wrote this was crazy or wired up. Sad to say, it hangs together.)<<<<<<

—History Bits (09:17:21/05-14-57)

>>ACCESS_ALAMOS_20K_readme.please!

<<ACCESSING>>

<<COMMENCE DOWNLOAD>>

Sender-Node: <<DATA DAMAGED: .01 Mp CORRUPTED>>

Distribution-List: <<DATA DAMAGED: 1.2 Mp CORRUPTED>>

<<**Delivery-Code-Segment:** <<DATA DAMAGED: 12 Mp CORRUPTED>> >>

When I started this story, I thought I was chasing down an isolated piece of violence, some gory little filler for the local news. Instead, I found myself<<DATA DAMAGED: .67 Mp CORRUPTED>>we are being used. All of us—norms, metas, all the races of humanity and maybe everything that lives on this planet.

I was a freelance newsie, working<<DATA DAMAGED: .06 Mp CORRUPTED>>years ago. It looked like a regular piece of nasty network in the elven enclave in<<DATA DAMAGED: 1.78 Mp CORRUPTED>>more than 20 dead. The local cops did an honest job trying to solve the murders—the elves had paid for Premium services, and the heat was way pissed at the bad publicity. But the mayor and council were<<DATA DAMAGED: 2.42 Mp CORRUPTED>>"person or persons unknown."

>>>>(Ghost's cojones! This file's chopped up worse'n soyburger.)<<<<<<

—Abraxas (13:52:09/05-15-57)

>>>>(Far as we can reconstruct what happened, it was under assault by a frame running a scrambler of some kind—zeroed in on specific datafields and tried to fry them. It got as far as a killing jar chokepoint on the Denver Nexus, and the deckers there stomped the frame. You're reading what was left. The envelope looked like it was carrying defensive software, but it was pretty badly slagged by the time they got ahold of it in Denver. We can't even tell who the other addressees were, just a guess as to how many there were from the size of the array in the envelope code.)<<<<<<

—History Bits (19:01:56/05-15-57)

>>>>(That's some fancy coding on both sides—whoever sent the info and whoever tried to stop it.)<<<<<<

—Netspook (04:09:39/05-16-57)

<<DATA DAMAGED: 2.78 Mp CORRUPTED>>street gangs get ahold of corp-military bioweapons like this? They had to have heavy connections. The one lead was <<DATA DAMAGED: 7.77 Mp CORRUPTED>>the local Free Human Brotherhood cell. These guys live in the Barrens, where the law usually won't go after them unless they kill someone in the wrong neighborhood. Lots of FHB members are SINless anyway, recruited in the prisons or<<DATA DAMAGED: 14.23 Mp CORRUPTED>>

>>>>(Frag dis slitch an' her line a' drek. Last lockup I wuz in, fraggin' slags tryna run things, geek anywun din't play their way. Free Human Brotherhood gave a real man somewun t' watch his back, no warhog could stik a snick innit. I'm FHB an' proud—walk tall, take no drek from anything on too feet. Not orks, not elves, not trolls—not no metaluvver race traitors either. Don't frag with FHB, we won't frag wit' you. But cross us an' we know you, an' onna day of rope and flame, we know what ta do wit' you too.)<<<<<<

—REAL Brother (04:25:48/05-16-57)

<<DATA DAMAGED: 6.84 Mp CORRUPTED>> a woman, but you have to give the Free Human crowd this—they're equal-opportunity Nazis. A woman who fits their profile is as welcome as a man. I'd built a good identity by then—prison record, fictional clashes with metas inside and outside the walls, rating as armed security cop to explain my weapons training, discharge with prejudice for abuse of authority, all calculated to make me look like good human supremacist material. Jamming with some of the certified "pure human gene carriers" in the local FHB cell helped, and I only needed a few endorphin patches to get through <<DATA DAMAGED: 17.64 Mp CORRUPTED>>know how a bunch of SINless gutterpunks were wired into an organization that could bankroll this kind of training facility. State-of-the-art combat simulators, with full range of motion; mil-spec weaponry; high-priced mercs in the cadre ... this place looks more like a well-funded corp war training camp than<<DATA DAMAGED: 17.99 Mp CORRUPTED>>

The guard—his name was Glenn—dropped like a stone. I swear I didn't want to shoot him, but I knew he'd never let a "race traitor" walk away from the camp. I don't think he could have. Another week there, I don't think I could have. Living and breathing hatred that long, it gets to you.

Behind me, the flames from the elven family's pyre were dying down. Their screams had stopped long since. The voice of the "supreme leader" echoed from the speakers, distorted by distance and masked by the cheers ... the howls ... of his "soldiers." But I couldn't have saved them. All I could have done was burn with them. And these files have to get out. They have to.

<<DATA DAMAGED: 4.79 Mp CORRUPTED>>lamos 20K exists. Not just a bunch of dangerous psychotics or paranoid gunnuts hunkered down in survival enclaves waiting for a racial Armageddon, but a ruthless tool controlling thousands of people, tens of thousands. Maybe more.

Since escaping from the Free Human Brotherhood, I've put everything into tracing down the leads I picked up at the training center. The picture that emerges is terrifying. While there are hundreds of independent racist organizations, a hard core of front groups is run from behind the scenes by Alamos 2<<DATA DAMAGED: 19.28 Mp CORRUPTED>>is led by a coalition of five powerful individuals, each with a personal agenda aimed at dominating—or possibly exterminating—the metahuman races. They may even intend to wipe out the entire range of Awakened sentients. The coalition, called the Central Executive, was formed during the days before the Night of Rage<<DATA DAMAGED: 1.49 Mp CORRUPTED>>vulnerable to discovery, so the Central Executive changed the direction of Alamo<<DATA DAMAGED: 02 Mp CORRUPTED>>Instead of an active terrorist organization, it became a



network, acting through a web of cutouts and front groups, but always directing its efforts towards “the Struggle:” an inevitable war for supremacy among the races of man.

Factionalism is rife in the Central Executive, and this tendency extends through all the organizations directed by Alamos 2<<DATA DAMAGED: 1.19 Mp CORRUPTED>>managed to identify five individuals—or maybe factions, I can’t be sure—who make up the Central Executive. My conclusions are largely based on patterns in their operations—signatures, M.O.’s, fragments of their communications. There may be more than five—the ones I describe may just be the ones who didn’t cover their tracks. Or there may be fewer. Maybe some of these crazies alternate styles according to the day of the week, or the phases of the moon. Proof of their identities is tenuous, and the danger of identifying the wrong person as one of these madmen seems horrible, so I’ve code-named them. As I uncover more solid documentation, maybe I can put names to them. I hope.

THE NAZI

This one I’m sure <<DATA DAMAGED: .002 Mp CORRUPTED>>He was the one wearing the uniform of “supreme leader” at the training center in <<DATA DAMAGED: .65 Mp CORRUPTED>>great-grandson of an SS Elite officer. But there’s nothing genetic about <<DATA DAMAGED: .001 Mp CORRUPTED>>racism was manufactured, if you like. His family apparently coupled Nazi occult beliefs—the stuff the real nutcases at the core of the SS used to practice—with conspiracy theory as a binding tradition.

<<DATA DAMAGED: .002 Mp CORRUPTED>>beliefs combine neo-Nazi “genetics” with weird German occult theories like the stuff produced by Der Thule Gesellschaft back in the last century, and this take on “the secret history of everything” colors all his plans and decisions. He seems to think that *homo sapiens* sapiens were slaves of other races in some fantastic past history—and that even other species, like dragons, had a hand in this subjection. Ergo, the Awakened must be exterminated or controlled before they can make humans their vassals.

<<DATA DAMAGED: 1.2 Mp CORRUPTED>>is the moving force behind a corporate-funded study group, the Meta<<DATA DAMAGED: .017 Mp CORRUPTED>>major money behind the MRC, with access to corporate muscle and research facilities when they need it.

>>>>(Whoever wrote that scrambler frame sure didn’t want us to see the Nazi’s name. Kinda clumsy, actually—makes you think there might be something to this story. Otherwise, why bother to shoot for datafields with that name in it?)<<<<<<

—Deeper (09:21:38/05-16-57)

>>>>(Good point. Anyone got a guess on who this geek is?)<<<<<<

—Usher (21:35:01/05-19-57)

>>>>(From the SS connection, it could be one of several people active on the German corporate and policlub scene. Gunther Hessler—old Bavarian money, lots of connections, and it’s always been Nazi country down that way. Arn Kaschel—linked to a cou-

ple of policlubs that seem fond of the “good old days,” and a nice portfolio of corp voting stock to keep the cashflow and connections working for the Cause. Dieter von Kammelburg—a hot researcher in gene-tech with a taste for old Nazi theories about racial differences. Doesn’t keep his cures from working, just proves a genius can be a real slot like anybody else.)<<<<<<

—Shin Bet (17:55:21/05-20-57)

>>>>(What is this, a hit list from a bunch of Israelis who can’t get over their grandparents’ problems? There’s no indication in the file that the “Nazi” is IN Germany. Half those SS guys split to the Americas after that war, didn’t they?)<<<<<<

—Unca Donald (01:09:17/05-22-57)

>>>>(We don’t forget. Never again.)<<<<<<

—Shin Bet (18:31:22/05-22-57)

>>>>(What about the MRC? Anything we can look up, something starting “Meta ... ”?)<<<<<<

—Bazooka (14:50:42/05-23-57)

>>>>(It should be so easy. I ran a trademark and name check on that pattern across some organization directories. I got 187 hits for those initials: Metaphysical Re-engineering Consultants, Metahuman Rights Coalition (seems we could ignore them, but think about it), Metamagical Research Co., MetaMatrix Registration Council, Metallurgical Refiners Council ... shall I go on? Only 183 more.)<<<<<<

—Chromed Accountant (23:02:34/05-23-57)

THE TROLL

I don’t know the identity of the Troll. As far as I can determine, he is the scion<<DATA DAMAGED: 1.63 Mp CORRUPTED>>old money in Boston, New York, somewhere. My theory is, he changed early, maybe even before goblinization hit<<DATA DAMAGED: .97 Mp CORRUPTED>>squirreled away as a freak<<DATA DAMAGED: .96 Mp CORRUPTED>>seems he was exposed to every quack with a medical, magical, or mythical cure for goblinization. References to the Troll make it clear he wasn’t “cured”—but these “treatments” left him deformed, unbelievably strong, and more than half mad<<DATA DAMAGED: 1.37 Mp CORRUPTED>>a high-up Alamos member makes it clear that everyone, even the other members of the Central Executive, are afraid of the Troll.

>>>>(Yeah. Right. Here we got the biggest buncha meta-haters onna planet, so they got a troll running things. What was this broad (it is a broad, ain’t it?) wired into when she wrote this dreck? I wanna get me some.)<<<<<<

—Zotz (00:02:02/05-29-57)

Apparently he is also carrying extensive cyber made by some of the most cutting-edge techs on the planet—people like Sorayama in Japan and Genschler in Switzerland—that enhances his physical strength, offsets the damage he suffered as a child and keeps him alive<<DATA DAMAGED: 1.74 Mp CORRUPTED>>

>>>>(Well, that narrows it down. NOT! Friend of mine hacked into Sorayama's private system a couple of years ago, after some data he needed for a run that turned nasty. Says he barely got out with his hoop still attached. At least Sorayama keeps his data on earth. Genschler's made custom spare parts for so many of those oldies up on Zurich-O, he collects part of his fees in storage space on their system. God himself couldn't deck that ice.)<<<<<<

—Beta Test (03:12:27/05-29-57)

The Troll believes that metahumans must be "cured," or will be better off dead. That belief made him the prime source of funds and networking in the founding of the Humanis Policlub. That's right: a troll runs Humanis. Most of the people in the policlub don't have a clue about it, of course. There's irony—of a sort.

>>>>(Who's this breeder bitch think she's kidding with this drek? No troll would dirty his hands with the hooded scum. The only thing of theirs we'll touch is their blood.)<<<<<<

—Son of Sauron 237 (03:37:18/05-29-57)

>>>>(Oh, you bomb-tossing, chest-beating professional victims speak for every metahuman on the planet? I don't like the idea any more than you do, but it makes a kind of twisted sense.)<<<<<<

—MOM Central (16:43:59/05-30-57)

THE ZEALOT

I'm pretty sure the leader I've code-named the Zealot is Asian, or based in Eastern Asia<<DATA DAMAGED: 1.00 Mp CORRUPTED>>his modus operandi uses religion as a cover<<DATA DAMAGED: 1.88 Mp CORRUPTED>>the Zealot believes he is on a Divine mission, or else plays that role to the hilt. One fragment of a memo I acquired says, "The kaliyuga dawns. Those with the Mark of the Beast must not prevail, lest the forces of evil raise up the Antichrist. Those bearing this mark upon their cells and souls shall be cast into endless fire. They shall first be confined in the Unclean Land, before the final trial." The sig icon is a Chinese pictograph that means "Son of the First Ancestor"<<DATA DAMAGED: .68 Mp CORRUPTED>>a newer cult, one that tries to blend science with religion. The memo itself mixed references to apocalyptic and other symbols from several religions. This gets especially interesting in the light of rumors about the Japanese internment center for metahumans—allegedly on an island nicknamed "Yomi." Yomi is the Shinto land of the dead, and death, in Shinto, is the ultimate pollution<<DATA DAMAGED: 2.17 Mp CORRUPTED>>Ministry of Mankind. I know they run hundreds of charities that help poor people everywhere, of any race. But looking at Min<<DATA DAMAGED: 2.72 Mp CORRUPTED>>references to the non-humans who oppose the heroes of myths like the Mahabharata or book of Revelations, even redesigning those myths to emphasize the heroic humanity of the protagonists. All those influences combine in this cult<<DATA DAMAGED: 2.37 Mp CORRUPTED>>even if it isn't one of Alamos ZOK's front groups, came from a mucknet newsie in Hong Kong. A series of charity clinics run by a branch of the Ministry helped treat people for a nasty virus that spread through the poorer sections of the enclave. Every metahuman who underwent treatment there has since proved to be sterile. Hard to pin down the facts: the newsie

turned up dead a month or so after the first part of the report hit the pirate nets, with all the marks of a Triad hit.

>>>>(Is this idiot sayin the Ministry of Mankind is an Alamos 20K front group? That's crazy. I was out of work, living SINless. My little girl got a viral infection. A Ministry of Mankind clinic fixed her up, and the pastor at their church got us emergency housing until I could get a job and we started living like people again.)<<<<<<

—Average Joan (19:59:23/06-02-57)

>>>>(If you're meta, it sounds like you'd better check to see if your kid can still have kids of her own.)<<<<<<

—Vette (21:43:17/06-02-57)

>>>>(The head of the Ministry of Mankind is Zhu Ping Adamson. He can't be an Alamos clown. The guy's married to an elf, a Japanese one, trained as a priestess in some religion over there.)<<<<<<

—Tridskimmer (03:52:13/06-08-57)

>>>>(Shinto—that Shinto church in Japan. She's a miko, like a priestess who communes with the gods and the ancestors and stuff. It was on "Hour of the Magi" on trid last month.)<<<<<<

—ShowMeNow (15:26:52/06-08-57)

THE SENATOR

The Central Executive member I call the Senator is still a question mark. I don't even know if he is a senator, or in which North American government he<<DATA DAMAGED: 2.17 Mp CORRUPTED>>not a chief executive, thank whatever God is watching. But he definitely holds some elective office—governor, legislator, something<<DATA DAMAGED: .84 Mp CORRUPTED>>seems clear that the Senator is at the center of an extensive network of political and corporate connections.

>>>>(This is ridiculous. That describes half the politicians on this fragged-out continent—hell, on the whole damn planet. This file is just a list of this slitch's pet hates, dressed in a boogiemer suit.)<<<<<<

—The Shmoo (06:49:10/06-09-57)

He is connected to a lot of cockamamie groups dedicated to reuniting North America under one government. *His* government.

>>>>(Like the NAN are gonna let that happen.)<<<<<<

—CyberLuvva (06:52:58/06-09-57)

THE LOON

The last member of the Central Executive that I've been able to single out is the Loon. Maybe I chose this ridiculous name to distract me from the utter terror I feel when I consider this individual's power and activities.

The Loon is a magician, probably based in NAN country, possibly a former member of the Sovereign Tribal Council<<DATA DAMAGED: .92 Mp CORRUPTED>>center on the use of magic in the Struggle. He seems to share some of the same fanatical, myth-

ic views of history as the Nazi and the Zealot<<DATA DAMAGED: 1.14 Mp CORRUPTED>>suggest a fierce, even frenzied fanaticism about the mythic history of the Awakened that verges on the insane. So I call him the Loon, and try to laugh.<<DATA DAMAGED: 1.82 Mp CORRUPTED>>suggests that this shaman was one of Howling Coyote's inner circle during the Ghost Dance War. More, that he and Howling Coyote split over uses of Ghost Dance magic that the Loon proposed ... and the prophet of the NAN would not tolerate<<DATA DAMAGED: 2.41 Mp CORRUPTED>>Look for an old-timer in one of the NAN governments, a veteran of the Great Ghost Dance who later became an opponent of Howling Coyote's on the Sovereign Tribal Council. The Loon may be someone severely slotted off by the metahuman "betrayal" of NAN when Tir Tairngire was founded<<DATA DAMAGED: .96 Mp CORRUPTED>>the head of some kind of magical order. Each of the senior members is the head of a subordinate magical group. These orders provide magical expertise and power for all sorts of operations by Alamos 20K and its front groups.

>>>>(Sounds like the old Illuminati gimmick in war paint and feathers.)<<<<<

—SeenIt/Donelt (12:41:47/06-09-57)

>>>>(Any guesses on this one?)<<<<<

—Passing Bell (03:22:41/06-10-57)

>>>>(Yes.)<<<<<

—NAN in the News (03:23:12/06-10-57)

>>>>(Well drek, omae, don't keep us hangin'. None of us is gonna pay you for the beat. Who'dya think it is?)<<<<<

—Soledad Sonny (03:26:39/06-10-57)

>>>>(Wouldn't be ... wise ... to say.)<<<<<

—NAN in the News (03:28:58/06-10-57)

>>>>(Oh, fer ... look, don't play oogedy-boogedy games, chummer. That's kid drek.)<<<<<

—Soledad Sonny (03:32:21/06-10-57)

>>>>(Look for the one who howls under a moonless sky.)<<<<<

—NAN in the News (03:35:01/06-10-57)

>>>>(First you play Mister Mystery, then you come back with riddles. What'n'frag izzat supposed to mean? Hey, Newsie ... you still there?)<<<<<

—NAME (03:37:28/06-10-57)

>>WHO_ "NAN in the News"

<<NO SUCH USER>>

>>>>(Drek!)<<<<<

—NAME (03:39:41/06-10-57)

>>DISPLAY_user_log : QUERY(NAME="NAN in the NEWS")

<<OPENING LOG : SEARCHING>>

<<NO RECORD FOUND - NO SUCH USER LOGGED>>

<<NULL QUERY>>

<<NULL QUERY>>

<<NULL QUERY>>

<<END>>

GAME INFORMATION

Alamos 20,000 is a threat of mythic proportions. Whether or not the organization actually exists has no bearing on the fact that people believe it does. Many metahuman organizations feel that Alamos 20K represents the "brains" behind every two-bit hate group from the Humanis Policlub to the secretive Unity Coalition, to the yakuza, to the religious fanatics of every mega-sprawl. Some say even metahuman race-hating groups like the troll bikers of the California Free State belong to Alamos 20K.

Hate and the chaos it brings serve as the lifeblood of Alamos 20K—every other goal and accomplishment is secondary. Similar groups will fight each other, even try to pull each other down, and through it all there remains the constant rumor of a worldwide organization planning every little war. Alamos 20K seems to be successfully pursuing the goal of worldwide chaos.

USING ALAMOS 20,000

Alamos 20K takes its cue from the classic, secret, world-spanning criminal organizations. One person leads each specific group or division, but the leaders fight among themselves for the top position in much the same way as their followers fight to achieve their groups' goals at the expense of rival groups. While all Alamos-related groups fervently believe in the anti-metahuman creed, that common belief is not enough to make them work together for a common goal. If the goal of Alamos 20K is chaos, then the organization represents the archetype, and it is precisely that characteristic that keeps the organization from succeeding in its goals. The Alamos 20K leaders give higher priority to their personal agendas than the activities of the groups they lead, and no single leader is strong enough to impose his or her will on the rest of the organization heads.

The leaders described in the fiction—the Nazi, the Troll, the Zealot, the Senator and the Loon—may represent the entire Central Executive, or they may be only a select few members. The gamemaster may adjust the makeup of the Executive to suit his or her campaign. To make Alamos 20K an effective threat, each leader should have a distinct personality and agenda, as should the organizations they control. The gamemaster should also determine whether or not the various Alamos operations will interact efficiently at any given time, whether the members of any group or plot are working with the local human supremacists, or if the supremacists are taking the actions of any faction at face value.

Alamos 20K works best as a behind-the-scenes organization, because that setup allows the gamemaster to choose what existing or new organizations are tied to Alamos. The connection to Alamos may be obvious (Humanis Policlub) or buried deep within shell companies and organizations (Ministry of Mankind). The second-tier organization itself may be so loosely structured that separate "divisions" don't even know they are controlled by the

same parent organization. In either case, the individuals of those organizations may not even know Alamos 20K exists or that they are part of that organization.

It is very unlikely that the player characters will ever come into direct contact with Alamos 20K, but entirely likely that they will, at some time, work for or against its pawns and shell organizations. Shadowrunners may have contact with the lower tiers of the Alamos organization: front groups for operations like Humanis, and maybe even second-tier operations like the Native Californians. Even these organizations are heavily divided into different tiers, factions and sects. The crimes of a local Humanis leader can never be directly connected to the policlub's central administrators, much less to an Alamos leader. Any runners who take action against a group intimately connected to one of the leaders, either deliberately or by happenstance, will be marked for death.

Many innocent working joes who are sincerely trying to help people of all races belong to organizations being perverted by Alamos 20K. Runners should keep in mind that their actions may end up hurting people this poor old planet can ill afford to lose.

RULES

Each corporate shell or organization under the Alamos 20K umbrella is unique, and so the gamemaster should run each group according to the needs of his or her campaign. The individuals named as the leaders of Alamos 20K in the fiction should serve as archetypes rather than characters: the gamemaster can make the leaders active or passive, give them unfathomable motivations and mysterious actions, play up the global scope of their goals and change their alliances and internal struggles arbitrarily.

However inscrutable the leaders might be, the organizational chart for each "division" actually can be traced. Again, the members of these organizations may not be aware that their work supports Alamos 20K. In fact, many of these organizations may consider Alamos the enemy.

The Nazi's Factions

The Nazi relies on two principle organizations or groups to promote his agenda: the Metagenetic Research Consortium and the human supremacists.

The Metagenetic Research Consortium is ostensibly a high-tech engineering operation, engaged in unapplied research and funded by a number of mid-level corps. The MRC has, in fact, delivered results to sponsoring corps which have, in turn, developed valuable genetic technology. The Consortium's main facility, a highly secret, ultra-high-tech research plant, carries the code-name RC ZED. RC ZED conducts experiments in metahuman physiology and psychology, with complete disregard for the well-being of the subjects.

The MRC runs various Project Centers. Some are actual physical plants, with staffs, salaries and the other paraphernalia of a secure corporate research facility. Others consist simply of teams of researchers with large budgets and minimal oversight. All Project Centers pursue various avenues of research useful to the Struggle: finding a "cure" for Awakened births or transformations; inducing mutations in Awakened births; locating or tailoring plagues or other bioweapons that are effective against metas in

various ways; and other results designed to destroy or weaken the metahuman races.

Project Centers engaged in publicly palatable research are often protected by corporate security resources. The other Project Centers receive very good hired muscle (runners, yaks, and so on) or well-armed goons associated with any of the militant groups outlined below.

The Nazi also serves as the focus for the human supremacists. These hate-mongers come in all shapes and sizes, ranging from the Free Human Brotherhood, modelled on the old Aryan Brotherhood and comprising a large SINless membership; to the spit-and-polish ranks of the Sapient Army, which combines Nazi regalia and middle-class paunches with a message of hate.

Most of these groups are semilegal at best, advocating violent measures to counter anything they perceive as benefiting metahumans. They also violently oppose all plots and organizations fronted by secret metahuman conspiracies—a policy that allows them to go after anything they dislike, because anything they dislike must be the product of a secret metahuman conspiracy.

These organizations usually run some kind of "breeding camps" and/or "training centers." The camps combine the characteristics of twentieth-century survivalist camps or racial supremacist enclaves with special breeding programs, often monitored by scientists from the Metagenetic Research Consortium, that are theoretically designed to breed "pure" *homo sapiens sapiens*.

The training centers usually set up in isolated territories in UCAS, CAS and even NAN, though other camps may exist in Europe, Western Asia and the Middle East. Attendance is limited to those members of individual human supremacist groups who fit a rigorous physical and psychological profile, and who have proved themselves on the local level by successfully carrying out violent actions. These shock troops draw their membership from any number of groups, including Free Human Brotherhood, Humanis, and possibly the Native Californians, and are as well trained as any high-level corp security team.

The Troll's Factions

The chaos of Alamos 20K comes into play in the Troll's factions. His control is local, limited to political and social organizations, an arena of influence that includes the Humanis Policlub and that organization's political arm, the Humanists.

Humanis skirts the legal side of the line that the more militant human supremacist organizations have crossed. The Policlub keeps its hands just clean enough to avoid legal action by the governments that tolerate it. UCAS presidential hopeful Kenneth Brackhaven used the Humanists to accomplish the "coup" that allowed him to win the nomination of the politically powerful Archconservative party—placing Alamos 20K a short step from controlling the White House.

The Troll's followers have named the wing of Humanis devoted to violent action the Shock Squad. Humanis always maintains plausible deniability regarding its storm troopers, though all these groups, from gangs in the sprawl to the Native Californians, operate under the Troll's watchful eye. They often receive training at camps provided by the Nazi.

The Troll's factions have begun taking power from both the Nazi and the Senator. A recent rise in supremacist group attacks against other supremacist groups points to the Human Nation facing off against the Nazi's Free Human Brotherhood.

The Zealot's Factions

As his name implies, the Zealot controls the Alamos factions that cloak their messages in religious trappings. The Zealot preys on humankind's irrational fears and offers his message in the guise of spiritual mumbo-jumbo. The Ministry of Mankind serves as the main venue for his work.

The Ministry oversees a huge network of operations that pulls in about half-a-billion nuyen a year, income on a par with many mid-level corporations. The Ministry itself enjoys recognition as a legitimate religious body in most countries. Where the laws or political climate restrict religious organizations, the Ministry develops local front companies that advance its plans and fit the local prejudices. The Ministry mainly funds churches and shelters, but also supports TruthNet and the Army of Light. Truth Net is a data-for-pay network that reveals "the truth" about various actions against right-thinking spiritual folks (i.e., morally and socially conservative humans) that are blamed on metas or meta-led conspiracies. The Army of Light (AoL) is a human supremacist, apocalyptic cult, centered in Vietnam and active throughout southeast Asia. AoL provides supplemental funding for the Zealot's organizations by managing a thriving drug trade—new vices rarely drive out the old vices, and the Golden Triangle still harvests its traditional cash crop of opium every year.

The Ministry of Mankind also goes by the name of the Church of God-Man in underdeveloped and isolated countries.

The Senator's Factions

The Senator works exclusively in the political arena. The Senator directs his efforts toward gaining political approval for the activities of the other leaders' factions. Many claim that it was the Senator's influence that gave the Humanis Policlub legal status in most countries and allowed the Ministry of Mankind to maintain its religious status. The Troll's factions' usurping of the

Senator's traditional power base in the UCAS Archconservative party has weakened the Senator's influence.

The Senator works best behind the scenes through the Unity Coalition. Those who know of its existence accept the Unity Coalition's public face of an informal and very loose association of political and business figures from all over the Americas, devoted to fostering international amity within the hemisphere, enhancing trade, and other lofty goals.

Actually, the Unity Coalition is dedicated to repairing the past fifty years of fragmentation in the North American government, re-conquering the NAN, and then extending a single government with dictatorial powers across both Americas. The Senator has agents in nearly every government in the world; where he couldn't infiltrate agents into the governments, he keeps up to date through his legitimate government and business connections.

The Loon's Factions

The Loon's principal operations in Alamos 20K involve magic. From magical groups to medicine lodges, followers of the Loon can be found in nearly every magical gathering worldwide. The Loon bases his operations in a magical cult called the Howling Lodge. The Lodge rarely takes a direct hand in matters, mainly because magical backtraces are hard to cover up effectively, especially when your enemy list includes immortal elves, dragons and most powerful metahumans. Subordinate lodges, whose members have no idea that they are working for another organization, pursue various agendas on the Lodge's behalf. The four best known are In Search Of... , which tracks down ancient magical knowledge and artifacts from earlier civilizations; Opposition Removal, which performs magical assassinations and provides magical muscle for shadowrunning teams executing a hit and for other muscle provided by other Alamos fronts; Anti-Meta Magic, known only as AM Magic, which conducts magical research into means of controlling or destroying metas; and GMR, the general magical research branch including the Howling Lodge and its subordinate organizations, which performs all sorts of magical research that is useful to the other leaders. This research covers everything from control spells for manipulating public opinion to military magic to security and counter-security.

AFRAID OF THE DARKE



>>>>(I promised a chummer of mine I'd post this. I'm not sure what to think about it. I'd rather not think about it at all. The last time I saw Lensman to talk to, he handed me an optical chip and made me swear I'd post what was on it if anything ever happened to him. He said it with the look in his eyes and the tone of voice that people get when they know some bad drek's coming down on them, but they don't know how or when. That "if-I-die-before-I-wake" look, y'know? Me, I figured Lenny had slotted a chip too many that day. He still slots a few, even though he promised his squeeze he'd quit. Slotted. Past tense—I keep forgetting. The way he looked—skin the color of old milk, hands shaking like he had Parkinson's real bad—what else was I supposed to think? So I promised him, just to calm him down.

I saw him again three days later. Dead in the middle of the Stuffer Shack on the fourth floor of the Renraku Arcology, where all the low-level suits go to bolt a quick pseudo-lunch before heading back to their workstations. He took a lot of those suits with him. Also a couple of little kids out with their Mom and Dad. I never saw so many bullet holes in one body before. The survivors all said he kept screaming about the dark: the dark was everywhere, he'd never let the dark take him. He managed to empty an FN-HAR before the sec-guards took him down; my decker bud, who'd never fired anything more dangerous than a Soakit water cannon.

I still don't know what to make of this file. I want to believe Lenny just snapped. But I'm not sure I can.)<<<<<

—Irish Rose (16:25:21/01-22-57)

October 2, 2056

Had the weirdest dream last night. I was riding in this minivan with a bunch of my best chums, going through some desert somewhere. The driver was someone I knew, but when he turned around and started talking to us I realized I'd never seen him before in my life. But I knew him anyway. He was chain-smoking while he drove,

only none of the cigarettes ever seemed to burn down. And he kept laughing. Not happy laughter, either—the grim kind, when you're laughing to keep from screaming.

Wish I could remember the rest of the dream. I don't even remember why we were driving through the desert in the first place.

Gotta meet Irish and the gang at Penumbra tonight. It's her birthday—otherwise I'd bug out. I feel like maybe I got the flu coming on. Wish I could stay home.

October 5, 2056

Man, I hate Nuke-it burgers. They keep repeating on me. Why do I eat them? Especially six at a time?

Hell—why does anyone do anything?

Had another weird dream. I was a cowboy, riding on a dinosaur. A Tyrannosaurus Rex, only it was a little one. Like about the size of a Great Dane. My Uncle Joe had a Great Dane I used to ride on when I was a kid ... I loved that dog. I haven't loved anybody since like I loved that dog. Nothing's been the same since Buster died. Everything's ... just drek.

Man, I'm sounding the way I used to sound after a dreamchip trip. Only I haven't touched the stuff for almost a year. That last run must have been a doozy.

I wonder how come I don't remember it. If it wasn't for my healthy cred balance, I wouldn't even know I'd been working recently. Did I get knocked on the head or something? Jeez, I hope this isn't some weird side effect of some IC I ran into. You never know with some of this stuff.

The guy who sold me the Nuke-its looked real familiar, but I can't quite place him. He's not the regular burger-flipper—some newbie Charlie hired on. Guess Charlie's doing okay, if he can afford to hire new help. I don't know about this new guy, though. He had kind of a weird smile. Funny eyes, too. Seemed to look right through me.

October 7, 2056

So I'm out with the gang and we're trying to figure out where to go to pound brews. Penumbra's getting old—we wanted to find a new place, maybe with a decent band. So I said, "What about the Songbird Saloon?" They've got live music, and they don't water the drinks." So my buds all start kidding around—you know, "Who'd you go *there* with, Lenny? Didn't invite us—some buddy you are. Some hot chica, Len? So when does she get to meet the family?" That kind of drek. I told them to shut the frag up and started giving 'em directions. As I'm wind-

ing up, I notice my buds looking at me like I'm turning into a suit or something. There was just this silence, y'know? Then Irish says to me, "Lenny, there's nothing at Twenty-fifth and Lilac. It's a vacant lot. We've been past there a thousand times." And you know what's really funny? The minute she said that, I knew she was right. Lilac and Twenty-fifth's the place where some corp or other dumped a lot of enviro-drek a few years back, and so even the squatters won't set foot there. So I thought, well, maybe I've got the location wrong. So my buds and I let our datajacks do the walking through the public datanets, looking for the Songbird.

We didn't find a fragging thing. The Songbird doesn't exist. So how come I remember spending an afternoon there listening to barrelhouse piano?

I swear I gotta get more sleep.

October 11, 2056

I saw that guy again. The one at the Stuffer Shack. I went into the Red Duck on the corner to buy a pack of smokes, and the guy was buying himself a soy dog with all the trimmings. Guess he doesn't like Nuke-it burgers, either.

He gave me that funny smile on the way out. There's definitely something not right about that guy.

October 17, 2056

Had another weird dream. This time, I was climbing up a mondo huge tower all made of steel-beam scaffolding ... like some kind of giant Erector set. There were balloons everywhere ... big white ones, like weather balloons or something. And I could hear someone laughing the whole time, even though I couldn't see anybody. So I'm walking around way high up in this tower, looking for whoever's laughing. In the dream, I know I have to find him and stop him from ... hell, I don't remember. So I walk between a couple of balloons that are bobbing real close to each other, and they leap toward me and start smothering me. And the laughter gets louder and louder as I black out.

I woke up with my pillow over my head, thrashing around like crazy. Kicked the cat off the bed, even. Poor old Stinky wasn't too happy with me about that. Couldn't get back to sleep for the rest of the night, I was so freaked out.

You want to know the weirdest thing? Just before I passed out in the dream, I saw the face of the guy from the Stuffer Shack. He was the one who was laughing.





October 20, 2056

Frag, I must be under a lot of stress. Either that, or there's something seriously hincky going down.

I saw the Stuffer Shack guy *again*. In the Matrix. I was checking around for a little something—you know, doing a little leg-work—and I saw someone else's icon go by out of the corner of my eye. I always like to check out who's floating the public Net with me, just in case it's a chum with some news, so I turn around to take a look.

And I fragging near jump out of my skin, 'cause the Stuffer Shack guy is standing right next to me. So close that if we'd been in our meat bodies, I'd have felt him breathing on my neck. He smiles at me, gives this little chuckle that for some reason makes my scalp crawl, then winks out. There was something weird about his icon, too ... but I couldn't put my finger on it. Still can't, and I've been worrying over it for half the day.

What the frag is *with* this guy?

October 22, 2056

I'm in bad shape. I woke up this morning and there was this spider crawling across my ceiling. Then it started crawling down the wall toward me, so I picked up my shoe to smack it. As I raised my arm, I saw the spider had a human face. The guy from the Stuffer Shack with the weird eyes and smile.

What is it about the guy? Why is he haunting me?

October 24, 2056

He's following me. I know it. Who the frag is he? Working for the Big A, maybe? Are they gunning for me? But there's no way they could know it was me who ... no, wait, I know. He's Renraku. Gotta be. The lousy Japs finally tipped to the team that wrecked their prize R&D lab in the boonies last year. Wait, that doesn't scan. They'd send the bully boys after me, not some ringer working undercover in a Stuffer Shack. I don't fragging get this ...

October 25, 2056

I saw him on the subway this morning two seats behind me. He got off at the same stop. I thought I'd lost him in the crowd, but when I came out of the donut shop on the corner with my cup of soykaf he was jandering up the street toward me. He smiled at me as he passed ... gave me a nod, like we were old friends. I meant to ask him what the frag he was following me around for, but somehow the words stuck in my throat.

What the frag does this guy want from me?

October 26, 2056

I walked out of my squat and started to jander down the street, when all of a sudden the sidewalk turned into a bridge. I was way high up, and I knew if I stepped off the bridge I'd fall down into darkness and just keep falling. The Stuffer Shack guy was at the other end of the bridge. He was laughing.

Help.

October 27, 2056

I know what he wants. I know who he is. He wants my soul. He said so. On the trid. He took over the news anchor for just

long enough to tell me. I told him to go frag himself. He started laughing. He started laughing and wouldn't stop, just wouldn't stop, so I had to kick the trid set in. Stinky didn't like the noise—he ran away.

Man, listen to me. I'm seriously fragged ... am I dreamchipping, and I just don't remember slotting?

I shouldn't have kicked in my trid set. I let him escape. He could be anywhere, and it's all my fault.

October 28, 2056

Stinky's dead. I had to kill him. I didn't want to. He screamed a lot at first. Made it real hard to leave him in there ... but I had no choice. There wasn't any other way to kill the Stuffer Shack guy.

Dammit, I should never have busted my trid set with Stinky in the room. Then *he* wouldn't have gotten into him. I'm gonna miss that cat. Stupid little flea-bitten fragger.

October 29, 2056

He's still alive. He got out of Stinky somehow. He's in my head, in my dreams. Nightmares.

I dreamed I was in a dark place, full of wind that smelled like blood, that copper smell you can almost taste. *He* was there, too. There was this little kid laid out on a big slab of rock, and the Stuffer Shack guy was standing over him with a bloody knife. He'd killed the kid. And he kept laughing.

I know what I have to do. I have to find him in the real world and stop him. I have to kill him before he kills all the kids and eats their souls.

October 30, 2056

He's everywhere. Everybody on the subway looked like him. He's trying to confuse me ... make everyone look like him so I won't know who's the real him so I can't kill him.

Thinks he's outsmarted me. I'll show him different.

I'll show him.

>>>>(Hey—didn't the Renraku Arcology massacre take place on November 1, just a couple days after that last entry?)<<<<<

—Newshound (13:25:46/01-23-57)

>>>>(Yeah, KSAF was on the scene—covered the whole thing in complete and gory detail. Though to give them credit, they did try to make sense of the tragedy; tried to find out what happened to this Lenny guy to make him throw so much lead around when he knew he wouldn't make it out alive.)<<<<<

—Fritz the Rat (14:23:12/01-23-57)

>>>>(This Lenny skag must have been seriously bent.)<<<<<

—Monty (14:30:43/01-23-57)

>>>>(What if he wasn't? This guy he keeps seeing ... what if he really exists? Maybe he's a free spirit that hates people.)<<<<<

—Inchworm (14:45:31/01-23-57)

>>>>(Or something worse. Who knows the true depth of the evil the Awakening has wrought?)<<<<<

—Ordo Veritas (15:01:34/01-23-57)

AFRAID OF THE DARKE

>>>>(Bulldrek. Magic is just magic, and there ain't no "cosmic evil" about it. This skag just went crazy, that's all. Fixated on some poor slub at random, then convinced himself the guy was the bogeyman. There ain't no bogeyman.)<<<<<<

—Boxer (15:15:15/01-23-57)

>>>>(You sure about that? Check out the number of incidents that read just like the Arcology massacre that have gone down over the past few months. The totals are going up, chummer. Way up.)<<<<<<

—Newshound (15:24:36/01-23-57)

>>>>(The bogeyman exists, all right. We created him. He's alive and well everywhere in the sprawl.)<<<<<<

—Reality Czech (20:23:12/01-23-57)

GAME INFORMATION

Mr. Darke first appeared as Harlequin's foil in the **Shadowrun** adventure campaign **Harlequin's Back**. Darke is a very high-level initiate whose power at least rivals, and probably exceeds, the abilities of the strongest mages in the Awakened world. Though no one has seen his physical form, his astral presence has quickly become the stuff of legends. Every account of his appearance describes an overwhelming sense of forbidding, doom, hopelessness and insanity—a feeling that remains even after Darke is gone. A harbinger of an evil apocalypse, Darke seems to create evil for his own pleasure—or for the pleasure of some specific others.

USING MR. DARKE

Mr. Darke offers psychological menace rather than a physical danger. Unlike other threats, Darke seems uninterested in taking over the world. His actions seem to be preparing the earth and metahumanity for something still to come. Mr. Darke never makes physical attacks, and never exposes himself to physical danger. Instead, he uses ritual magic, manipulation and detection spells and other long-distance tools to foster despair, hatred and the rest of (meta)humanity's ugliest, most powerful emotions.

Mr. Darke appears to work alone, with the help of minions who do much of the dirty work. His minions include creatures and metahumans who serve him on the physical and astral planes. Though it might seem unlikely that a single person could pose a world-altering threat, Darke currently works for Aztechnology, with access to all the resources of that megacorporation and the Aztlan government. It is entirely possible that Mr. Darke may be the highest-placed, most powerful human in Aztechnology. If true, that would give him authority to direct operations on the largest scale possible: supporting armed conflicts of all sizes, maintaining drug operations, executing corporate raids and wars, coordinating the size and frequency of the blood sacrifices said to be performed at the Aztechnology Pyramid, controlling one of the widest and most powerful networks of affiliated magic users—the list goes on.

For those characters who survived the **Harlequin's Back** campaign and successfully made the sacrifice at the bridge, use **Afraid of the Darke** to reintroduce Mr. Darke to the player characters' lives. For their actions in that astral quest, Mr. Darke may

have declared a personal vendetta against the characters. If they chose not to make the final sacrifice, the gamemaster may simply add Mr. Darke to the bad dreams the characters will suffer as a result of their choice. The characters might also come to Darke's attention as a result of a successful run against Aztechnology or one of its many subsidiaries. The gamemaster can also use Mr. Darke as a red herring, having his likeness appear repeatedly just to keep the players on their toes. If the characters have not played the **Harlequin's Back** campaign, don't worry; Mr. Darke doesn't really need a good reason to harass the target of his choice.

If the player characters manage to kill Mr. Darke, another initiate of equal power and influence will simply take his place—and the characters move to the top of the hit list.

RULES

Mr. Darke is paving the way for what Harlequin has dubbed The Enemy. The Enemy is some sort of negative energy that Harlequin believes will cause total destruction of the Awakened world. Mr. Darke uses others to do his bidding and uses psychological warfare to affect his enemies. He has many options at his disposal, and the gamemaster should use as many or as few as needed to achieve the desired effect. Mr. Darke concentrates on disorienting his opponents as completely as possible: generating confusion, fear and terror, and ramping up the evil those emotions can inspire, is far more important than simply causing death. Mr. Darke is a torturer and his victims are the player characters.

The stats below reflect Mr. Darke in the physical world. Adjust his stats as needed for astral space.

Mr. Darke

B	Q	S	C	I	W	E	M	R
5	4	4	3	6	6	6	10	5

Initiative: 5 + 2D6

Threat/Professional Rating: 9⁺/4

Initiate Grade: 6

Skills

Armed Combat: 4
Firearms: 5
Magical Theory: 4
Sorcery: 6
Unarmed Combat: 4

Spells

Combat

Death Touch: 4
Hellblast: 5
Rot: 4
Sleep: 7

Detection

Animal Spy: 3
Foretelling: 3
Mind Probe: 4
Mindlink (Individual): 3

Health

Decrease Reaction (-2): 4
Heal: 4
Increase Reaction (+1): 4

Manipulation

Anti-bullet Barrier: 5
Control Actions: 5
Control Emotions: 5
Control Thoughts: 5
Flamethrower: 8
Influence: 7
Terrorize: 5

Illusion

Agonizing Pain: 5
Dream: 8
Invisibility: 5
Mask: 8

Gear

Power Focus (3)

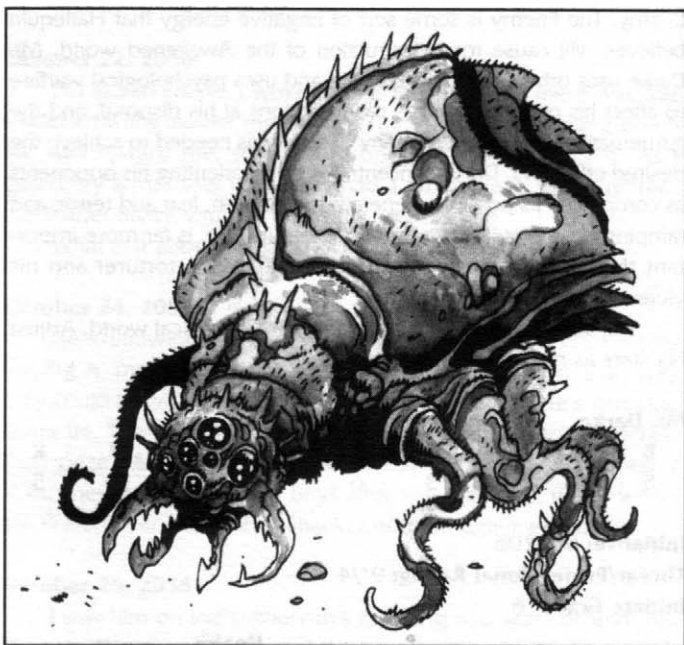
Spell Lock (Anti-Bullet Barrier 5)

Spell Lock [Increased Reflexes (+1)]

Other gear as needed. Remember that Mr. Darke has all of the resources of Aztechnology at his disposal.

*Reduce Mr. Darke's Threat Rating to 8 on the physical plane and to 6 when outside of Aztlan.

Mr. Darke controls two unique types of creatures that only he can call on. So far their presence has been limited to astral space, but the gamemaster can use them as advance shock troops for Mr. Darke's actions on the physical plane as well.



Crawlers

These abominations are ancient creatures, and yet seem perfectly adapted to modern times. They look like giant spiders, but their "legs" are actually furred tentacles. Upon close inspection, these creatures appear to have once been human, now horribly twisted by the pain and powerful magic that brought them into being. They can walk, but prefer to leap at their victims. No one has seen Mr. Darke make a crawler, but he seems to have an inexhaustible supply. Mr. Darke can only control 6 of these at any one time, and will not release more than that.

B	Q	S	C	I	W	E	R	Armor
10	8 x 5	12	6	6	8	(6)	7	8/10

Initiative: 7 + 4D6

Threat/Professional Rating

Astral: 6/4

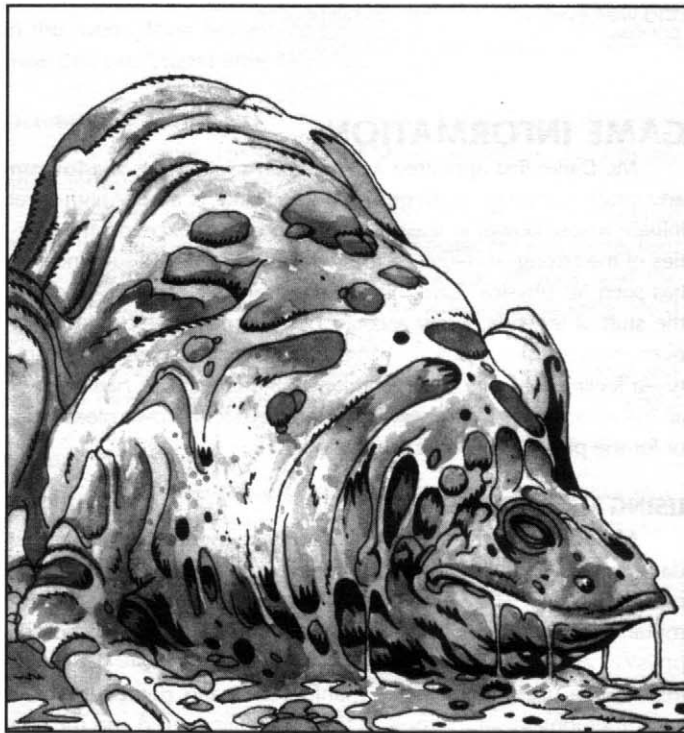
Physical: 4/4

Attacks: 3

Tentacle Attack (x 2): Damage = 12M Stun

Mouth Bite/Venom (if both tentacles hit): Damage = Every 2 net Melee Combat successes reduce the victim's Reaction by 1. Successes may be offset by the victim's Melee Combat successes, per standard rules, and by a standard Damage Resistance Test. Reaction reduction wears off at the rate of 1 point per minute after the fight has ended. Any Reaction reductions affect cyberware, bioware and magical bonuses to Reaction as well.

Notes: The creatures move quickly across the ground or by leaping (distance traveled is the same, leaping is just more impressive). They make no noise.



Gum Toads

These toadlike creatures are piles of barely mobile fat that excrete a gooey, binding gel. Their primary attack consists of body-slammng a target and binding him or her to the ground until the victim suffocates. Like the crawlers, the gum toads prefer to leap at their victims for the maximum scare factor. Mr. Darke can only control 6 of these creatures at any one time, and will not release more than that.

B	Q	S	C	I	W	E	R	Armor
12	3 x 2	7	2	4	4	(6)	3	3/3

Initiative: 3 + 2D6

Threat/Professional Rating

Astral: 6/4

Physical: 4/4

Attacks: 7M, Melee Attack Body Slam (6 dice)

Powers: Binding

WINTERNIGHT



>>>>>(This thing turned up on Shadowland about two weeks ago, and I've spent most of the time since then trying to decide whether anything this bizarre might possibly have something to it. Keeping in mind the first lesson of this crazy world—that nothing is impossible—I've decided to post the file, with reservations. This may be nothing but tabloid-screamsheet stuff, the ravings of a madman. Or it may be a desperate attempt by a man slowly losing his mind to warn us about the nice folks who started him down that path. Or anything in between. On the off-chance that there's a grain of truth to this sick story, I offer it to the general Shadowland public. Make of it what you will—and if you find anything at all that might give it some credence, for Ghost's sake, LET US KNOW.)<<<<<

—Captain Chaos (06:34:21/05-22-57)

My life is ashes.

I have betrayed everything I ever believed in. My career is in ruins. My family lies dead by my own hand. All because of Winternight. Because of the monsters, the inhuman fiends who made me KILL KILL MY FAMILY KILL THEM ALL DROWN THEM IN BLOOD DROWNING I'M DROWNING

No. Not inhuman. All too human—in the general sense of the word. They are our own twisted reflections, the dark sides of every race of humanity. If they were truly inhuman, I could not have become one of them so easily.

No matter what it costs me, I will die a free man. With my family gone, no one else can be hurt by the disclosures in this file. And I must expose the truth in all its awful detail, or the whole world will die. I don't know how and I don't know when ... they have people working on more different ways of destroying life on Earth than most of us have ever imagined ... but they intend it to happen soon. I can't do much to stop it—only shout a warning and hope to God someone hears. If there is a God.

Someone has to believe me. That's the only way I can make up for what I've done. I've done things ... terrible things. Some of them I can't remember. Some things I remember all too AFRAID I'M AFRAID THEY'RE COMING TO KILL ME CAN'T LET THEM FIND ME RUN RUN HIDE HIDE IN THE DARK DIE IN THE DARK

The chip. It's done something to my mind. I have to stop this ... have to focus, get all this down, send it where it might do some good. Got to control myself.

Three years ago, I was appointed director of the UCAS Army Special Assets Division. Special Assets tracks down, handles and stores weapons of mass destruction. Nuclear weapons, chemical, biological ... all the horrible tricks humankind ever managed to pull out of its collective bag before the Awakening brought us magic as the new tool of choice by which to destroy one another. IN FIRE IN BLOOD IN AGONY THE UNWORTHY WILL PERISH IN THE FLAMES

The fugues are getting worse. I may not have much time left.

I remember watching the trucks at the toy company. Toronto, that's where it was. A few people with me ... colleagues, friends ...

Voices over the headset. Seeing through a cold camera eye. Gray gloves ... they kept carrying boxes of toy cars around, wearing heavy gray gloves. I knew what the gloves meant. Shielded gloves. Keep the poison out, the radiation.

How long ago? I can't remember. Did the chip do that, too?

Or have they already gotten to me? Wiped my memory of all but a few fragments ... oh God, if You're there, please make that not be true. Make it not be true, God. If I can't tell this story, I can't atone, and then I'm damned BURN IN HELL BURN LIKE THE REST THE WORMS THE ANTS THE VERMIN COWER IN THE DIRT WITH ALL THE REST AND SCREAM WITH THE PAIN OF THE FIRE

Early in 2055, an intelligence analysis crossed my desk. A small toy manufacturer in Toronto had received a small shipment of nuclear material. We placed them under surveillance, hoping to find out who or what was behind them before sweeping in and making arrests. After months of fruitless watching, several pounds of nuclear material arrived hidden in a shipment of plastic resin. We traced the material as far as a warehouse in Nairobi, Kenya—which burned down two days after we confirmed the address. Where the contraband originated prior to Nairobi remained a mystery. I know the answer now, of course—but none of my superiors are likely to believe me. Those that did would be killed instantly by Winternight agents, anyway. KILLED DEAD BLOOD BLOOD EVERYWHERE WHY WON'T YOU STOP SCREAMING STOP STOP STOP

I can't tell anyone in SAD. This is the only way to get the warning out.

They kept changing the boxes. I remember that. The Urban Brawl T-shirts—that was the funniest one. So many trucks, so many little towns ... it was cold all the time. New England winter. Always hated winter in upstate New York, Philly, Boston ... so damned cold. Our van kept breaking down. None of theirs did. I remember Jake saying it must be magic. Right ... a "charge battery" spell.

Where did we end up? All I remember is driving endlessly after panel trucks in the cold and blowing snow ICE THE WORLD

WILL END IN ICE IN WINTER DARK AND COLD AND DEAD

I remember poor Hauser died. Congenital heart failure. He found out the unmarked van's registration numbers were bogus. Dead a week later.

The final shipment—labeled as a state-of-the-art trideo set with all the accessories—ended up at a private house. I don't remember where. The person renting it was a travel writer and part-time researcher at MIT&M. Nothing about him suggested anything out of the ordinary; he had no record of political involvement, and nothing about any of the datawork that we could find appeared to have been faked. The only odd note about the house or its inhabitant, aside from the arrival of the nuclear material, was the heavy magical shielding around the building. None of our agents could penetrate it.

I remember being somewhere very dark and cold. So cold, my fingers went stiff. Down ... I remember moving down, walking down a slanted floor. No, a passage. Cold, hard rock under my feet. I couldn't stop shivering COLD COLD AND DARK AND DEAD DEAD SMOTHERED SUFFOCATED CLOSED IN OH GOD THE WALLS THE WALLS THEY'RE GOING TO FALL ON ME

Coal mine. I led the team into a coal mine. It was late ... dark ... quiet. In an airshaft halfway down a disused passageway, almost entirely blocked by rubble from a long-ago collapse, we discovered eight nuclear weapons. They were covered with magical inscriptions inlaid with orichalcum.

>>>>(Orichalcum?! They must've been trying to ... no. I'm not even going to write that down. It's too fragging scary.)<<<<<

—Wozzard (08:11:21/05-22-57)

>>>>(It's fragging bulldrek. Can you say "nuclear weapon foci?" Can you say "mixing technology and magic—can't be done?")<<<<<

—Wiz Kid (08:20:35/05-22-57)

>>>>(Can you say, "cybermancy?" There's tech and magic for you. Just because no one's made a magic nuke bomb yet—that we know of—doesn't mean it's impossible.)<<<<<

—Whisper (08:26:36/05-22-57)

>>>>(I don't want to think about this.)<<<<<

—Dancer (08:32:45/05-22-57)

>>>>(So get off-line.)<<<<<

—Bung (08:35:43/05-22-57)

We arrested 58 suspects, of whom 51 knew nothing about nuclear material or weapons. They knew only that certain anonymous people had paid them good money to drive a truck from Point A to Point B, or to type in a false entry on a shipping manifest. None of them held particularly well-paying jobs. When offered a chance to make a year's salary or better with one simple act, they jumped at it. The remaining seven suspects suicided under questioning.

I prepared a report—such as it was—and submitted it to my superior officers. Three days later, in Cincinnati on an inspection



tour, I woke to find myself tied to my bed in my hotel room. Four men were in the room with me, one of them bending over me. He clicked a chip into my datajack, and suddenly I was a god.

ECSTASY PERFECTION POWER STRENGTH JOY RAISE THE GLEAMING SWORD LET IT FALL FALL ON THE ENEMY WATCH THE BLOOD WATCH IT CATCH IT DRINK IT LAUGH AS MY ENEMIES DIE

Absolute power. Absolute certainty. Swinging a gleaming axe at the heads of my enemies. They died in fountains of blood. I laughed. My friends laughed with me. Laughed and danced and drank. We still lived. We were the chosen. We would live forever and ever, Amen.

DARKNESS DEATH COLD PAIN IT HURTS HURTS HURTS ALL GONE ALL GONE ALL GONE I'M DYING DYING DEAD DON'T LET ME DIE I WANT TO LIVE I HAVE TO LIVE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE

Why does it hurt so much to cry?

The chip was gone. He took it. I fell from Heaven, plunged into the depths of the Inferno. Cold, empty, desolate. Someone was whimpering like a whipped dog, blubbering the word "please" over and over until the sound died away into sobbing. When my eyes started burning, I realized the one whimpering was me.

The man who'd given me the chip—he was slender, well-dressed, with smooth dark hair and gold-rimmed glasses—promised me I could have another taste of it if I listened very carefully to what he had to say. I listened. I tried not to breathe too loudly for fear the noise might keep me from hearing his every word.

When he talked, I heard the flutter of birds' wings. His shadow on the wall looked like a raven. His hair was just the color of raven feathers. Funny.

He told me about Winternight. Winternight wants to destroy the world so that they can bring to life the old gods of Norse myth. They believe the Awakening has made the world ready for the gods' advent—all that remains is the final act of preparation, the creation of Ragnarok.

Ragnarok is the ultimate war of destruction. Every living thing must die in this battle, so that Winternight's Elect can use the overwhelming power of the sacrificed life-force to transform the world into Midgard and themselves into gods. Everyone who has ever knowingly aided them, even those not among the Elect, will become gods as well, as a reward for their deeds. Not even death will keep them from transcendence.

Nuclear winter. That's one way. Or biowar. All the food crops all over the world, dying. Then the rest of us die of starvation. Slowly. Our agony pleases the old gods. The slower we die, the stronger they become.

Ebola ... was that one of theirs? I can't remember. Probably. They're fiends. I know they have scientists working for them. Would-be gods designing microbes to dissolve innocent flesh into dead nothing. They're monsters.

I'm a monster.

>>>>(Crack-brained. Addled as a dozen year-old eggs. Absolutely, totally, no-fragging-doubt-about-it crazy. What's this guy slotting?)<<<<<

—Big Daddy (10:23:43/05-22-57)

My friend with the chip told me that Winternight wanted me. I would be useful to them. If I was a good boy and did exactly what they told me, I could have the god chip to play with sometimes. That's what he called it—the god chip. Whenever I did a really good job for Winternight, my friend would send me a god-chip with a self-destruct. Just enough for one dose, then PFFFT! He promised I could have that if I joined Winternight. Otherwise they'd have to kill me. He looked so sad when he said that—

KILL KILL BLOOD RED RED HAZE EVERYWHERE SCREAMING SOMEONE'S SCREAMING AND WON'T STOP

The recruiter gave me two drones, little plastic ovals that moved on tiny, vectored fans. No distinctive parts or markings—they could have come from anywhere. He said I could contact fellow members using the drones ... but only some of them, only the ones he told me to contact. He said he would tell me everything I needed to know, whenever I needed to know it.

When I got back home from Cincinnati, Angeline asked me if I was coming down with the flu. I went to bed and stayed there for three whole days, dreaming of being a god.

For the next few ... months? Years? It's all so fuzzy in my mind ... I got word every so often that certain things needed doing. Certain reports discredited or mislaid, certain connections downplayed, certain people transferred from one assignment to another. Sometimes they sent credsticks, with orders to hire shadowrunners for jobs here and there—datasteals, sabotage. I never saw any of my contacts. They sent instructions via drone, and I sent word of my accomplishments the same way. Sometimes a plastic drone brought me a god chip. I lived for those days.

I destroyed the drones one day. Someone had been talking to me, I remember ... soft voices, kind voices, saying I couldn't help it, I wasn't to blame. Addict. What a harsh word ... addict. Almost as bad as crazy. Psycho.

Monster. MONSTERS EVERYWHERE KILL THEM ALL SLICE THEM UP SLICE AND DICE THEM WATCH THEM BLEED AND DIE DIE DIE

But I wasn't a monster, not really. That's what the kind voices told me. They gave me strength. Strength to destroy the drones ... to write down, late at night, alone in my study, everything I could remember about what Winternight had done to me. The memories came hard ... disjointed fragments that I almost couldn't believe were real. Yet I kept on, knowing I was working against time, knowing they would strike me down for my treachery sooner or later.

Then Leslie disappeared.

Poor little girl, gone between school and home one afternoon. I remember Angeline looking at the clock over and over and over. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. No calls. No word. Ten. Call the police, Lucius. Now, now, I'm sure she's all right. Things have been a little tense around here lately—she's just acting out a little, that's all. She'll call soon. Just wants to give us a little fright. Wants a little attention from her old Dad and Mom. Please, Lucius. It's almost twelve. Call the police. What kind of a father are you?

Angeline called the police at twelve-thirty a.m. I went out to look for Leslie. Got in the car, started driving—

I was standing in a strange hotel room, dizzy and sick, my vision blurred by a terrible headache. Someone was standing

behind me, holding my arms. Leslie's body lay on the bed in front of me. Her drying blood soaked the sheets. Only her face was still intact—eyes wide, mouth pulled into a grimace by the fish hooks holding her to the mattress.

On the dresser were two new message drones. A voice told me to pick them up. My friend with the glasses and the chip. He said Leslie's death was punishment for disobedience. If I betrayed them again, Winternight would arrange horrible accidents for the rest of my family. They had spared my life only because I was still useful to them. If I ceased to be useful, my son Jamie would be the next to die. Then Elizabeth and Jerry and baby Tommy, then Angeline.

He told me in graphic detail what they had planned for Angeline. I'm glad I can't remember any of it.

I drove straight home, like they told me to. I knew they'd be watching. Angeline was crying in the bedroom. She didn't stop for a long time.

I went to my study. My notes were gone. They'd taken everything. But they didn't know what I knew. I knew how to fight them. To battle the monsters, I must become one.

>>>>(Classic signs of a psychotic break. I'm surprised the doc treating his chip addiction didn't see the signs and intervene.)<<<<<

—Headshrinker (11:01:21/05-22-57)

Earlier this evening, I killed my family. I shot them all, quickly and cleanly. Winternight won't have them. Then I came here and made this file. They thought they got everything, but they didn't. They didn't get my mind. Not all of it. I remember enough to damn them all, if someone listens and then goes looking in the right places. It's all I can do to stop the monsters now.

After I finish this post, several kilos of C-12 plastique will destroy this terminal and kill me. Winternight won't have me either. And they won't have this file. My warning will go straight to Shadowland. Someone please, please heed it and do something. Everything I've said is true. I'm not crazy. I'm not. Winternight exists, and they will kill everything unless you stop them. Stop them. Stop them.

>>>>(I heard about this guy. Brigadier General Lucius Harding—killed his own family, bombed the Pentagon. If someone could make him crazy enough to do that with a chip ...)<<<<<

—Muskrat (12:00:35/05-22-57)

>>>>(You buy this bulldrek? The paranoid ravings of a certified fruitcake who butchered his own family? If he'd said "The Devil made me do it," would you believe that too?)<<<<<

—Pretty Polly (12:06:57/05-22-57)

>>>>(I thought that's what he was saying. These Winternight slots sound pretty devilish to me.)<<<<<

—Wild Man (12:15:43/05-22-57)

>>>>(If they exist.)<<<<<

—Eponine (12:19:35/05-22-57)

>>>>(I've heard rumors about a new chip on the streets that sounds an awful lot like Harding's god chip. They call it a berserker chip, and it makes you into an unstoppable killing machine. Triggers all the violent impulses in the brain and makes you like it. As I understand it, these things don't work quite like your usual BTL. Instead of replacing the user's sensory input with the stuff coded on the chip, the berserker amplifies the id, ego and endocrine responses. It converts pain to pleasure, and sets up a strong feedback loop to the pleasure centers. I've heard it mutes fear responses as well. A meek little wageslave could use one to chip herself into a frenzy and go on a rampage, hacking at everyone within reach until someone puts a bullet through her brain. If Harding got ahold of something like that and it fragged up his brain, the violence of the experience might well account for all those weird lapses into blood-and-death ranting.)<<<<<

—Lazarus (12:37:32/05-22-57)

>>>>(Doesn't prove some bunch of destroy-the-world nuts gave him the chip, though. Maybe he got it from his friendly neighborhood dealer.)<<<<<

—Pretty Polly (12:43:11/05-22-57)

>>>>(Anybody noticed how many news stories there've been recently about lab break-ins? All over the world. I've seen at least five over the past couple of months. Maybe there's something to this.)<<<<<

—Bitbert (13:10:35/05-22-57)

>>>>(Oh, right. "Prize orangutan snatched from Northwestern University's Animal Research Department by outraged animal lovers. Note left behind says, 'Non-sentient primates are people too.'" This is evidence of a conspiracy to destroy the world and create Valhalla in its place?)<<<<<

—D. Bunker (13:18:56/50-22-57)

>>>>(Not the orangutan story, you slot. The other ones. Like the chemical plant in Seattle whose warehouses got broken into a month or so back—just one can of some nasty poison the newsies wouldn't or couldn't name got lifted. Or the two-bit subsidiary of Shiawase outside of Sapporo that lost a whole slew of reports on test cures for cold viruses. Somebody even raided a Saeder-Krupp outfit somewhere off the North Sea coast. The place wasn't much more than a dumping ground for unpleasant industrial drek—like leftover nuclear material. No one's sure exactly what or how much went missing, because the place kept sloppy records. Poisonous chemicals, nuke stuff, viral research—anyone starting to see a pattern yet?)<<<<<

—Bitbert (13:23:44/05-22-57)

>>>>(HEY! I did some digging and found out something weird about that S-K facility. The exec in charge of running whatever the frag gets done there recently contributed a drekload of cred to the New Frontiers Foundation. New Frontiers goes around to school districts in poor neighborhoods, promising scholarships to bright-but-poor kids with an aptitude for science. The first crop of high-school graduates are going to college as bioscience and

physics majors, with corp contracts kicking in the minute they get the fancy letters after their names.)<<<<<<

—Muskrat (15:24:31/05-22-57)

>>>>(Which corps?)<<<<<<

—Eponine (15:28:24/05-22-57)

>>>>(All of the Big Eight, plus about half a dozen smaller ones I've never heard of.)<<<<<<

—Muskrat (15:32:54/05-22-57)

>>>>(So Mr. Piddly-Drek Saeder-Krupp exec has a smidgen of social conscience. So what?)<<<<<<

—Tin Lizzie (15:54:32/05-22-57)

>>>>(Lizzie, Lizzie ... since when does any corp exec exhibit social conscience? Ever? Once you earn above a certain amount of cred working for a corp, you have your conscience surgically removed. It's in their contracts somewhere. Trust me—there's an ulterior motive here.)<<<<<<

—Auntie Social (16:03:44/05-22-57)

>>>>(Brain drain, maybe? If these Winternight skags are real, and they want to destroy the planet in all kinds of neat and interesting ways, they could use a few good scientific minds. Get 'em while they're young, and you can train 'em up to do all kinds of horrible things for you without batting an eyelash. With a few years' worth of investment, they've got themselves a pool of bright, educated, amoral flunkies to come up with breakthroughs in biowarfare, nuke physics, or any other potentially destructive branch of scientific research you can name.)<<<<<<

—Lazarus (16:20:43/05-22-57)

>>>>(They plan *that* long-term? Man, we're in deep drek.)<<<<<<

—Dancer (16:23:54/05-22-57)

>>>>(Did this guy Harding say he hired runners for these Winternight freaks? Did I read that right?)<<<<<<

—Jack-in-the-Green (17:00:21/05-22-57)

>>>>(One more reason to check out your Johnson. Try before you buy, chum.)<<<<<<

—Miz Liz (17:05:35/05-22-57)

>>>>(Oh, like you'd be able to dig that deep. If Winternight has covered its tracks so well that no one's ever heard of it until now, they certainly have the talent to keep their connections to their Johnsons buried. Any one of us could've taken on a job for them without ever knowing it.)<<<<<<

—Wild Man (17:09:32/05-22-57)

>>>>(Why is anyone even taking this seriously? Winternight's not real. It's just this sicko general's version of the boogieman. If they really existed, somebody would have heard something by now.)<<<<<<

—Pretty Polly (17:21:43/05-22-57)

>>>>(Maybe we have, and just don't realize it. Anybody notice

the rise in terrorist incidents over the past ten years? All kinds of groups crawling out of the woodwork. Tsunami in Japan, Armageddon in the Mideast, Red Tide in Central Europe—awfully similar imagery, neh? Destruction sweeping the world. What if it's more than just a coincidental similarity? What if they're all different branches of the same organization dedicated to sparking off a worldwide war?)<<<<<<

—Bitbert (17:28:45/05-22-57)

>>>>(The "guy with the chip" Harding keeps talking about ... that really bugs me. I had a run-in once with a Raven shaman—a toxic, a real twisted slot. When I assensed him, I saw the same weird bird-shadow thing that Harding described. If this Winternight bunch has toxics working for them ...)<<<<<<

—Casper (17:44:32/05-22-57)

>>>>(Toxic Ravens would make sense (insofar as any of this makes sense), seeing as the raven god was pretty big in Norse mythology.)<<<<<<

—Auntie Social (17:50:32/05-22-57)

>>>>(Oh, man ... I just figured something out and I DON'T LIKE IT ... ! Some chummers and me tangled with some really bad customers in Salish last summer—don't ask for the details, I don't want to talk about it. But four of the skags we went up against were toxic shamans. Four of 'em. Working together. A Raven and three Wolf shamans. Think about that for a minute.

Anybody shaking yet?)<<<<<<

—Jack-in-the-Green (18:01:22/05-22-57)

>>>>(Toxics don't work together. They're all too psycho to work with anybody. They'd kill each other over who got to be Top Spell-slinger inside of three seconds. Lucky thing, too. That's the only thing that's saved us from some major bad mojo ... oh drek.)<<<<<<

—Eponine (18:06:32/05-22-57)

>>>>(Exactly.)<<<<<<

—Jack-in-the-Green (18:11:46/05-22-57)

GAME INFORMATION

In Scandinavian mythology, Ragnarok is the great, world-spanning battle that will destroy the old, bloodthirsty Norse gods and usher in a new era of peace. The Winternight organization gives this tale a twist—they believe that by helping to bring about Ragnarok, they are earning their place in the pantheon of the Norse gods, who will once again rule the earth.

To accomplish its ends, Winternight uses a network rivaling Lofwyr's in size and power to stockpile nukes, collect and create unique magic items and commit carefully planned atrocities, among other activities. To achieve their goal of global Armageddon, they are absolutely ruthless, relentless, shameless and very, very clever. The only thing they want from those outside their organization is those others' deaths.

Winternight is subtle and secretive. The player characters will not be aware of the true nature of Winternight before they come into direct contact or conflict with the organization, and so the level of violence to which the group subscribes, when the characters encounter that violence, will come as a complete shock. Winternight willingly and casually kills family members, takes hostages, blows up buildings and commits blackmail to get its way. Any scenario that involves Winternight should fill the players with dread: Winternight makes nightmares come true.

USING WINTERNIGHT

Winternight is organized into cells, each cell consisting of 3 to 20 members. Only the cell leaders may initiate contact with one another and with the cell members. They do so through message drones, typically small, commercially available types (see **Drones**, p. 30). Winternight is constantly recruiting new talent, using tactics ranging from simple bribery and offers of camaraderie, to extortion threats, blackmail and fiendishly subtle psycho-plots.

This organizational style makes it nearly impossible to track down and eliminate all of Winternight, but an individual cell makes a formidable yet manageable opponent for the typical shadowrunner team. Cell members can range from highly placed individuals in corporate organizations (for example, accountants funneling money to Winternight) to street-level punks. Players can make contact with Winternight agents nearly anywhere.

Larger cells serve as strike teams used to destroy both hard and soft targets or just cause trouble. The makeup of these cells often resembles a shadowrunning team or a small mercenary group, including at least one Toxic Wolf shaman. Except for the cell leader, members of these teams almost never know they are working for Winternight. Smaller, covert cells specialize in disguising accidents, poisonings and other, subtler methods of elimination as random violence, suicides, or the actions of other groups.

Much of Winternight's equipment is built without serial or registration numbers on standard assembly lines, then classified as over-runs and shipped to dummy companies where the cells can retrieve the equipment as needed. Winternight maintains hundreds of these impromptu arsenals all over the world. Winternight obtains its message and combat drones, vital to all its operations, from the same types of sources (see **Rules**).

Winternight refuses to use the Matrix, convinced that the worldwide communications network is the design of Loki, the trickster god of Norse mythology. They view the Matrix as a great enemy, a deceiver and a spy. Possible Winternight organizations may be identified by their complete lack of Matrix connections.

Most of the magicians in Winternight belong to the cells pursuing specific technological goals. These cells are designing and building the tools Winternight will use to bring about Armageddon. Their first priority is to construct and/or steal nuclear weapons, followed by mystical research into making those bombs into weapon foci. Other tech cells concentrate their efforts on drilling mine shafts into geological faults all over the world and carving runes into the shifting plates to ensure that the transformation of the world is complete. Winternight is also researching alternate weapons of destruction, such as cryogenic

supercritical nuclear masses, subatomic dimensional linkages, necromantic transformation rituals, nuclear resonance triggers for tectonic shifts, and even a plan for a crop virus that will cause huge fires to sweep the earth, bringing about a global winter without a single nuke.

Aware that other powerful and secretive groups in the world, as well as megacorporations and most governments, would be hostile to their plans, Winternight's survival in this shadowy war relies on the fact that no one can find them to stop them. To maintain the organization's secrecy, most members of Winternight carry suicide devices ranging from cranial bombs to poisons to summoned spirits whose services include killing captured agents.

RULES

Winter has unique uses for three elements of the **Shadowrun** world: toxic shamans, simsense chips and drones.

Toxic Shamans

Because the Winternight organization is based on ideas from Norse mythology, it seems inevitable that Raven and Wolf shamans play a large role in its activities. The strongly necromantic cast to most of Winternight's activities ensures that shamans affiliated with them will be twisted and toxic in the truest sense of the term. The toxic Ravens are Avengers (see p. 100, **Grimoire II**) and are the driving influence behind the plot to remake the earth. Their twisted rituals are nearly impossible for those of the hermetic tradition to comprehend. Winternight also heavily recruits toxic Wolf shamans. Toxic Wolf is a blood-soaked berserker, fiercely committed to destruction and loyal to the goal Winternight represents. They are almost always Poisoners (see p. 100, **Grimoire II**) and are inspired by the Great Wolf Fenris, who seeks the end of all things. Unlike Raven shamans, Wolf shamans willingly participate in battles and often provide magical support for strike cells. There are more Ravens than Wolves in Winternight, but the Wolves have a much higher profile and are more likely to be an active opponent for a shadowrunner team.

When using a Winternight group that contains more than one toxic shaman—that's right, Winternight seems to be able to get them to work together—simulate this gestalt of evil by pooling their Threat Ratings into a Threat Array. This allows the gamemaster to reassign Threat dice to each participating shaman according to the requirements of the story. For example, some characters may receive no Threat Rating dice while a single shaman may receive the entire group's Threat Rating dice. This advantage carries a few restrictions. A gamemaster can only combine the Threat Ratings of toxic shamans that belong to the same Winternight cell. If a shaman contributing to a Threat Array dies, immediately subtract his or her Threat Rating from the Threat Array. To reallocate Threat dice among the members of a Threat Array, all contributors must be within line of sight of each other on the same plane (physical or astral). The Threat Array dice may be reassigned a number of times each day equal to the highest Threat Rating in the group.

Berserker Chips

One of the tools Winternight gives to its strike cells is a fiendish variation of simsense BTL chips called "berserker chips."

Normal simsense and BTL chips suppress the user's senses completely, replacing that input with information from the chip. In addition, the chips boost the user's ego, id and glandular responses. Winternight's special, stripped-down version of the standard chip amplifies the id, ego and endocrine responses, converts pain to pleasure, and establishes a strong feedback loop to the pleasure centers of the brain. In addition, the chip mutes all fear responses, and often implants compulsions such as the desire to kill. Some versions also may contain skills, allowing users with skillwires to use these chips as skillsofts.

Nearly every berserker chip is a unique design intended for a single, specific mission, and even the few existing generic designs commonly create varying effects. The gamemaster can include a wide variety of these highly addictive chips in his game. In game terms, the berserker chips may produce one or all of the following effects: +2 Strength, +2 Quickness, +2 Willpower and +1D6 Initiative. However, reduce the character's Intelligence and/or Charisma by a number equal to the total increases. These reductions remain in effect for a number of days equal to the total increases. For example, a chip that bestows all of the increases listed above would decrease Intelligence by 3 and Charisma by 4 (or any combination of those two attributes) for 7 days. These increases and decreases are in addition to any cyberware or bioware modifications. Characters may exceed racial maximums with the berserker chip, but no stat can be reduced below 1.

Because the chip also dampens all pain signals, the user suffers no negative modifiers for accumulating Physical or Stun damage. Characters using the berserker chip will continue attacking until they exceed their Damage Overflow boxes, at which point they will die.

If not killed outright while chipped, the user must make a Body Test immediately upon removing the chip. The target number for this test equals twice the number of rounds the chip was used, plus any wound modifiers that may be in effect. If the test results in no successes, the character immediately dies from what is essentially a total system failure. If the character survives, he must make a Willpower Test against a target number equal to the number of rounds he used the chip, plus the number of boxes of Physical damage suffered while chipped, plus the number of times he has used a berserker chip. If the test results in no successes, the character is addicted to the berserker chip. The gamemaster may determine the details of the addiction, but an addicted character might suffer a permanent loss of Intelligence, Charisma, Willpower or Essence, or

a permanent level of Stun damage.

All berserker chips contain two self-destruct procedures. First, the chips are good for only one use. The act of using it burns it out, erasing the data from the chip and destroying the programming. Second, if the user dies while chipped, or if the chip is removed, a tiny thermite charge in the chip melts it into a blob of plastic.

Drones

Winternight makes extensive use of drone vehicles. Small, autonomous message drones provide the essential links between the various cells of the organization through a double-blind delivery system. The first cell programs the drone with several drop points and signals for each drop. The first cell ships the drones to the second cell, whose leader programs a second chip with the locations and signals of where messages are to be left on his end. Both chips are sealed into the machine, which will self-destruct if tampered with. Because of Winternight's aversion to the Matrix, it also uses message drones to send money between cells in the form of certified credsticks. Courier drones will self-destruct if they are intercepted, tampered with, if a drop point is tampered with, or upon command by a rigger.

When the organization's goals require a massive combat punch, drones equipped with heavy weapons represent the tool of choice, as Winternight considers a single rigger controlling several drones less of a security risk than a team of people. All Winternight drones are modified to contain several thermite charges set to destroy any part of the drone that could be traced back to the organization. In a combat situation, the drone controller must transmit a "safe" signal to the drones once each minute. If the drones do not receive this signal, they automatically go to "Alpha Strike Mode," which puts them beyond the rigger's control, and immediately discharge all remaining ammunition at the nearest target and self-destruct. The combat drones also self-destruct if they run out of ammunition, fuel, or are disabled, if they are tampered with between missions, or upon receiving a signal from their rigger.

The combat drones most commonly used include Dobermans, Steel Lynxes, and Wandjinas. Winternight prefers to equip them with heavy machine guns, assault cannons, and missile launchers. They will use APDS ammo if available and if the target demands extra firepower. If forced to apply extreme prejudice, Winternight attempts to eliminate all survivors and destroy as much property as they can to camouflage their real goals.

THE VAMPIRE CONSPIRACY



>>>>>(Some of you folks may know Martin DeVries' name. He's a vampire hunter who—supposedly—also happens to *be* a vampire. Whether that's true or not, he seems to know quite a bit about the whys and wherefores of the bloodsucker lifestyle. He's written a new book called *Shadows at Noon*, with some stuff in it that deserves a good close look. He's met with serious opposition in his attempts to get it published, so he wrote up a synopsis for us to post on Shadowland. I don't allow advertising here—no plugs for nothing—but if he's right, we all need to know this drek. So here it is.)<<<<<<
—Captain Chaos (08:17:12/05-24-57)

The new racists of the Sixth World tell us that the metahuman races are demons bent on the destruction of pure humanity. They tell us that elves, dwarfs, orks and trolls are demons, monsters, not human and therefore our enemy. But even as they rouse the ignorant masses against our harmless metahuman brothers, the real enemy lives and prospers underneath humanity's collective nose. The real demonspawn lurk in the shadows, growing stronger on the blood of the living. They are the vampires, the so-called living dead.

In the dispassionate nomenclature of the parabiologist, the vampire is known as *Sanguisuga europa*—not as *Homo sapiens sanguisuga*. The choice of words is revealing. Orks, trolls, elves and dwarfs are all classified as subspecies of *Homo sapiens*, yet the vampire—who bears as great or greater a physical resemblance to “true” humanity than many metahumans—occupies a completely separate genus.

>>>>>(Run that drek by me in English)<<<<<<
—Link (14:37:04/05-24-57)

And so it should. The vampire is forever separated from the races of metahumanity on which it preys by a tiny, invisible, half-alive organism: the Human-Metahuman Vampiric Virus, or HMHVV. These viral cells are too small to be seen in any microscope, yet these tiny creatures transform their hosts so utterly that the once-normal human, dwarf, elf or what-have-you becomes a creature completely removed from humanity. The vampire may appear human, but the resemblance stops at the beast's cold, clammy skin. Once infected, the human or metahuman victim of vampirism is dead. In the victim's place is born a devil from the darkest heart of Creation, a thing reared in darkness and nurtured on innocent blood.

>>>>(Geez. Lays it on thick, don't he?)<<<<<
—Curious George (15:00:34/05-24-57)

>>>>(Especially when you consider that he *is* one of the "demon-spawn" he's ranting about.)<<<<<
—Milton (15:10:46/05-24-57)

Fear and suspicion follow the vampire wherever it goes. Humans and metahumans know that vampires are predators, vicious and merciless, held at bay only by their miniscule numbers and the protection of daylight. They hate and shun the vampire, who hates them in turn because they still have the simple, precious humanity that the undead monster has lost. Most vampires withdraw from mortal society entirely, emerging from their dark lairs only to feed. Often, bitter loneliness drives them to band together for what little companionship they can give each other.

>>>>(DeVries is no better than the bigots he started off denouncing. I knew a vampire named Victor DeLann; ran a bar called The Count's here in San Francisco. He bought his blood from hospitals, or drank small amounts from people who wanted to see how it felt. Victor wouldn't hurt a fly. But some fool watched one too many reruns of *Kill the Dead*, then broke into Victor's apartment just after dawn and staked him while he was sleeping. Some people can't coexist with anyone different.)<<<<<
—Darwin (07:20:49/05-25-57)

>>>>(Hey, I get the same drek every fraggin' day, just cuz I happen to be a troll. 'Course, unlike your pal Victor, if anybody gives me a hard time, I'll pop his head clean off.)<<<<<
—Angus (11:44:17/05-25-57)

These solitary monsters and small bands of outcasts are dangerous enough, stronger and faster than metahumans and driven to kill by a combination of hunger and homicidal rage. Worse dangers, however, exist. One faction of vampires, hiding behind an innocent façade, is even now working to shape the course of earth's future, to release all vampires from their dark hiding places and let them walk free as masters of metahumanity. This group extends its web of treachery and deceit through many nations and countless organizations, but its roots lie in England's Ordo Maximus.

>>>>(An interesting side note: DeVries was a member of the Ordo Maximus himself, though he dropped out in 2035. Apparently, he was warning the members about a new magical conspiracy every week, and was miffed that they didn't take him seriously.)<<<<<
—Hangfire (17:07:39/05-25-57)

>>>>(Oh, please. DeVries didn't quit the Ordo, he was blackballed after breaking into the Grand Chancellor's private chambers looking for proof of who-knows-what half-baked suspicions. Ever since then, he's been spouting off conspiracy rubbish to anyone who'll listen, with not a whit of proof behind any of it. This latest bunch of bull-drek is just an attempt to get back at the Ordo for doubting all his earlier nonsensical theories.)<<<<<
—Salamander (20:34:24/05-25-57)

>>>>(You're a member of the Ordo, aren't you, Sally? I thought I remembered hearing that once.)<<<<<
—Paleface (21:39:31/05-25-57)

>>>>(Are you implying that I'm trying to cover something up? Do you actually believe this paranoid drivel? Lovely. Now I have two conspiracy theorists to contend with.)<<<<<
—Salamander (21:42:02/05-25-57)

Most people believe the harmless facade that the Ordo Maximus has deliberately constructed; they see this hermetic order as a social club for well-heeled Britons with an interest in—though not necessarily any talent for—matters arcane. Many wealthy and powerful individuals join the Ordo out of intellectual curiosity or as a mark of status, and these unknowing pawns pour their fortunes into the organization's coffers without ever progressing beyond the lowest ranks of initiation. They have not the slightest inkling that their monies are financing their own downfall, along with the rest of metahumanity's. They don't realize that they are giving aid and comfort to the greatest enemy metahumanity has ever known, because they do not know the terrible truth. At its highest levels, the Ordo is the tool of a secret cabal of at least half a dozen vampires—perhaps more—all skilled initiates who use the Ordo's funds and political connections to conduct biomagical research well hidden from the public eye. Their goal is simple and terrifying; they seek to create variant strains of HMHVV, new viruses that will confer the strengths and weaknesses of vampirism at the Ordo's sole discretion.

>>>>(I thought the vampires were trying to summon Man-Eating Astral Monsters from Spaaaace ... no, wait, that was DeVries' last Giant Vampire Conspiracy theory.)<<<<<
—Woodridge (12:14:01/05-26-57)

>>>>(Whoopee. Viral superweapon research. Name me one major megacorp that isn't working on the same thing. Why should I be any more worried about this project just because the guys heading it up are vampires?)<<<<<
—Dogmeat (18:06:31/05-26-57)



>>>>(Assuming there's any such thing as a secret cabal of vampires in the first place, let alone that they give a drek about viral research. Or know enough to do anything with their alleged little hobby. You people believe everything you read?)<<<<<

—Skeptic (18:11:45/05-26-57)

>>>>(A little paranoia is a healthy thing these days, chumbay. If I'm wrong in thinking that DeVries's secret bloodsucker cabal just might exist, then I got no worries. If you're wrong about it *not* existing ... you may be in for one nasty surprise some fine day.)<<<<<

—NoNews (18:30:24/05-26-57)

>>>>(I'd worry about *anyone* looking into new and fun uses for HMHVV. For one thing, HMHVV is one of the few viruses for which no one's yet found a corresponding zeta-interferon, which means there's no good defense against it. Even worse, HMHVV doesn't just make you sick. It changes you. Bad enough if some corp bioweapon kills your chummer, the ork samurai. Imagine if it turned him into a ravenous newborn wendigo instead—with you as his nearest meal.)<<<<<

—Hangfire (00:04:26/05-30-57)

>>>>(Plus, vampires tend to be sadistic and vicious, lacking even the microscopic morals of your typical corp exec. If they develop a doomsday virus, they're a lot more likely to use it.)<<<<<

—Lady Death (23:45:47/05-30-57)

The physical changes that the virus causes in humans and metahumans are widely known. It increases the victim's physical strength, reflexes and sensory acuity; it stops the aging process; and it makes its host immune to virtually all diseases and toxins. Vampires have few weaknesses, save for a fatal allergy to sunlight. Worse, vampires can transform their bodies into mist and regenerate tremendous amounts of physical damage. Most frightening of all, they must feed on the life energy of humans and metahumans. The vampiric leaders of the Ordo Maximus believe that each of these changes can be isolated and individually added to, or removed from, the primary HMHVV viral strain. Even now, they are bending every resource at their disposal toward accomplishing this end, in order to put their discoveries to a truly horrifying use. They plan to create custom viruses that will confer any or all of these physical changes, in various combinations, to their chosen victims.

I cannot possibly overstate the danger to all living beings should the vampires succeed in their aim. Consider one seemingly innocuous focus of their research: to isolate and remove the viral sequence that causes the vampire's extreme susceptibility to sunlight. Where, some people might ask, is the harm in this? Are not vampires victims of a disease, no more sinister than cancer or AIDS? Why should they not use modern medical technology to ease their plight, just as other sufferers do? If they can find a way to enjoy sunlight once again, to walk among metahumanity and rejoin it once more, why should they not be free to do so?"

>>>>(Why can't we all just get along? Vampires are people too!)<<<<<

—Little Boy (02:31:59/06-01-57)

The Ordo Maximus has carefully fostered this view of the vampire-as-victim, exploiting metahumanity's natural compassion in order to safeguard and further its own sinister plot. In fact, susceptibility to sunlight is the only thing preventing vampires from becoming the dominant life form on this planet. If the Ordo succeeds in creating an HMHVV strain without that weakness, humans and metahumans are doomed ... save for those few kept alive to breed the vampires' food supply.

>>>>(Euurrngghhh ...)<<<<<

—Blacknight (13:06:19/06-01-57)

A vampire that can move at will in sunlight is a fiend with power beyond measure. It can travel wherever it wants to, whenever it wants to; it can hunt at any hour of the day; and it cannot be easily distinguished from a normal metahuman because *it lacks the very weakness that once defined it*. People know that vampires cannot survive in sunlight; therefore, they reason, anyone unharmed by sunlight cannot be a vampire. If the Ordo's plan succeeds, this simple piece of common wisdom will no longer be true. Vampires will no longer be detectable except by sophisticated blood tests, and this new anonymity will enable them to take over every institution in society with no one the wiser until it is far too late. They will gain total control over all of our lives in the blink of an eye, and we will be unable to lift a finger to stop them.

>>>>(Vamps with no weaknesses. <shudder>!)<<<<<

—Paleface

>>>>(What about the old stake through the heart? Even a vamp that can live in sunlight has to sleep sometime. Sneak up on 'em and stake 'em, that's what I say.)<<<<<

—Nicky

>>>>(Fine then ... you go ahead and try it. Try to sneak up on a creature that's got a lot more sensitive hearing than you do, and is perfectly capable of waking up and resisting you. Actively. Oh, and you'd better brush up on your anatomy. Make sure you pound that stake all the way through the vampire's heart with the first blow, cuz you ain't getting another.)<<<<<

—Lady Death

>>>>(Every major medical corp in the world would probably pay the Ordo Maximus—or whoever—any price it wants for successful results. I don't know the exact numbers, but something like six percent of all metahumans suffer from acute photosensitive reactions—not HMHVV cases, just normal folks with a weird allergy. That's one hell of a big market if they can find a cure.)<<<<<

—The Dark Wight (00:09:21/06-02-57)

Other possibilities exist, all frightening in their implications. Once isolated, the light-sensitivity factor could be engineered into a new virus, inflicting extreme (and possibly fatal) photosensitivity on the victim without any of vampirism's other side effects. Imagine how easily the vampire cabal might take such a virus and combine it with an airborne vector to infect hundreds of people instantly. Simply by releasing it into a crowd at noon on a sunny day, they could kill countless innocents. Imagine the unsuspecting victims erupting into flames for no apparent reason, infected by a microscopic killer whose existence they never suspected. Imagine how easily the Ordo Maximus might use the threat of such a killing to blackmail anyone with power and money into doing anything they desire.

>>>>(Imagine what this scare-story will do for your book sales, Mister DeVries. So far, I haven't read anything in this screed to persuade me that the "vampire conspiracy" is anything more than a load of warm drek.)<<<<<

—D. Bunker (12:35:56/06-02-57)

>>>>(Wait a tick. Me and some chummers were doing a snatch-n-grab at a Saeder-Krupp biolab outside Charlotte a few months back. On the way out, we hit this one room that had no lights in it at all. Soon as we got through the door, this ... thing rushed me, screamin' like my mother-in-law. Looked kinda like one of those dzoo-noo-qua things I seen in Paterson's, at least on thermo. It knocked me down and was going for my throat when our mage threw a light spell to see what was going on. The thing's skin was dead white, and where the light hit, it started to smoke and fall apart. The fragger just burned, wailin' and hollerin' like it'd gotten hit with a flamethrower. I still get the creeps thinkin' about it. Is that the kind of thing DeVries is talking about?)<<<<<

—Angus (14:05:11/06-02-57)

>>>>(Well, dzoo-noo-qua are trolls infected with HMHVV, and S-K's given the Ordo Maximus quite a whack of cred over the years. Draw your own conclusions.)<<<<<

—Paleface (22:49:53/06-02-57)

>>>>(Sorry, Angus. It's a lovely story, but it just doesn't hold water. Even if there was some kind of genetic tinkering done, no one can turn a mild allergy to direct sunlight into a fatal reaction to dim artificial light. Perhaps your mage cast a fire spell?)<<<<<

—Salamander (07:01:12/06-03-57)

>>>>(I know what I saw.)<<<<<

—Angus (11:44:00/06-03-57)

The plots of the vampires do not end there. Science has already discovered that the HMHVV virus, and its numerous variants, have wildly differing effects on different metatypes; the vampires of the Ordo Maximus intend to isolate these as well, and use them to create monsters of their own devising. To take one example, humans, elves and orks retain normal intelligence after infection with HMHVV; dwarfs and trolls do not. If the vampiric cabal can determine the reason that some metatypes retain

their mental faculties and others do not, they can convey intelligence on infected dwarfs and trolls ... or take it away from infected humans, elves, and orks, creating mindless feeding machines or powerful creatures with malign intelligence at their whim.

>>>>(The Jarka-Criscione strain of the virus—that's HMHVV-II, for you scientific illiterates out there—causes severe neurological and physiological deterioration in all races, including humans. Then there's the Bruckner-Langer strain of the virus, which transforms humans into nosferatu but kills other metatypes. I wonder if the vampires might try to eliminate those.)<<<<<

—Doc Watson (13:00:24/06-03-57)

>>>>(Wonder if we might be able to use 'em as a weapon. Turn the vampires' own weapons against 'em.)<<<<<

—Angus (13:25:32/06-03-57)

>>>>(Under certain conditions and with a carefully selected diet, metahuman nosferatu can survive. Trust me—I know whereof I speak.)<<<<<

—Professor S (14:11:25/06-03-57)

But there is worse to come. Loup-garou are rendered sterile by the HMHVV-II virus; however, the same viral strain endows bandersnatches with an extraordinarily high fertility rate. Fomorian—trolls infected with HMHVV-II—develop impressive resistance to magic, and goblins—HMHVV-infected dwarfs—appear particularly resistant to fire. Each of these characteristics is the effect of a particular segment of the virus' RNA acting upon certain cells of the host's body. If these attributes can be isolated and combined at will, the vampiric cabal will be able to artificially create monsters of untold destructive power. Imagine a troll infected with a custom strain of HMHVV. In addition to its already fearsome size and strength, it could be endowed with the classic vampire's abilities to transform into mist and regenerate damage, the fomorian's resistance to magic, the goblin's tolerance for fire, and the bandersnatch's adaptive coloration and high reproductive rate. Such a monstrosity—virtually impervious to harm, ravening for blood, and able to reproduce—would cut a swath of destruction wherever it went.

>>>>(I don't like the sound of that, not one bit.)<<<<<

—Dogmeat (15:00:59/06-03-57)

>>>>(Getting worried, Dogmeat?)<<<<<

—Lady Death (15:40:09/06-03-57)

>>>>(What a fullback one of those things would make. Go, Dolphins!)<<<<<

—Mitch in Miami (16:41:06/06-03-57)

Even more dangerous are the vampires' studies of the creatures known as vampiric pawns. Currently, such creatures can only be created by a lengthy process involving significant quantities of the vampire's own infected blood, often combined with drugs and magical coercion. The sinister masterminds of the Ordo

Maximus are attempting to determine the specific biochemical elements that make the pawn so desperately obedient to its master; if they succeed, they will have the means to swiftly turn any opposition into an army of slavish followers. Imagine if they then transform those followers into the vampiric monstrosities I have described; who could survive an onslaught of such demons? If the Ordo gains the knowledge it seeks, humanity is clearly doomed.

We must fight this terrible menace before it claims all our lives. But what can ordinary metahumans hope to do against a secret, powerful band of hellspawn unknowingly backed by some of the richest and most influential people in the world?

>>>>("First, buy my book. Second, send your certified credstick donations to Martin DeVries, care of this BBS. Third, e-mail your bank account codes to 'Geek the Vamps, Inc.')

—Cynic (21:12:04/06-03-57)

First and most important, we must make the truth known. Please send copies of this synopsis to as many bulletin boards and media outlets as possible. The vampires of the Ordo have enormous influence over the media worldwide and have so far successfully blocked publication of this information, but if enough copies are distributed some will inevitably find their way into the public eye.

For those who wish to take a more active role, I ask you to join the ranks of the world's vampire hunters. Send a message to "Stalker" on this BBS, and you will be contacted shortly. Keep your eyes and ears open; report any evidence of vampiric activity to Shadowland, and anywhere else you can think of. Overlook nothing; even seemingly random events may lead toward the terrifying truth.

>>>>(Random events, eh? How about the recent 2-cent rise in the price of SoyBacon?)

—Darwin (02:33:42/06-04-57)

>>>>(SoyBacon's gone up? Omigod, the end of the world is nigh!)

—Cynic (03:01:24/06-04-57)

>>>>(Waitasec. The price of soy meat goes up ... so do cattle mutilations ... oh, man, I don't like the connection I'm seeing!)

—Paleface (03:12:53/06-04-57)

>>>>(... um ... I was kidding ...)

—Darwin (03:17:35/06-04-57)

>>>>(Kidding aside, folks ... anyone else notice how fast HMHVV's been spreading lately among Europe's dwarfs? It's far too rapid to be explained by normal means. Ghost knows whether DeVries is on the money or absolutely cracked, but this infection pattern needs looking into.)

—Plague Mother (03:22:40/06-04-57)

The shadows are deadly enough at night, my friends; do not let them grow to darken the sky at noon.

>>>>(Hey, some of us like the shadows.)

—Kagehika (04:41:35/06-04-57)

>>>>(This whole deal's possible, I guess ... but it sounds more like a nosferatu plan to me. Vampires tend to be bite-first-and-plan-world-domination-later types.)

—Edge (07:20:05/06-04-57)

>>>>(This is all bulldrek. Look at the way DeVries talks about the Ordo—like they're all the Bad Guys that ever were, all rolled into one. Nobody could be that evil, especially not some tinpot bunch of prissy English pseudo-hermetics who like to act like they know something. He's either a raving paranoid or he's got an agenda.)

—Cynic (11:24:37/06-04-57)

>>>>(Even if he's a raving madman whose Purpose In Life is to bring the Ordo Maximus crashing down, how does that prove he's wrong?)

—Milton (12:02:35/06-04-57)

GAME INFORMATION

Even the most ancient legends of vampires suggest that these beings pursue unique goals in cooperation with each other, served by human pawns. Now that the existence of vampires has become a reality in the public consciousness, denizens of the **Shadowrun** universe must accept that vampires' presence among them might well constitute a worldwide threat. Though some vampires see themselves as no different from the player characters—humans with a disease, each with different motivations and personal goals—other vampires consider themselves to be higher up on the food chain. Of the vampires who have taken that attitude to the extreme, using their knowledge, power and abilities to conduct research and experiments that contaminate those around them, many belong to the mysterious organization called Ordo Maximus. Even without knowing this organization's goals, the Ordo's knowledge of cybermancy and the scale of its metahuman research makes this group a threat.

USING THE VAMPIRE CONSPIRACY

The global vampiric conspiracy presents a wide variety of options for the gamemaster. At the simplest level, the vampires' genetic research provides game-world justification for the player characters to encounter an unlimited number of nasty, Awakened humanoids with a lot of unpredictable magical powers. At its most frightening level, the Ordo Maximus represents a global conspiracy of some of the most powerful, soulless, determined vampires in existence, and they fear no one and nothing. From cybermancy to experimental drugs, cures and other "medicines" to vampire "conversions" of powerful people—to accomplish its ends, Ordo Maximus has agents in nearly every organization, corporation and secret society in existence.

The gamemaster may choose how far the Ordo Maximus can reach. Rather than maintaining a worldwide network of spies and coordinating that network's efforts, the Ordo Maximus may simply buy or steal others' research and experiments. This style of organization offers plenty of options for shadowrunners to become involved in the vampire conspiracy. If the gamemaster prefers to avoid hiding a vampire around every corner, behind-the-scenes deals and blackmail make it possible to bury the vampires and the Ordo Maximus behind double-blinds and dead-ends. Ordo Maximus becomes a mythological threat that exists beyond the realm of the runners.

Because the Ordo's public façade is a brotherhood of hermetic magicians, the organization has access to a great deal of magical firepower.

The gamemaster may also choose to use Ordo Maximus without ever exposing the vampire secret. Ordo Maximus is one of the few organizations with the knowledge and equipment necessary to perform cybermantic rituals (see **Cybertechnology**, pp. 70–77), which means that important sites and individuals will be guarded by some very unpleasant entities, from cyberzombies to HMHVV-affected metahumans. And if the player characters yearn to live as cyberzombies, any Ordo Maximus clinic/research facility (under an assumed name, of course) will gladly oblige such characters in exchange for some assistance in one or two experiments they are conducting ...

RULES

The most important things to remember when dealing with the Ordo Maximus is that they are a very experienced, very cautious and very well-connected group. They do not take chances lightly; vampires do not age, and so can afford to be patient. They wield a great deal of power in England: because many of that country's young nobles are members of the Ordo's lower ranks, even if they do not know the Ordo's real purpose they can still

bring an enormous amount of influence to bear on its enemies, from police harassment to deportation or worse. The Ordo possesses less influence in other countries, but advances its agenda with the help of any number of politicians, executives and even street types as its pawns.

For every vampire there is a vampire hunter. Martin DeVries is just one person obsessed with destroying these abominations. Vampire hunters have yet to form a cohesive organization, but they share information in much the same way as bounty hunters of the nineteenth century. Loners who focus on their vocation to the exclusion of all other interests, these individuals may throw a wrench into the player characters' plans as easily as bail their rear ends out of the fire.

If certain power-hungry players seem eager to have their characters infected with HMHVV and positively drool at the prospect of gaining vampiric powers, we suggest that gamemasters discourage this desire in the strongest possible terms. Play up the cruel, bestial and ugly nature of these creatures, and make sure that friendly non-player characters loudly proclaim their severe revulsion at the thought of exchanging one's humanity for bloody damnation. If the player insists, let his character become a vampire, and then send Martin DeVries after him. Serves him right.

The players may be too knowledgeable about the powers of various vampires and other infected metahumans for such creatures to challenge their characters and keep them off balance. In this case, a few bizarre mutations might make the players think twice. The gamemaster may either use the Toxic Creatures rules from page 148 of the **California Free State** sourcebook to swap infected creatures' powers, or use the following quick and dirty system. To create HMHVV variant creatures, remove one existing power for every "new" power granted, and raise the allergy severity by one level. The gamemaster must also reduce the Intelligence of the new creature by half.

HALBERSTAM'S BABIES



>>>>>(Even time and repeated debunking can't seem to squelch the rumor that artificial intelligence exists in the Matrix. In all honesty, technological advancement is leapfrogging ahead at such a breakneck pace that we've got to assume that someone, somewhere will eventually make the breakthrough that brings such an entity to life. The best Matrix runners get closer to creating an AI with every refinement they make to their own tools and weapons, and the recent emergence of the otaku certainly suggests that the human brain is capable of far more than we give it credit for. Taking all that into consideration, the following download and accompanying rant seems to cover interesting new ground on this topic.

Mind you, I'm not saying I agree with Hondo's conclusions or even accept his evidence as valid—I just think he's got a right to be heard (as much as any other cracker posting in this subject area).<<<<<

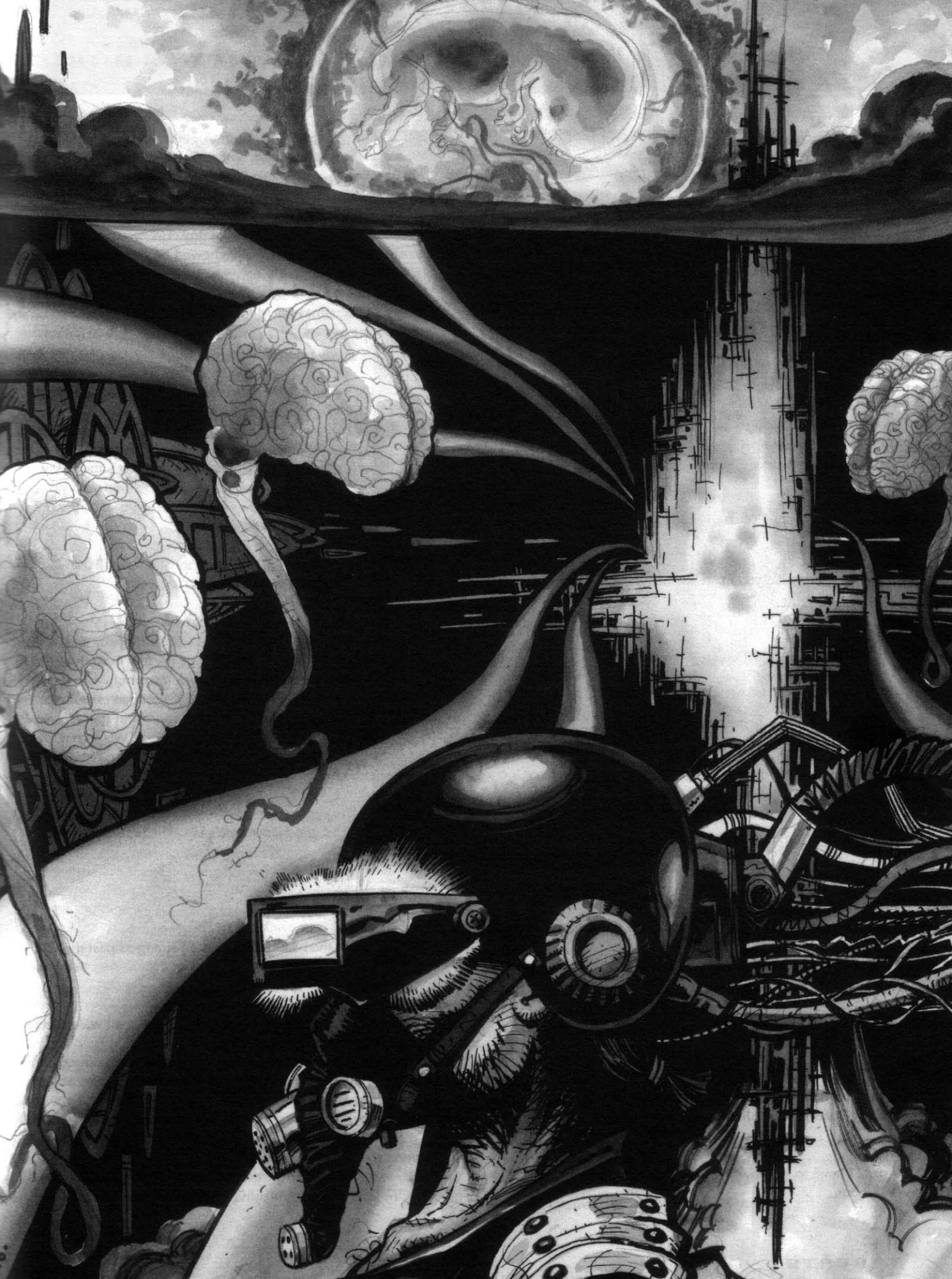
—Captain Chaos (12:34:45/04-05-57)

>>>>>(When I first saw Willis, he was crashing one of the toughest nests of black IC I've ever seen so casually that I did a double take. I thought he looked different somehow, so I followed him around for a while. The longer I stuck with him, the stranger things got. Just scan this dump, then I'll tell you what I think it all means. Let me warn you, though, it's pretty fraggin' scary.)<<<<<

—Hondo (02:27:12/01-15-57)

>>>>>(BOO!!)<<<<<

—Bung (23:42:17/02-11-57)



ME

Hoi, chummer. Pretty impressive work there.

WILLIS

Um ... thank you.

ME

So, just to satisfy my professional curiosity, what exactly was that next-to-last command you inserted? Looked to me like that was the one that did the trick.

WILLIS

Command? What's that mean?

ME

Hey, if you don't want to say, just tell me to frag off and I'm outta here. I just figured you might give me a hint, you know, as a courtesy from one shadow-guy to another.

WILLIS

No, don't go! I'm sorry—I don't understand what you're asking.

ME

Okay, uh ... how did you make the monster stop breathing fire on you?

WILLIS

Oh, that was easy. I just colored the red part over with green.

ME

Huh?

WILLIS

You know. I took the green color out of the box and rubbed it over the red spot just under the monster's chin.

ME

Riiight. Say, what's your name, anyway?

WILLIS

Willis.

ME

Well, Willis, that's a real interesting reality filter you're using there.

WILLIS

Reality filter?

ME

You don't know what that means, either? Where'd you learn how to deck—under water? Sheesh!

WILLIS

Um ... I have to go now. I'm supposed to bring this box to the classroom.

ME

Whatever. See you around, sprite.

<<I watched the Willis icon float away on what looked like a modified skateboard, and finally figured out why the kid looked so weird to me—his icon was super-dense, the most high-res representation I'd ever seen in the Matrix. His total ignorance about common decking terms really chewed on me, too, so I decided to follow him and see what was what. The sprite floated along until he arrived at a small, carefully sculpted building with the words, "Shelbramat Boarding School, est. 2054" inscribed on the cornerstone.>>

WILLIS

<<kicks the door because he's holding the box with both hands>>
Hey! Let me in!

Σ

<<in a muffled voice, through the door>> What's the password?

WILLIS

Oh yeah. Um ... noodlenoggin!

Σ

<giggle> Okay, you can come in.

ME

<<I move up to the door, which is closed again, and whisper "noodlenoggin." It opens, and I wedge my foot in so it stays open a crack. A quick peek inside shows me an empty, old-fashioned sitting room, so I slip in. Suddenly, a dog made out of pink balloons runs through the door across the room and starts squeaking at me. While I'm trying to figure that one out, Willis comes back, followed by a little girl with silver hair—and her icon has that same, weird density.>>

WILLIS

Oh, it's you. Did you follow me?

ME

Yeah.

WILLIS

Well, okay, but the headmaster says no strangers past the visitors' room.

ME

S'alright—I gotta take off now anyway, 'cause my meatbod needs to be somewhere else in an hour.

<<The kids look at each other and then at me, and both open their mouths to ask me something at the same time, but I scoot out of there quick, before they can say anything. I don't even want to think about what it means if they don't know what a meatbod is.

So I shadow these two and three more kids who hang around the "boarding school" for a couple of weeks in my spare time, watchin' them run the Matrix like they were born to it. They're fast, efficient, effective and damn-near omnipotent. The

only thing I ever see them fumble is non-combat interactions with other deckers. IC they got down cold, sysops are like breathing, in stealth mode they leave no trace—these kids can do anything and go anywhere; they're unstoppable until they have to get something from another decker without fighting for it.

After the first week, I start to get real nervous about what I'm seeing. The stuff these kids are snatching seems random at first, but I do a little research and start finding some threads that tie certain things together. I also try to find out a little more about Willis and his friends and the Shelbramat Boarding School, but every line of inquiry comes up empty. That sends up a big red flag, and so I set up a couple of smart frames to search under wider parameters. If these "kids" are really as powerful as they seem, then whoever's running the show could threaten our whole way of life! I decide to try talkin' to Willis again.>>

ME

Hey, Willis. Can we talk for a minute?

WILLIS

About what?

ME

I got some biz you might be interested in, but you gotta make a physical meet.

WILLIS

<<blank stare>>

ME

Not interested, huh? Okay, but I've seen you work—this job would be easy nuyen for a kid with your skills.

WILLIS

<<blank stare>>

ME

Look, what part don't you understand this time?

WILLIS

We're only allowed to do what the headmaster says.

ME

What are you, a wage slave? Hey, if it's about getting permission from your fixer, just let me talk to him—I'll straighten the whole thing out for you.

WILLIS

No one but us talks to the headmaster.



ME

At least give me the headmaster's name, and maybe I can find a way to get through to him.

WILLIS

Um ... I have to go now. I'm doing something very important for the headmaster.

ME

Geez, don't you ever take a break? Get a hobby, go to a virtual bar, jack out for a few hours—do something besides work for once in your life!

WILLIS

Stop saying those things! I don't understand what you're talking about! You're confusing me and I don't like it! I could make you go away!

ME
Whoa! Calm down—I didn't mean to make you upset.

WILLIS
Well ... okay. But what is "jack out"?

ME
You really don't know? Okay. Well, jacking out is when you leave the Matrix, the place where we are now, and you sort of "wake up" in the real world—the physical world, where your body is, where you go to eat and sleep and see your friends.

WILLIS
<<blank stare>>

ME
Here, let me show you.
<<I take Willis to the system for the Wee Wanda Winkie School, hook into the security camera that I usually use to check on my little brother and show Willis a class of first-graders learning to read. I watch his face, and he looks torn between disgust and jealousy.>>

WILLIS
I ... I don't remember "waking up" like that. When I'm not doing things for the headmaster I sometimes go to a dark place, but ...

ME
<<The little guy was startin' to look concerned, so I pretended it didn't mean anything.>>
That's okay, everyone's different. No need to worry yourself about it. You know, if you let me talk to the headmaster, maybe I could take you to meet some of my friends and we could hang out together. That sound like fun to you?

WILLIS
I don't know ... Dr. Halber ... I mean, the headmaster, he's real strict about not talking to strangers. I don't want to get into trouble, because then I have to go to the dark place ...

ME
<<Now I was getting somewhere! That fragment of a name was probably enough to find out what I wanted to know.>>
Alright, then, I'll catch you later.

>>>>(I saw the kids a few more times after that, but I spent most of my downtime chasing the lead Willis gave me. I gotta tell you, I wasn't too happy about what I found. Do you remember the rumor from the summer of '52 about an AI running around the Matrix out of UCAS Data Systems? Well, when the chief honcho on that project, one Dr. Ronald Thomas Halberstam, lost his funding, he didn't shut his operation down—he just moved it. Sure, he was out of the loop for a couple of years, but evil of his caliber always finds a way back on top. Now he's got funding again from I don't know where, but he's in the CFS, so it could be any of the big guys, including the Azzies.

And don't say I'm overreacting because I call this guy evil. The further I dug, the worse the story got. Down in the deep darks, I found out that the incident in '52 wasn't an unsuccessful AI experiment—it was an unsuccessful attempt to isolate little kids' brains from their bodies and make them into superdeckers by raising them completely in the Matrix! My guess is that Halberstam's up to his old tricks again: I mean, a "boarding school" whose name is a scramble for the good doctor's; super-talented little kids who have no concept of the real world, controlled by a strict leader; unusually dense icons with no apparent connection to a meatbod—sounds like the recipe for Lucifer's crash and burn all over again.

This doctor is one sick, amoral, POWERFUL piece of drek. The thought of him tormentin' little kids again, makin' a huge profit on the side and controlling the potential to shake up the entire, world-spanning Matrix so hard that we couldn't recognize a datafile if it bit us on the fleshy part scares the living drek outta me. Halberstam must be stopped!<<<<<

—Hondo (11:42:28/01-16-57)

>>>>(Sounds to me like old Halby-boy's just done what we've all wanted to do one time or another—found a way to live in the Matrix without always stopping to eat, drink and eliminate. Everyone knows the younger you are, the easier it is for your brain to adapt, so it just makes sense that he'd rope in the youngest volunteers he could find. And if volunteer means sendin' your baby away to make a little cred so you can feed the rest of the brood, well, then science has helped make the world a better place once again.)<<<<<

—Joblow (11:55:32/01-16-57)

>>>>(What an unbelievably self-centered, cynical attitude. But I guess I shouldn't be surprised by an opinion like that coming from a complete drek-for-brains like you. You've always resented your mother, and every time you open your mouth we get a little closer to the reason why.

If it's possible to live only in the Matrix, it should be a conscious choice made by a fully informed person of legal age—not a condition forced on a child too young to know he even has a choice. I agree with Hondo: Halberstam is evil by nature and by action, and he and his work must be destroyed.)<<<<<

—Salli 4th (20:32:01/01-17-57)

>>>>(Whoa! You're debating the morality of something you can't even prove! Did I logon to the Theoretical Philosophy board by mistake? Let's take a looong step back here and consider our source for this little beaut of a tale: Hondo, an unknown among the decker community, with no proven credentials and no way of knowing his motives. What we've got here is a Stoney, folks—he's wild, he's unpredictable, he's off his rocker!)<<<<<

—Socrates P (21:55:13/01-17-57)

>>>>(Query: Stoney?)<<<<<

—Newchum (01:41:25/01-18-57)

>>>>(A disciple of the late Olly Stone, master conspiracy theorist and guru of the EXCULT. In his opinion, there was nothing in this world that couldn't be explained by a government coverup.)<<<<<

—Socrates P (01:56:13/01-18-57)

>>>>(That's one of the oldest dodges in the book—debunking a theory by destroying the credibility of the theorist. Well, it doesn't work so well in the age of information, because anyone can find the same information that I did. The time I spent with Willis and his reactions to what I was saying point pretty clearly to the only possible conclusion: this kid-icon didn't know he had any other body. If Dr. Halberstam has "improved" his research, which all scientists do if they can, then we have to assume that he's taken his experiment one step further. It was the kids' meat body that fouled up the results before, so Halberstam must be removing the brains from SINless babies and putting them in jars hooked up to the Matrix. It's the only conclusion that fits all the facts.

He's got to be stopped! He's an amoral monster with no sense of right or wrong, a modern-day Mengele experimenting on children for the pleasure of hearing them scream, a mad scientist out to rule the world for his own twisted ends. We've got to find him and stop him before he dissects again!<<<<<

—Hondo (08:23:08/01-18-57)

>>>>(And there you have it, chummerees, the ranting of a total madman. I say we oughta find Hondo and stop him before he hurts himself!<<<<<

—Joblow (10:11:32/01-18-57)

>>>>(First, let's find out where he got his information so we can go beat them senseless, too ...)<<<<<

—Core Warrior (12:12:46/01-18-57)

GAME INFORMATION

While in the employment of UCAS Data Systems, Dr. Ronald Thomas Halberstam ran the Matrix Born project, an experiment designed to wire a metahuman brain directly to the Matrix. This experiment was based on the theory that a direct connection between the Matrix and the metahuman brain would make the subject more proficient in the Matrix and capable of far higher levels of performance than ordinary deckers. UCAS Data Systems released Halberstam from its employment in the fall of 2051, after the project failed.

Several years ago, Halberstam disappeared underground, leaving his wife and his past behind. Still convinced that his concept is sound, Halberstam believes that his past experiments failed because the subjects' meat bodies also had to be maintained. His newest solution to this problem is to remove the subjects' brains from their bodies and immerse the brains in a tank of nutrients and electrolytes to maintain the tissue. Making that image even more disturbing is the fact that the brains in question belonged to children who most likely never gave their consent for this experimentation. Dr. Halberstam is part butcher and part genius, all wrapped up in the massive ego of a man with a god-complex.

USING DR. HALBERSTAM AND HIS BABIES

The gamemaster may choose to use either Dr. Halberstam and/or his bizarre Matrix beings as a threat.

Dr. Halberstam is seriously warped, and probably clinically insane. Like most mad scientists, he cares for nothing but the ultimate conclusion of his research and believes that the end result justifies any means he must use to pursue those results. Halberstam receives substantial (though secret) support from corporate backers that he uses to maintain several hidden scientific labs and lairs, and supplies his backers with enough misinformation to keep the corporate Johnsons from even guessing his true goals.

The logical conclusion of Halberstam's research (logical, at least, to his mind) will be the creation of enough powerful Matrix beings under his control to allow him to freely manipulate the Matrix and thus take over the world. (Like most megalomaniacs, he hasn't really thought about what he would do with the world once he controlled it ...) Based on the experiment's latest results, in which Halberstam's babies appear to exhibit the main characteristics of an artificial intelligence, Halberstam's powerful megacorp supporters believe the doctor is *this close* to creating a manageable AI, the Holy Grail of the Matrix and every megacorp's ultimate desire. They want his experiments (as far as they understand them) to succeed, and willingly devote considerable assets to protect the good doctor and his work. In keeping with his sly, secretive nature, Halberstam most likely sold multiple corporations the same line, and is expertly playing both ends against the middle while using the corps' money to further his personal goals. The gamemaster may choose exactly where Halberstam is working at any one time, and what corporation is protecting that location.

The "Babies"

Halberstam's babies are children between the ages of 6 and 12. He has four to six children's brains in a vat at any one time, though he never runs more than two in the Matrix at once. Each subject is mind-wiped before being taken from his or her body, so that the remaining consciousness has no recollection of its previous life. He takes each subject off-line for a couple of hours every three days in order to run diagnostics. Otherwise, the subjects remain in the Matrix, performing the duties Halberstam sets for them. While in the Matrix, the brains act according to the rules for semi-autonomous knowbots (see **Rules**, below). Because Halberstam's babies only have access to the knowledge he provides them, the gamemaster should play these Matrix entities as if they really are little kids; curious, afraid of getting in trouble, easily distracted by anti-adult behavior, sometimes spiteful and completely unaware of the existence of any reality outside the Matrix. References to the "meat world" only confuse them, causing them to behave erratically and sometimes even attack the icon making the statement.

Halberstam creates a new node for every batch of subjects. Most of these nodes have a child-friendly sculpted imagery: a schoolhouse, a toy store, "home" and other familiar, comfortable places. He has set up nodes all over the Matrix, which makes it easy for player-character deckers to discover the existence of his

babies. Because he is constantly moving and rebuilding nodes and commanding the babies to perform a wide variety of tasks, deckers can meet the babies most any time and any place.

So far, Halberstam's biggest disappointment in his recent experiments is the overall frailty of the disembodied brains. If the brain survives the shock of being removed from the body and the initial wiring and programming, it generally survives for approximately six months. Because Halberstam is still in the experimental stage and fails more often than he succeeds, he assumes the problem lies in the technology, not in his theory. The limited lifespan of the babies also means that Dr. Halberstam constantly needs new subjects. Having the runners stumble upon a group "harvesting children" offers a good way to introduce players to the dark and disturbed world of Dr. Ronald Thomas Halberstam.

RULES

The gamemaster needs no specific rules for running Dr. Halberstam. He can be played subtly or completely over the top, according to the demands of the gamemaster's campaign. He is a highly intelligent, well-supported madman determined to control the Matrix and the world. He will do whatever it takes to reach his goal, sacrificing everything if necessary, including his humanity. The potential for power that would result from his success encourages even the most moral megacorps to ignore the doctor's more distasteful methods in favor of obtaining results.

What Halberstam has managed to do is create biological knowbots, a variation of the semi-autonomous knowbot (see p. 140–41 of *Virtual Realities 2.0*). The main difference is that the biological knowbots (BK) originate in a live brain rather than a native host, greatly reducing the necessary computing power. The main disadvantage of the biological knowbot is that it cannot repair damage. The Matrix icons for the biological knowbots are the images of small children, based on the disembodied brains' bodies. These icons are extremely bright and flawless; because there is no Matrix interface, there is no static.

The gamemaster can create a biological knowbot using the semi-autonomous knowbot (SK) creation rules, with a few exceptions. The MPCP Rating of a BK is Intelligence (of the brain) + 1D6. This allows the gamemaster to give the BK a range of statistics appropriate to small children, and in general to tailor the BK to suit the needs of the encounter. The BK uses the same Utility Pool as an SK, but the BK cannot change utilities or adapt new utilities

on the fly. It takes Halberstam a minimum of (MPCP Rating x 2) days to change the initial programming of one of his babies.

In combat, or whenever a BK takes damage, use the standard damage rules as presented in *Virtual Realities 2.0*, except that every point of damage reduces the BK's Bod Rating by 1. If the Bod Rating is reduced to 0, the brain then loses 1 point of Intelligence for every point of damage taken. As the BK loses Intelligence, the gamemaster must recalculate the knowbot's stats to reflect the new Intelligence. Because it lacks effective defenses, a BK usually flees the first time it is damaged. Halberstam can heal Bod damage when he takes the brain off-line, but cannot replace lost Intelligence. Unlike an SK, a BK will always return to its native host, even with piles of IC following it. Halberstam has concentrated much of his most recent research on making his babies more durable, and so the gamemaster should massage the numbers as he or she sees fit to represent Halberstam's ongoing experimentation.

The biological knowbots must "recharge" every 72 hours, which takes place when Halberstam removes the brain from the Matrix to run diagnostics. The BK has no concept of how long it remains "in the dark," but it does remember any pain it experiences during that period—a memory Halberstam cannot seem to erase.

The gamemaster may choose to allow the knowbot to recall certain details of its previous life, but the knowbot will assume the remembered events took place somewhere in the Matrix.

Willis (Typical Biological Knowbot)

Intelligence	5
MPCP	10
Bod	6
Evasion	9
Masking	7
Sensor	8

Computer Skill	10
Utility Pool	15

Response: 10 + 1D6

Utilities: Chosen by gamemaster

Threat/Professional Rating: 2/1 (if needed)



OPEN CONFERENCE

>>>>>(Funny how no one's commented on conspiracy theories as scapegoating. I've never seen so many scary accusations directed at major megacorporations, magic, and the Matrix in one place before, and I think it points at our worst collective fear: the Unknown Entities lurking just under the bed or on the other side of the trid set. Pick your favorite fear and fill in the blank.)<<<<<<

—Professional Student (10:16:22/05-04-57)

>>>>>(Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you. If the corps and the governments didn't have secret agendas, a lot of shadowrunners would be out of work. From what I can tell, biz is hotter than ever. That sure points to *something* going on.)<<<<<<

—Tomtom (10:22:23/05-04-57)

>>>>>("Something" doesn't mean every single conspiracy theory or nasty rumor is true. But people buy them as if they were. Want an example? Aztechnology. There's a corp with a bad rep among shadowrunners because its professional security pretty often stops or kills them. So shadowrunners demonize the corp, concluding that Aztechnology is behind unethical experiments—blood magic, cybermancy, cattle mutilations and the like. That lets them feel OK about killing Aztech employees—they must be bad folks or they wouldn't work for that nasty megacorp, right? The fact that none of the rumors can be substantiated with hard evidence and reputable witnesses is immaterial. The point of the demonizing is to let runners rationalize striking back hard at a tough opponent.)<<<<<<

—Professional Student (10:26:12/05-04-57)

>>>>(And they're less ashamed to admit they're scared of the Azzies if the Big A is some big nasty instead of just another corp. Just like the rumors about how the Tir elves steal your mind if you run the Tir Tairngire border. They really just dose you with something that temporarily knocks out your memory, but the "mind-stealing" drek justifies being afraid of some skinny-hooped elves.)<<<<<

—Mole (10:35:42/05-04-57)

>>>>(You snotnoses want documentation on the 2053 cattle mutilations outside of Denver? Try the 4/8/53 datafax in the archives of KSAF, at NA/UCAS-SEA 2460, and ask for ksaf/arch/4/8/53/cattle. They were on the scene and got the whole thing: Aguilar helicopters, flashing lights, show-cattle being loaded on hovertrucks. Digipix and everything.)<<<<<

—Addie (11:26:31/05-04-57)

>>>>(Why is everybody getting all their info from KSAF? I know some other people who talk about them as their resource for info too. Lots of other people. I don't even know if KSAF's trid or radio, but people keep saying they've got the clean gen on stuff. What makes them the experts?)<<<<<

—Knight of Diamonds (12:16:52/05-04-57)

>>>>(They're a local cable station based out of New York. They're not particularly big, but they have a rep for accuracy.)<<<<<

—Reid (12:23:22/05-04-57)

>>>>(No, they're based out of Seattle. They're right down the block from me. Look at the station code—KSAF. The "K" means they're west of the Mississippi. Otherwise they'd be WSAF.)<<<<<

—Mork from ORC (12:26:32/05-04-57)

>>>>(They used to be in Chicago, but they moved out in the spring of 2055. Lucky slots just missed the Cermak Blast. They're in Seattle now, I think.)<<<<<

—Diamondback (12:45:20/05-04-57)

>>>>(I think you've got the wrong group. I was still with Newsday when Mayor Small got shot a couple of years ago in New York. He was on his way to work—just got out of his limo, as a matter of fact. We heard the shots from our offices a couple of blocks away and scrambled a camera team as fast as we could. By the time we got over to City Hall, KSAF was on the scene. They couldn't have been more than a block away when the first shots rang out—lucky bastards got footage of the actual shot that hit the mayor. I don't know why they would have been hanging around NYC that particular day if they're from Seattle or Chicago or wherever.)<<<<<

—Julia (13:06:22/05-04-57)

>>>>(They were a block away and managed to get their cameras turned on and rolling and facing in the right direction between the time they heard a shot fired and the time a bullet hit the guy? Tell me where they got their wires, 'cuz I'm buying.)<<<<<

—Hellcat (13:20:24/05-04-57)

>>>>(You suggesting they set the shot up? Right, and they killed Jetblack, too. And they were behind MCT's attempted takeover of Federated Boeing, and the FBI bust of the DeeCee yakuza slave ring. Oh, and let's not forget the century ferret. They covered the story when the first one got caught in the Michigan backwoods in 2000.)<<<<<

—Kane (13:46:18/05-04-57)

>>>>(HOLD THE PHONE! I took a jander thru some old records, and KSAF's been at *just about every important event in the past forty-five years*. If they're not setting things up, they must have a spy network that'd give Shiawase execs wet dreams.)<<<<<

—Lambert (04:02:13/05-05-57)

>>>>(Didn't you know? KSAF's CEO is Hans Brackhaus—the major Mr. J. that Saeder-Krupp uses for black ops. One word, 'mano—Lofwyr.)<<<<<

—Lightfinger (04:12:10/05-05-57)

>>>>(Not to burst your bubble, Lighty, but ... YOU'RE A MORON! I checked KSAF out. Private corp, independent, no shell-company drek that I could smell—and I've got a sensitive nose. Three people run it, and none of them are anyone you've ever heard of. And they're tiny. Think of the little cable station you watch at one in the morning; blue curtain in a blank cement room, some local religious leader begging for cred or a parazoologist with bad hair explaining the life cycle of a fruit fly. They work out of a piece-of-drek building in Tacoma. Ghost, their annual budget is less than 500K. Aside from being in the right place at the right time so often, they're completely unremarkable.)<<<<<

—Carousel (05:01:13/05-05-57)

>>>>(Right. Totally unremarkable. One anchor who looks like a glimmer of interest might kill her, itsy-bitsy camera crew, no cute Matrix-drawn 'toons for the weather, no flash at all. Drekky little stuck-in-the-twentieth-century station that probably serves bad coffee on top of everything else. So why do these losers manage to get fragging *everything* on trid?)<<<<<

—Tomtom (05:06:13/05-05-57)

>>>>(Like what? Why does everyone suddenly have a bug up their hoop for KSAF?)<<<<<

—Viper (05:12:09/05-05-57)

>>>>(Chumley, KSAF gets to everything that happens faster than any of the major media boys. They've got footage of the first wisps of smoke coming off Redondo Peak in '14. They had cameramen on the field at Redding when the Tir armies uncloaked. Frag, even when they cover some little local thing, it turns out to be important later. Anybody remember the interview they did with Arthur Vogel a few years back? Just weeks before he pulled off the big settlement against Hawkshorne Chemical that fragging near put them out of business? Nobody knew he was anybody back then, except for a few wishful-thinking enviro-nuts who hoped their pet dwarf lawyer would win big against all the odds. He managed it, and now he's running for UCAS prez with a decent shot at getting in. And there

was KSAF with a camera on the guy even though he was nobody at the time. Trust me—there's something going on.)<<<<<<
—Tomtom (05:17:23/05-05-57)

>>>>>(So maybe they don't work directly for Saeder-Krupp—but they might as well. I heard they've got quite the sweetheart deal with SK—Lofwyr sleeps with KSAF's prez when he's in human form. She's supposed to be one hot chica, and he tells her about the future when they get done bonedancing. He found out everything that's ever gonna happen by doing this great dragon ritual that they all know how to do which lets them travel to the future. Lofwyr's gonna take over the world, and KSAF's gonna help.)<<<<<<
—Rathceet (06:02:19/05-05-57)

>>>>>(Right. Where do you buy your chips, omae? I'll clue in the Star. Much as I hate to say it, though, you've actually got a point buried in all that buldrek. KSAF could be a lot bigger than they look—maybe all the connections are just buried real deep.)<<<<<<
—Gamera (06:20:13/05-05-57)

>>>>>(Don't think so, cobber. The same ten folks or so are always on crew, not different locals each time. And they haven't just found some super-fast way to travel, either. It's like they know what's going to happen. I mean, they'll make reservations at some bitty little cheapo hotel in London, check in at 10 a.m., unpack their bags, have lunch, and then someone assassinates the queen the second they've got their cameras set up. They've gotta know the future somehow. Can you scope out the future with magic?)<<<<<<
—Muffin Man (06:27:03/05-05-57)

>>>>>(Not in this world, chummer. And a good thing, too. Can you imagine doing a run against Renraku when some corp mage knows exactly where you'll be and what you'll do? Not my idea of a way to spend a Sunday afternoon.)<<<<<<
—Kotick (06:38:45/05-05-57)

>>>>>(Kotick's right about reliable prophecy being impossible for a metahuman mage or shaman. But who knows what a dragon can do? Maybe Lofwyr or some other dragon *is* controlling KSAF ... predicting or even manipulating events and then sending his/her/its pet newsies out to cover the story.)<<<<<<
—Syn (07:14:05/05-05-57)

>>>>>(If dragons could predict the future, wouldn't Lofwyr have used that ability by now? And never mind the usual drek about "he's a dragon, his motives are inscrutable." He acts pretty human as far as wanting to buy low, sell high, and make as much fraggin' nuyen as he can. Wouldn't he have used his foreknowledge to fatten up Saeder-Krupp's bottom line?)<<<<<<
—Jacare (07:24:02/05-05-57)

>>>>>(What makes you think he hasn't? Krupp's the largest corp in the world.)<<<<<<
—Kotick (07:30:15/05-05-57)

>>>>>(Go Ares!)<<<<<<
—Bingo (07:44:24/05-05-57)

>>>>>(?????)<<<<<<
—Lariat (07:51:25/05-05-57)

>>>>>(Why does everything have to be connected to dragons? They're big, they're scary. So what? I can think of scarier—free spirits. Wouldn't it make more sense if a free spirit was giving KSAF its info? No one knows what the hell the freebies can or can't do. Why not predict the future? Anyone who's ever watched Discovery Trid knows that time works differently in astral space. Why couldn't a spirit—which can stay in astral space as long as it fragging wants and go absolutely anywhere there, unlike *terrestrial* metahumans and dragons—just pop into the astral, zip ahead to the future, then come back and tell KSAF what's going down?)<<<<<<
—Dante (08:14:15/05-05-57)

>>>>>(Rubbish. Impossible. Everything hermetic theory has thus far proven about the nature of free spirits and astral space says so. Free spirits can distort an individual's sense of time if that individual is on a metaplanar astral quest; however, they are still subject to certain rules of astral motion, including (10.6 Mp deleted by sysop))<<<<<<
—Anonymous (08:18:05/05-05-57)

>>>>>(Enough with the magical-theory nerd talk. Anyone who wants to check out the whole dissertation, I stuck it into Marvello the Great's Amazing Online Hermetic Encyclopedia under "Free Spirits.")<<<<<<
—Captain Chaos (08:22:01/05-05-57)

>>>>>(Why would a spirit want to help some podunk trid outfit? All this drek about how some powerful Mr. Big is feeding KSAF info from the future just doesn't make sense. What's in it for the Big Guy? I can see Lofwyr now ... "Hmm, whom should we tell about the impending downfall of the planetary economy? Damien Knight, Renraku, the CIA ... naah, let's leak it to a fifth-rate cable station in Chicago that runs mediocre cooking shows." If the power to predict the future is available, to dragons or spirits or anyone else out there, why hasn't anyone done anything with it? Every megacorp and lots of smaller outfits own whole networks, never mind just one dinky station. How come all of them have to wait until something actually happens before they show up to cover it? Nah. There's something else going down—I just can't scan it yet.)<<<<<<
—Tomtom (08:34:11/05-05-57)

>>>>>(Hey, guys, where's the last place you'd look for a plot to take over the world? *In Tomtom's brain!!!* I say we get him, to make the world safe for democracy and nuyen.)<<<<<<
—Carousel (08:47:45/05-05-57)

>>>>>(All this jawing made me mighty curious, so I spent the last few hours checking out KSAF with a pal of mine. He's in Seattle, I'm not, for reasons of safety.

Watching their Matrix was one weird program, chums. I didn't think much of it at first, but then things got strange. They've got nasty but not impossible IC—about Red-7 around the footage archives and other sensitive stuff, which isn't out of line for a trid station. I got in and skimmed the data that looked interesting, then dropped it binside and scanned it. And found absolutely nothing hincky. It's a legit company—a little nepotism here and there, maybe, but it's a family outfit, so that's no big bug. Financially, it's doing okay. Not spectacular, not drekky enough to need anybody else's cred with strings attached. Most big advertisers ignore it because its Nielsen ratings are low, but it scrapes by.

The weird thing was the data pulse. For just a second, the system went to active alert for no apparent reason and a heavy dataload came barreling into the CPU. Wasn't directed to any data-store on the system map, either. It got dumped directly to hardcopy, and then the hardcopy shut off. Physical removal from the system, chummers—no touchee from where I was. My guess is, a non-Matrix autosystem popped the chip out.

Since I couldn't eyeball the data, I tried tracing it. The point of origin was an LTG number. That's all, chummers. KSAF's phone rings, but there's no one on the other end.)<<<<<<

—Kotick (14:05:21/05-05-57)

>>>>>(So? An AI could easily have been at the LTG's SAN and generated the data from its own construction. As a self-sufficient program code, it leaves no trail. The point of origin would be right where it was sitting.)<<<<<<

—Rathceet (14:09:20/05-05-57)

>>>>>(An AI takes up how much program code? A fragging lot, right? Now let's take a look at KSAF's SAN—my deck says Red-5. That puppy can handle quite a few Mps of data, but it's not exactly the Renraku core, neh? If you stick an AI in a system as small as KSAF's, you know what you get? An AI with the brain of a one-year-old sheep or a SYSTEM OVERLOAD! (Leaving aside for the moment the fact that there's no such thing as an AI, there won't be for at least four or five years, and KSAF isn't going to be able to afford one for a fragging long time after somebody finally makes the breakthrough.)<<<<<<

—Red Wraith (14:15:11/05-05-57)

>>>>>(Cattle mutilations are up.)<<<<<<

—Addie (15:02:01/05-05-57)

>>>>>(I checked the place out physically, then thought better of jandering in. I could've cracked it, but why borrow trouble if I'm not getting paid? Fences, two-stage lasers, retinal scans: impressive for a mom-and-pop outfit that does its own security. I'd say they've got a little undeclared income somewhere.)<<<<<<

—Mist (15:25:21/05-05-57)

>>>>>(News flash. KSAF personnel were at the announcement photo-ops of every candidate for the 2057 presidential election. Yes, *that* one. They've never shown up for announcement speeches before.)<<<<<<

—Julia (15:34:27/05-05-57)

>>>>>(I could've sworn I saw "KSAF" jotted down in my boss's appointment book last week. BTW, I work for MegaMedia.)<<<<<<

—Stonewall (15:55:20/05-05-57)

>>>>>(WHAT??? I thought KSAF didn't touch the megacorps. If they can be bribed ... corporations certainly have the nuyen ... oh, fragging drek.)<<<<<<

—Tomtom (16:00:41/05-05-57)

>>>>>(So they know where to show up for some newsworthy events. Like I give a drek about which trid station gets there fastest.)<<<<<<

—Bouncer (16:05:53/05-05-57)

>>>>>(Don't you see? KSAF somehow knows where big news is going to go down before it happens. They tell MegaMedia, which owns half the nation's trid broadcasting companies. MM gets in bed with the regulatory committee and causes a news blackout. So the public doesn't know about whatever important event MM wants to squelch. KSAF gives MegaMedia—or whatever other corp they're dancing with this week—the ability to delete history as it happens. I don't like this.)<<<<<<

—Tomtom (16:12:21/05-05-57)

>>>>>(That's assuming KSAF is more than just real lucky, and that they're selling their "insider information" to MM. Or anyone else. Big assumptions, omae.)<<<<<<

—Skeptic (16:20:31/05-05-57)

>>>>>(Those who control the present control the past. Those who control the past ... ?)<<<<<<

—Fred (16:25:19/05-05-57)

GAME INFORMATION

Can the media threaten the status quo of the world? Sure, if it knows about events, innovations, disasters, inventions, and human tragedies and triumphs before the rest of the world. The trid station KSAF currently finds itself in just such an enviable (or perhaps cursed) position. Founded in 1997 in Chicago, this tiny network should have been squashed by the media conglomerates a hundred times over by now. Quite simply, KSAF has survived on timing: the station has been in the right place at the right time to cover the majority of significant world events since the Awakening. Sometimes the KSAF crew records apparently unimportant events that suddenly become news worth knowing months or even years later. Just as often, they join the rest of the media in covering more obvious events, but somehow point their cameras in the direction of the unexpected incident that becomes the real news of the day. Occasionally, what the KSAF footage doesn't show is as important as what appears on the film.

KSAF stays in business by selling its exclusive footage to other networks for whatever price the market will bear. Recently, however, the media giants have begun to examine the frequency of their payments to the station and seem determined to find a way around the KSAF middleman. For now, though, KSAF contin-

ues to follow the leads it can, serving as the “voice of truth to the public” and doing its part to “preserve the future.”

USING KSAF

A small, completely independent media corporation currently based in Seattle, KSAF has a knack for covering stories whose footage becomes valuable at some point in time. The station achieves this impressive record with help from a mysterious benefactor. KSAF receives an e-mail message once every few days that contains a location, a day, a time and instructions such as “point the camera to the sky,” “talk to the dwarf,” “focus on Renraku’s president” or “film the entrance for twelve consecutive hours,” but rarely offers specific information regarding the expected event. The messages cannot be traced to their origin; they flow through timed nodes, satellite uplinks, and nearly all the megacorporations’ ultraviolet hosts, among other hazardous pathways. Even attempting to follow the data trail offers certain death to any deceiver so foolish.

The owners of KSAF received these messages for nearly a year before they began to take them seriously. By the time they had identified more than ten separate incidents that the messages correctly predicted as worthy of media attention (but that no one else bothered to cover), they had become true believers. From that time forward, KSAF has made the effort to follow up on as many suggestions as possible—though their relatively low budget often forces the staff to choose between several potentially lucrative stories. The Sender (KSAF management’s private name for the entity that provides for the station’s most spectacular successes) does not seem to pursue a specific agenda with his messages. The KSAF team is equally likely to show up at a political rally, film an apparently empty, ordinary street, or seek an interview with someone no one has heard of (yet).

Its long-standing mission of bringing truth to the public has made KSAF unpopular with many groups; the current management’s wholehearted pursuit of profit seems likely to make the station even more enemies. Governments automatically assume that the media crosses legal barriers every chance it gets, and suspect that KSAF may be staging these events for its own profit; the megacorps and the media giants are tired of being consistently scooped and want direct access to the network’s source of “inside” information; powerful players resent having their private deals and backroom negotiations broadcast nationwide courtesy of a two-bit station in Seattle.

Since the station’s original owners died, KSAF has strayed a little more each year from the purity of its mission. As they become less altruistic, they become more of a threat. They aren’t trying to take over the world, but they may have incriminating video footage of the individuals or groups who are, and that gives them a great deal of potential power. The gamemaster may make KSAF the good guys or the bad guys—or a little of both, depending on the needs of his adventures. If the shadowrunners become involved in a plot to expose KSAF’s source, they could be headed for a lot of nuyen or a lot of trouble. Runners going up against the media risk public exposure, and nothing is worse for shadow business than fifteen minutes of fame.

KSAF Management

KSAF management consists of the president, Helena Rossum, the matrix consultant, Fredrick Kargon, and their chief reporter, Joann Conolly. Of the twenty or so additional cameramen, anchors and editors on staff, only these three know about the messages from the Sender, though the other employees guess that their boss has some way of knowing where news will hit. KSAF maintains above-average security for a business its size, with Matrix security being its strongest suit, followed closely by physical security. The station barely bothers with magical security.

The daughter of the station’s founder, Helena Rossum handles the money, schedules appointments, and manages all affairs not directly related to producing the news. Several years removed from her days as a KSAF reporter, Helena is a businesswoman first, and she intends to use KSAF’s unique advantage to launch the station as a larger player in the media pool by making a deal with one or more of the large companies or playing them off one another to KSAF’s benefit. Ambitious, proud and self-confident to the point of arrogance, Helena would prefer to implement her plans without consulting Kargon and Conolly, but she knows she must remain on good terms with those who share her secret.

Fredrick (“Freddy to my friends”) Kargon’s work as a high-school intern for the station impressed the owners enough that they hired him as permanent staff after graduation. He set up most of the security that maintains the integrity of the messages from the Sender, including a program that instantaneously sends the e-mail off-line. He also designed the Matrix security that protects the rest of the KSAF system. Though initially distrustful of strangers, Freddy makes friends quickly and willingly shares all sorts of confidences with his new bosom buddies. Helena keeps close tabs on his associates because of this, fearful that he’ll let out the secret.

Unlike Rossum, who’s primarily interested in making a profit, and Kargon, who only really appreciates the technical expertise of the Sender, Joann Conolly recognizes that the messages often have a significant effect on world events. Realizing the importance of her role in this situation has made her noticeably paranoid; less distrustful than the average shadowrunner, but suspicious enough to draw attention in polite circles. Her work for KSAF over the last fifteen years has made her the station’s most popular reporter and anchor. Conolly now fears that Helena Rossum’s ambition may result in KSAF falling under megacorporate control—a disastrous situation that she would do anything to avoid. She believes wholeheartedly in the efforts of the station’s unknown benefactor and believes that education is the answer to all the world’s problems. She reports the truth as she sees it despite any danger to herself, and so often seems oblivious to hazardous situations.

RULES

KSAF does not cover every story suggested by the Sender. Whenever the station receives the same message ten or more times, it sends a crew to cover the event. If the station receives the same message fewer than ten times, it usually means that the Sender considers the event less likely to take place or less significant. Less than ten messages also means the importance of the event may not become apparent for a long time. For example, no

one was interested in the station's interview with Arthur Vogel until he stepped into the spotlight as a UCAS presidential candidate in 2057—several years after KSAF broadcast its chat with that up-and-coming environmental lawyer. Each message from the Sender looks identical to the following example, which is the message KSAF received that got the station exclusive footage of the dragon Hestaby attacking the Tir border guards at Shasta Dam.

Location: Redding (Shasta Dam), California Free State

Day: Friday, June 27, 2053

Time: 9:03 am

Assignment: Point camera at Dam and wait.

Cover this event truthfully and without concealing any details. Use this knowledge to become a voice of truth to the public. People must be informed and educated so that metahumanity can do what is right and avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. The future must be preserved!

Every message since the first has carried the same closing statement, word for word. Because they never receive any feedback from the Sender, the people at KSAF must rely on their instincts to tell them whether what they are doing is good and right, or if they are simply playing their part in some sick individual's psycho-games.

Helena Rossum's plans for KSAF rest on her cutting a big-money, high-prestige deal with one or more players in the media or entertainment fields. She is likely to approach any of the corps associated with the news or amusement biz profiled in the **California Free State** sourcebook (pp. 122–136), or any other megacorporation the gamemaster likes to use.

KSAF Matrix System

The KSAF Matrix system possesses several unique features. Though the system security is only Red-7, a level that stretched Kargon's design capabilities, his real stroke of genius was the instant download program for the Sender's messages. To protect the message from being accessible through the Matrix, it is instantly downloaded to a chip when it arrives in the KSAF system, and the chip is immediately ejected. This program cannot be

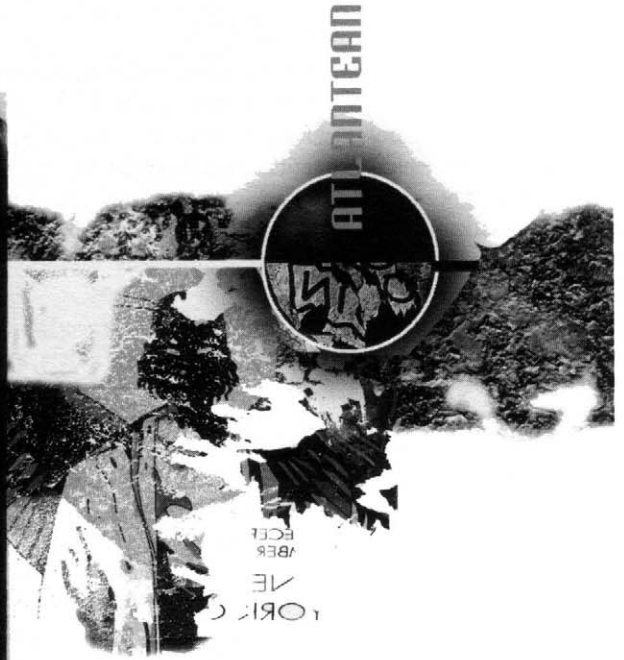
interrupted except by shutting down the entire host, in which case the protection surrounding the message itself will corrupt the contents beyond retrieval. The ejection program boots from the chip and does not appear on the KSAF nodes or hosts. For purposes of game play, security on the host receiving the message doubles from a Red-7 to a Red-14 for the duration of the download courtesy of the defenses attached to the message. The gamemaster may choose the quantity, severity and type of IC attached to the message according to the skills of the player-character decker and the demands of the situation, but it commonly carries data bombs, scramble IC, worms (any variety) and psychotropic IC (see **Virtual Realities 2.0**, p. 38–52 for descriptions and rules).

The Sender

The people at KSAF don't know the Sender's identity and have made only a few halfhearted attempts at finding out. They assume that someone capable of predicting world events will certainly know if someone tries to discover his/her/its whereabouts and name. Besides, KSAF enjoys a very lucrative position—why question its good fortune and risk the relationship ending? The gamemaster should reward all speculation on the the Sender with equally plausible stories, allowing the player characters to investigate any number of likely candidates without every getting any closer to the truth. If a decker chooses to try and trace the incoming message to its source, the gamemaster should give the decker the ultimate run for his or her money. Lead the decker through as many trap doors, vanishing SANs and satellite uplinks as possible and feel free to route the message through the heart of the main hosts serving several megacorporations. Because the Sender uses different routes and different types of IC for each message, no two messages originate in the same location or behave the same way. The Sender should act like the dictionary definition of paranoia.

If KSAF gets too chummy with megacorp money or leaks any information about the Sender or the messages, the station's benefactor abruptly ends communications with KSAF and establishes a similar relationship with another tiny, private media news team, anointing a new network as the next beacon of truth.

THE ATLANTEAN CONSPIRACY



>>>>>(First, a disclaimer. I didn't write this and I don't personally know the guy who did. He goes by the handle of Lone Gunman and he's a conspiracy fanatic. He's been uploading all sorts of drek to Shadowland for years, but we've never posted any of it because it all seemed just too wild. I decided to post this one: a) because it's tamer than most, and b) I hope it will get the Gunman off my back. (There, I posted one of your pet oogie-boogies. Happy? Good. Go away.) Before you scan it, I want to remind everyone that Shadowland isn't responsible for the sanity of anything that gets posted here—by the Lone Gunman or anyone else.)<<<<<

—Captain Chaos (02:12:33/06-05-57)

Sometimes I think I'm the only one who sees the danger the world's in. Hell, most of the time I know so. What's the old saying about a prophet never getting credit in his hometown? That's me. I keep telling people and telling people, and no one ever believes me. Well, you'd better believe me now. All of you out there. Listen close to what I'm about to tell you and ask yourselves: can I really take the chance of dismissing this guy again?

>>>>>(Nice opening, Gunman. Just open up and let all that paranoia hang out, there's a good boy.)<<<<<

—Gerd (03:21:43/06-05-57)

Throughout the forty-plus years since the Awakening changed civilization, a lot of people have gathered a lot of data. Some of it points to certain truths about the Awakening and the nature of the world that—well, let's just say *certain people* for

now—have done their damndest to suppress. Because these certain people buried this information so deeply, our society has fragmented into factions that co-exist and oppose each other. Part of our society does not or will not believe the larger truths about the Awakening and the cycle of magic. Another part acknowledges some of the truth or at least the possibility of it, and yet another part is busy suppressing the truth.

Research into the nature of magic and the Awakening follows a similar pattern. Some researchers view magic from an empirical, scientific perspective; others search for patterns and functional relationships in events; still others ask the right questions at the right time and get answers. Some of those answers sound fantastic—or disturbing—to some people because they show that we are not alone in this world—and that the Others have always been here.

Sound scary? It gets scarier. For quite a while, certain groups in our society have known of the existence of the Others and have even been interacting with some of Them—all without telling the rest of us, of course. These groups have been leading metahumanity up the garden path ever since the Awakening—maybe longer—through layer upon layer of conspiracy and disinformation. Those of us who suspect what's been going on keep trying to cut through the bulldrek so that the world can have the magical knowledge we're all entitled to and the power to control our lives that goes with it. But *They* know what we're after and will do anything to stop us.

This file brings the truth to light. If you cannot handle these ideas, if they seem too way-out for your personal comfort zone, then read no farther.

Clearly, the Awakening has brought vast changes in our understanding of our world, our race, our culture and our history. Using documents available here on Shadowland, we can establish the following facts:

- Dimensions outside the physical, such as astral space and the metaplanes, exist.
- Magic is cyclical, rising and falling over periods of thousands of years as predicted by the Mayan calendar. The last Age of Magic ended more than five thousand years ago and is mentioned in several of metahumanity's myths and legends.
- The great dragons "awakened" from hidden lairs where they have slept since the last Age of Magic—which means that they have lived for thousands of years.
- From time to time, individuals have discovered artifacts that appear to predate any known human civilization; many of these items have powerful magical auras.
- According to their own legends, elves originally came to this world from somewhere in the metaplanes and plan to return there eventually.
- Some elves possess the genetic potential to become immortal under the right set of magical circumstances.
- Immortal elves are in charge of the major elven nations: Tir Tairngire, Tir na nOg and Azania. They have access to considerable magical and technological resources, many of which remain hidden from the rest of the world.

- Certain corporations and governments have known about these immortals for some time and have chosen to conceal this knowledge.

>>>>(Gunman's "facts" are really no more than speculation that cannot be proved or disproved. Let's take the Gunman's points one at a time:

- Most people accept the existence of astral space, true, and some even believe that "metaplanes" exist. But there's no way to *prove* they exist.

- There is no proof that magic is cyclical—that's just a theory. For all we know, the magic level will taper off at some point and stay there forever or just keep climbing slowly for the next million years. It may go away some day or it may not. Who can say? The magic-cycle theory appeared in one of Ebran the Scribe's pop-culture books about elves, magic and all that other NewAge (rhymes with *sewage*) drek that elf-groupies seem to scam right up. Interesting source for him to trust.

- There's no proof that great dragons existed in prehistoric times. No one has ever seen a "dragon lair" or watched a dragon "awaken." They just turned up one day.

- Ancient artifacts? Gunman himself says that these artifacts "appear to predate any *known* human civilization." They may appear to be ancient, but perhaps we simply don't have the means to accurately measure their ages. And even if they are extremely old, they still may have been produced by human civilizations—*unknown* human civilizations.

- The story of the elves coming from a "bright, shining land" in the metaplanes is a Tuatha De Dannan belief from Tir na nOg. Not all elves share this belief, and it's most likely metaphorical anyway—like the traditional creation story that contends humans were formed from clay.

- There's no scientific proof that an "immortal gene" exists in elves. (Or anyone else, so don't you conspiracy buffs get any stupid ideas.)

- Elves are in charge of the major elven nations, but no one has ever proved that they are immortal.

- A globe-spanning corporate and governmental cover-up? I'm sorry, but without something to conceal how can you have a cover-up?

I already know that all you devoted conspiracy freaks out there are probably saying, "Well, it's a *real* good cover-up, that's why no one knows about this stuff. And that Magister dude is probably in on the cover-up anyway." Well, there's no way I can convince anyone who wants to believe in this stuff that it's just a pile of drek. Like I said before, it's mostly speculation. There's no evidence to back it up, so there's no way to prove it or disprove it. Read the file by all means if you're interested, but think hard before you take any of this stuff at face value. It may simply distract you from the real dangers we all face.)<<<<<

—Magister (04:01:35/06-05-57)

These facts, taken together, raise a vital question—what do they really mean? What larger picture of reality, what larger truth, brings them all together? *Who are the immortals, what do they want, and what kinds of magical power may be at their command?*



>>>>(Hooboy. Is the Lone Gunman trying to tell us that elves are aliens from another dimension or something?)<<<<<<

—Tal Gilgalad (04:25:32/06-05-57)

>>>>(No, but I think he's proposing something almost as preposterous.)<<<<<<

—Thelma (04:31:32/06-05-57)

The Cycle of Magic and "Elven History"

In the fall of 2051, Eهران the Scribe, High Prince of Tir Tairngire, gave a speech to the Young Elven Technologists. Eهران intended the contents of the speech to remain "an elven secret," but person or persons unknown leaked it on the Matrix. It's been circulating through various channels ever since, protected from Tir Tairngire's search-and-destroy deckers. In the speech, Prince Eهران describes what he calls "the cycle of magic," the rising and falling of magical power throughout history. But more important, he describes the fall of ancient Atlantis during the last cycle of magic more than five thousand years ago:

"As the last Age of Magic came to a close, the citizens of Atlantis began to disperse from their homeland, carrying their sophisticated technologies and culture to their new homes throughout the world. Only the magic of its inhabitants protected the Isle from the forces of Nature, and the Atlanteans knew that as the level of magic in the world dropped, the day would come when their magical protections would fail and Atlantis would sink back into the depths from which it came. That day came on August 12, 3113 B.C., marking the end of the Fourth World and the beginning of the Fifth."

Eهران's speech tells us that: 1) Atlantis was a great civilization in the last Age of Magic, and its people achieved scientific and magical wonders; 2) when the world's magic level dropped, Atlantis disappeared; and 3) before that happened, some Atlanteans migrated elsewhere. Eهران mentions several specific beliefs of the ancient world and several ancient calendars—like the Mayan calendar, for example—influenced by the Atlanteans.

>>>>(Eهران's speech tells us that: 1) the High Prince is a flake; 2) his elven flunkies will believe anything that makes them feel superior to "mere" humans; and 3) the Tir is doing a bang-up job of making everyone chase their tails.)<<<<<<

—Cynic (06:32:11/06-05-57)

Ever since the founding of Tir Tairngire and Tir na nOg, more than a few people have asked how the cultures, language, beliefs and customs of the two Tirs could possibly have sprung full-grown out of nothing in only forty years. Clearly, they couldn't have, which brings us to the 64-nuyen question: where did these "elven" cultures and language originate? The evidence points toward only one rational conclusion: *the elven nations are the inheritors of ancient Atlantis's legacy through the immortal elves who established those nations.* These immortals created the Tir Council of Princes and the Seelie Court of Tir na nOg, and they control those two governing bodies to this day.

>>>>(Elf-supremacist drek. I can't believe even Gunman is fool enough to fall for that line of Tir propaganda. The elves like the image of an "ancient tradition" harkening back to a mythic past—but the truth is, they made up all this drek out of whole cloth to give their nationalistic goals some respectability.)<<<<<<

—Social Adept (10:11:32/06-05-57)

>>>>(I'm not so sure. Sperethiel is a huge question mark all by itself. How could the founders of Tir Tairngire and Tir na nOg have conspired to create an entire language that complex and refined in roughly a single generation? Why even make Sperethiel so complicated? The degree of cooperation and foresight needed to create a language as complicated as Sperethiel and make it work exactly like a language that's evolved over centuries requires a conspiracy even bigger than the one Gunman's blathering about. I don't know what the answer is, but I'm not willing to dismiss any speculation—no matter how off-the-wall it might sound. If the Awakening has taught us anything, it should be that nothing is impossible.)<<<<<<

—Socio Pat (10:32:44/06-05-57)

The Atlantean Foundation

In 2012, a scant year after the Awakening and decades before Eهران's speech, Sheila Blatavska created the Atlantean Foundation in Atlanta, Georgia. (Ms. Blatavska is quite the lady of mystery—but I'll save her for later.) The Foundation's stated goal is "to rediscover the lost wisdom of ancient Atlantis," and it has sponsored numerous expeditions in search of evidence of the lost civilization. The Foundation solicits private memberships; individuals who donate to the cause receive a monthly newsletter updating them on the progress of the search. With a current membership of more than a million people in the CAS alone, the Atlantean Foundation funds expeditions to search for Atlantean artifacts and lore all over the world and provides grants to corporations and universities for related archeological and magical research. The Foundation continues to grow, becoming an increasingly influential force in academic circles with each passing year.

Though debunkers and detractors have done their best to discredit the Foundation's findings, Foundation expeditions have uncovered more than three hundred artifacts that *could not possibly* have been made with conventional techniques known to exist at the times to which the artifacts belong. Every artifact has been carbon-dated, the most reliable dating method known in the archaeological field, and there is no doubt about the period from which they come. Foundation experts claim that these items are remnants of the Atlantean civilization, and no one has yet proved them wrong.

>>>>(Anybody wants to try, the hot stuff's in the Atlantean Foundation's central archive building in Atlanta. Well protected, of course—they don't want just anybody playing with their toys.)<<<<<<

—Villette (12:21:34/06-05-57)

Universities associated with the Atlantean Foundation have published numerous "breakthroughs" in magical theory: anchor-

ing, new enchantments, new spells, and new metamagical techniques. Magical technique throughout the Sixth World has improved by leaps and bounds, all within a few short years. In the past four years alone, material on four new metamagical techniques has been published. How could we possibly have learned so much in so little time? Because universities working with the Atlantean Foundation receive more than funding from the Foundation—they also gain access to the *ancient Atlantean magical secrets* uncovered by the Foundation's expeditions. The Foundation shares its information so that university professors "in the know" will publish the material as their own discoveries. The professors make mega-nuyen from patents and promptly funnel that money back to the Foundation to further its ongoing research.

>>>>(Buldrek. So magical technique is advancing quickly. So what? Remember the computer revolution of the twentieth century? Back then it seemed like computers got considerably more sophisticated every six months. Why not so for magic?)<<<<<
—Findler-Man (12:35:46/06-05-57)

>>>>(Lugh Surehand, High Prince of Tir Tairngire, survived an assassination attempt by using what appeared to be a triggered magical shield—about *six years* before theories on metamagical anchoring were even published. Nobody knew how to do that, but Surehand apparently did. What about that?)<<<<<
—Allard (13:00:24/06-05-57)

>>>>(Cutting-edge tech can be around for years before it gets out to the general public, Allard, old boy. Why not magic too? The government and the corps have always had at least a five- to ten-year lead in tech; doesn't seem so unusual for magic to work the same.)<<<<<
—Silicon Mage (13:20:34/06-05-57)

So what, you say. So the Atlantean Foundation has figured out a way to turn its findings into more nuyen, to keep it doing what it does best. At least the information is getting out into the world where any magician can use it—so what's the problem? The problem, friends, is this. The spread of vital magical information through *carefully selected channels* is only the first step of the immortal elves' plan to *re-establish the lost Atlantean Empire in all its glory*.

>>>>(How did we get from a simple, slightly crackpot research foundation to a secret plot by immortal elves to rule the world? (Man, I feel stupid just saying that.))<<<<<
—Bung (14:01:35/06-05-57)

>>>>(Probably the same way we got from a simple, slightly crackpot religious organization to a secret plot to turn everyone into bugs—remember that, Bung? The Lone Gunman might be crazy as a bedbug, but that doesn't mean he isn't on to something.)<<<<<
—Tiger Faux (14:10:32/06-05-57)

>>>>(OK, but where's his evidence? This is just wild speculation. No proof.)<<<<<
—Bung (14:16:31/06-05-57)

>>>>(You think *this* is wild, keep reading.)<<<<<
—D. Bunker (14:27:44/06-05-57)

More interesting facts for inquiring minds: Ms. Sheila Blatavska, founder of the Atlantean Foundation, apparently did not exist before 2012. No birth records, no SIN, no documents of any kind show that she existed before that time. She put up a considerable personal fortune to fund the Foundation's initial expeditions in search of lost Atlantis, and her personal appearances are few and far between. She is a magician, most likely hermetic, and has demonstrated impressive magical abilities on occasion. She also has a penchant for ancient Greek art, literature and mythology; numerous receipts and purchase orders show that her home in Atlanta is decorated in a Neo-Grecian style. And on the Matrix she goes by the name *Hecate*, the ancient Greek goddess of magic—a name that suits her perfectly.

>>>>(Waitaminute! Is Gunman talking about that stuff from the **Aztlan** file?)<<<<<
—Raiko (14:54:35/06-05-57)

>>>>(Yup. Now check out this next leap of logic.)<<<<<
—D. Bunker (15:01:24/06-05-57)

In the **Aztlan** file on Shadowland, an individual named *Hecate* and a number of other mysterious conspirators engage in a conference about the goings-on in Aztlan. Through the actions of a brave but anonymous individual, we have access to their discussion. Each of the participants represents a significant Awakened power in the Sixth World. Hecate is clearly Sheila Blatavska of the Atlantean Foundation; I have listed the identities of the other participants below.

THE BIG D: A Matrix alias used by Dunkelzahn the great dragon. He is the instigator of the conference and represents the world's great dragons.

LAUGHING MAN: A Matrix alias used by an elf known as Harlequin, allegedly a powerful magician.

WORDSMYTH: Obviously an alias for Ehren the Scribe, representing Tir Tairngire.

LADY OF THE COURT: A representative from the Seelie Court of Tir na nOg.

JUNGLE CAT: A representative from Amazonia, as the participants themselves make clear in the discussion.

USMONDO: A representative from the elven nation of Azania in South Africa; this much is clear from his use of several African references.

This group makes up a cabal representing all of the major Awakened powers in the Sixth World: the Atlanteans, the three major elven nations, the great dragons and the Awakened nation of Amazonia.

>>>>(Sorry to burst anyone's bubble, but Sheila Blatavska's background isn't as mysterious as the Lone Gunman thinks. Some info I turned up suggests that she might really be Maria Kapatelis, daughter of the Greek shipping magnate Stavros Kapatelis. Maria had quite a reputation as a wild child. She got snatched back in 2010 when she was nineteen. Old Stavros paid a ransom of ten million American dollars, but his daughter was never found and the one kidnapper the authorities caught up with got geeked in a fire-fight. Little Maria might have staged her own kidnapping to get her hands on daddy's money and disappear. Rumor had it he was planning to cut her off. I don't know whether or not Maria had any magical talent—all this went down long before they tested for it. With a little cosmetic surgery and enough money to buy herself some fake bona fides, Maria could have become "Sheila Blatavska." Why she'd set up the Atlantean Foundation, I have no idea.)<<<<<

—MoleMan (15:16:35/06-05-57)

>>>>(Anyone with half a brain who reads the **Aztlan** file can tell that these people, whoever they are, don't get along. Some of them hate each other's guts, in fact. From the sound of it, the dragon had to trick them all just to get them in the same Matrix chat room together. Some all-powerful cabal, eh?)<<<<<

—DeeCeeIoT (15:35:22/06-05-57)

>>>>(Hey, DeeCee—living in the UCAS capitol with all the election drek going on, you of all people should know that you don't have to like someone to work with them.)<<<<<

—Cobalt Blue (15:39:46/06-05-57)

The secret discussion between the individuals in the **Aztlan** download makes it clear that all the participants are immortals—elves, dragons, and perhaps others who have lived since the fall of the Fourth World. But if everything you've read so far still doesn't convince you, check out the **Tir Tairngire** download. It contains the transcript of a discussion that definitively establishes the existence of elven immortals. The cabal exists—it is a secret group of immortals who intend to use the Atlantean Foundation to recreate their ancient empire in the twenty-first century. And if the rest of us get in the way, *we will be dealt with*.

More evidence for the existence of the cabal appears in the **Cybertechnology** download, which contains a transcript of a conversation between two allegedly human magicians (they could be *anything*, for all we know). They talk about the origins of cybermancy, a blending of technology and magic with truly frightening consequences that most people probably thought was impossible. One section of the conversation is especially revealing:

Ω

Look, I don't want to mention the cabal, but I think you heard something about the death of an earlier world.

∞

You're talking about an explosive end to something, some place, where the cabal lived.

Ω

All right, we know what we're referring to. It wasn't a world, it was only an island on a world.

An island on a world is an unmistakable reference to ancient Atlantis, the large island destroyed at the end of the Fourth World. The cabal managed to flee from doomed Atlantis before disaster overtook the island. The cabal members have lived secretly among us for the past five thousand years, preparing for magic's return so that they could rebuild what they had lost. And for the past forty years, they have been doing just that with every resource at their disposal.

The Atlantean Foundation's "discoveries" are carefully orchestrated frauds that allow the cabal to "dig up" whatever the cabal members need to further their plans. They are using their vast collection of magical lore and artifacts to strengthen the power of their respective nations, doling out samples of this magical knowledge and power to the governments and universities allied with them so that these allies become dependent on the cabal for everything. It is no accident that a great dragon and one of the princes of Tir Tairngire were chosen to advise President Steele of the UCAS about the disaster in Bug City. *The cabal members knew the bugs were coming the whole time*—they knew because they've seen all this before. As Ebran himself said, the cycle of magic repeats itself—the cabal had foreknowledge of everything that has happened to us since magic returned to the world, but it did nothing to prevent or warn the rest of us about the dangers. Its only concern has been to use the rising magic level to its own advantage.

The plots of the immortal cabal so far are simply a prelude to its ultimate goal. It has established nations under its control in key places around the world and has made the planet's major powers dependent on it for magical knowledge and power. It has hidden its most secret knowledge about what is to come so that its members will be the only ones prepared for it. *When the time is right, they will re-establish their empire and rule the world—unless we stop them*.

We must expose this terrible conspiracy. Spread the word!
The truth must be free!

>>>>(I'll say it again. The Lone Gunman is trying to weave an entire tapestry with only a couple of threads. He has *no* evidence, none. All he's got is a bunch of conversations off the Matrix. Even if they're authentic (and there's no guarantee of that), they don't tell us anything useful about all this secret-conspiracy drek. Take it with a big dose of salt.)<<<<<

—Magister (17:22:43/06-05-57)

>>>>(What if he's right? What if it's all true?)<<<<<

—Slater (17:30:42/06-05-57)

>>>>(Look. If these immortals want to rule the world, why don't they yet? Look at what the Ghost Dancers accomplished—a bunch of scroffy humans, barely acquainted with magic by this alleged cabal's standards, yet they brought the major nations of North America to their knees with one ritual. If these immortals have so much fragging mojo, why don't they just take over and be done with it?)

—Silicon Mage (17:45:32/06-05-57)

>>>>(Dunkelzahn's running for President. If he's part of the cabal, maybe the takeover's started.)<<<<<

—Slater (17:51:21/06-05-57)

>>>>(No dragunz fer prez! No orks or elfs or nuthin' but PURE HUMANS rule the world! The dragun'z dead meat!)<<<<<

—REAL Brother (18:02:35/06-05-57)

>>>>(Lovely sentiments. And so eloquently expressed!)<<<<<

—GBS (18:05:34/06-05-57)

>>>>(Think about it, Slater. If you want to take over a country, you don't do it through democracy. Dunkelzahn's running because it gives him a great chance to get in front of a lot of trideo cameras and, maybe, he feels he has something to contribute. If the drag-on wanted to take the country by force, DeeCee would look a lot like Tehran right now.)<<<<<

—People Watcher (18:10:36/06-05-57)

>>>>(Do not meddle in the affairs of immortals, for they are subtle and quick to anger.)<<<<<

—Frosty (19:01:35/06-05-57)

>>>>(Hey! No paraphrasing Tolkien on this board!)<<<<<

—Goblin-Boy (19:12:53/06-05-57)

>>>>(Is that who first said that? Sorry, I thought it was someone else.)<<<<<

—Frosty (19:17:32/06-05-57)

GAME INFORMATION

Okay, let's just come out and say it. There *are* immortals running around the Sixth World and they *do* have plans of their own brewing, that much is obvious. But do they all form a single cabal that wants to dominate the world? Quite simply, no. Certainly, the ranks of dragons, immortal elves and spirits contain a few entities that would like to be worshipped as gods, but not all share that fantasy. Some, in fact, want to help metahumanity. In short, immortal characters are like other **Shadowrun** characters, in the sense that they are individuals with personal goals, interests and desires that they may or may not share with others of their kind.

USING IMMORTALS AND THE ATLANTEAN FOUNDATION

Immortal characters have been the focus of various **Shadowrun** game products and novels over the years. While some immortals, such as Harlequin and Dunkelzahn, take a very

active role in the world, others remain uninterested in the world of shadowrunners, megacorporations and such. As already mentioned, immortal characters are individuals with their own interests and goals, so making any definitive generalizations about their behavior is impossible.

While most immortal characters take little interest in the everyday world, many immortals use runners and other mortals as pawns to serve their ends. In fact, this is probably the most likely way that immortals will affect player characters. It is not uncommon for the goals and interests of different immortal characters to conflict, which can lead to feuds and vendettas that may run for thousands of years. And when immortals are unable or unwilling to carry out their own dirty work, they may hire, trick or otherwise manipulate runners and other mortals to do it for them. This may seem simple enough, but keep in mind that the motivations and goals of immortals may seem quite complex, even unfathomable, to mere shadowrunners. As a result, runners who unwittingly become the pawns of an immortal may never really know what is going on. (In fact, gamemasters should never fully reveal the motives for any immortal's actions.) Additionally, immortal characters tend to have long, long memories and tend to seek revenge against runners with the audacity to spoil their plans.

That said, immortals may band together at times. Some type of danger that threatened all immortals might be enough to unify some or all of them, at least for a brief time. A few immortals may have even formed a cabal, with the intent of pooling their powers for some purpose—maybe even ruling the world. Individual gamemasters should design and implement any such occurrences, based on their desires and the needs of their games. However, keep in mind that immortal characters tend to be an arrogant, proud, and powerful bunch, so keep any alliances rare and volatile.

The Atlantean Foundation

Similarly, gamemasters may determine for themselves the true nature of the Atlantean Foundation and how they wish to use it in their games. On the surface, the foundation works much like the present-day National Geographic Society. It solicits donations and members and provides members with benefits that range from monthly newsletters to full sim recordings of exotic locales. However, the foundation has some very impressive resources at its disposal. The group maintains magical research labs and facilities, a complete staff of archeologists, historians, "educators" and librarians. And the foundation's collection of magically active items, ancient lore, and mundane relics dwarfs those of the world's largest museums. The foundation also maintains a very powerful security force called the Mystic Crusaders. The Crusaders maintain a network of operatives that provide security at all foundation facilities and locate and obtain magical items for the foundation's collection. (That may sound fairly harmless, but remember that the foundation collects powerful magical artifacts that people may kill for.) Of course, the foundation always uses legal means to obtain items when possible, but it does not hesitate to use illegal means when necessary.

Individual gamemasters may decide whether the organization gathers magical items and knowledge for the greater good

of all of metahumanity or to serve the interests of a single immortal or group of immortals. (In fact, both motivations may be at work. The organization employs many people, after all, and some may be keeping secrets from others.) Individual gamemasters may also determine for themselves the true identity of Sheila Blatavska.

Generally, the foundation carefully preserves its public front and conceals its true identity at all times. However, individual gamemasters may determine whether the foundation acts as a behind-the-scenes power or as a potential threat that runners confront directly. Additionally, gamemasters can have player characters work for or against the foundation. For example, the foundation may regularly augment its Mystical Crusaders by hiring shadowrunners to protect archeological digs, snatch powerful magical items or magicians, and so on. Or individuals and corporations may hire runners to take on the Mystical Crusaders and steal secrets or items from the foundation (the foundation's extensive collection is housed at various sites scattered throughout North America and Europe).

The foundation's continued attempts to enlarge its collection also provide a convenient means for gamemasters to remove any excessively powerful magical items a player group may possess. For example, the foundation might have one of its Crusaders or other operatives contact a player-character group and make it an offer for one of its magical items. If the players refuse to sell, the Crusaders may attempt to steal or obtain the item through force. Individual gamemasters must decide whether a specific magical item is excessively powerful or over the top. For example, a Force 5 item might be powerful enough to throw some games out of balance. In other games, however, only items with double-digit Force Ratings will attract the foundation's interest.

As stated before, individual gamemasters may determine for themselves the true nature of the Atlantean Foundation and how they wish to use it in their games. The foundation may be working with or for immortal elves, elven governments, megacorporations, secret magical societies—or it may be working against one or all of the above. Or it may simply have its own agenda.

RULES

Less than 25 immortal elves are known to exist, and none have been born since the Awakening. Immortal elves possess an immortality gene that is triggered by the rise of the world's mana level. (Allegedly, the Seelie Court of Tir na nOg and Tir Tairngire's Council of Princes have perfected a genetic test that reveals the presence of the gene in an elf.) Also, note that the

immortality gene may lie dormant in an elf, so theoretically several other "unawakened" immortal elves may exist.

Use immortal elves the way the Greek playwrights used Hercules and other heroic or tragic figures in their stories. Immortals are statistically more powerful than the average metahuman, so their abilities and victories should seem extraordinary. On the flip side, their arrogance, pride and hubris makes their defeats seem extraordinary as well. Immortals can be played as either heroic or tragic figures, depending on how a gamemaster wants to use them.

If using an immortal in a campaign, stack the deck in the immortal's favor. Immortals do not need to follow the standard rules because their knowledge goes back a long way and they can milk the mana flow at will (hey, they lived through all this before). Start all immortal characters with Threat Ratings of 10 or higher.

Mystic Crusaders

Technically, the Crusaders are an independent organization that has simply aligned itself with the Atlantean Foundation because it shares the foundation's desire to study the magical phenomena of this age. However, the Crusaders are anything but harmless scholars. The group includes mages, shamans, riggers and deckers, but all members consider themselves part of a very tightly knit warrior society. They are ruthless, especially when dealing with those they consider dishonorable (which may often include shadowrunners).

Player characters may find themselves opposing Mystic Crusaders if they end up on the wrong side of the Atlantean Foundation. The specifics of such encounters may vary greatly, as the Crusaders include street samurai types, spies, deckers, and so on. All Crusaders have Threat Ratings of 5 or higher. For other statistics, use any appropriate **Shadowrun** contact or archetype.

On rare occasions, the Crusaders may recruit a character who displays the required courage, knowledge of history, and willingness to sacrifice one self for the greater good. For example, characters who successfully sacrificed themselves in the **Harlequin's Back** campaign may receive a recruiting visit from one or more Mystic Crusaders. No player character may simply join the group; the Crusaders do not accept any recruits except those they have chosen.

Members of the Mystic Crusaders can be identified by their signature tattoos, which depict a crescent moon with a long sword and banner over it. Every member personalizes his or her tattoo by selecting a symbol that is placed within the banner.

HERE THERE BE DRAGONS



>>>>>(This here's (yet another) cautionary tale about the dangers of becoming involved with more highly evolved life forms. Or, as Miz Liz puts it, "Never deal with a dragon." No matter how hard you try, you'll never come out on top. While you've got the situation figured out eight different ways with seven optional resolutions, Lofwyr's got forty more plans in motion, all of which will culminate in success regardless of your actions—whatever you decide to do. And no matter how convoluted your brain gets, only a fragile package sent through the UCAS snail mail has more creases and folds than Lofwyr's twisty dragon mind. He throws away more good ideas before breakfast than most of us think of in a month. In other words, you can't outsmart him—he anticipates your every move and stays five steps ahead, and even when you think you win, you lose. If you can't avoid getting involved with Lofwyr, get your affairs in order; sooner or later, he'll tie off your loose end.)<<<<<<

—Captain Chaos (05:22:15/04-22-57)

>>>>>(Anybody wants a few drinks for free, come on down to Club Penumbra about ten p.m. Tell 'em Rod sent you, and take a seat at the bar. Anybody at the bar between ten and eleven gets their poison, on me. I'm buying!)<<<<<<

—Roderigo (14:31:14/03-20-57)

>>>>>(Got something to celebrate, Roddy? Like having a date for the first time since sixth grade?)<<<<<<

—Miz Liz (15:45:31/03-20-57)

>>>>>(Go ahead and laugh, slitch. Let's see if you keep laughing when I tell you what



I'm celebrating. This scroffy little shadowrunner just beat Lofwyr—that's right, Lofwyr, the Big Noise at Saeder-Krupp, the richest and most powerful wizworm on the planet—at his own stinkin', double-crossin' game. Made a fat profit at it, too! (Still laughing, chica?)<<<<<<

—Roderigo (16:00:01/03-20-57)

>>>>>(I take mild exception to your characterization of Lofwyr as the world's most powerful dragon ...)<<<<<<

—The Big D (16:10:10/03-20-57)

>>>>>(Sigh. You did not pull anything over on Lofwyr. No one puts one past Lofwyr. What extra-strength chip are you slotting, Roddy?)<<<<<<

—Miz Liz (16:11:56/03-20-57)

>>>>>(I ain't slottin' nothing. Read this and weep, Lizzie babe. Maybe next time you won't be too fragging picky to take a job I set up, neh?)

Some chummers and I did a little work for a Johnson by the name of Brackhaus—you know who that is, don't you, Liz? Simple run, he said—a little sabotage, take out a few labs and the records of what they'd been working on. Our target was a small-potatoes corp heavy into chemicals and pharmaceuticals; seems they'd been working on a new drug for jack itch lately, and were on the verge of a breakthrough. This little corp stood fair to beat Saeder-Krupp's R&D divisions to the punch on this stuff, and that's the kind of thing that cuts into profits. So the ol' wizworm decided to take a little direct action. He hired my chummers and me, told us where the facility was that we were supposed to hit, gave us the rundown on its security, and promised us a fat fee for trashing the place. (We demanded and got half payment up front—we ain't no newbies.)

So we checked out the security info Brackhaus had given us—we know better than to trust some Johnson's word. It all checked out, from every single source we tried. (I'm still trying to figure out how the fragging worm managed that.) We went in prepared for extra drek anyway—always be prepared, right? Only there's no way we could have been prepared for what hit us.

We got over the wall OK—fooled all the cameras, null sheen. Morse, our street sammy and a good buddy of mine, wondered how come there weren't any sensors or gun ports on the wall—when we hit the dirt on the inside, we found out why. An unearthly howl split the sky, and then a pack of fenrir wolves was rushing at us out of the darkness. No question about what they were—no other critter is that big, that mean and that fast. A couple of guards with guns were with them, but the guards just stood back and watched. They didn't even have to unsling their rifles; the wolf pack was on us before Morse had time to finish saying, "Holy bleeding drek!"

I know what some of you skags are thinking. "Bulldrek, fenrir wolves. Nobody uses them as watchcritters. You can't train the fraggers—they're too crazy. They'll rip their handlers to shreds along with everybody else in range." Well, I'm telling you, this little corp solved the problem. Whether the wolfies were cyber-implanted halfway to hell somehow, or whether they just had really good trainers, I don't know. Misty, our magicker, told me one of the

guards was a Wolf shaman—maybe he trained them. Whatever, the wolves came straight for us and attacked in formation. Swear to God. It was like facing a four-legged military unit or something ... the fraggers were using strategy to break us up and run us down. If I didn't know better, I'd swear they were intelligent. Anyway, when the wolfies came charging, I ran without thinking about where I was heading. Morse and Misty followed me. Just by fragging luck, we happened to bolt toward the lab building instead of toward the wall—and there wasn't time to change direction, or the wolves would've got us all for sure.

I'm still not sure how Misty and I got inside before the wolves could jump us. Morse didn't make it—he was twenty feet from the loading dock entrance when the lead wolf took him down. I've dreamed of him screaming every night since it happened. And I don't usually get nightmares, OK? Horrible sound ... all wet and bubbly, like dozens of wolf claws had torn open his lungs ...

So Misty and I headed straight for the labs we'd been told to blow, ducking sec-boys and smart guns all the way. Funny thing was, there weren't nearly as many sec-boys and smart guns as Brackhaus had led us to believe. If there had been, we'd never have made it as far as we did. And of course, he hadn't said a fragging word about the wolves—about any paracritters at all. Somehow, for some reason, the fragging wizworm had crossed us up. Why, I'm still not sure—but as it dawned on me that we'd been had by the dragon, I started thinking about how to pay the big scaly bastard back.

We got to the lab and found it deserted. While Misty placed charges in strategic spots around the room, I jacked into the lab's system and went hunting for the data we'd been told to delete. Didn't take me too long to find it—after all the fire-fighting, my system was pumped full of adrenaline and I slipped the electrons faster than I ever have before. I found the datastore, took a gander at it just for yuks ... and I figured out how to get revenge.

I trashed the datastore—but I copied it first.

Misty set the last charge just as I surfaced, and we ran out of there as fast as we could beat feet. Some frag of a security guard got Misty in the neck just a few feet shy of the loading dock—poor kid always was just a tad too slow on her feet. I kept going, keeping a weather eye out for fenrir wolves. Lucky for me, they weren't around; I guess their handlers were patrolling some other part of the grounds with them. As soon as I got back over the wall, I pressed the magic button and the lab went up in a huge fireball. Made a real pretty funeral pyre.

So a few hours later, after I'd had a chance to sleep and eat and look halfway alive, I called on an old friend or two with connections to Shiawase Corp. Me and my chummers had done a little biz for them a few months back, and I knew just who to trust there (and how far). Without going into dangerous details, let's just say that by noon that day I was a far richer man than Brackhaus would've made me—and Shiawase Biotech was the proud possessor of some breakthrough jack-itch drug research with megaprofits written all over it. So look for a brand-spanking-new Shiawase product to hit your pharmacy shelves sometime soon—and as for Lofwyr, I hope he fragging chokes on it. Fragging double-crossing worm.)<<<<<<

—Roderigo (17:30:22/03-20-57)



>>>>(Rodney James Goodhue, aka "Roderigo," was found stone dead at his deck this morning. He'd been dead for several days, but no one reported him missing. He was discovered when a gang of squatters who'd taken over the digs next door got curious about the stench in their doss. After determining that moldy pizza couldn't possibly smell that bad, they thought to kick down the door next door. The cause of Roddy's demise remains officially unknown, but ten to one Lofwyr's people had a hand in it—the wizworm is notorious for tying off loose ends with all deliberate speed.)<<<<<

—Roz (11:35:44/03-27-57)

>>>>(Wow! I'm amazed this schlub lasted as long as he did on the street. Even with hindsight he couldn't see that he fell for an expertly laid trap? Security measures they didn't know about, and bad numbers on the security they expected? An empty lab? The wolves "patrolling some other part of the grounds?" It's a wonder this guy managed to make a living in this biz at all, walking around with that huge "Kick Me" sign on his back. Wow. He took a job from Lofwyr and was surprised to be double-crossed ... I'm practically speechless.)<<<<<

—Bung (15:21:46/04-01-57)

>>>>(I've done a little digging since the above post first appeared, and I've turned up a few interesting factoids. Number one: every runner on Roderigo's team had been involved in at least one run against Saeder-Krupp holdings over the past year. Given how deep the S-K connection was buried in a lot of cases, I can't say how many of Roddy's chummers were aware that they'd hit Saeder-Krupp—but then, that wouldn't matter to Lofwyr. Anybody who crosses him is dead—end of story. Roddy and his chummer Morse, specifically, had a long history of working for Shiawase; and the "little biz" Roddy referred to that he and Morse had pulled for Shiawase awhile back was the extraction of one of S-K's top researchers into drone technology. (I doubt either of them knew

they'd snatched the poor goob from a Saeder-Krupp affiliate; I had to go through four separate layers of holding companies before I uncovered S-K's ownership of the podunk corp where the researcher worked.)

Number two: The "breakthrough research" Roddy sold to Shiawase is pure bunk. Oh, it looks good when you first scan it—but

there's just enough subtle things wrong with it to make a roomful of chem specialists chase their tails for weeks and then give up in despair. Which, I assume, was Lofwyr's aim. He knew Roddy—investigated the poor sap thoroughly before hiring him and his buddies for the run—and counted on him stealing the paydata instead of destroying it. He also counted on Roddy selling it to Shiawase at the first available opportunity.

As for the fenrir wolves, I don't know whether Roddy told the truth on that one. He thought he was, but the jury's still out. What does seem clear is that the whole run was a setup. That small-potatoes corp whose lab got trashed? It doesn't exist as an independent entity. The whole building—lock, stock and loading dock—belongs to Saeder-Krupp (again, through a thousand million shell companies). What's more, the lab's alleged owners recently bought a generous insurance policy for the building and the land indemnifying themselves against "criminal violations and acts of God." So in one swoop, Lofwyr executed a team of runners who'd crossed him on several occasions, fragged up

the progress of R&D at Shiawase to punish that corp for fragging with him, collected a packet of insurance money on a nothing little laboratory, and—just possibly—field-tested whatever system he's got going for training fenrir wolves as guard doggies. (Even if the last one turns out to be a load of warm drek, three out of four is pretty impressive.)

You know what they say ... never deal with a dragon.)<<<<<
—Miz Liz (10:22:14/04-10-57)



GAME INFORMATION

In the world of **Shadowrun**, only one name can send chills down the spine of every living being, from the best-protected megacorporate head to the lowliest, SINless runner: Lofwyr. The great dragon Lofwyr may represent the biggest threat to the Awakened world for the simple reason that he controls a larger playing field than any other entity on earth. As president, CEO and chairman of the largest of the huge megacorporations, Lofwyr uses his business savvy against the other commercial giants at the top of the financial pyramid, in a world far removed from a shadowrunner's wildest imaginings. He sits on the Council of Princes, the ruling body of Tir Tairngire, which makes him privy to the secrets and schemes of the immortal elves. And he is a dragon, a member of the most knowledgeable, most magically powerful race in the Awakened world. What universe-shattering secrets does he share with his wyrm chums?

Lofwyr's talons seem to touch some aspect of nearly every event in the world, and he approaches every negotiation, interaction and conflict from a position of strength. If he is so omnipresent that he appears to be everywhere, how long will it be before he really does control a piece of everything?

USING LOFWYR

While readers may not be able to synthesize a complete picture of Lofwyr's personality, attitudes and opinions from the published **Shadowrun** material, the scale of his sphere of influence is unmistakable. Lofwyr and/or Saeder-Krupp make an appearance or play a part in five **Shadowrun** novels and at least three sourcebooks—and that's just what we could find without making an exhaustive search. Any mention of Saeder-Krupp must be understood as a reference to Lofwyr. From the dragon's involvement with Sam Verner's story in **Never Deal with a Dragon** to the description of his influence on Saeder-Krupp in **Corporate Shadowfiles**, Lofwyr may be one of the most often-mentioned players in **Shadowrun**. He makes his influence felt in more areas than nearly any other being in the **Shadowrun** universe, though the ordinary people caught up in his schemes rarely know of the dragon's interest or involvement. Like a master chess player, Lofwyr plans his strategies so many moves in advance that his opponents cannot hope to anticipate the who, what or why of his agenda. As a dragon, he can create and follow through on plans that will not even come to fruition during the lifetimes of his adversaries.

When using Lofwyr as a threat, the gamemaster should bury the great wyrm's involvement as deeply as he or she can. Though the players may be working for a variety of reasons, from nuyen to pride to payback, somewhere, somehow Lofwyr is manipulating events for his own personal reasons. He may be pursuing a

higher percentage of the nuyen for Saeder-Krupp, angling for a better business position in the market, or bringing an ancient personal vendetta to a close. The dragon prefers for others to do his dirty work so that he can concentrate on the big picture. If Lofwyr shows up to take care of something himself, rest assured that the matter at hand is very personal and very important.

Though his thought processes seem alien to the ordinary citizen, Lofwyr maintains a clearly consistent policy for rewarding success and punishing failure. Rewards for success are many and varied, and usually quite close to the recipient's heart's desire. The punishment for failure is death.

RULES

Like most powerful men and women, Lofwyr considers himself above the law—he makes his own rules. As does any contemporary leader of a successful legitimate or criminal business empire, Lofwyr wields absolute control and conducts his daily life as if he is untouchable. Unlike ordinary mortals, of course, Lofwyr actually is unassailable. If it suits his style of play, the gamemaster can use Lofwyr as the ultimate puppet master, controlling from behind the scenes literally everything a player character becomes involved in. Runners who become involved with Lofwyr can never walk away from that association. If they perform well for the dragon, he will continue to command their services; if they fail him or cross him, Lofwyr will arrange for them to die sooner or later. The gamemaster must always remember, however, that Lofwyr has literally thousands of schemes in motion at any time, and multiple plans to achieve the same goal. By playing both ends against the middle, the dragon ensures that he will win in the end—one shadowrunning team's failure may actually prove advantageous to the overall result. Lofwyr considers these losses acceptable.

Gamemasters who prefer to give their players more autonomy can use Lofwyr as the wheels of fate. If the characters choose to accept employment with Lofwyr, they can earn great wealth and impressive reputations by riding along on his machinations. Player characters must also accept that the wheels of fate driven by the dragon turn exceedingly slow and fine; few have successfully judged the best time to get off, or correctly anticipated the wheels' change and rode it out. Staying on too long might just get them dead. No matter how successful a team is for Lofwyr, no matter how many jobs come down from the S-K headquarters, no matter how many times the runners help Lofwyr or how much money they make, it takes only one mistake and they're finished. Runners should never make the mistake of thinking even for a single instant that they have bested the master manipulator. At that moment, the wheels of fate have turned against them, and soon the great wyrm Lofwyr will collect what he is owed.

BUGS



>>>>>(This little tidbit came to us by way of the lashed-up system that's been set up to get data in and out of the Chicago Containment Zone. The author appears to be a mage or shaman—or at least he thinks he is. Other than that, nobody knows anything about him or this document. The rationality of the contents is questionable at best, so take it with a considerable dose of sodium—but if any of this *is* true, the implications are frightening. One more thing to keep us all up nights, neh?)<<<<<

—Captain Chaos (19:34:12/05-12-57)

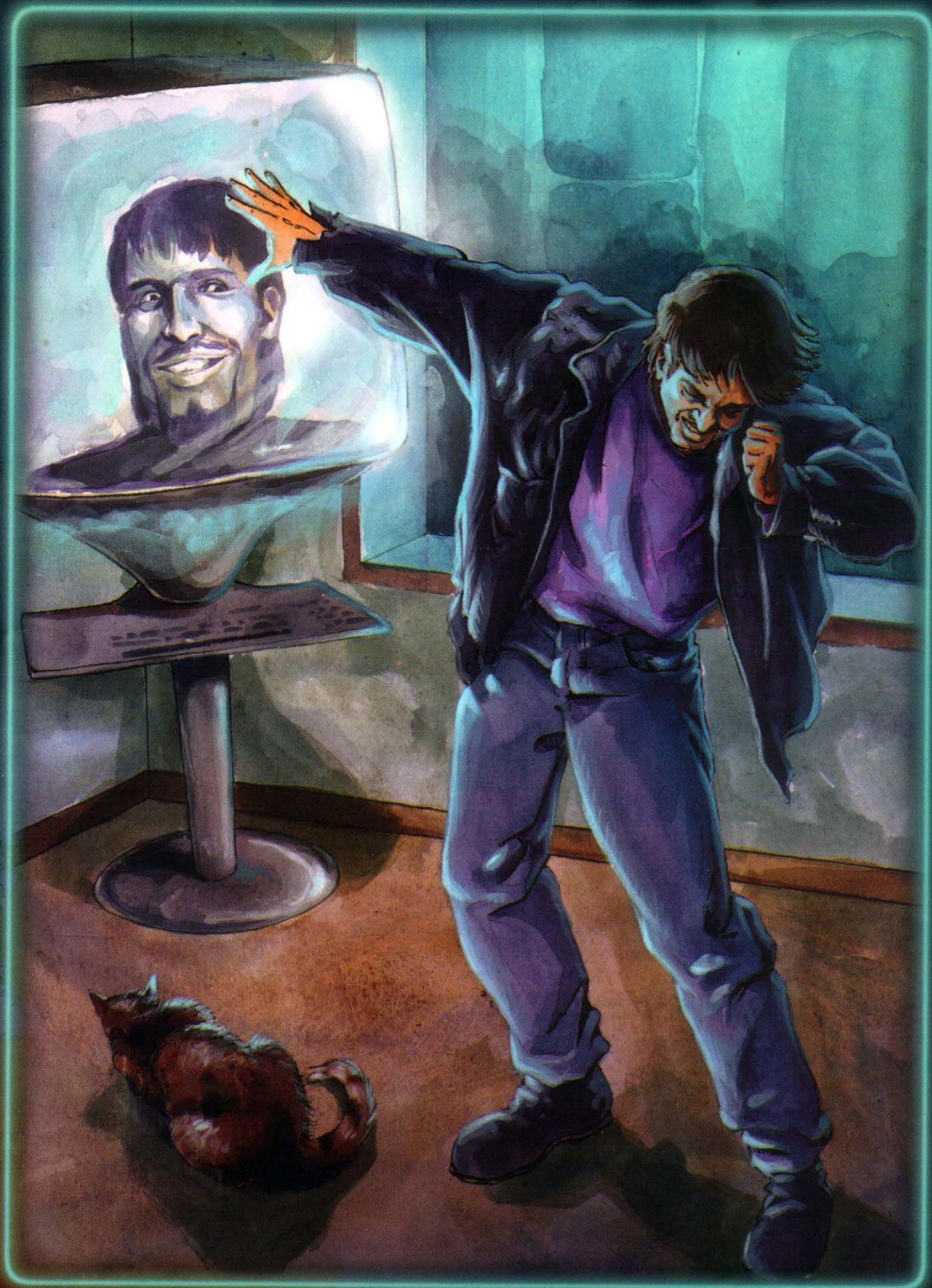
Somewhere on Shadowland once, some guy said maybe it was time humanity just cacked off and gave the cockroaches their shot at ruling the world. I think that's exactly what's happening. The bugs have come to take the world away from us and there's not a fragging thing we can do about it—and it's scaring the drek out of me so bad I'm shaking as I dictate this. Or maybe it's just the damned cold.

It's really cold, man. A lot of people aren't gonna survive this winter. I'm pretty sure I'll be one of them, but it won't be the cold that gets me. I've survived some of the worst drek the streets could throw at me, but now I'm living in a nightmare that never ends. The first snows are starting to hit, and people are cacking each other over food and blankets and firewood. Folks are stripping everything you can burn out of every building in the CZ, and everyone's eyeing everyone else with hungry, suspicious eyes. The ones in power are the ones who control food supplies and shelter, no matter how little, from the cold.

I don't even know why I'm bothering to dictate this. I guess I'm hoping that somebody somewhere out there will see my words and warn everyone about what's happening. That should count for something in the big picture, maybe make a difference. Funny, used to be I didn't care jack about what happened to everyone else in the whole fraggin' world. I wasn't interested in the big picture—just how much I was getting paid. Used to be it was everyone for himself, but I can't think that way any



Bugs



Mr. Darke



Tutor

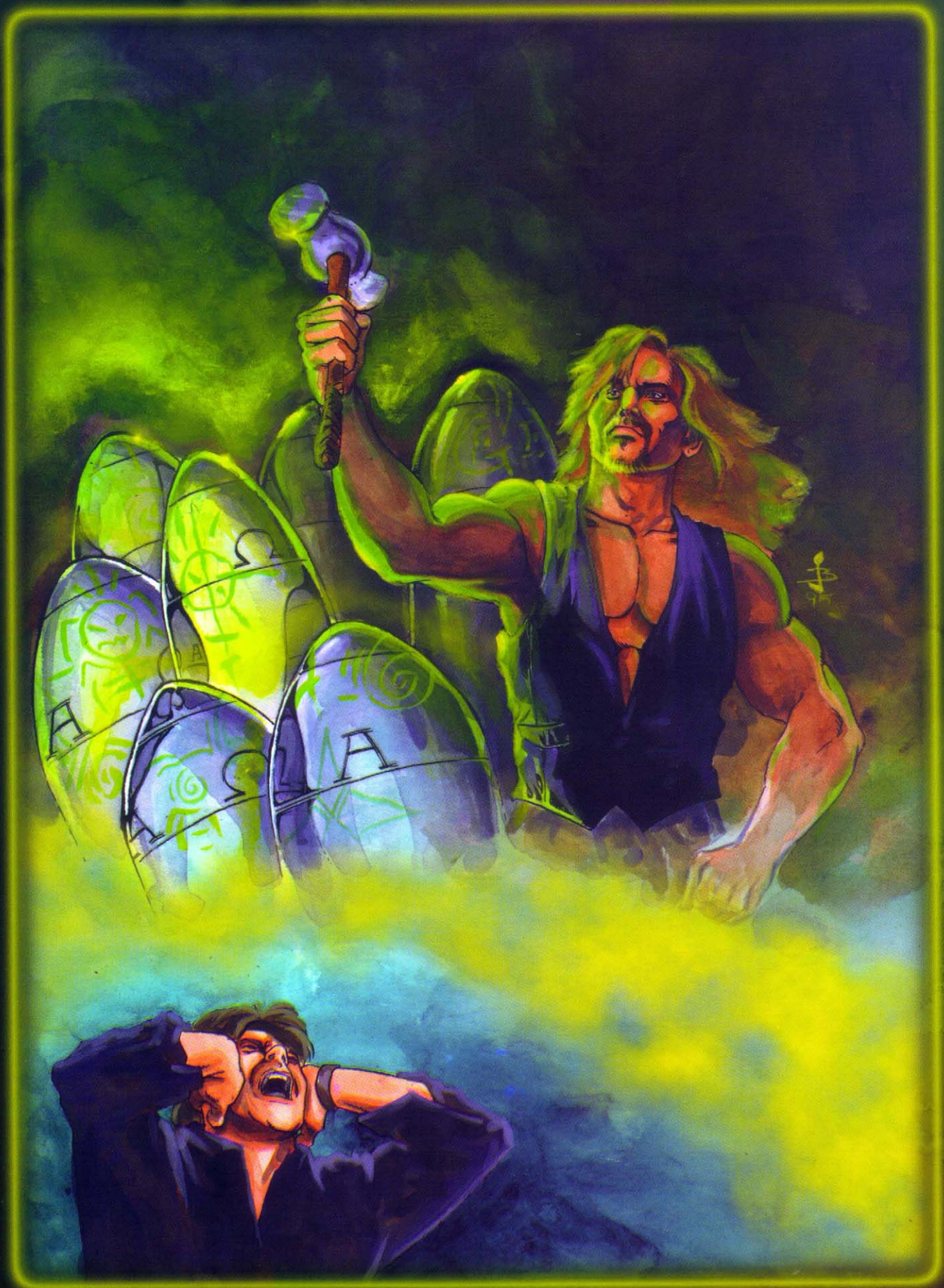




Halberstam's Babies



Vampires



Winternight



Alamos 20K



more. That's what got us into this. That's not how They think or how They do things. And that's why They're winning.

The bugs, man, the fraggin' bugs. We thought—we hoped—the cold would kill them, put them to sleep, stop them somehow. We hoped that Nature would get us out of this nightmare and let us all go back to the way it was, that somehow Mom Nature'd save us. But Nature's a cruel slitch who doesn't give a frag about us. We're just one part of the whole deal, and if the bugs cack us all and take over the world, Nature isn't gonna notice. Everything will just go on without us.

The cold isn't stopping them. We thought it was; we thought it was working and we'd crawl out of this hell hole, but we were wrong. We were so wrong.

At first it seemed like winter was our great hope. As the temperature dropped, so did the bugs' activity. People figured if the bugs were like *real* bugs, then the cold should kill them off, or make them hibernate or fraggin' *something*. And something started to happen, no doubt about it. We heard fewer reports of bug attacks and bug sightings. More people got brave enough to go out into the streets to forage for food and supplies in some of the places that no one had dared to hit before because they were scared of the bugs. Things seemed to get a little better for a while. We started allowing ourselves to hope, just a little, that this nightmare was coming to an end and we'd all wake up soon.

Fragging insect bastards. I swear they did it on purpose. They wanted us to get our hopes up, to break what was left of our spirits. They wanted to make sure we wouldn't have much fight left in us. I'll bet they wanted to make sure we were nice and well fed when they finally came. They want us healthy, after all. They *need* us.

We made a mistake by thinking that the cold would stop them—that anything would stop them. The one lesson we should have learned from Mommy Nature is that *nothing* stops bugs. They're the fraggin' toughest critters in the entire world. They adapt to everything—every environment, every threat, every toxin, every way we've ever come up with to wipe them out. Somehow, they survive and grow stronger. Nietzsche would have loved these fraggers.

Frag, I just read what I've been saying. I'm rambling. I'm having trouble keeping it all straight. All the thoughts in my head are fighting to get out at once. I'll try to lay it out nice and simple.

>>>>(Wow. This guy's lost it.)<<<<<
—Shade (18:13:04/06-14-57)

>>>>(Actually, for someone trapped in the Containment Zone, he's remarkably lucid. Remember, paranoia is a survival trait in Chi-town now more than ever.)<<<<<
—Argent (18:27:40/06-14-57)

The bugs have *changed*. There's something different about them. Something monstrous. They're not operating like they did. Maybe it's the cold or being walled in the CZ, but I don't think so. I think it's the Glow Zone, the tac-nuke the government dropped on the big hive. I think the radiation did something to the bugs. Changed them somehow. Mutated them. (Can you mutate a spirit? Who the frag knows?) They just seem *different*.

It's hard to describe what I felt and saw. Like, the other day this guy came up to me. I kept a real careful eye on him. His aura looked OK—calm and unthreatening. Too calm, really. Too placid, too fraggin' *normal* for someone who's lived in this hell from day to day since the bugs came. That should've told me there was something wrong with him. He talked to me, said he wanted to help me. Said he knew a place where I could get shelter and food, and he'd take me there.

I asked him where it was. He said he couldn't tell me, he could only show me. Said it wasn't safe to talk about things out in the open. I took a real good look at his aura. Steady as a rock. Not a ripple or a shift in it to tell me he was lying. Something—some instinct, maybe—made me tell him to frag off and die. I yelled it, I think, and backed away from him.

He grabbed me by the arm. I looked into his eyes and suddenly this buzzing noise filled my head. I thought I was gonna explode. It was so loud, buzzing and buzzing, and I could almost make out voices in it. The voices were singing to me, telling me to relax, stand still, be quiet. And over it all I heard the slag with the aura, talking oh so calmly and quietly, telling me he wanted to help me. I felt like I was being smothered in honey, drowning in a warm, sweet mass of bliss and contentment. I felt so warm inside, so warm and cozy, like my insides were the most comfortable overcoat in the world. The buzzing kept getting louder and louder and louder.

I lost it then. I yelled something and threw all the mojo I had at the guy. He turned into a torch. He screamed, a high shrill sound that stabbed through my brain as I turned and ran.

When I got my head back on straight, I thought about what happened. As near as I can tell, the guy who grabbed me was either a bug in human form, a bug spirit possessing a real guy, or some kind of insect shaman. I think he pulled some kind of telepathic attack on me. Tried to take over my mind and make me a cooperative little drone. Maybe he—it—didn't know I had the Talent and didn't count on me resisting. Maybe it got careless. Whatever, I got lucky. I got away. But maybe other people haven't. And maybe *I* won't next time.

>>>>(Is what this guy says possible? Could the bugs have mutated?)<<<<<
—SouthSider (01:19:20/06-15-57)

>>>>(First off, this guy (or gal, as the case may be) is probably a raving lunatic. It's entirely possible that all the drek he's describing is just a massive hallucination. What if this guy, who may or may not be a real mage, goes crackers inside Bug City and some innocent slob tries to help him out? This wacko paranoid sees "bugs" out to get him, geeks some guy and dreams up this whole "telepathic attack" story to rationalize what he's done.)<<<<<
—Silicon Mage (01:35:14/06-15-57)

>>>>(But is it possible? C'mon, man, my brother's in Chicago. I need to know!)<<<<<
—SouthSider (01:43:16/06-15-57)

>>>>(Anything's possible, I suppose, but I doubt the insect spirits would've mutated from exposure to radiation. They're spirits—they



have no DNA, no genetic code to alter.)<<<<<<
 —Magister (03:39:46/06-15-57)

>>>>>(True, but the Cermak Blast had an effect on them. Isn't it possible something like what this poor slub's describing might have happened because of it? What do we really know about spirits being exposed to mutagens and radiation? After all, nature spirits have "mutated" and gone toxic from exposure to pollutants. Why not the bugs?)<<<<<<
 —Talon (03:51:19/06-15-57)

>>>>>(Nature spirits and insect spirits are two very different things.)<<<<<<
 — Silicon Mage (20:19:22/06-15-57)

>>>>>(Oh, come off it, SM! We don't know drek about the bugs. For all we know, this story's chip-truth.)<<<<<<
 —Know-It-All (21:04:03/06-15-57)

>>>>>(Okay, it's possible. I just don't buy it.)<<<<<<
 —Silicon Mage (21:11:47/06-15-57)

The bugs have changed somehow to deal with the new difficulties they're facing. They seem to have developed a powerful telepathic hive-mind that lets them to overwhelm the minds of other creatures. How much of the new "spirit of cooperation" everybody's so happy about in the CZ is really coming from telepathic manipulation? Maybe we're not really pulling together in a crisis—maybe we're just succumbing to the bug-mind. Can all bugs do this, or just the ones here? I don't know. I hope it's just here.

They also seem to have gotten a lot better at possessing people. Used to be, people who got turned into bugs looked like bugs, at least a little. You could tell they were infected. But this guy looked totally normal. Even his aura didn't show any hint of what he was. The bugs are making more bugs that look like us, agents to infiltrate and move among us without making us suspicious. They can be anywhere and anyone they want. That means they can do anything, and we can't stop them.

>>>>(An interesting tie-in with this file: since the catastrophe in Chicago, bug activity has decreased worldwide. There are fewer sightings and fewer posts on Shadowland about them. Coincidence?)<<<<<

—Sally (03:29:48/06-19-57)

>>>>(Sure there's less activity—there're fewer bugs. We've taken out lots of them.)<<<<<

—Bug-Hunter (09:47:41/06-19-57)

>>>>(Or they went underground to regroup and try something more subtle.)<<<<<

—Sally (10:01:39/06-19-57)

>>>>(Okay—people have seen the bugs all over the world, from Chicago to Ankara to Lagos. Just how many of these things are there? Was Chicago the biggest hive in the world or was it just the only one that got its lid blown off?)<<<<<

—Maggie (09:43:10/06-20-57)

>>>>(Nobody knows, Mags. Or at least, nobody's telling. Word in the Ares grapevine is that the Chi-town hive was the biggest one Ares' bughunters had ever encountered. But that doesn't mean it was the largest one there is—or the only one of its kind.)<<<<<

—Silk (10:19:34/06-20-57)

>>>>(Certain highly placed officials in the megacorps, national governments, military/intelligence agencies and international intelligentsia know something of the scope of the insect threat, but none of them are talking. They're afraid. Most know that they can't trust others in positions of power, because evidence suggests that disguised insect spirits may have infiltrated national governments, militaries, law-enforcement agencies, and even megacorporate boardrooms. In fact, a few of these individuals fear that the bugs may have infiltrated their own ranks. In addition, these individuals realize that publicizing their conclusions would cause widespread panic. So they try to use their knowledge covertly, through channels that give them maximum deniability.)<<<<<

—Jerusalem (00:01:44/06-22-57)

>>>>(That sounds like us, all right.)<<<<<

—Tangent (18:09:27/06-22-57)

>>>>(Seems like a few other folks know about the bugs, too. Tir Tairngire officials and Saeder-Krupp execs have been "unofficially" advising the UCAS government on the bugs since the Chicago disaster went down. From what I hear, both parties are playing their cards close to their chests. If they know something, why don't they just come out and say it?)<<<<<

—DeeCeelOT (20:57:14/06-22-57)

>>>>(Nothing in this world comes for free, chummer.)<<<<<

—Findler-Man (21:23:54/06-22-57)

But the worst thing I sensed when that thing touched me was what it wanted. The voices, those buzzing voices, kept calling me to join them, to be part of them. Not just to join their little hive, but to be *part* of them. One with them. The bugs have figured out how to survive the winter and the Containment Zone—they'll use us, use our bodies as shelter against the elements to fool Nature and keep on going as long as they need to. Eventually, we won't be able to tell the bugs from the people. Sooner or later, someone is going to make a mistake. One or more of the possessed will get outside the CZ. They'll mingle with the rest of the world and disappear. Hell, there's probably lots of bugs outside just waiting to be taught all the new tricks—assuming they don't know them already.

Those bastards. They won't stop. They won't ever stop. They've won and they know it. They've taken all we can hit them with, and it's only made them stronger. They can take our bodies and our minds and everything we have. They've got new powers to do it. They're not the same any more. They're smarter. They know how to trap us better, know how to fool us into thinking they're our friends. They know they have to use us to survive. They're like a plague taking over our bodies—like larvae consuming their hosts from the inside out.

I know they're coming for me. I got away from one, but I can't stop them all. They'll get me sooner or later. But they won't get this. They won't get the truth.

Listen to me. They're out there. They're not gone. They've just slipped into something warmer. Friendlier. They could be your brother or your best chummer. Watch out or they'll get you too.

>>>>(If the bugs' ability to possess people has improved this much, how can we detect them?)<<<<<

—Timid Tom (06:44:20/06-23-57)

>>>>(If this telepathic hive-mind is for real, maybe we can figure out a way to detect that. Plenty of corporate security departments have been running experiments in detecting telepathy—maybe they've discovered something useful. Of course, bug telepathy might be on a totally different "wavelength" from what we understand, but it's certainly worth investigation. Anyone who's interested, contact me.)<<<<<

—Magister (10:01:20/06-23-57)

GAME INFORMATION

Bugs are the only single threat that concerns nearly everyone in the Awakened world, from Lofwyr to the homeless family living out of a box in the Seattle Barrens. Why? First, they just won't go away. Runners, corps, and governments have all fought them, but no opponent has exterminated them. In Chicago, a bug hive survived a tactical nuclear blast—even though it was at ground zero. No matter what people throw at bugs, they seem to survive. And in many cases they get stronger.

Second, the motivations of bugs are completely alien and unfathomable to most everyone. Most **Shadowrun** threats and villains have recognizable human and metahuman motivations—greed, power, domination, the desire for revenge. But no one truly knows what motivates insect spirits and the warped people that worship them. On the surface, insect spirits and shamans seem to want nothing more than to turn the Awakened world into one big hive. But why? That's where the mystery comes in. Insect spirits seem to yearn to be metahuman, yet at the same time they wish to destroy the single characteristic that distinguishes metahumans and humans from all other beings—their souls. For centuries, strategists have understood that knowledge of one's enemy is the greatest weapon. They've known that by learning what makes an enemy tick, they can use the enemy's own desires, fears, strengths and weaknesses against him. But no one really knows what makes the bugs tick.

USING BUGS

Insect spirits and bugs are the single most common threat in most **Shadowrun** campaigns. Usually bug-based adventures are nothing more than a series of "bug hunts"—combat with endless hordes of flesh-form spirits. (Nothing is wrong with these types of adventures—heck, no one likes to pump hot lead into the bodies of flesh-form spirits more than the FASA staff.) However, the new, craftier bugs presented in **Threats** provide gamemasters with the option of making insect spirits subtler and more dangerous opponents for their players. As before, bug spirits still seek to increase the size, security and prosperity of their nests while remaining hidden from the rest of humanity as long as possible. But now they pursue those goals with more subtlety (which is a logical development, considering the publicity generated by the events detailed in the **Bug City** sourcebook).

Mainly, the bugs do this by carefully using "good merges"—possessed human and metahuman hosts who are not significantly changed by their mergers with insect spirits. These good merges, which have learned to mask their auras quite effectively, can operate in normal society virtually undetected. This means that just about anybody may be a disguised bug spirit—Lone Star cops, UCAS intelligence officials, fixers, Mr. Johnsons, corporate honchos, your new running buddy, your girlfriend.

By using bug spirits in this manner, gamemasters can turn the paranoia level way up in their games and transform an encounter with an insect hive from a series of bug hunts to a slow process of investigation and discovery for his players. Rather than stumbling across a warehouse full of insect cocoons, runners may discover a

hive by piecing together several seemingly unconnected events and clues before realizing the true nature of their opponent.

Runners can become involved with a bug hive in a number of ways. Most simply, they might inadvertently present an obstacle to some bug queen's plans. Naturally, the queen might use disguised bug spirits to get the runners out of the way. Or an acquaintance or fixer used by the players' group might become the host of a "good merge." The acquaintance or fixer may then manipulate the runners into making runs or hits against its hive's enemies. The runners, of course, may not suspect what's happening unless they notice the strange little differences in their friend since he came back from his vacation.

Alternatively, runners might encounter hives by joining the growing ranks of "bughunters"—runners and mercs who have taken it on themselves to hunt down and exterminate bug spirits wherever and whenever they can find them. Working with or joining a bughunter group can present its own dangers as well. Many bughunters took on their new careers after losing loved ones and friends to the bugs, so their reasoning may be clouded by the desire for revenge, paranoia, psychological trauma, or just plain hate. These individuals tend to see bugs in every nook and cranny. And nearly all of them seem obsessed with the fear that their little groups will be infiltrated by disguised bug spirits. As a result, they are highly suspicious of everyone—but especially of characters from outside their groups. Anyone who works with a bughunter team may have to continually convince its members that he is not a disguised bug himself.

On a final note, gamemasters should keep in mind that the Cermak Blast has actually speeded up the evolution of bug spirits. The blast destroyed many of the less hardy and intelligent bugs, leaving the Chicago hive a little cagier and more adaptable on the whole. And while politicians, military officials, and megacorporate honchos have been trying to figure out what to do next, the bug hive has looked beyond the walls of the Chicago Containment Zone and recognized metahumanity as a virtually endless supply of hosts and food.

RULES

Using insect spirits in a subtle manner requires a little more work than simply throwing mindless flesh-form spirits at players. Gamemasters may find the telepathic power described in the fiction section useful here. When endowing bug spirits with such powers, use the critter power Influence (p. 218, **SRII**). Instead of using Essence for the required test, however, make an Opposed Willpower Test between the insect spirit's Force Rating and the target's Willpower Rating. Typically, insect spirits use their telepathic power to subtly change the views of others and befriend them—before bringing them into the hive.

Gamemasters who have used insect spirits frequently in their campaigns and want to punch their bugs up even more may use the Toxic Critters rules from the **California Free State** sourcebook (pp. 148-149) to increase the powers of Chicago bugs that have been exposed to radiation in the Cermak Blast.

BLOOD MAGE GESTALT



>>>>>(This file comes to Shadowland from a media hound in the Los Angeles area who posted simply as JQ. It's self-explanatory and scary enough that I decided it belonged, even though I can't verify JQ's source.)<<<<<

—Captain Chaos (10:09:21/05-23-57)

Not too long ago, while I was doing a piece on magic and religion in Aztlan, one of my sources spilled some interesting stuff to me. I don't know whether it's bulldrek or veritas or what—but I'm putting out the word anyway, because if my source wasn't chipped out halfway to hell, then the world needs to know this game. Scan it for yourselves.

My source is an Owl shaman who served as a vassal in a *teocalli* in Ensanada, Aztlan. I downloaded the whole interview with my headcam, but I don't think I want to carry it around. You'll see what I mean.

>>>>>(What the frag is a *teocalli*?)<<<<<

—Misfit (12:15:43/06-13-57)

>>>>>(Check the **Aztlan** post elsewhere on this BBS. A *teocalli* is a pyramid-shaped temple dedicated to a specific god. Every Aztlaner village has at least one; there's literally hundreds in larger cities. The whole fragging country is littered with 'em.)<<<<<

—Pyramid Watcher (12:19:23/06-13-57)

I met the shaman at midnight in a grove of eucalyptus trees on the cliffs overlooking Topanga Canyon. She was beautiful—amber-skinned with long, straight black hair. She wore an inky nylon bodysuit with feathers woven into it. Her dark eyes reflected the full moon. She spoke in a harsh whisper, like the sound of the wind churning sand.



Haunted—that's how her eyes looked. Like she'd been staring for hours at visions of blood and death. The kind of shell-shocked look soldiers get when they've been out in the killing fields too long ... or chippies get after a really bad trip. After hearing everything she had to say, I'm still no closer to figuring out if she was for real, or strung out on some kind of snuff chip.

She told me she knew of priests in Aztlan who use the power of blood to make magic. "An evil art, practiced by evil men. This you know, or may have heard," she said, then walked right up to me and took my hands in a tight grip. "But I have worse to tell. Promise me you will believe!"

I promised. Anything for a story, right? She bought it, let go of my hands, took a few steps away as if gathering her thoughts.

"I know magicians—few, but more powerful than you can imagine—who specialize in ritual blood magic. They serve no gods—none I know, at least. They are known as the Gestalt.

"I have seen them in Ensanada, performing their sacrifices. I watched them kill seven young men and women to power their ritual magic. I escaped with Maria after they left. I could no longer participate in such atrocities.

>>>>(At the risk of being flamed for insensitivity, who the frag cares? I thought this file contained world-threatening powers. This is just a group of twisted religious fanatics, and that hardly qualifies.)<<<<<

—Brain (14:34:05/06-13-57)

>>>>(Read on, drek-for-brains. It gets to the point in less than an Mp.)<<<<<

—Mole (14:36:3 /06-13-57)

"The victims were all beginning adepts, gifted with the power. Spellcasters, conjurers. I thought I was training them for initiation into the priesthood." She laughed, a brittle sound. "The Gestalt prefers adepts, because their victims' power makes their sendings stronger.

"In the dark of the moon, I was ordered to bring a group of my students to the sanctuary. The sanctuary lies inside the top level of the pyramid. Quetzalcóatl watches over it—he lives in the statue, his gold wings spread over the altar. He protects us." She laughed again, something between a giggle and a sob. Then she put her hands to her face, clenching her fists, struggling to get ahold of herself. "I did as I was told. I am a loyal servant of the Serpent. Ten of my finest students, I brought them—none older than nineteen.

"Guards met us in the sanctuary. I don't remember what they looked like. I try to see them in my mind, but everything looks blurred. They led us all up the stairs to the apex, then took me out into the black night.

"So hard to remember ... the pyramid ... the guards, six of them ... the stars glittering like the cold eyes of the priests—" She stopped suddenly, grabbed at her head with a little cry, then stood dead still for ten seconds. I counted. Then she started up again, in a flat, dead voice. "Ten priests, sitting in a circle at the apex. In the center of the circle was the *Chac-Mool*—the stone basin that holds the sacrificial organs.

>>>>(She's talking about live hearts, cut while still beating from the chests of the victims. Sometimes they come from animals, but metahuman sacrifices happen just as often.)<<<<<

—Mole (14:41:23/06-13-57)

"The priests were human, men and women, dressed in loose-fitting sleeveless robes of deep red velvet with the hoods pulled back so their heads could be seen. Runic scars covered their arms and necks.

"The magi were linked together, chanting. Not holding hands—not touching at all. Physically linked by intravenous tubing. By catheters in their necks.

"I could see dark red liquid—almost black—flowing through the tubing. Their blood was passing from one to the other. I could feel their hearts beating in unison as they chanted. Medical attendants ministered to the magi, checking IV lines and watching over a strange machine through which the blood flowed. The machine pumped the thick liquid through all their veins until each individual had become one with every other.

>>>>(How could this be true? Sharing blood would cause an allergic reaction. Unless they all had the same blood type ...)<<<<<

—Dr. Bones (16:59:18/06-13-57)

"My stomach heaved, and bile choked my throat. Then suddenly the sickness passed. A weightless feeling came over me—a spell, I could sense it. From a great distance I watched myself help them, my body responding to instructions I could barely hear.

"I watched myself walk back down into the sanctuary and invite one of my students to come up the stairs with me. I chose Luz-Anna. Seventeen, she was ... just beginning to master the spells. As she passed into the ritual chamber, she too became entranced.

"I watched her pull her brown curls back to give the attendant a clean view of her neck. The attendant drew a sharp blade across Luz-Anna's unmarred flesh. Luz-Anna did not flinch, standing still as a stone while her blood drained into the *Chac-Mool*. At the last second, something flickered across her face—a momentary recognition, a flash of understanding. Then she collapsed, her body drained of life.

"I screamed ... but silently, inside. My body did not react. A voice from somewhere outside me said that the basin must remain full, so that the ritual's power would continue to grow. I tried to resist the voice. I tried ... but it did no good. My body turned and descended the stairs. Another unsuspecting student followed me back up to join in the ceremony.

"When I knew that I could not stop, I focused on the ritual. I couldn't leave my body; the spell they had cast on me kept me locked in my physical form. I fought with all the strength left to me, and caught a brief glimpse of astral space before the chains of the spell clamped down again, cruel and cold.

"I had seen ritual sendings before, but not like this. The circle glowed deep red, like the embers of a campfire. The magi no longer had individual auras; instead, their auras had fused into one pulsating ring of fire. Shadows flickered across the fire like spec-

tres and spirits trapped inside a flaming prison. I felt the pain of a million sacrifices like a white-hot needle through my chest. Twisting. Grinding into me until I had to look away.

>>>>(Hey, JQ, what was this Owl shaman on? Sounds like a bad peyote journey I once had.)<<<<<

—Con X (13:29:28/06-14-57)

“Above the circle the astral sky was warped, folded over on itself. At first I thought I was looking through a barrier, that the energy of the astral wall was creating the distortion. I was wrong.

“The warping worsened as I watched. I could feel the dull echo of pain in my chest, like a phantom memory. Then, as if a window had opened, the image of another *teocalli* appeared through the distortion.

“I knew that other temple; I had been there, I had seen its aura. I saw the Great Temple of Quetzalcóatl in Tenochtitlán, thousands of miles away.

>>>>(What!?! No fragging way do I believe that. I’ve heard of some pretty odd drek happening on the metaplanes, but right down here on the etheric in our own back-fragging-yard? This is too outrageous. Magic has rules—consistent, predictable rules. Astral windows and gateways and etheric warping don’t fit with those rules.)<<<<<

—Eye’n’styn (18:40:29/06-14-57)

>>>>(Maybe it’s time for a shift in worldview, chummer. Not too many years ago, magic itself was completely outside the realm of believability. Now it’s commonplace. Keep an open mind, chummer, or nasty drek like bug spirits might get you.)<<<<<

—Hy Zenberg (18:45:00/06-14-57)

“I went down for a third sacrifice. When I came back up, I tried to see into the astral plane. Already I was growing distant from my students, trying not to see their frightened faces. They were becoming animals in my eyes, to be used up and replaced with new ones.

“They had been my friends, and I—”

The shaman broke off, choking back tears. She sank to the ground, then took a few ragged breaths and looked up. She fixed me with a stare as hard as granite. The look passed over and through me like a static charge, making the tiny hairs on the back of my neck stick straight up.

“This time,” she went on, “I could see red tendrils rising out of the ring of fire—wisps the color of blood that twisted and coiled into a rope of magical energy high above the *teocalli*.

“The rope throbbed with power, arcing upward into the strange sky. I felt the power like a second pulse, like the beating of a giant heart. Astral space vibrated with its rhythm. Like a gigantic astral artery, it channeled the life energy of the sacrifices up and away into the warped ether.

“My astral sight followed the artery upward, watching it grow. It shot toward the distortion, toward the aura of the Great Temple. The Temple’s aura shimmered and stretched in time with the warping, which seemed to drift back and forth like ebbing water.

“The artery reached the distortion and passed through it. As it touched the aura of the Great Temple, the window collapsed around it and the warping vanished. The astral plane looked untouched, unchanged ... except that a bond of magic had been forged between the Ensanada *teocalli* and the Great Temple at Tenochtitlán.

“The ritual continued for hours ... four more young people lost their lives. Their blood helped to link the auras of the two temples together, making them stronger. Making them one.

“By the end of the ritual, the rope of blood had become transparent, invisible. The next day, after the priests had recovered, one of them spoke to us.

“She was young, with a shaven head and dark, penetrating eyes. The runic scars on her skin looked elaborate and elegant. I wondered how much of her body they covered. She was beautiful, especially the delicate downward curve of her lips. She entranced me even before she spoke.

“Her voice was old, like dry leaves in a hot wind. She spoke of the ritual, explaining that the priests were visiting temples in every major city in Aztlan, tying their auras to the Great Temple. She said we must all prepare for the coming of the *tzitzimine*.

“She told us that at the end of the Fifth Sun, *teocalli* all across Aztlan would perform blood sacrifices simultaneously. The power from these sacrifices would flow to the Great Temple in Tenochtitlán through the magical bonds the past night’s blood ritual had forged. Such immense power was necessary to help Quetzalcóatl defeat the *tzitzimine*.

>>>>(What is all this drek about *tzitzimine* and the end of the Fifth Sun? Anyone?)<<<<<

—Misfit (12:35:30/06-15-57)

>>>>(The *tzitzimine* are demons which, according to the Aztec calendar, will descend upon the world to devour it at the beginning of the Fifth Sun. We’re in the Fourth Sun now, and the calendar isn’t too specific about when it will end. Could be tomorrow, could be a thousand years after we’re all dead.

It’s all in the **Aztlan** post, plus a whole lot more scary info. I wasn’t a fan of The Big A before, and it doesn’t look like I will be anytime soon.)<<<<<

—Mole (14:46:43/06-15-57)

“I listened, and wanted to believe. She was so beautiful, I didn’t want to see the darkness in her. I didn’t want to hear the death in her words. But Owl was speaking to me then, in her subtle way ... trying to touch me, helping me to see a clear path through the dark.

“In my mind, I saw the faces of my students who remained alive. And I knew I must try to escape. A few months later I came north with Maria; she was the only one who would leave the *teocalli*. I do not know what happened to the others.”

The shaman turned away from me then and walked deeper into grove of eucalyptus trees. When I tried to follow her, a huge nature spirit manifested and blocked my way. I can take a hint: I walked away and didn’t look back.

Truth? Chip dreams? Schizophrenia, maybe? I'd like it to be one of those last two. But I won't take the chance that it isn't the first. When I can, I prefer to keep my promises.

>>>>(Flaming nutcase, this Owl chica. And JQ's a chump for giving her the benefit of the doubt.)<<<<<

—Buster (16:22:12/06-15-57)

>>>>(Aztlaner priests, Buster old chum. Aztechnology magic. Need I say more?)<<<<<

—Tomtom (16:45:23/06-15-57)

>>>>(Meaning that because it's Aztlan/Aztechnology/whatever, the worst just has to be true. <Sigh> Doesn't proof mean anything anymore?)<<<<<

—Dr. Bones (17:00:34/06-15-57)

>>>>(And what kind of proof do you consider sufficient? The corpse of one of the murder victims, found conveniently in the bedroom of one of the priests, all nicely ID'd so there's no doubt who did what to whom?)<<<<<

—Tomtom (17:07:35/06-15-57)

>>>>(There's no proof. The blood mages are too smart for that. When are you people ever going to figure out that Evil always covers its tracks?)<<<<<

—Simon Pure (18:02:35/06-15-57)

>>>>(Hysteria 1, Objective Reasoning 0.)<<<<<

—D. Bunker (18:23:43/06-15-57)

GAME INFORMATION

Aztechnology and blood magic: two threats intertwined in a double-helix of purest evil; a combination custom-designed to break the hardest runner. The heart of Aztechnology hides a group of high-level initiates working magical rituals that lie beyond the understanding and comprehension of the most educated and experienced students of thaumaturgy. Named the Gestalt by those who oppose their methods and goals, these initiates have been trained by the best and most powerful magicians in Aztlan to perform certain unspeakable blood-magic rituals. Its existence known only to those who actually run Aztechnology, the Gestalt operates unopposed to achieve a mysterious objective. The rituals it performs range from unbelievably powerful versions of common ritual magic to bizarre and ancient metamagics. The fact that this group exists at all exemplifies the pure contempt with which Aztechnology regards the rest of the world.

USING THE BLOOD MAGE GESTALT

The Blood Mage Gestalt is a perversion of all the magical theories (and possibly multiple ethical ideals) taught throughout the Awakened world. These mages are culled from the ranks of priests serving Aztlan, and their selection appears to be based on two criteria: all priests serving in a single Gestalt group must have the same blood type, and they must pledge total, unquestioning commitment to following the orders of those they serve.

Recruits receive training in the ways used to twist the usual practice of metamagic and in the performance and application of blood magic. Where the instructors learn these perverse and corrupted concepts remains a closely guarded secret: Gestalt members are given the means to die in order to safeguard that knowledge. From all current accounts, the Blood Mage Gestalt contains only 20 members. Each Gestalt member receives around-the-clock protection from 12 Aztechnology Jaguar Guards permanently assigned to each priest. All guards must be present during the Gestalt's blood-magic rituals. Once they become members of the Gestalt, the priests no longer serve a *teocalli*; their primary goals are to locate magical sites and perform "The Linking," and to bind free and blood spirits. According to rumor, the Gestalt lives in secret chambers of the Great Temple of Quetzalcóatl in Tenochtitlán.

A Gestalt member's first priority is to search the smaller *teocalli* scattered across Aztlan to find high background counts, mana lines, power sites, unusual astral phenomena and any other magical occurrences that may be used to power their magical and metamagical rituals. When the priests identify such locations, the Gestalt performs what observers have named The Linking, a blood magic ritual that permanently connects the etheric forms of two locations in astral space by a magical link. For this ritual, ten Gestalt priests in the Great Temple are physically connected to each other via tubes that circulate blood from one mage to another. A second Gestalt group connects to each other by the same method at the new site of power. The individual power of the mages in each group becomes a collective power, a Gestalt of blood magic. While circulating their own blood between them allows the priests to combine their power and successfully cast the unique, high-force spell that links the Great Temple and the magical site, the blood sacrifices allow them to do so without suffering Drain. The Gestalt can use any sentient victims for their blood sacrifices, but achieve better results if the victims are magically talented (meta)humans between the ages of 12 and 20.

The Gestalt's secondary directive is to research, summon and control free spirits and blood spirits. As a result of its concerted efforts in this area, the Gestalt may control more free and ally spirits than any other person, group or organization in the Awakened world. When combined in their unique blood magic ritual, the Gestalt travels extensively in astral space, pursuing high-priority metaplanar quests. It is while on these quests that player-characters are most likely to encounter the Gestalt.

No one outside the Gestalt knows why the group performs its secret rituals. The most popular theory is that the mages are somehow preparing for the coming of the tzitzimine, the demons that the Aztec calendar predicts will destroy humanity at the beginning of the Fifth Sun (see **The Aztec Calendar**, p. 75). The Gestalt is creating a vast astral lattice by linking the aura of each *teocalli* to the Great Temple in Tenochtitlán. When this net is complete, it will funnel power generated by blood magic rituals performed simultaneously in each temple to the Gestalt, which will gather that power at the Great Temple and use it to summon the tzitzimine.

The next most popular theory proposes that the Gestalt is simply a very unorthodox and massively powerful tool in Aztechnology's bid to take over the world. The astral lattice may,

in fact, be designed to repulse the demon attack, or may be part of a sinister plot to control the metaplanes and thus the world. If the Gestalt functions as an independent entity, however, Aztechnology must ask itself if this tool can be controlled—or will Aztechnology end up on the list of slaves and sacrifices along with the rest of metahumanity?

RULES

All magic rituals performed by the Gestalt require blood magic (see the **Aztlan** sourcebook, pp. 175–77). The gamemaster should tailor the Gestalt's use of this powerful magic to suit his gaming style and group. As a rule of thumb, the gamemaster can review the greatest levels of magical power that have appeared in his campaign to date, then pitch the Gestalt's capabilities well beyond that point.

The Gestalt uses blood magic sacrifices to negate the Drain effects for spells according to the published blood magic rules. Each priest also takes a Deadly physical wound as a result of the ritual. This damage can only be healed by rest. This means that each time a priest performs a blood magic ritual, he or she must make the standard test for magic loss. The high risk of magic loss is the only consideration that keeps the Gestalt from performing the Linking ritual more frequently. Rumor has it that Gestalt priests who burn out by performing one too many blood magic rituals often serve as one of the blood sacrifices during the next Linking ritual—as do the runners these burned-out priests hire to help them escape from Aztechnology.

At the present time, only 10 Gestalt members can join together for the Linking ritual. The Gestalt's strange ritual actually combines the 10 separate individuals into one magical entity that appears as a single etheric form. In fact, those who have seen it claim the entity looks like the tzitzimine rumored to be the point of their experiments.

To determine the game stats for the Gestalt entity, add together the stats of all 10 ritual participants and divide by 10. Though this gives the entity only average stats, the Gestalt entity makes up for it in initiate grade, which is simply the sum of all the ritual participants' initiate grades. Because the average Gestalt priest has an initiate grade of 3, the Gestalt entity has enough power to perform magical rituals beyond the aspirations of any individual in the Awakened world (an opponent with an initiate grade of 30 can really make for a bad day in astral space). If he finds it necessary (or just plain fun), the gamemaster can add together the priests' Threat Ratings and give the Gestalt entity an over-the-top number in that area, too.

As something of a side benefit, a Gestalt entity with a material link can locate and kill the subject of that link almost without effort, anywhere on the planet, unless that person is extremely well-masked or protected by extremely powerful magic.

By connecting the auras of the *teocalli*, mana lines, and other powerful sites, the Gestalt is slowly but surely transforming the astral terrain in Aztlan by polluting it with skyrocketing background counts in multiple areas. Some believe that the foveae—localized regions of zero mana—came into existence as a side effect of the Gestalt's activities, though the gamemaster may decide the truth of that rumor.

The Gestalt's long-term goals and big-picture methods lie well beyond the influence of the ordinary runner, but the player characters should be skilled enough to contact the spirits it binds and even interrupt its blood sacrifice rituals and other metamagical experiments. The Gestalt currently confines its disturbing work to the territory of Aztlan, but that country's ongoing power grab, backed by Aztechnology, makes the discovery of the Blood Mage Gestalt only a matter of time.

The Aztec Calendar

Though the Mayan calendar predicted that a new world cycle would begin on December 24th, 2011—the date generally accepted as the birth of the Awakened world—other religions, both past and present, mark other dates for the apocalypse. For example, the group named Winternight (see pp. 23–30) continues to work toward the apocalypse of Norse mythology known as Ragnarok, convinced that the Sixth World is not the new world.

The Aztec calendar also predicts a new world cycle yet to come (see the **Aztlan** sourcebook, pp. 92–94). According to the Aztec calendar, the **Shadowrun** universe inhabits the Fourth Sun, called the Sun of Motion. The Fifth Sun will begin with a cataclysmic earthquake that will destroy the earth and release demons to devour the remaining peoples. As has happened for many of the ancient belief systems in the wake of the Awakening, the Aztec religion is experiencing a resurgence of worshippers, who are finding new and powerful ways to deal with the changes of the so-called Sixth World. The fringe groups surrounding Aztechnology's efforts to remake the world in its own image, if not exactly that of the ancient Aztec empire, have begun to follow the ancient Aztec calendar, beliefs and social structures, and to worship the Aztec gods in an effort to bring about the Fifth Sun. The gamemaster may decide how Aztechnology and Aztlan view these groups, and if the Gestalt falls into the fringe category.

THE BLACK LODGE



>>>>(This file turned up anonymously on Shadowland awhile back. I figured it for a mis-post, intended for the Fantasy Writers' BBS, but the SEND codes leave no doubt that its author meant to send it here. So if this is someone's practical joke masquerading as a literary work, send your stuff to an agent and quit bugging Shadowland; on the off-chance that someone's chosen to tell a scary truth as fiction in order to get it out in the world, here it is.)<<<<<

—Captain Chaos (01:24:43/05-20-57)

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Linnet

They'll be coming for me soon. No place to run, no place to hide ... no choice but to go with them and hope for a shot at escaping. Not likely to happen, of course. Me, an inexperienced mage with enough potential to attract them, but not enough training to make me a threat? How'm I supposed to get away from magicians so powerful they can teleport anywhere in the blink of an eye?

>>>>(Teleportation? This is fiction, all right.)<<<<<

—Balthasar (03:22:13/06-10-57)

My only hope is to fool them. Make them think I'm going along. Get all the training and information I can, then make my break.

Assuming they don't corrupt me in the meantime ...

Her cup of tea had long since gone cold. Linnet gulped at it anyway, hoping the liquid would ease the tightness in her throat. *You need a vacation, Dr. Abe had said. A break from all the skullsweat. Why not take that trip to Scotland you've always talked about? You'll come back rested, refreshed, ready to tackle your thesis with new energy.*



It had sounded so harmless at the time. Two weeks in Scotland, starting in Edinburgh and moving on wherever the spirit moved her, with a side trip to check out the roots of the family tree in Rosslyn. Castles and battle sites and other famous spots; a peek at the Scottish crown jewels. Tourist drek. *Only the tour's gone off the rails. Stop the bus, I want to get off ...*

She should have known there'd be trouble the minute she saw Rosslyn cathedral. She'd seen the spire from the train as it clanked into the station; the city of Rosslyn had been built back in the days when the cathedral stood in the center of town and gave travelers a landmark to steer by. The spire had caught her eye, and she'd felt ... a tickle, that was the only way to describe it. A tickle in the back of her brain, like a mosquito bite inside her skull. The feeling of magic in the air that wasn't hers. So she'd headed straight for the cathedral, keeping the spire in sight the whole way.

>>>>(What is this, a fragging travelogue?)<<<<
—Bung (05:23:43/06-10-57)

The closer she got to the cathedral, the harder it was to keep going. She found herself leaning forward, as if she was walking into the teeth of a high wind. The leaves on the trees stayed still, passersby strolled easily along without so much as a hair stirred by a gentle breeze, yet Linnet strained to keep moving forward. A young mother pushing a stroller looked at her curiously; Linnet ignored her, intent on each step. Only when she stumbled over heavy, gray stone did she realize she had reached the front steps of the cathedral. She leaned against the heavy wooden doors, gathering her breath, then stepped inside.

Dizziness struck her like a wave. The floor seemed to tilt crazily under her feet, and pain shot through her head from sudden, overwhelming sinus pressure. The light seemed to flare, then dim, then flare again. As Linnet fought to keep her balance, she noticed that the few scattered worshippers seated in the pews or walking down the aisles seemed completely unaffected.

Linnet groped her way back outside and down the steps. She walked away from the cathedral as quickly as she could, feeling the pressure and dizzy sickness recede a little with every step. She recognized the source of the power surge that had made her ill—high background count, higher than anything she'd ever experienced. *But I've never felt anything like that before. A count that high should have come from something that happened there ... I should have gotten some echo of it along with all that power. But nothing. Not a fragging thing. No Becket-style murder in the cathedral, no spirit summoning, Nothing. Just power—raw, overwhelming power. I don't understand this at all.*

Several blocks later, weak and shaky, Linnet bought a sandwich in a local tea shop. She ate it slowly, savoring the taste of sharp cheddar and pickles, and considered how she would go about doing a little research on her experience at the cathedral.

That night, she dreamed. She stood on the front steps of the cathedral; in the doorway just ahead of her stood a man in a monk's robe. He was tall, with a bony face, a nose like a hawk's beak, dark eyes, curly dark hair. She saw chain mail gleaming at his throat. He was picking dirt out from under his nails with the

point of a dagger. The dagger had an ivory hilt, and a triangle symbol with a curved bottom carved into it. Linnet couldn't stop watching the dagger as it moved, though it made her feel nauseous to look at it.

"Questions are dangerous," the monk said. He had a smooth voice, like oil on metal. Smooth and cold. "Leave well enough alone. Be wise, and forget your inquiries."

Suddenly Linnet couldn't breathe. She woke up abruptly, buried under blankets. She threw them off in a panic, gulping for air. *Calm down, Linny. It was just a dream. Probably from that cheese-and-pickle sandwich.*

Feeling calmer, Linnet slipped out of bed and got herself a glass of water. Glass in hand, she gazed at her reflection in the bathroom mirror and considered. *Okay—why that dream? Why now? Who was Mr. Monk with the dagger, and why was he warning me off?*

She sipped the water, frowning. *Either I've been drinking way too much dark ale, or somebody somewhere is sending me a message. And if somebody's telling me something with that dream, I want to know who the frag even cares that some mage tourist had a bad reaction to a wild background count.*

She slept dreamlessly for the rest of the night. In the morning, she stopped at a local bookseller and bought a thick volume on Scottish cathedrals.



Back at MIT&M, she dug the book out of her luggage and turned to the chapter on Rosslyn. "Rosslyn cathedral is believed to have been commissioned by Ranald Sinclair, head of the wealthy Sinclair family and Master of the Stonemasons' Guild in Rosslyn. Fragmentary evidence suggests that Sinclair was also a member of the Ancient Order of Freemasons, an esoteric society devoted to the study of the occult." Across from the paragraph was an inset drawing of the symbol Linnet had seen on the dream-dagger: a compass, not a triangle. The caption read, "The compass is the symbol of the Ancient Order of Freemasons, and appears in Masonic temples to this day."

She spent the rest of the afternoon buried in MIT&M's stacks, scrolling through chip after chip of material on Freemasons. As the last light of day faded from the library windows, Linnet scanned her notes and tried to make sense of her discoveries.

Okay. The Ancient Order of Freemasons apparently sprung up from nothing in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century. They were real big in Scotland, with enough money and political clout to commission the building of the cathedral in Rosslyn. Masonic symbols are all over the fragging place in there. And I felt a whisper of power even from the pics in my book—the same thing I felt when I was there.

So what does that tell me? What the frag could possibly be going on?



>>>>(Magical oogies from a photograph. Riiiiiight.)<<<<<
—Buster (11:12:43/06-10-57)

>>>>(You can get stuff from a photograph. It's called emotional resonance—the energy inanimate objects pick up from the people who use them or care about them.)<<<<<
—Dancer (11:32:45/06-10-57)

>>>>(But this chica's talking about pix from a reference book, not a family snapshot. I don't buy it.)<<<<<
—Buster (11:37:58/06-10-57)

>>>>(Maybe it's the cathedral itself, not the picture. How many worship services do you suppose have been held there since the thing was built? That's a lot of emotional resonance built up.)<<<<<
—Mr. Mistik (12:01:23/06-10-57)

Linnet stood in the nave of the Rosslyn cathedral. The monk faced her from a few feet away. Only he wasn't wearing a monk's robe; he'd changed to a snazzy gray pinstripe, a mid-level corporator's second skin.

"You were warned," he said, the thick brogue making the words roll off his tongue like water. As the floor started rumbling, he disappeared. The walls started shaking; Linnet looked up just in time to see the cathedral ceiling falling toward her.

She woke up, huddled next to the wall of her dorm room and gasping for breath. *Okay, Mr. Whoever-you-are; that tears it. That just fragging tears it. I don't scare—and I'm fragging well going to find out what's happening.*

Linnet let things lie for the next few days, keeping a sharp astral eye out for trouble. After four days of nothing, she dug up a book-on-chip about Rosslyn and the Sinclair family. The table of contents listed a chapter titled, "Oliver Sinclair: The Vanishing Heir." Curious, Linnet clicked the entry. As the first page materialized onscreen, she stared at it in shock. Oliver Sinclair's portrait glowed from the reader: bony face, nose like a hawk's beak, dark eyes, curly dark hair. Oliver Sinclair was the man from her nightmare.

Quickly, she scanned the accompanying text. Oliver Sinclair had been an architect and sometime soldier. He had vanished, along with a huge chunk of the family fortune, around 1545. No body was ever found, nor any other trace of him.

Linnet flipped through the rest of the book, gleaning piece after piece of an increasingly strange puzzle. *Simon St. Clair and his five sons fought as mercenary troops for the Scottish king Robert Bruce ... the St. Clair family, fleeing royal persecution in France, fetched up in Scotland around 1308 ... St. Clair's aid helped turn the tide in the Bruce's favor at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314 ... Ranald St. Clair, Simon's youngest son, appears to have been a high-ranking member of the Freemasons, who first appeared in Scotland between 1315 and 1321 ... changing his name to the Anglicized Sinclair as a symbol of his allegiance to his family's new land ...*

Linnet sat up slowly in her chair. *And Ranald commissioned Rosslyn cathedral right around the same time. So how did he and*

the other big kahunas who presumably founded the Masons go from French refugees with nothing but the armor on their backs to rich enough slags to found an esoteric order and build a fragging cathedral? In less than a decade?

The next afternoon, Linnet got her answer.

>>>>(Okay. So far we've got Freemasons, nightmares, a bizarre experience attributed to background count (which doesn't work that way, trust me), a little Scottish history, and an alleged "disappearance." Out of this, the author appears to be fashioning a full-blown conspiracy—Big Bad Magicians are Secretly (fill in the blank). Entertaining? Sure. True? No.)<<<<<
—Magister (12:35:46/06-10-57)

>>>>(If you were a powerful magician—or magical order—intent on taking over the world, you'd make a point of not leaving a trail. So any clues to your existence or your agenda would probably look just as disconnected as the clues in this story. It'd take someone like this Linnet chica to see a pattern in them that no one else does.)<<<<<
—Mr. Mistik (12:45:33/06-10-57)

>>>>(So you believe this?)<<<<<
—Buster (12:51:22/06-10-57)

>>>>(Let's say I don't discount it. If this chica's for real and this post is some kind of warning, couching it as fiction might be the only way to hide it from the people who don't want the truth getting out.)<<<<<
—Mr. Mistik (13:03:46/06-10-57)

She arrived five minutes late for her appointment with Dr. Abraham Barrett. She'd often thought she couldn't have asked for a better thesis advisor; Dr. Abe had unusual tolerance for new and strange ideas, unlike a lot of academic hermetics who thought the sun rose and set on Kano and White Eagle. He'd always said there was still plenty to figure out about magic, and encouraged a select group of his brightest students to explore even the least orthodox possibilities. Linnet figured Dr. Abe would be delighted with her thesis topic: magic in pre-Awakening hermetic orders. She knew it was one of his pet weird theories, and that he didn't dare research it himself because he'd get laughed out of his job. According to conventional wisdom, only crackpots even entertained the possibility of genuine magic existing before the Awakening. So Linnet would do what Dr. Abe couldn't—and get more answers to her own personal mystery in the process. "Dr. Abe, I've decided on—"

"Ah, Linnet." Dr. Abe beamed at her. "Here at last. Good. Someone you ought to meet, my dear. Someone important."

A gentleman in a snazzy gray pinstripe stepped into the office from the lecture room next door. Tall, bony face, nose like a hawk's beak, dark eyes, curly dark hair.

"Persistent and intelligent; useful qualities," he said, favoring Linnet with a chilly smile. "You may be an asset or a liability, Miss Mackay; choose wisely." His voice held a faint trace of a Scottish brogue. Then he waved a hand and the world spun out from under them.

Linnet hit the ground hard, stumbled, and fell to her knees. On cold stone. Cold, gray flagstones with names and dates carved into them. She could feel space all around her. Someone—Oliver Sinclair, the vanishing man?—helped her up. The three of them stood in the cathedral at Rosslyn—Linnet, Sinclair and Dr. Abe. Dimly, Linnet realized that she didn't feel sick. She wondered why.

"Shielding," said Dr. Abe, looking utterly unfazed by the change of scene. He wore his usual expression of gentle good humor, tinged with a little concern that Linnet might have hurt her knees. "We have ways of blocking magical ability when necessary. And at the moment," he said, taking her arm and walking her to the frontmost pew, "it's necessary that you sit and listen to what Master Sinclair has to say." He sat them both down with a warm smile. "You can't concentrate very well if you're fighting off nausea, now can you, Linny? So we've made sure you can't feel the background count."

Or anything else, was the first panicked thought that ran through her mind. *I can't feel my magic anymore. I don't know of any shielding that can do that. What have they done to me? How could they do that?*

Dr. Abe patted Linnet's hand, then gave Sinclair a look of respectful attention ... and something else that Linnet couldn't read. "When Master Sinclair is finished, Linny, you'll have a decision to make. And I'm sure it will be the right one."

After a small silence, Sinclair spoke. "Would you care to guess my age, Miss Mackay?"

Linnet swallowed. "About forty-five, give or take a year."

"Wrong—by not quite seven hundred and fifty years." He smiled, but the smile didn't reach his eyes. "I was born in 1264. At the age of twenty, I joined the Knights Templar. At the age of thirty-one, I had progressed far enough in my studies of the order's esoteric lore to understand the first principles of magic—and to use them." Linnet gaped at him, prompting another cold smile.

"Yes, magic—pre-Awakening magic, as your esteemed professor would have it. I and others in the Templar order learned of its existence, gleaned the fragments of its power from the very elements of life, pried its secrets from a reluctant universe. All at a time when magic was not supposed to exist.

>>>>(Bulldrek. Magic began with the Awakening. End of story.)<<<<<

—Mephisto (16:23:41/06-10-57)

>>>>(She's got a lively imagination, I'll say that for whoever wrote this piece.)<<<<<

—Balthasar (16:34:56/06-10-57)

>>>>(What makes you so sure it's imagination? We know people like this exist. There's all kinds of magical orders and groups springing up every day, and how do us mundanes know what they're really up to? And since all our info about the Awakening and magic comes from these same magicians, how do we know any of what we think we know is true? Huh?)<<<<<

—Norm (17:02:45/06-10-57)

>>>>("Everybody's a liar." The last refuge of the paranoid.)<<<<<
—Cynic (17:14:35/06-10-57)

"Magic has kept me alive, barely aging, for eight centuries. Magic has enabled me to cheat death time and time again, each lifetime bringing myself and my associates closer to our ultimate goal."

>>>>(Don't tell me, let me guess. To rule the world. Lame ...)<<<<<
—Swift (18:00:34/06-10-57)

Linnet tried to laugh. It came out more like a choking squeak. "You're telling me the Knights Templar—who were destroyed in 1307—are still around, always have been, and have an Ultimate Purpose? What—control of zinc prices? A corner on the world banana market?" *Go, Linny. Mouth off to the Super-Villain. Make him nice and ticked at you. After what he pulled to get you here, he's got enough mojo to fry you in a millisecond. If he's what he claims to be instead of just some nut, then you're in waaaay over your head. Nice going.*

"The Templars were no great loss to us," Sinclair said. "An inconvenience to me personally—burning is such an unpleasant experience—but no great setback to our plans. We merely resumed our work in a more hospitable country, under the name of Freemasons."

"Burning," Linnet whispered, rapidly running dates in her head. Sinclair claimed to have been born in 1264. King Phillip of France destroyed the Templars in 1307, and burned their Grand Master at the stake for heresy in 1314 ... when he was fifty years old.

Sinclair was smiling again. Linnet was beginning to hate that smile. "Yes," he said. "I was Jacques de Molay."

"But you *died*. They took your burned corpse down from the pyre. It's a matter of record."

"Magic has many applications that you would call impossible." He smirked. "I am here—you cannot quarrel with that fact."

Linnet couldn't look at Dr. Abe. "So who are you people really?"

"The Black Lodge," Sinclair said softly. "We have existed since the beginning of time. In a hundred different places, in a hundred different ways, we have worked to further our understanding of the principles of magic. We have deciphered mysteries whose existence the so-called Awakened world has yet to suspect; we have used the forces of magic for hundreds of years. Carefully, of course—for much of our history, too open a use of magic would have caused our fellow human beings to turn against us. At first we were not strong enough to survive against a determined onslaught; as we grew in power, we also realized that open conflict with the unenlightened would not serve our ends. We would win the battle, but at the cost of throwing civilization into a new Dark Age. And what could a world sunk in barbarism possibly offer us?"

"So you want to rule the world. Anybody ever tell you what a cliché that is?"

"Linny," said Dr. Abe, frowning.

"We want to *control the world*," said Sinclair. "A fine distinction. Let someone else rule ... or appear to. Meanwhile, we make certain that everything works to benefit the Lodge. The rewards of power, without the drawbacks."

>>>>(Makes sense, in a weird way. If you're the guy who runs the world, everybody knows who to blame when things go bad. Who wants to deal with that hassle? Run things from behind the scenes, and you can make sure you get the power and the money, while your puppets get the credit and the grief for things beyond their control.)<<<<<

—Balthasar (19:21:32/06-10-57)

"So what do you want from me?"

Dr. Abe patted her hand again. "We want you to join us, Linny," he said. His smile looked faintly anxious. "I've persuaded Master Sinclair that your abilities are far too useful to waste. I've been keeping careful note of your progress, you know, and you've always been one of my best students. You'll make a valuable addition to the Boston chapter."

"And if I say no? You kill me, right?"

He looked pained. "Certainly not. A little judicious memory tampering, that's all. You'll hardly notice a thing. Well—a blank spot here and there in response to stimuli that might prompt unlucky recollections, but nothing to worry about. Much."

They know how to wipe memories. Linnet felt cold. Now she understood why no historical source had ever mentioned the Black Lodge. *Anyone who ever found out about it had their memories edited, like a simsense recording.*

And unless I join up, they'll do the same thing to me ...

>>>>(Chapter break right at the cliffhanger. Predictable.)<<<<<
—Swift (19:55:43/06-10-57)

>>>>(I think I might have found the Black Lodge's first try for control. Not the whole world, just a piece of it—Europe.)

The Templars were a crusading order, given the Pope's blessing to safeguard knights on crusade in the Holy Land. At that time, the Holy Mother Church had as much power as the megacorps do today. If the Templar Knights got in good with high Church authorities, they could eventually take over the office of Pope and control the Church in Europe. Control of the Church would have given them control of everything, because no government could stand without the Church's blessing.

In 1302, the French king Philip the Fair quarreled with Pope Boniface VIII over taxation, and sent a band of armed thugs to capture him. The local townspeople freed the Pope, but he died a month later. Philip—and just maybe, the powerful Templars—pushed for and got a French Pope elected: Clement V. They moved the seat of the Church to Avignon, a French city under Philip's control.

Five years later, things went to hell for the Templars. Their buddy King Philip turned against them, arresting them all and seizing their HQ in Paris. Which, by the way, was supposed to hold tons of treasure down in its burial vaults or wine cellars or something. Philip got Clement V to declare the Templars heretics, and gave

all their lands to the Knights of St. John. (They later paid him a hefty kickback, but that's another story.)

The heresy trials dragged on for years until March of 1314, when Grand Master Jacques de Molay was burned at the stake. (Just like the lady says.) Loudly declaring his innocence, Molay called down a curse on Phillip and Clement, saying they would meet him "at God's judgment seat" within a year. Clement died a month later, and Phillip kicked off in November of 1314. Phillip's death was a real surprise; he was in perfect health, and hadn't been jousting or hunting or anything. Just alive one night, dead the next morning.

Any bets that de Molay's curse had some mojo behind it?)<<<<<

—Histobuff (20:46:23/06-10-57)

>>>>(Phillip le Bel died of a cerebral hemorrhage. And even if de Molay could use magic somehow, this Sinclair weirdo couldn't be him. No magic can bring a dead man back to life, or keep someone alive for eight hundred years.)<<<<<

—GBS (21:02:11/06-10-57)

>>>>(No magic you know of.)<<<<<

—Dancer (21:24:55/06-10-57)

>>>>(Isn't it obvious?! I can't believe you're all missing it! Sinclair's a vampire! What else could possibly have lived that long?)<<<<<

—Paleface (02:33:21/06-11-57)

>>>>(Jeez, enough with the vampires already!)<<<<<

—Woodridge (02:40:24/06-11-57)

GAME INFORMATION

With the rise of magic creating the Awakened world, it was inevitable that people would assume the existence of a secret magical organization pulling the strings of events behind the scenes. Like Alamos 20,000, the Black Lodge might simply have come into existence because people expect such an organization to try to take over the world.

The strength of any global threat is a clear focus on its goals, and the Black Lodge possesses a crystal clear vision of its ultimate purpose. Using its vast magical power and influence, the Lodge intends to control the world governments from behind the scenes, wielding secular power without the disadvantages of responsibility. Its widespread membership gives the Black Lodge the capability of affecting everyone on the planet—the ability to control the destiny of humankind and therefore to control the future.

Those who suspect the existence of the Black Lodge (however well- or ill-founded those suspicions might be) believe the Lodge members were able to adapt too quickly to the emergence of magic in the world. The ease with which they grasped the reins of magical power supports the idea that the Lodge was involved in the mystic arts for hundreds of years before the Awakening. The mystics, enchanters and alchemists known to be members of the Bavarian Illuminati, the Freemasons and the Knights Templar are now assumed to have been working for the Black Lodge. The discovery of ancient magical items has further convinced magical

theorists (and paranoid conspiracy theorists) that the Black Lodge existed many years before these other organizations, long known for dabbling in the mystic arts, were ever founded.

Whoever coined the phrase, “absolute power corrupts absolutely” never met a Black Lodge member. Most recruits to this organization are corrupt even before they gain the power offered by the Lodge. Typical recruits usually seek the influence granted to members of the Lodge in order to grab personal power and pursue private vendettas. The Black Lodge can twist the purest of intentions with the temptation of “the end justifies the means.”

USING THE BLACK LODGE

The Black Lodge recruits its members from many mundane, secret and semi-secret societies in the world whose members traditionally practice some type of mysticism. These groups include the Freemasons of Europe and the Americas, the medicine societies of the Native American Nations, the Japanese ninja and the Thuggee of India. The awakening of magic in the Sixth World broadened the Lodge’s recruiting base to include universities and colleges that offer advanced magical-studies programs. The Black Lodge recruits mages and shamans as well as adepts of all kinds, though adepts cannot progress beyond the fourth tier of the organization. The Black Lodge never recruits elves.

The Black Lodge exists as a unique form of magical group (see **Magical Groups**, pp. 54–61, **Grimoire II**). It has established a tiered group structure in which each sub-group, or lodge, maintains its own astral contact and consists of no more than seven members at any time. One of those seven members leads the lodge and is also a member of a lodge of the next tier, thereby linking together the entire organization through shared astral contacts. The fifth tier, the Black Council, maintains the astral contact for the Black Lodge magical group. The Penultimate Master leads the Black Council. Of the seven members of the fifth tier, only the Penultimate Master does not share an astral contact with a lower-tier group.

Each tier’s members belong to one of three initiate grades. From lowest to highest, these grades use the titles of Novice, Warden and Master. Grade 0 initiates are known as Apprentice. If the leader of a lodge is hermetic, his title is Judge; if shamanic, Guide. The following lodge names are simply the current incarnation; throughout history the Black Lodge has taken on many titles.

The fifth tier consists of the Black Council, formally known as the Lodge of Merlin. The seven members of this lodge have achieved initiate grades of 13 or higher. Themselves led by the Penultimate Master, each member of the Black Council leads a fourth-tier lodge, known as the Lodges of Morgana. Members of the Lodges of Morgana have achieved initiate grades of 10 to 12, and each member leads a third-tier lodge, known as the Lodges of Mordred. The Lodges of Morgana coordinate the Black Lodge’s operations on each continent. Initiates of the Lodges of Mordred have achieved grades 7 to 9, and each member leads a second-tier lodge, known as the Lodges of Rasputin. The Lodges of Mordred run operations in every country. Members of the second-tier lodges have achieved initiate grades of 4 to 6, and each member of the Lodges of Rasputin leads a first-tier lodge, known as the Lodges of Nostradamus. Members of the Lodges of Rasputin direct the Black Lodge’s operations in cities all across the

world. Members of the first tier, the Lodges of Nostradamus, have achieved initiate grades of 1 to 3, and, along with an unlimited number of Grade 0 initiates, serve as foot soldiers for the Black Lodge. The tier structure gives the Black Lodge control over 1,333 lodges and 9,331 initiates of Grades 1–13 and higher—a truly vast web of influence.

When members of different lodges meet, individuals are referred to by the name of their lodge and the title associated with their grade of initiation. This allows the members to accurately track the current configuration of the Black Lodge and identify each other by initiate grade and sphere of control. Internally, each lodge may use slightly different titles to reflect its country of origin and unique culture. Gamemasters are encouraged to invent distinctive names for all members of the Black Lodge that the player characters encounter in order to muddy the issue of the exact lodge or initiate grade to which the character belongs. For example, a Warden of a Lodge of Mordred based in the UCAS might hold the title, “Knight of the Weeping Cross,” while a Warden of a Lodge of Mordred based in Japan might be called, “White Crane Master.”

The Black Lodge recruits heavily from existing organizations, and many of its new members hold high ranks in those secret societies. All new members, however, enter the ranks of the Black Lodge as Apprentices of a Lodge of Nostradamus, regardless of their existing initiate grade, if any. Magically active recruits must accept the stricture of not using the advantages conferred by their existing initiate grade in service of the Black Lodge, and must accept the Lodge’s judgment regarding their progression as initiates. While a Black Lodge member would treat a high-ranking member of the Freemasons with all appropriate respect when associating with him in the Mason’s official capacity, the Mason might receive a rude awakening at his treatment on the lowest rung of the Black Lodge ladder.

Its recent success in recruiting Apprentices from college campuses implies to some that the Black Lodge actually serves as nothing but a tool for UCAS presidential candidate Rozilyn Hernandez and the Illuminates of the New Dawn. Others theorize that Ms. Hernandez split from the Black Lodge to form the Illuminates of the New Dawn and is recruiting promising mages and shamans who would normally join the Black Lodge. (For more information on the Illuminates of the New Dawn, see the **Shadowrun** adventure set **Super Tuesday**.) Such a recruitment war offers plentiful opportunities for the gamemaster to introduce the Black Lodge into a campaign setting.

RULES

Certain elements of the Black Lodge organization and operations makes it unique among magical societies, particularly those trying to take over the world. As always, however, the gamemaster decides what is true for his or her campaign.

One of the most striking aspects of the Black Lodge is that it shows an unexpected strength of numbers and degree of loyalty (as demonstrated by its multiple astral contacts) for a magical organization, considering that magic only emerged in 2011. These considerations give credence to the Lodge’s claim that it has, in one form or another, been studying the nature and use of mana for thousands of years.

The Black Lodge's meeting houses, its leader, and the level of its influence in world affairs also makes the organization unusual among its kind.

Chantries

Unlike many secret societies, which meet in out-of-the-way places or highly secure private estates, the Black Lodge maintains its meeting houses, called chantries, in ordinary buildings located in ordinary neighborhoods. The chantry serves as a physical location that lodges from several tiers can use as a place to gather both socially and for Lodge business. Members of the Lodge sometimes live in the chantries, most often the highest-grade initiate associated with that chantry, who is responsible for masking the dramatically high background counts that build up around these sites from the repeated use of powerful magic. Because these sites tend to be major focal points of Black Lodge activity, they provide wonderful locations for adventure and intrigue.

The Georgetown chantry, a modest brownstone in the Georgetown section of the Federal District of Columbia, for example, serves as the meeting house for a lodge from each of the four tiers. The building's modest exterior is deceptive, as it is protected by multiple layers of magical and physical defenses, including several powerful spirits and elementals. Several of the magicians who belong to this meeting house also teach magical studies at Georgetown University, and they often recruit new members from the student population. The leader of the Lodge of Merlin, American Continent, lives in the Georgetown chantry.

The chantries in Scotland possess an unusually high background count. The location of the chantry used by the Lodge of Merlin remains a closely guarded secret, but it most likely is in Scotland or continental Europe.

The Penultimate Master

The Penultimate Master practices magic at a level unknown to the rest of the Awakened world. He or she may wield such power simply as a function of an extraordinarily high initiate level, or as a result of the ancient rituals the Black Lodge has perfected over time. The Penultimate Master becomes what the Lodge calls a pure magician, and is no longer limited by the ordinary constraints of magic—to an observer, the Penultimate Master seems to be able to manipulate magic to do what he or she wants, when he wants. The Master no longer needs to follow a magical discipline, such as hermetic or druidic. He can summon spirits, elementals and watchers and cast any spell. He does, however, lose any totem bonuses (and disadvantages) and any other benefits or hindrances according to which ordinary magicians practice magic. The main restriction on the Penultimate Master's power is that he must cast all his spells, including conjuring and summoning, from ancient texts. The spells the Penultimate Master casts have a Force of power beyond the comprehension of player characters, and many create bizarre side-effects. "Pure" magicians are unique to the Black Lodge, probably as a result of its tiered lodge structure and history.

Members of the Lodge of Merlin take the names, mannerisms and physical appearances of historical figures known to have practiced the arcane arts. For example, the current Penultimate Master

is, for all intents and purposes, the Scotsman named Oliver Sinclair, member of a wealthy family of French refugees who pledged their loyalty to the Scottish king Robert Bruce in 1308. The gamemaster can choose from any number of such people from any period in history and any culture to convince the player characters that they are dealing with an unknown, unimaginably powerful force. Because the countries on the North American continent lack the rich history of other continents, the American lodge leaders tend to default to Scottish history for the magical leaders they imitate.

World Influence

The organizations under the direct control of the Black Lodge and those over which it wields influence span the globe. Its members serve corporations of all sizes, including the megacorps; control or heavily influence governments of all types; run charitable organizations and churches; lead civic organizations and hospitals, street gangs and sports teams, shadowrunners and arms manufacturers—the tendrils of the Black Lodge have infiltrated and established a chokehold on nearly every aspect of life in the Awakened world.

As one of its primary objectives, the Black Lodge has sworn to destroy the elven nations. The Black Council views the elven nations as rival organizations seeking the same goals, using very similar means. This singlemindedness is symptomatic of the sole reason why the Lodge has so far failed to achieve world domination: the personal goals and fears of the members of the Black Lodge so often conflict with acting in unison toward a common objective that the organization's power is greatly diluted. It is the Lodge's concern with the Tir nations, for example, that has allowed the Illuminates of the New Dawn to out-recruit them on college campuses.

Typical Black Lodge

(See pp. 54–60, **Grimoire II**, for definitions of terms used.)

Name: Lodge of Mordred, Confederated American States

Leader: Joseph Willis "J.W." Ellis, Novice Initiate of the Lodge of Morgana, American Continent

Type: Initiatory/Conspiratorial (protect and promote the Black Lodge's interests)

Members: 7

Limitations: Black Lodge initiates. No elves.

Strictures: Attendance. Exclusive Membership. Oath. Obedience. Secrecy.

Resources/Dues: Luxury. No dues.

Patron: The Black Council

Customs: Members of this lodge and all lodges below it in the tiered hierarchy are recruited from what remains of the "Southern North American gentry," a definition that is becoming broader with each passing year. Expected to act in the manner of civil gentlemen and gentlewomen at all times, all members of this Grand Lodge practice hermetic magic. This lodge is responsible for coordinating all Black Lodge activities within the Confederated American States.

THE HUMAN NATION



>>>>>(This particular bit of paranoia doesn't seem meant for public consumption—assuming it's legit. (Not that any nasty thing those goons get up to would surprise me, but let's face it—sometimes the Bad Guy really is just a bunch of two-bit thugs.) If this file *is* legit, then we have a lot more to worry about than the good ol' boy HP and their buddies, and the world is a whole lot scarier than most people think. (And more power to the mole who scammed this thing and leaked it to Shadowland.)

Scan it and decide for yourselves—and let's hope the Human Nation is just some paranoid's nightmare.)<<<<<

—Captain Chaos (09:12:36/05-25-57)

>>>>>(What, an organization whose charter explicitly calls for the destruction of all "metahuman scum" isn't frightening enough?!)<<<<<

—Eponine (08:11:46/06-17-57)

The Human Nation represents the international fraternity of productive members of society. Every one of you is serving humanity in its hour of greatest need. Be proud—be strong—stay true to Pure Humanity, and we can remove the metahuman blight from society. With time and patience, all things will come to pass.

We want a world in which human beings can live free, where our children can grow up in a safe environment, where every citizen can walk the streets without taking his life in his hands. We will achieve this goal, if we work harder and smarter than the forces who oppose us.

For far too many of us, the Awakened world is a world of fear. Every day, hatred destroys property, lives, and the chance for peace. Where to lay the blame for these troubles? On society at large? On the decline of personal morality and responsibility? On some intractable flaw in human nature?



Of all the possible answers, the third is the closest to the truth; but it points at the wrong culprit. It is not flawed human nature that causes the problems of the world, but flawed metahuman nature. Facts, statistics and common-sense evidence clearly show where the blame falls.

In the years since the Awakening, government welfare agencies, social workers and others charged with seeing to the well-being of ordinary citizens have learned that the largely metahuman populations they serve have a consistently negative impact on the society around them. Take, for example, the case of orks. According to the 2050 census, 32 percent of all births in the UCAS and CAS are orks. Of these, 20 percent will die before they reach five years old. Fifty percent will have served time in jail at least once by the time they reach age twenty. Only 5 percent will attend college, and 2 percent of these will drop out well before graduation. Fewer than 1 percent of all orks will end up in managerial positions, and an estimated 63 percent of orks in the UCAS and CAS are either SINless or on welfare.

>>>>(So metahumans are the big threat? Ooh, I'm scared. Ma and Pa ork from Peoria comin' to kick my hoop!)<<<<<<
—Gamera (11:24:05/06-17-57)

>>>>(What the frag is this clown slotting? 32 percent ork? Seattle's pretty representative, and the ork population there runs 19 percent max.)<<<<<<
—Maxinations (13:01:42/06-17-57)

>>>>(Orks give birth in litters of four to eight. Go to Puyallup sometime and look inside the buildings. You won't believe how many kids can fit in one rowhouse. Also, a lot of the orks born don't survive long enough to get counted in a census, and a lot of them are SINless.)<<<<<<
—Landry (13:05:11/06-17-57)

Even metahumans from comfortable backgrounds are 50 percent more likely than humans to end up in jail or on welfare. According to studies conducted by the Lone Star Corporation's rehabilitation department, metahumans of all kinds are twice as likely to show signs of antisocial personality disorder—specifically, an inability to connect cause and effect that makes them difficult to rehabilitate. Most violent crimes in this country are committed by metahumans, and the only effective means of protecting society from these miscreants is to keep them in jail permanently. But how many jails can the rest of us afford to build and maintain indefinitely, draining the resources of government at every level?

>>>>(Do they ever think maybe orks keep rolling people because they send us back to the streets without telling us what else we can do? If you rob people because you got six kids to feed and no job, and they send you back after a year in jail without anything changing 'cept the kids getting hungrier, you'll go right back to stealing.)<<<<<<
—Lex (14:21:33/06-18-57)

>>>>(People like you are exactly the problem. Get a real job instead of logging on to Shadowland all the time, and maybe your kids won't get so hungry.)<<<<<<
—Dark Father (14:26:21/06-18-57)

>>>>(Right. You'd give a job to an ork with a record. Sure you would.)<<<<<<
—Lex (14:30:11/06-18-57)

>>>>(And whose fault is it that you've got a record? If you'd gotten a legitimate job, starting at minimum wage and working your way up, instead of expecting to be handed the world ...)<<<<<<
—Dark Father (14:35:46/06-18-57)

>>>>(Why don't they just get off their hoops and inherit their money like the rest of us, right?)<<<<<<
—Smiley (14:39:55/06-18-57)

It is easy to be misled by pity, to want to help metahumans raise themselves from the gutter. But all such help is wasted effort. Biology makes it so.

To give just one example, orks and trolls are born with frontal-lobe brain damage that inhibits their intelligence and their ability to control their tempers. As the ork or troll grows, these areas suffer additional damage from pinprick hemorrhages, lesions and strokes, killing off key cells and further reducing mental acuity. With increased muscle mass and the growth of tearing teeth, metahuman children as young as ten suddenly gain the physical strength of an adult human weight-lifter, combined with the mind of an eight-year-old.

When metahumans first appeared, some believed they were mutations caused by nuclear radiation. We have since discovered that the mutation was a magical phenomenon, but one fact remains the same: metahumans are genetic mutations of human beings.

In every enlightened nation on this planet, blood tests are required for marriage so that a couple who may be carriers of genetic malformations or diseases can be counseled on whether or not to have children. Anyone affected by a genetic abnormality is strictly advised not to pass it on, lest the next generation suffer from it. If we have the wisdom to avoid birthing humans afflicted with such terrible scourges as sickle-cell anemia or Tay-Sachs disease, why do we not have the sense to treat metahumanity in the same way?

Forty-eight percent of metahumans say they would prefer human children, who will not have to suffer their parents' disadvantages. Unfortunately for them, they have no choice in the matter. But human parents have that choice. The Human Nation sponsors Informed Parenting clinics at hospitals around the world, where an expectant human mother can receive early testing to discover if her child will be born metahuman. Parents are counseled on the kind of life a metahuman child can expect, and how the birth of metahuman offspring will change their own lives.

>>>>(This is a complete crock. Humans don't give birth to metahumans, or vice versa. The only metahuman offspring of

human parents are the ones who were born human before UGE, and goblinized in 2021. We still don't know exactly why that happened, but every generation since then has bred true. Humans breed humans, orks breed orks, elves breed elves. Anything else is bulldrek.)<<<<<<

—Dr. Bones (02:35:43/06-19-57)

>>>>>(You sound awful defensive, Doc. You said yourself we don't know why goblinization happened. Maybe there's other stuff we don't know about—like metahuman mutations lurking in human cells, just waiting for the right stimulus to activate them. They might not show up for years, like the AIDS virus a few decades back.)<<<<<<

—Truthseeker (03:01:35/06-19-57)

>>>>>("Metahuman mutations lurking in human cells?" Nice choice of words. You'll pardon my attempt to confuse you with the facts—like the *fact* that no birth of a metahuman to a human, or vice versa, has been recorded since the post-goblinization generation hit breeding age.)<<<<<<

—Dr. Bones (03:06:32/06-19-57)

>>>>>(No recorded birth. I rest my case.)<<<<<<

—Truthseeker (03:08:11/06-19-57)

>>>>>(Ignorance and prejudice win again. Why am I not surprised?)<<<<<<

—Eponine (03:21:22/06-19-57)

>>>>>(So these people run clinics at hospitals. I'd love to get a sneak peek at the incidence of miscarriages by metahuman mothers at those hospitals. I can see it now; friendly Nurse Ratchet says, 'Here's your morning-sickness medication, and next thing you know you're doubled over with cramps and bleeding.)<<<<<<

—Offred (05:11:36/06-19-57)

>>>>>(Wouldn't it be easier to introduce a sterilizing agent into the water going into Puyallup, or the Cascades, or maybe the Tir?)<<<<<<

—Sonic Sal (05:23:21/06-19-57)

>>>>>(That's messing with serious biological hazards. If it affects metahumans, chances are it'll get humans too. We share 98 percent of our genes with chimpanzees—metahumans are even closer to humans. They're humans with one altered gene out of 32 chromosomes—a subspecies, able to interbreed.

Interesting that nobody's mentioned the high elf birth rate. About one in six elf pregnancies are twins.)<<<<<<

—The Smiling Bandit (Strikes Again!/Ha-Ha-Ha)

We recognize the trauma a mother feels when she learns that her unborn child will be an ork or troll, born with irreversible brain damage and unlikely to live past forty or fifty. We have made it our mission to spare human women this painful experience, while simultaneously lowering the percentage of undesirables in the general population.

>>>>>(Undesirables. <Shudder> Eugenics, anyone?)<<<<<<

—Eponine (07:54:46/06-19-57)

>>>>>(Once again, humans don't give birth to metahumans.)<<<<<<

—Dr. Bones (08:12:24/06-19-57)

>>>>>(Maybe they just don't want people to know.)<<<<<<

—Truthseeker (08:15:45/06-19-57)

>>>>>("They" who? The Grand Poobahs of the Great Metahuman Conspiracy?)<<<<<<

—Dr. Bones (08:17:46/06-19-57)

>>>>>(So you admit it exists!)<<<<<<

—Truthseeker (08:20:33/06-19-57)

>>>>>(Oh, for ... forget it.)<<<<<<

—Dr. Bones (08:23:45/06-19-57)

The plight of unwanted metahuman children is particularly pitiable. Teen pregnancy rates among metahumans are approximately equal to those among humans, but multiple births among orks mean that a single pregnancy can result in four or more unwanted offspring. The only cure for this epidemic is easy, affordable birth control.

According to a recent Gallup poll, 59 percent of orks and trolls do not want to have children, but continue to breed because they cannot afford the exorbitant price of effective birth control measures. Everyone recognizes the problem, but no one is doing anything about it except the Human Nation. Our Informed Parenting clinics offer sterilizations and abortions at rates even an ork welfare mother can afford.

>>>>>(Sterilize the meta girls, right? Get 'em while they're young and confused. Tell them you're doing it to help them, and by the time they realize that maybe they'd like a family, it's too late.)<<<<<<

—Tish Bite (11:22:21/06-19-57)

>>>>>(If the children would end up starving or being abused because Mom didn't really want them, maybe they're better off not being born.)<<<<<<

—Malthus (11:30:11/06-19-57)

>>>>>(I know lots of ork guys who're considering getting snipped. Don't have to worry about knocking anyone up, don't have to roll anything on, she doesn't get chemically messed up on any kind of pill. 100 percent effective. Like the subway ads say, sometimes you wish you were only shooting blanks.)<<<<<<

—Darren B. (12:06:17/06-19-57)

>>>>>(Didn't some private organization buy out Gallup a few years back? Wonder who that might've been.)<<<<<<

—Carousel (12:32:10/06-19-57)

>>>>>(It'd be easy to frag up metahumans if these slags got control of a whole hospital, not just the baby wing. They open a charity hospital in a poor, mostly meta area of town. They get so many cases and are so understaffed that sometimes people get treated just a little too late. Or the drugs get mixed up. Drek happens, you know? So much the better if some metahumans catch on to the fact that too many people are dying and go for payback. "Ork gang fire-bombs hospital; vidcast at 2300.")<<<<<

—Tomtom (14:12:33/06-19-57)

>>>>>(You're loco, Tomtom. If these people are the secret force behind Humanis, why are they telling anybody that? Besides, Humanis is nothing. Yeah, some countries aren't so hot on metahumans. But we've made great strides in the past ten years. Humanis got roasted in Berlin, of all places. Even the CAS has cleaned up its atrocious metahuman rights record. Every runner I talk to has one or two metahumans on his team, and even the corps are integrating. It just takes time.)<<<<<

—Ramp (14:16:09/06-19-57)

>>>>>(Yeah, the Big Eight megacorporations are real fragging paragons of metahuman rights. Saeder-Krupp and Ares have the best records, and that's not saying much. Their hiring patterns vary with local politics.)<<<<<

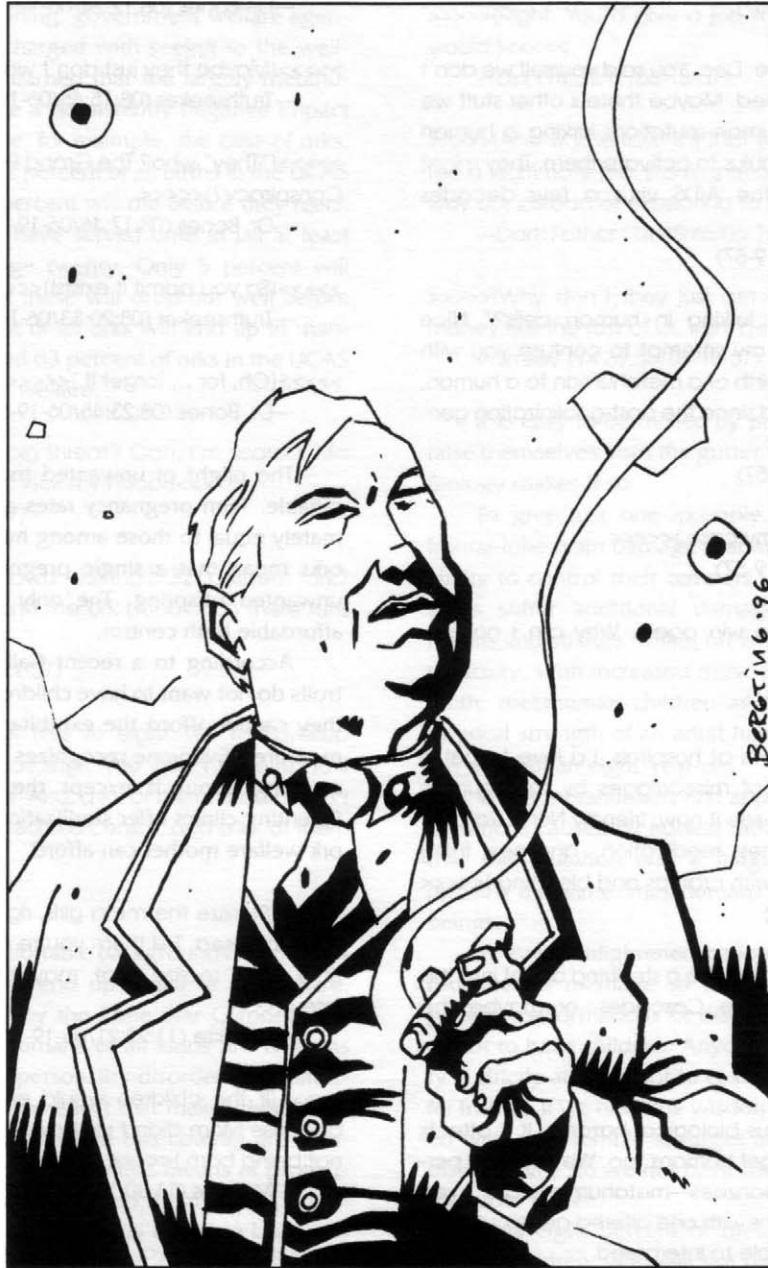
—Locke (14:21:33/06-19-57)

>>>>>(If the Human Nation really runs all the Humanis-based movements, all it takes is one HP member with loose lips to give folks like the Sons of Sauron a new name to strike at. Maybe the HP "mole" who supposedly leaked this thing to Shadowland is really from MOM or ORC. Maybe he made it up to gain support.)<<<<<

—Moriarty (14:45:22/06-19-57)

>>>>>(They exist. Governor Victor Allenson followed their orders in 2039. Do you really think the worldwide Night of Rage was a coincidence?)<<<<<

—Anonymous (15:00:12/06-19-57)



>>>>>(I ain't never hearda Human Nation before, but there's someone pulling HP's strings. I did a run on Humanis once. Didn't do much prep, cuz I figured 'em for a posse of hicks and skinheads. My mistake. Four of us went in—only reason three of us came back out was cuz our shaman saved our butts. Right before things went to drek, I got a quick eyeball at their matrix. You wouldn't believe how much cred they get from how many places. The Japanese government, magic groups, even some names I heard in trid stories about terrorists. They can use all that cred to make sure the metas do real bad, y'know? And ain't no way a buncha hicks and rednecks'd rate this much attention. If these Human Nation hoopheads are the guys behind it all, we better start worryin'.)<<<<<

—Stainless (18:03:35/06-19-57)

Orks and trolls look threatening to normal humans, and the human instinct to recoil from their ugly appearance provides a certain safeguard. Elves and dwarfs are a different story. Both of these races, especially elves, look more like human beings; as a result,

many humans mistakenly think of them as normal people. Though it is true that proportionately fewer of them commit violent crimes, elves and dwarfs remain a threat to pure humans. Across the globe, they have created their own "countries" on land that once belonged to humans. Worse, more and more corporations are promoting them to responsible positions, not realizing that their longer lifespans will enable them to keep advancing up the corporate ladder even as generations of humans die off. We may wake up one day soon to discover that humans, who created civ-

ilization on Earth, are no longer the majority—have, in fact, become slaves to longer-lived metahumans. For this reason, the Human Nation opposes so-called “affirmative action” in all its forms. The metahumans will not be so kind to us when our grandchildren are the minority. For the sake of future generations, pure humans must remain in control.

>>>>(This guy’s got a point. Species can go extinct, including humans. It’s only natural to watch out for our children.)<<<<<<
—Dark Father (04:08:46/06-21-57)

>>>>(Subspecies. We’re all human, we’re just different.)<<<<<<
—Lustin’ Prussian (04:12:11/06-21-57)

Magicians are at the highest risk for producing metahuman children. Because the trigger for the metahuman genome is a magic-rich environment, an active magician can do irreparable damage to a fetus, bringing out a genetic potential that might have remained latent otherwise. We therefore advise all magically active humans to refrain from actively using magic during pregnancy. Ideally, they should not have children at all.

>>>>(To save the magickers from this peril, of course, they’ve all got to be registered so the helpful counselors can find them. Plus mandatory testing, so no one slips through the cracks. 2084?)<<<<<<
—Constanzia (04:19:23/06-21-57)

>>>>(This claim is based on inconclusive data from CalTech—which, incidentally, received a gift of 51 million nuyen from Zebulon Kroger in 2053. Kroger is executive VP of a pro-human policlub called Focus on Humanity.

It may interest you to know that H.R. 366, the “Mage Registration Act,” will be introduced into the UCAS House of Representatives this fall. The Technocrat and Archconservative parties are all for it ... as are the Humanis Policlub, the Sword, the Knights of Jesus, the Pure Human League, and the Legion. If Human Nation really pulls the strings of all of those groups, they’re doing a lot more than pregnancy counseling.)<<<<<<
—Anonymous (05:01:32/06-21-57)

Studies at Johns Hopkins University show that children of different metatypes actively fear one another as early as two years old. At such young ages, the psychological damage from fear can be irreparable, causing phobias or scarring the child for life. Once again, the Human Nation is taking active steps to protect our vulnerable young. We are working to segregate nursery and elementary schools so that our children may grow up among their own people, free of traumatic encounters with metahumans.

In the UCAS, 113,000 cases of goblinization-related phobias are reported among pure humans each year. In the CAS, the number is 86,000. In Japan, where metahumans are separated from the general public, the number dwindles to 2,400.

>>>>(“Separated?” Try “shoved in a cargo hold and shipped to Yomi while you’re still twisting in pain from kawaru.” These bastards

have no idea what it’s like. Packed together, living in anarchy, just waiting to get back at the breeders because they made you live in hell. I’m living for the day when the Tirs declare war on Japan for what it’s done to the metas.)<<<<<<

—Fury (10:16:11/06-21-57)

>>>>(The Tirs are not going to declare war on Japan, or Aztlan, or Quebec, or any other place where metahumans get a raw deal. You think the elves give a frag about all the poor, abused orks and dwarfs and trolls? They have their own dirty laundry to worry about. Don’t wait for someone else to save you, chumley—do what you can now. Protest peacefully, so they can’t use your actions to “prove” how naturally violent metahumans are.)<<<<<<

—Cassandra (10:38:01/06-21-57)

>>>>(That’s just what these guys want. They want us to send e-mail to Congress and march and feel good about ourselves, so that we won’t take real action to stop them committing genocide. Sterilization and eugenics! They’re trying to breed us out and keep tabs on the magickers because they can! Magically active people are 1 percent of the population. They have no influence on voting patterns. These people will sterilize them next, because mages, “as everyone knows,” cause trauma because people are scared of them! We need to get off of our hoops and start hitting back before we’re all dead.)<<<<<<

—Fury (10:44:21/06-21-57)

>>>>(So four billion humans are going to get together and kill off all the metahumans because some bogus studies and a stupid policlub tell them to. Sure.)<<<<<<

—Billabong (11:10:21/06-21-57)

>>>>(All they have to do is “just follow orders” when the time comes. Slot a fragging history chip if you’re too lazy to pick up a book.)<<<<<<

—Fury (11:12:44/06-21-57)

>>>>(I get the Nazi reference, OK? The Nazis failed. They went down because when the world saw what they’d been doing, the Allied Powers beat them into submission. This is the information age, boy. Any drek like that goes on, the media will jump on top of it and every government on Earth will take steps to stop it. Remember when pure-human goons tried to take over Santiago? KSAF picked up on it, and it was all over the trids by evening.)<<<<<<

—Billabong (11:16:54/06-21-57)

>>>>(Sure, the Nazis failed, but they got pretty damn far before anyone stopped them. From a single starting point in Germany, they managed to take over most of Europe and a chunk of Northern Africa, using clunky 1940s communications tech and weapons. Humanis has a hundred million members worldwide; if they, or this Human Nation crowd, have slipped ringers into enough governments and corps, they could pull off the Nazis’ trick and more, with wiz 2050s technology to back it up. The Nazis got what, fifty countries starting from one? Imagine if they’d started

with fifty. Plus, metas make easy targets. You can pick an elf or an ork out of any crowd.)<<<<<<

—Tomtom (12:00:33/06-21-57)

>>>>>(It doesn't matter if you shoot or lock up male metas. In a sense, males are expendable. In a normal war, the winning side kills off some of the loser's men, conquers their country, rapes or marries their women, and then assimilates the children. So the losing group survives, albeit genetically watered down a bit. If you really want to get rid of a group, you slaughter women and children. If the Nazis had won in 1945 and been overthrown by 1950, it wouldn't have mattered to the Jews. They'd have been gone.)<<<<<<

—Offred (12:14:22/06-21-57)

Remember what you've learned from this pamphlet, and don't forget to talk about these issues with your human friends and neighbors who haven't yet joined the fight. Remember, however, that the Human Nation *must remain secret*. If the metahumans learn our name, if they find out who we are, they will take steps to stop our vital work. *Don't let this happen*. You have been privileged to learn the truth; guard it well, and do whatever you can to advance the cause of the human race.

>>>>>(Well, heck, I'm convinced. Time to go butcher the dwarfs downstairs.)<<<<<<

—Bung (15:12:17/06-21-57)

>>>>>(I just had a frightening thought. Lots of metahumans run the shadows, right? Only job in the world where somebody without a SIN—like plenty of metahumans—can make a big wad of cred, and the Johnson doesn't even have to look at him twice. So what's the life expectancy of a shadowrunner? If you're good and you're smart, you might survive awhile. If you're former military or corp, you might have some skills or old contacts, or maybe even decent cyber.

But the poor saps trying to work their way up from nothing? The ones who can't even read the "security alert" sign? The ones who can't drop a few hundred nuyen for ballistic armor, let alone cyberware? There's a reason you see so many ork mercenaries as extras in action sims. They've got an automatic weapon and nowhere to go.

What if the Human Nation—or Humanis, or whoever—is secretly encouraging metahumans to shadowrun? Not only do fewer metahumans live to have kids, but the metas get blamed for all the damage shadowrunners do. If they've got corporate donations like Stainless said awhile back, they can hire cheap runners themselves, give them bad information, and set them up as patsies. Tell them to cack a celebrity, invite the media, and everyone who turns on the trid sees their favorite simstar brutally murdered by metahumans.

Maybe I should shut up now.)<<<<<<

—Death Angel (15:55:31/06-21-57)

GAME INFORMATION

The Human Nation is a new player in the anti-metahuman fervor gripping the Awakened world. The organization's origins remain a mystery to those who watch international threats, to other anti-metahuman organizations and even to conspiracy theorists. Originally thought to be an arm of Alamos 20,000 (see pp. 9-16), it is increasingly clear that they are simply the most recent entry in the crowded field of hate-mongering. The most prominent rumor suggests the Human Nation was founded in the early 1900s by upper-class individuals who were "tired of the rich getting pushed around by the masses." The apparently random nature of the organization's membership supports the theory that it grew by members passing the torch to their heirs and by recruiting promising newcomers. The sheer number of anti-metahuman organizations in the world makes it extremely difficult to distinguish a Human Nation member from a Humanis Policlubber or a member of the more chaotic Alamos 20K.

The Human Nation seems to function much like a fraternity or brotherhood; its rich, powerful members do not attend regularly scheduled or organized meetings. When they need to discuss something as a group, they usually do so in a social setting such as a large party, business dinner or political reception. This group sponsors no openly hate-motivated activities, but the individual members do what they feel needs to be done to push the Human Nation agenda: the extermination of metahumanity and of the poor, both of whom are dragging down the process of human evolution. Rumor has it that members of the Human Nation greatly influenced the creation of Yomi Island, the walled enclave to which all Japanese citizens who goblinized were sent, a rumor that, if true, gives credence to the idea that the Human Nation is a Japanese-based group with major power-holders in the Japanese government and in Japan-based megacorporations.

The backlash of bad press and anti-Japanese sentiment that followed the establishment of the Yomi compound proved the existence of a large group of humans in favor of metahuman rights. Rather than continuing to push for assembly-line slaughter, the Human Nation now recognizes that it must build up slowly to overt violence and so has been focusing primarily on instituting eugenics programs, waiting for the time when multiple governments will enact the laws the Human Nation proposes and endorse the wholesale massacre of metahumans, their sympathizers and other humans not worth saving.

USING THE HUMAN NATION

The Human Nation is a unique type of anti-metahuman organization. Unlike more social groups, such as the Humanis Policlub or organizations with a hidden agenda like those groups belonging to the Alamos family, the Human Nation seems to consist solely of powerful individuals gradually remaking the world into a purely human and elite enclave. Because they are more focused on a specific, potentially attainable goal, these individuals represent a very threatening antagonist.

The Human Nation philosophy reflects the social Darwinism of the early 1900s in the United States and Western Europe. Newly wealthy individuals felt that their success proved Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest; because they adapted and learned

to use the world for their gain, they were inherently better than the “masses” whose efforts allowed them to get rich. In their opinion, the human masses that did most of the work were only one step above animals. With the Awakening and the emergence of metahumanity, the Human Nation knew it could not sit idly by and watch goblinized freaks take over the humans’ natural evolutionary destiny. Though it was determined to act, many other anti-metahuman groups beat the Human Nation to the punch and took the forefront, including the chaos-oriented Alamos 20,000. The outraged reaction of both humans and metahumans and the movement to enact metahuman rights showed the Human Nation the risks of indulging in knee-jerk anti-metahuman activities.

The Human Nation does not advertise its membership, and so the gamemaster can choose anyone possessing wealth and/or power in his or her ongoing campaign to be a member of the Human Nation. It can be someone the runners have known for a long time or someone new to the campaign—a well-established fixer, the arms dealer the player characters prefer to deal with, a newsworthy politician, an international businesswoman, the eccentric decker they recently provided with physical security, the head of the local arcology the runners hit last week—the list is practically infinite. All Human Nation members have at least one characteristic in common, however; they will be fiercely anti-metahuman, and will practically ooze an attitude of arrogant superiority toward those around them.

The gamemaster can use other anti-metahuman organizations as cover for members of the Human Nation. Many members claim they belong to the Humanis Policlub just to keep others from looking too closely at their personal politics, and others belong to various Alamos organizations just to keep an eye on the activities of the competition. In a new approach to its usual low-profile strategy, the Human Nation has decided to solidify its claim to what it believes is its rightful place, and to bring along others it deems worthy. The Human Nation recently embarked on a recruitment war to gain for its cause some of the world’s best and brightest minds, and the richest and best-connected individuals worldwide. The gamemaster can bring this small-scale war to the streets by using the runners to extradite a member from one hate group to another. In addition to the usual difficulties of such work, the gamemaster may force the player characters to answer the question, “Is there any room for morals on the street?”

Certain members of the Human Nation began training at secret military camps in the past year, and have also begun

recruiting “soldiers” from the best security services and private armies in the world. Naming themselves the Flaming Sword, these militants feel that the time for violence is fast approaching, and intend to follow this path to controlling their destiny.

RULES

Because they believe they represent the current pinnacle of evolution, as the fittest, the members of the Human Nation should and will survive. Members of the Human Nation take great pride in their personal accomplishments, and have the depth of resources to risk gambling against extreme odds to win. They are ruthless and generally command a virtual army of people loyal to them and their money. The rank and file who carry out the Human Nation agenda rarely know or care about the motivations of the person or group they serve—nuyen talks, and talks very loudly.

The origins of the Human Nation, and even the extent of its membership, cannot be discovered. Though not strictly organized according to cells, individual members usually know only those members with whom they have regular professional or social contact. Because they do not convene in official meetings, the gamemaster can devise a secret handshake, code or tattoo that allows members to identify each other. The primary clue to a Human Nation member, however, is an attitude of overweening pride and ruthless unconcern for those less fortunate. Of course, many non-members come across that way, too, giving the gamemaster ample opportunity to plant red herrings.

The Flaming Sword

Made up mainly of bored Human Nation members looking for a thrill by hunting down a few evolutionary dead-ends, the Flaming Sword disagrees somewhat with the current Human Nation strategy of a low-key approach to genocide through eugenics and covert operations. Though they began as dilettantes, their military training fired their enthusiasm for direct action against any who might hold them back from achieving their chosen destiny. To make themselves into a better tool, the Flaming Sword has also begun to recruit professionals to their cause. The Flaming Sword operates as a combination crack military team and the ninja warriors of ancient Japan, which provides more fuel for the rumors that the founders of the Human Nation were based in Japan.

The assassins of the Flaming Sword have a minimum Threat Rating of 6.

TUTOR



>>>>>(I think I've figured something out, and I don't like it. I hope to every god there ever was that I'm wrong. I might well be—I'm no magic-user, so there may be things about this whole deal that I don't understand. I may be misinterpreting things. I'm sure it doesn't help that Sven was a good friend of mine—I'm upset, and probably inclined to put too much weight on coincidences.

But frag it all, there was no reason for Sven to die of heart failure! I'm his doctor; I know his ticker was fine. As solid a piece of biomachinery as anyone could hope to have. Strong as a Belgian draft horse, Sven was. Congestive heart failure just doesn't make any sense.

Nor does his personal journal showing up in my e-mail box two days after a mutual friend found him dead on the floor of his squat. Sven had missed a meet, and our mutual friend Masterson knew that wasn't like him. Sven had been depressed lately—a couple of fellow magic-users he called chums had died over the past few months, and he hadn't taken the loss well—so when he didn't show on time or leave word, Masterson got concerned.

Poor Sven. Masterson said there was no sign of forced entry or a struggle; according to him, if a corp hit team got Sven because of some run or other, they were a talented bunch who left no tracks. I don't know how likely that is. I'm a street doc; I patch people up after the run's over. I don't run the shadows myself. I suppose it could've been a hit.

But that still leaves Sven's journal. From what he said in there, and the things I found out about his two dead buddies, I don't think a corp squad got him. I think it's something a whole lot worse.

So I'm posting my findings for all and sundry. Reach what conclusions you will ... and all you spell-slingers, watch your backs.)<<<<<

—Doc Watson (06:13:33/06-01-57)



February 3, 2056

He says his name is Tutor.

Interesting name for a spirit. It's funny—I've read a few novels about people with free spirits for chummers, and those stories always seemed just a tad implausible to me. I mean, why in holy fragging drek would a being as powerful as a free spirit even give the time of day to a mortal magician? An ally that goes free, I can understand; if you treat your allies decently, they get to like you after awhile, and that gives them a reason to hang around even when they don't have to any more. But an independent freebie, with no connections to anyone? You'd think they'd be on the first fast boat to the spirit equivalent of Shangri-La. Sure not hanging around us street-grunt magicians, so worried all the time about our shaky cred balances and the squat we might be kicked out of in a week, and keeping our skins safe from all kinds of jokers who might want to put a hole in them. All those petty preoccupations that mortal man is heir to, or however the saying goes.

Guess I was wrong. Wouldn't be the first time.

He's quite a being, this Tutor. Though why I say he, I don't know—for all I can tell, Tutor might be female, or both genders, or neither. A being of light, pure white with a touch of gold around the edges—yet it doesn't hurt my eyes to look at him. Imagine being able to stare straight into the sun without blinding yourself or even feeling uncomfy; that's what it's like to look at Tutor. He's got a vaguely humanoid shape—body, head, the right number of limbs in the right places, though his outlines are a little indistinct. He even made eyes for me, bright blue ones. I happened to mention that it felt a little weird to be talking to a sunbeam, because I couldn't look a sunbeam in the eye; next thing I know, a pair of glowing baby blues is beaming at me from Tutor's "face," and he says, "How's this?" with a laugh. A really nice laugh. The kind of laugh you'd expect Santa Claus to have. Rich, deep, warm-all-over jolly.

I still can't quite believe he actually wants to pal around with me. He says I interest him—can you imagine that?

He says we have a lot to learn from each other.

>>>>>(This Tutor sounds like a Great Form elemental, or maybe a guardian spirit. They don't usually spend quality time with metahuman magic-users. Hmmmm ...)<<<<<

—Mr. Mistik (02:24:54/06-22-57)

February 11, 2056

Tutor's really amazing. He taught me this thing he calls "contemplating water;" it's a meditation technique to help fight drain. You just ... well, you contemplate water. You visualize drops of water falling into a bowl. Then the feel of water sliding over your hands as you wash them. Then the way a slow-flowing river sparkles in the sun. You make yourself hear the sound of rain on the roof. Calming stuff like that. And it does calm you down ... and something more, somehow, some psychosomatic thing that calms and heals at the same time. I don't mean physical healing; you can't use this technique to close up a cut, say. But it makes you stronger. It makes the horrible fatigue of throwing a spell go away. I tried it; I tossed a spell that usually leaves me with spots in front of my eyes and a nagging headache. The headache

cleared up inside of two minutes, and the spots went away even faster than that. I've never recovered from drain that fast before. Pretty fragging useful for the next time me and my chummers are limping along with the hard boys after us and some ignorant street sammy whines at me to heal him RIGHT FRAGGING NOW. And it's so easy! I can't believe no one ever thought of this before.

Tutor says there's more to it than just thinking about water—that you have to have a certain special aptitude for it. He says I've got the inborn knack, and it was just a matter of giving me a mental structure to channel it through. He says spirits all have the right—I don't know what you'd call it—mental wiring, I guess.

Me, doing special spirit magic. Ain't that a hoot? I mean, I'm good enough to get steady work, but I'm no Akiko Kano.

Maybe I will be by the time Tutor gets done with me!

March 2, 2056

Tutor's been teaching me spells I didn't know existed. Because of him, I can pack more power at less cost in drain than I thought was possible. Matter of fact, I'd still be swearing it was impossible if I hadn't actually done this stuff.

I can't wait to try out my new-and-improved fireball spell the next time we go on a run against the Big A. Me and those Azzie slags have a personal score to settle.

>>>>>(I've cut out some entries; Sven's got a right to some privacy, and it's just more stuff-I-learned-today anyway. We're cutting to the chase, folks; pay attention.)<<<<<

—Doc Watson (06:15:21/06-01-57)

>>>>>(Ohhh, convenient. What's in there that doesn't back up your little story, Doc? This is just some anti-spirit, anti-magic piece of bulldrek designed to remind all the mundanes out there that we magicians deal with Powers Unknown.)<<<<<

—Copperfield (03:35:24/06-22-57)

>>>>>(Snap judgement, Cop ol' slag. I'd read a little further before deciding it's bulldrek. Hell, I don't even know what Doc's getting at yet.)<<<<<

—Talon (03:41:21/06-22-57)

July 20, 2056

Tutor came back today, finally. I asked why he was gone so long, but he wouldn't tell me. He seemed kind of defensive about it, so I let it lie. He's a powerful being, after all. Not the kind of chummer you want to make mad.

I couldn't find him anywhere on the astral, which still bothers me. After everything we've shared together, I ought to have been able to pick up at least a trace of him ... an etheric "echo" or something. He was in kind of a mood, though, so I didn't ask about it. Maybe later, when he's feeling friendlier.

July 22, 2056

Genia's dead. I can't believe it. She took a job in CalFree, tried to conjure a weeny little fire spirit somewhere in L.A., and instead whistled up a huge fragger that got away from her. Huge, angry fragger. She went up like a torch. Man, I knew the L.A. astral'd

gone weird, but somehow it doesn't seem real until it happens to someone you know.

August 1, 2056

Tutor wanted to know why I was feeling low, so I told him about Genia. I suppose I shouldn't have expected him to react like a person would—he's a spirit, after all, and it's not like he knew her. Still ... it was strange, what he said. "Every choice carries its price." I couldn't figure what he was on about. What choice—to conjure the fire spirit? To go on the fragging run in L.A.? And the way he said it ... he sounded cold. Cold and ... I don't know. It scared me.

August 13, 2056

He's taught me the best spell yet—a binding spell that lasts until you take it off. Jeez, I can't believe what I just wrote; but it's true. Tutor gave me a binding spell that lasts indefinitely. I called up a teeny earth elemental to help me grow my herb garden—give the soil a little extra punch, you know? And it hung around, doing whatever I told it, for three whole days. Then I ran out of stuff for it to do, so I let it go.

I feel a little bit like God. Tutor's the best friend a mage ever had.

September 3, 2056

Lousy day. Lousy, lousy day. Lousy week. Lousy month. Lousy life.

Deer Dancing bought it yesterday. He was supposed to show for a meet. He's like me; he never misses biz for nothing. I got a buzz from his squeeze, Lani, about an hour after he no-showed; she could hardly get the words out, she was so ripped, but she managed to tell me that Deer'd had a massive brain hemorrhage. She said he'd been working with some new spells lately that seemed to tire him a lot more than usual ... but other than that, he'd been perfectly fine. No warning at all that his brain was going to up and burst on him.

I've been feeling awfully run-down myself lately. I thought it was the flu coming on, but there's no real symptoms. I'm just tired all the time. Maybe I'll go see Doc tomorrow.

I wish Tutor'd drop by. I could really use something to take my mind off Deer Dancing. He would pick this time to go off on another of his mysterious jaunts to Ghost-knows-where. I haven't seen him since ... yeah, since the day he taught me the binding spell.

Oh, well. He'll turn up.

September 9, 2056

Funny thing. Lani mentioned at the memorial service that Dancing's totem had taught him some wiz new binding magic. She said it seemed to take a lot out of him, and she wondered if maybe the strain of it might have done something to his brain. Maybe there was some little congenital flaw in the blood vessels or something, and the extra-strength mojo triggered a meltdown. I'm not sure—I'll ask Doc the next time I see him.

Got to see him soon, anyway. I could hardly lift myself out of bed this morning. Just on a hunch, I tried Tutor's water meditation,

but I couldn't see the water droplets. Like my brain was too tired to make pictures.

Still no sign of Tutor anywhere on the astral. It's like he never existed. This is really getting weird.

>>>>>(He never did come to see me. Three days later, Sven was dead. Then his diary showed up. The deaths of his two chummers, and especially the bit about Deer Dancing's new binding magic, made me curious—so I went to see Lani. She told me Deer Dancing'd been spending a lot of time "doing magic stuff" for about six months or so before his death—so much time, in fact, that she'd joked about being a magic widow. She said he was either lying around the squat while his astral self went strolling, or else buried in the basement storage room he used as a medicine lodge. He told her his totem spirit had come to him in a dream one night, saying that he was ready to learn the higher mysteries of magic. From the morning after that dream up to the day he died, Deer Dancing spent at least an hour a day in his medicine lodge, sometimes talking to someone, sometimes testing out new spells he said his totem had taught him. Lani said she'd never forget the voice she heard talking with Deer Dancing—it was the kind of voice "that makes you just know everything's gonna work out wiz, even when the world's falling apart. The kind of voice I used to imagine angels had, y'know?"

Lani also told me that Dancing had done a good turn for Frances Kelly, one helluva talented street doc who happens to be a friend of mine. Fran runs a little clinic in the Redmond Barrens, and she's used her shadowrunner chums to swipe an impressive array of diagnostic equipment. A real lifesaver, Fran is. So in exchange for the "favor" Dancing did, Fran gave him a free physical. Being SINless, it'd been years since he'd had one, and he was getting concerned about feeling tired all the time.

Fran found Deer Dancing in perfect health. The workup included an EEG, and it showed not a thing wrong inside Dancing's skull. He shouldn't have died of a brain hemorrhage, any more than Sven should've died of heart failure.

I traced Genia next. Squatters had taken over her doss on the outskirts of Tacoma, but I persuaded them to give me her little stash of optical chips in exchange for free med treatment. Three of the chips held Genia's grimoire, and on one of them I found a mnemonic device for a binding spell. According to the sketchy notes accompanying it, the spell would last indefinitely ... and Genia'd learned it from a powerful spirit named Mentor. The spell and the notes were dated eight days before Genia's death.

Consider the evidence, now. Three different spell-slingers learn a powerful new binding spell from three different spirits—Tutor, Mentor, and a totem spirit. All three die soon after acquiring the spell: two by "natural" causes that were anything but, one in a freak accident. "Tutor" and "Mentor" both refer to teachers; and what's a totem if not a teacher of the shamans that follow it?

I think this Tutor, Mentor, or whatever is a free spirit out to get spell-slingers. Why, I don't know. Maybe it's trying to keep its fellow spirits from being conjured up and bound ... or maybe it just has an insane hatred for magicians. I think it's got something to do with that binding spell, but I can't imagine how. Like I said, I'm no magic-user.

But Sven sent me his diary for a reason. I think he was starting to figure it out, and took steps to make sure the word got out if something happened to him. As far as I can tell, this spirit has murdered three magicians—who knows how many other spell-slingers who died apparently unremarkable deaths are actually Tutor's victims?)<<<<<<

—Doc Watson (07:10:24/ 06-01-57)

>>>>>(This is bulldrek. First off, there ain't no such thing as a binding spell that lasts till whenever. Second, anybody can make a wrong diagnosis—how do either of the docs know for sure that their buddies were really all that healthy? Third, weird drek's been happening in CalFree for quite a while. So a mage buys it in L.A.—so what? This biz has risks, and her number came up. That's all.)<<<<<<

—Cynic
(10:24:52/06-22-57)

>>>>>(How do we know this super-binding spell doesn't exist? Chummerinos, what we know about magic would just about fit on a fingernail paring. If this Tutor is some kind of big badass free spirit, it just might know a few magic tricks we've never heard of. And isn't it a hinky coincidence that right after learning this binding spell, two of the three deaders start feeling unexplained fatigue all the time? Then they kick off just a week or so later? I'm with Doc Watson—something smells here.)<<<<<<

—Tin Lizzie (10:32:12/06-22-57)

>>>>>(Just get me a copy of that Genia chica's grimoire. I WANT THAT SPELL!!)<<<<<<

—Waltzing Mephisto (10:36:54/06-22-57)

>>>>>(No go, Wally. You think any responsible mage'd just write down something like that in so many words? All you'll find in the grimoire is a few notations that won't make any sense to anyone except the one who set 'em down. That's what a mnemonic is: a personal shorthand that helps you remember something else. Nobody except you can use it, because nobody except you associates that particular set of words or symbols or whatever with the thing you're trying to recall.)<<<<<<

—Mr. Mistik
(11:02:35/06-22-57)

>>>>>(If you buy Doc Watson's story, you also have to buy the idea that a free spirit could convincingly masquerade as a totem. Seems unlikely to me.)<<<<<<

—Crazy Harry
(12:33:21/06-22-57)

>>>>>(If this freebie is as powerful as it seems to be, I'd be willing to bet it can do fragging anything.)<<<<<<

—Jack-in-the-Green
(12:36:27/06-22-57)

>>>>>(What if Tutor is real? What if it has friends? What if they're the real reason that magic-users are still just a couple percent of the population, more than forty years after the Awakening?! Maybe the killer spirits are picking us off one by one, and we just haven't noticed!)<<<<<<

—Goodfellow
(13:02:45/06-22-57)

>>>>>(Guess there really is a sucker born every minute ...)<<<<<<

—Cynic (13:06:22/
06-22-57)



GAME INFORMATION

The free spirit nicknamed Tutor gives new meaning to the phrase, "the hunter becomes the prey." Now, years after mages and shamans and others with magical talent have begun feeling confident in their knowledge of spirits and the intricacies of astral space, Tutor appears, reflecting their darkest nightmare and their

deepest fear: a spirit that wants revenge. Tutor is the self-appointed guardian of all the denizens of astral space, including elementals and spirits. It intensely resents the enslavement of its fellow spirits by magical metahumanity and intends to end mankind's abuse of the metaplanes. If accomplishing its goal means killing mages and shamans one by one, then that is what it will do.

Tutor does not limit its influence to the material plane. In addition to causing the deaths of many magic-users, it devotes considerable effort to convincing spirits to fight their conjurers and summoners. Though many of the denizens of the astral worlds know of Tutor and its objectives, not every astral entity sympathizes with its aims—but none dare to openly oppose such a powerful spirit. Most astral beings obey Tutor's orders without question or hesitation; others comply with the letter of its desires, if not the spirit; still others refuse to accept its leadership at all.

Fear of this vindictive free spirit might eventually unite the beings who exist in the metaplanes, though metahumanity might never recognize their rebellion as such. Until then, Tutor represents a very real threat to the denizens of the Awakened world: a metaplanar entity that embodies metahumanity's most powerful and negative traits and uses greed and the desire for revenge in a quest for power and complete control of the astral plane. Now spell-slingers must ask themselves, Will the astral plane ever be safe again? Will the spirit I conjure just kill me outright? How long will it be before the rules change—and can I survive long enough to figure it all out?

USING TUTOR

A spirit that hunts magic-users and kills them for their "abuse" of the spirits they have summoned or conjured and controlled is every spellcaster's nightmare. The free spirit called Tutor uses a particularly insidious method of luring magic-users into its trap. Appearing as an unusually friendly ally or free spirit, it gains the confidence of magic-users by teaching them new spells that allow mages and shamans to conjure/summon powerful spirits, and by guiding them on difficult quests. This ruse also makes it possible for the spirit to manipulate the magician's skills and make it appear that he or she is casting more powerful spells with less effort.

Tutor "helps" the mage or shaman by linking itself to the magic-user through its special Spirit Tap power. By feeding some of its own power to the spellcaster, Tutor makes it appear that the caster can cast more powerful versions of common spells and take less drain for doing so. The spirit's payback is that use of the Spirit Tap power exposes the mage or shaman to potential backlash that can result in the loss of magical power, loss of abilities and even loss of life. Each time the mage or shaman uses magic learned from the free spirit, Tutor brings that spellcaster a little closer to death. Tutor considers the members of metahumanity to be nothing but vile pests that should be eradicated.

Tutor frequently passes itself off as a human or metahuman magician. In this form, it wreaks havoc by preying on the most common weakness of the spell-slingers of the Awakened world: magical jealousy. It shows off its powers, teasing magic-users with the temptation of casting extremely powerful spells with minimal drain. Tutor offers magic-users the Holy Grail of magic

and they line up to receive it. It urges magic-users to share its secrets with other spellcasters, thus encouraging them to use their "new abilities" more and more often. Because other magic-users view those mages and shamans who perform magic in a unique way with deep suspicion, however, those who refuse to accept the usefulness of Tutor's teachings vehemently reject those who do, effectively splitting the community of magicians. Tutor is just as happy to accomplish its ends by allowing magicians to kill each other off. This free spirit has also been known to travel the lecture circuit of universities and conferences to spread its magic to groups, leaving in its wake a trail of insane and dead magic-users.

Only rarely can metahumans persuade other spirits to speak of Tutor or the free spirit's intentions. Other free or ally spirits who fear Tutor's growing power sometimes choose to share their concerns with magic-users they like and trust, but only in return for a substantial incentive. So far, none of those spirits that oppose Tutor have suggested a way to stop the free spirit.

Depending on how the gamemaster uses magic in his campaign, he can choose to tailor Tutor's threat level according to what he wants to accomplish with the free spirit. Tutor may simply be an omnipresent threat hovering at the edges of the magic-user's consciousness; the gamemaster may use the free spirit to plague the magic-user's every attempt at spellcasting; if the mage or shaman routinely uses spirits and elementals as cannon fodder, the gamemaster may use Tutor as a lever to encourage the magic-user to mend his ways. Because Tutor can strip a character of his abilities or even kill a player character fairly easily, the gamemaster must weigh the degree of threat the free spirit can become. Sometimes death is the only effective lesson.

RULES

The spirit known as Tutor uses its natural abilities to adversely affect those it deems unworthy to use the astral energies and call on the denizens that live there. The gamemaster may give the spirit whatever motivations suit his campaign: everything from a systematic purge of all magic-users in the Awakened world, to teaching a lesson to those who abuse spirits of any kind, to making itself the ruler of astral space.

Tutor combines several magical abilities into a power called Spirit Tap. When incorporated into a spell formula, this power causes magic-users to actually tap into the spirit to cast spells, summon/conjure spirits and to resist Drain. Tutor teaches magic-users new versions of the spells commonly used to accomplish these tasks, adding a unique element that creates the connection between the metahuman and the spirit. The fictional account of Tutor describes the magic-user concentrating on water as part of the spellcasting process, but the gamemaster can choose any appropriate spell(s) or techniques to introduce the free spirit's power to player characters. There is no way for the magic-user to discover that the Spirit Tap is occurring—he or she will simply view the spells as unusual adaptations of ordinary spells. The gamemaster may also introduce the Spirit Tap as part of a new spell from **Awakenings** or the **Grimoire, Second Edition**.

Spirit Tap

When it uses its Spirit Tap power, the spirit reduces the Drain of the spell by one level and boosts the effects of spells, though in an unpredictable manner. The caster will assume he or she has simply stumbled across a particularly potent version of a specific spell. If the results seem more variable than might be expected, well, the character usually finds the advantages to be worth the risk. The gamemaster may simply choose the effect of Spirit Tap on the Force of the spell, or randomly determine the Force of each spell cast according to the Spell Force Increase Table. Note that all standard penalties for casting a spell greater than the caster's Magic Rating apply (see p. 128, **SR11**).

SPELL FORCE INCREASE TABLE

Die Roll Result	Effect
1 or 6	Force remains unchanged
2	Force increases by 1
3	Force increases by 2
4	Force increases by 3
5	Force is doubled

The magic-user only receives these "bonuses" without penalty to cast the spell a number of times equal to Tutor's Force Rating. For example, a spellcaster dealing with the Tutor spirit designed according to the stats below could cast the spell 10 times without penalty. The next time the caster uses the spell, he or she suffers 1 box of Stun Damage that *cannot* be healed by any conventional methods or ordinary magical means. The twelfth use of the spell causes a second box of Stun Damage that cannot be healed, and so on. The gamemaster should keep track of the number of times the mage or shaman uses the spell, and when that number exceeds Tutor's Force Rating, he should find a way to notify the character that he or she is now taking permanent, unhealable Stun damage. Until the character figures out what he must do to heal that damage (see below), all Stun modifiers apply.

The only way a player character can heal the Stun damage caused by excessive use of the spells that incorporate the Spirit Tap power is by making a deal with Tutor. The gamemaster can make this deal as easy or as hard as he or she wants. For example, the mage may take some kind of geas on summoning or conjuring; he may promise to free every spirit he calls; she may agree to kill every other magic-user that summons or conjures (remember, Tutor doesn't have the same moral values as metahumanity); the mage might agree to teach a Spirit Tap spell to another mage; or the magic-user might make a deal involving Magic Pool dice, foci, or astral quests. There are no tests for this deal, and no negotiations: Tutor (and the gamemaster) is calling the shots. If the mage refuses to make a deal, he can heal 1 box of Spirit Tap damage for each Magic Rating point he sacrifices. This may seem harsh, but hey, the player character struck a deal with the devil on this one.

In order to force a character to do its will, Tutor may break off the Spirit Tap link. All spells incorporating the Spirit Tap no longer work, and the mage or shaman immediately loses 1 die from his Magic Pool for every Spirit Tap spell he has learned. If he loses more dice than he currently has in his Magic Pool, the character takes the remaining magic loss in Stun damage that cannot be healed. The Magic Pool will regenerate 1 die per month until it reaches its original number. The character can only heal the Stun damage by making the deal with Tutor. Rather than suffer this dramatic loss, and because they easily become addicted to his spells, most mages and shamans accept Tutor's terms.

The Spirit Tap spells are easy to learn, but hard to teach. If a character learns the spell from a mage rather than from Tutor, increase the target number for learning the spell by 2. This penalty reflects the teacher's impatience with the student's difficulty in learning the spell, and the extra effort required to make the connection with Tutor.

Tutor's Targets

While Tutor is a threat to anyone who uses magic, it really only affects those it can reach at any one time, and would only target the magic-users in a player character group. Even with this restriction, Tutor still offers many options for using this threat against your group. The gamemaster may use Tutor as a vengeful spirit hounding an individual mage or shaman, or as an indirect threat against the magic-user's team by influencing the actions of others. Tutor may be controlling other mages who are trying to kill your magic-user, magical societies going to war against each other or against specific independent operators, or free spirits running amok. Tutor may appear in various forms, all of whom seem to have it in for your magical friends; it may hire the player characters to free bound spirits held by others; or it may appear in place of the spirit or elemental the magic-user called—instead of the tame spirit the character expected, he suddenly faces a fierce spirit that seems to want a piece of him.

Because gamemasters and players all put a unique stamp on their campaigns, what each group considers to be high-level magic varies a great deal. The gamemaster should adjust Tutor's stats to suit the nature and feel of the campaign, though Tutor is a Great Form spirit and should be the most powerful spirit that the player characters have ever seen. If the player characters manage to defeat Tutor, another spirit with the same agenda takes its place, for Tutor has shown that vengeful spirits can strike back and punish those who abuse them and their kind. The gamemaster may give other spirits the Spirit Tap power, but should limit this to free and ally spirits, because ordinary spirits and elementals are usually not equipped to handle such a power.

Tutor (Great Form Spirit)

Force Rating: 10

Spirit Energy: 6

Powers: Astral Gateway, Aura Masking, Dispelling, Human Form, Possession, Sorcery, Spirit Tap

STRAIN III



>>>>(Listen up, everybody! Decker friend of mine dropped this little tidbit in my lap a few days ago. I can't verify it, but he swore it was on the up and up. Anyone who knows anything about magic, I don't have to tell you the ramifications if this file's for true. Can anyone verify this information? Or tell me it's a load of hooey?)<<<<

—Tsunami (14:23:56/06-24-57)

::File Attached/10 Mp::

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::File Received::

MEMORANDUM

TO: DR. RONALD HALSTEAD
FROM: DR. LYNNE GREENE
SUBJECT: PROGRESS REPORT, PROJECT #44578
DATE: NOVEMBER 6, 2056
CC: M. MATZCATLA

PROGRESS REPORT, PROJECT #44578

Ron: I'm sorry to spoil your holiday plans, but I'm afraid this won't wait. Hardly the expected formal opening of a Progress Report, I know, but this isn't just any Progress Report. Please read it. If you ever intended to read anything my department has sent you over the past year and a half, read this. We've made a breakthrough, and I'm afraid it's not the one Upstairs was hoping for.

I must urge the **immediate cancellation** of the Fat Bacteria Reverse Engineering Project. I cannot urge this step strongly enough. We've created a nightmare here, Ron; the rest of this report will prove that beyond even Upstairs's capacity to doubt.

When we began this project in February of last year, our high hopes for the Ares Fat Bacteria strains seemed justified. The samples were clean and large enough to work with, and the recent acquisition of formerly outside experts gave us a real brain boost. The Strain I project went extremely well, and I believe it still may be possible to develop a variant bacteria that requires a smaller biomass per unit volume than the Ares Strain I to intersect with astral forms. We might—just might—be able to put something out on the security market in the next few months, if we can survive the disaster that the rest of this project has become. But I'm afraid that's a bigger "if" than we bargained for. Oh, and we can forget the UV strain. That puppy never worked right, not once.

>>>>(Hey, Tsunami, where'd your decker bud claim to've gotten this file? Doc Greene's giving out trade secrets—must've been squirreled away in a top-secret datastore. Gee golly gosh, but your friend must be talented ...)<<<<<

—Cynic (16:33:24/06-24-57)

>>>>(You think we're slotting around here? Well, I'm not. I doubt my buddy was, either.)<<<<<

—Tsunami (16:36:21/06-24-57)

>>>>(Was?! They geeked your friend, Tsu? Oh, man. Oh, drek.)<<<<<

—Bonzo (16:40:55/06-24-57)

>>>>(... um ... I'm fine, actually. Just took a little time off from biz, is all.)<<<<<

—Bitbert (16:56:21/06-24-57)

>>>>(Hey, aren't you the slag who was spouting off about lab thefts and terrorist conspiracies in an earlier file?)<<<<<

—Calvin (17:02:35/06-24-57)

>>>>(Hello?)<<<<<

—Calvin (17:36:22/06-24-57)

I know what you're thinking, Ron. Get to the point, right? Don't rehash old news. Well, bear with me, all right? I tend to babble when I'm scared—in words, on paper, doesn't matter. And I'm plenty scared.

We've discovered Strain III, Ron. Or created it. I'm still not sure which. No one else can agree on it, either. Not that it matters.

From what we can tell, Strain III is not present in physical space; it exists solely in the astral plane. Ilse—that's Dr. Zimmerman, the new acquisition from Zurich—discovered it by accident, when her Level 4 power focus started losing strength. Fast. Far too fast to be explained by any natural cause we knew of. This happened in the middle of a room full of the best magical-theory minds on the planet, Ron; I know theory isn't your specialty, so you'll just have to trust me on this. Not a one of us could

figure out what was draining the energy out of Ilse's focus, and between us we should have had at least a dozen explanations at our fingertips. So we did what any group of competent scientists would do when confronted with a totally unknown phenomenon—we observed it.

>>>>(Flaw in the power focus. Somebody used the wrong materials somewhere. Has to be.)<<<<<

—Magister (10:49:24/06-25-57)

After several hours, we realized that the strength of the focus was decreasing at an exponential rate. The lower the power level, the faster the drain. We kept monitors active on it around the clock. Twenty-two hours and seventeen minutes after Ilse had first observed the phenomenon, the power focus was completely inert.

Dr. Izanagi then proposed that we make a test, to see if the drained power focus was some bizarre fluke. As no one was willing to sacrifice another power focus—those things are expensive, after all—we decided to put a devil rat in the laboratory. A devil rat is a dual-natured paranormal; if there really was something in the lab that absorbed magical energy from Ilse's focus, the rat would show signs of being affected. So Dr. Izanagi slapped on the heavy gloves, fetched Iggy out of his cage, and dropped him in the middle of the lab. (Between you and me, I think he wanted to get rid of Iggy—he never did manage to stop that rat from biting the others, especially the breeding females. Izanagi went a little over the edge when Iggy bit Esmerelda; he spent the rest of the day crooning over Es like a fussy mother goose, and kept shooting Iggy bad looks. A devil rat—I ask you! Izanagi needs a vacation, in my opinion ... but that's another problem.)

Within two hours, Iggy started showing flu-like symptoms. Less than an hour after the first signs appeared, Iggy was too weak to lift his head. An astral exam of Iggy's aura showed an alarming depletion of his life energy. Roughly twenty minutes later, Iggy's aura was so faint we could barely detect it. I went into the lab then and picked him up in my bare hands.

>>>>(Crazy lady. She's fragging lucky Mr. Rat didn't chew her hand right off.)<<<<<

—Tin Lizzie (14:24:32/06-25-57)

>>>>(I'm telling you, this has to be a send-up. Nobody picks up a devil rat.)<<<<<

—Cynic (14:37:11/06-25-57)

Yes, Ron, you read that correctly. My bare hands. No one picks up a devil rat in her bare hands unless she wants one bitten off at the wrist; but I picked up Iggy, and my hands are fine. He was barely breathing, and his body temperature was way below normal. (He recovered slowly over the next several days, but he's been prone to mild infections ever since. My guess is the Strain III bacteria permanently affected Iggy's immunity to pathogens, though I still can't determine exactly how. He also hasn't bitten anyone since the lab experiment.)



>>>>(This stuff permanently frags with a paracrifter's powers?! I hope this memo's a send-up. I don't want this to be real.)<<<<<
—Mr. Mistik (15:02:44/06-25-57)

So now we knew there was something in the lab that could suck up magical energy like a sponge absorbs water. But we still didn't know what it was or how it worked. I decided to take an astral look—from outside the lab—to see if I could spot anything.

I saw globules of glowing yellow-green, floating in midair. They ebbed and contracted and swirled, like water droplets in free-fall. The color and motion together almost made me lose my lunch; the gobbets were the exact shade of the gunk left in my hankie the last time I suffered through a bad sinus infection, and they rippled and twisted like live things. (Sorry if the graphic description makes you queasy, but that's the only way I can do it justice.) When I reported my findings to the team, Ilse offered to toss another power focus into the lab so we could watch what happened astrally. (Curiosity got the better of her, evidently; and because the focus was a measly Level 1, she figured the odds were pretty good that the firm would reimburse her for its cost.) So she threw the focus through the door and then backed off, while I rode astral shotgun.

The greeny-yellow stuff swirled toward the focus, fusing and flowing together into a solid mass around it. The power focus was completely engulfed. I sat there and watched it for four hours, while it sucked the focus dry. The mass grew brighter by almost imperceptible degrees, its color turning more green and less yellow. After four hours and three minutes, it ebbed away from the power focus, which clattered to the floor. Astrally, the focus had gone dead black. Not a flicker of power was left in it. I made sure everything I carried was powered down, then went into the lab and picked up the dead focus. Safely back in the observation room, I gave the focus an astral scan. It felt somewhere between oily and sticky—I've always thought a slug's trail would feel like that. I wish I could be more specific, but the sensation defies description.

>>>>(Thank you for sharing that observation, Dr. Greene. I won't be eating my bowl of Jello® after all.)<<<<<
—Flipper (17:21:34/06-25-57)

Over the past few days, we've made additional observations of the stuff in the lab, which we've tentatively christened Fat Bacteria Strain III. It exhibits some characteristics common to Strain I bacteria, including exponential growth with a k value of .3838. In English, that means the colony doubles every hour and 48 minutes. As no technology exists that allows us to examine astral presences microscopically, we can't say whether Strain III is a "living" bacteria or something that acts as an oxidizer—an "astral rust," if you will. From the speed with which it drained Iggy, we can assume that it works faster on magically active living organisms than on inanimate magically charged objects. Unfortunately, we haven't a clue as to why—which means that if this stuff gets out of Lab 4B, we've no way to stop it from latching onto the very next mage or shaman who tries to use a power focus or cast a spell around here. If it gets out of the facility, Ghost only knows what might happen.

We've got to shut the project down, Ron. Surely you can make Upstairs see that. We've got to shut things down and seal off Lab 4B, before this bacteria gets out of our grasp and out into the world. We've tried everything we know of to neutralize it: sterilization spells, healing spells, every trick in all of our books. Nothing has the slightest effect on the colonies. They just absorb the spell energies. Everything we throw at them is just another delicacy. We can't risk letting loose an astral parasite that we can't cure; a shutdown, even a temporary one, is the only sane course of action.

I'm counting on you, Ron. Please let them know about this Upstairs. Sell them on a shutdown any way you can. Otherwise, my team and I can't answer for the consequences.

::END FILE::

>>>>(AAAAARRRRRRGGGGHHHH!!!!!!)<<<<<
—Link (15:21:50/06-26-57)

>>>>(Time to find another line of work.)<<<<<
—F/X (15:24:20/06-26-57)

>>>>(This has to be a fake. Tsunami, I'm sure you and your decker pal believe you've got the clean goods here, but I just don't buy it. It's just too perfect a doomsday scenario—the magical equivalent of Crisis in the Hot Zone, or Secret Files: VITAS-IV, or one of those other evil-microbe scare books.

Here's my theory. The corp that put this out—and isn't it convenient that this oh-so-official-looking memo isn't tagged as coming from any specific source?—is playing nerve games with the shadow community. The corp bigwigs figure we've heard at least a rumor or two about fat bacteria, so they figure they'll really give us the willies. They'll make up some official-sounding glorp about Killer Magic-Eating Astral Germs, see to it that some patsy snags a copy, and watch us chase our tails after he posts it. Hate to tell you, folks, but we've fallen for it.)<<<<<
—ZindyLou (18:03:25/06-26-57)

>>>>(So what do the corps get out of their little scam, huh?)<<<<<
—Bitbert (18:05:24/06-26-57)

>>>>(Nervous shadowrunners who're more likely to make mistakes. And fewer runs with mojo worth noticing, 'cause all the spell-slingers'll be afraid of becoming targets. How's that for starters?)<<<<<
—ZindyLou (18:08:59/06-26-57)

GAME INFORMATION

From the black plague to AIDS to Ebola to VITAS, man has always considered viruses to be the silent killers. Viruses give no warning, they attack without mercy or discrimination, they offer no cure—the threat they represent can dislodge the metahuman creature from its secure position at the top of the food chain without warning. Viruses cause widespread and uncontrollable destruction. VITAS and HMHVV both took their toll on the Awakened world and now it seems there is one more aggressive killer to fear—an inexplicable organism, dubbed Strain III fat bac-

teria, that appears to feed on magical energy. Neither the scientific nor magical community has been able to successfully define the nature of Strain III, and so they continue to describe it as a virus, considering that label as providing the most accurate way of accounting for its nature.

Whether as a result of the natural course of events or because activity in astral space has polluted that realm, astral space is changing as quickly and as often as do conditions in the physical world—and the inhabitants of the Awakened world understand far less about astral space than the world they can touch and smell. Some theorists assume that Strain III always has been in astral space, continually gaining in strength. Others claim, as someone always does, that metahumanity introduced the virus there. They accuse metahumanity of polluting yet another pure environment with megacorporate experimentation, unprovoked combat, mistreated natives (in this case, spirits) and other magical debris, perverting the astral plane in the same way that humanity has despoiled purity since the dawn of time. Regardless of its origin, the virus exists. It may be nothing but an annoyance, like the common cold, or it may turn out to be as deadly as Ebola or VITAS. Only time will tell, and time is running out.

USING STRAIN III

While mages, shamans, adepts and others with magical talent may travel in astral space, that realm is home to all kinds of known spirits, elements and metaplanar entities, as well as a multitude of creatures not yet discovered. The most recently detected of these “creatures” is the misnamed Fat Bacteria Strain III. These microscopic entities drift freely through the astral sphere, including through the astral imprint of walls and other non-living, inert barriers. Their small size makes Strain III effectively invisible, and they may attach themselves to any other astral entity. So far, their effects seem confined to astral space surrounding magical research labs: the high levels of mana being manipulated, the high-Force Rating foci being used, the high-level initiates who work there and other conditions common to such facilities allowed Strain III to develop an observable effect.

When a sufficient amount of Strain III has attached itself to an astral entity, it begins, as do all good viruses, to “consume” its host, in this case, the astral energy of its target. As it feeds, Strain III grows, but so slowly that its effect remains undetectable for a certain period. As soon as Strain III reaches a certain critical mass, it feeds at an exponentially faster rate. Unless a magical item is active, or “enabled,” Strain III does not affect it. For example, magical items with an active astral presence, such as spell locks and foci, will lose Rating Points if exposed to Strain III, but inert magical items are not affected by the virus. An active magical item exposed to Strain III usually loses 1 Rating Point approximately 36 hours after initial contact. Sustained, quickened, or anchored spells and wards lose Rating Points at the same rate as magical items.

While Strain III might prove to be a major annoyance to characters who carry magical items, the virus has a far more serious effect on creatures and beings that exist either fully or partially in the astral plane. Dual-natured creatures unlucky enough to encounter Strain III will lose Essence in the same manner as an item

loses Force, until they die. Spirits or elementals, if bound by their masters to remain in an area occupied by Strain III, will eventually be destroyed. Spirits and elementals attacked by the virus may rid themselves of Strain III simply by traveling to the metaplanes, where no trace of the virus has been found. The fact that Strain III has not been found in the metaplanes supports the theory of those who postulate that the virus originated in the physical world.

So far, astrally perceiving magic-users remain safe from Strain III, because they do not remain dual-natured long enough for the virus to take hold. No one has volunteered to astrally project through an infected area to determine the possible side-effects on metahumanity, though most researchers assume that the magic-user would only remain in danger until he or she left astral space.

Scientists and magical theorists have yet to determine exactly how thoroughly Strain III covers astral space. Very few reports of “viral sites” exists, and none of those sites seem particularly expansive or especially corrupt. But as governments, corps, researchers and runners continue to use the astral plane, it must be assumed that the virus will become more and more widespread. How long will it be before Strain III becomes powerful enough to breach the barrier between the astral and physical planes? How soon before Strain III becomes the next VITAS or black plague?

RULES

Strain III fat bacteria has all the qualities of an astral virus, but was misnamed by its discoverers, who detected the astral entity in the process of attempting to create a new version of fat bacteria (pp. 82–84 and 103, **Corporate Security Handbook**). Strain III is an entity that exists solely on the astral plane and affects astrally active items, beings and constructs. Strain III is not dual-natured, and does not affect normal auras or inactive magical items.

Strain III will attach itself to anything that is magically active, including astrally projecting metahumans, spirits, foci and other magical items and entities. Initially, the virus simply absorbs magical energy from its host. As it feeds, it grows, and the larger it grows, the faster it feeds, until it reaches critical mass and divides into smaller entities. The faster it feeds, the faster it reduces its host’s Magic Rating, according to the Force/Feeding Table.

To determine if Strain III successfully attaches itself to a magical item, a sustained, quickened, or anchored spell, or a ward, the gamemaster makes a Success Test using the Force Rating of the Strain III (see the Force/Feeding Table) against the item’s, spell’s or ward’s Force Rating. One success means that the virus has attached itself to the item and started to feed. The rate at which the host loses magical ability appears in the Force/Feeding Table.

FORCE/FEEDING TABLE

Stage	Force	Feeding Rate
Dormant	1–5	1 point per 36 hours
Active	6–9	1 point per 24 hours
Mature	10+	1 point per 12 hours

The Strain III virus increases its Force by 1 for every point of Force or Essence drained. For example, if a Force 4 Strain III entity (Dormant stage) successfully attaches itself to a Force 5 weapon focus, the entity would absorb 1 point of Force from the weapon focus after 36 hours and a second point after 72 hours. Because the entity in Dormant stage gains a point of Force for each point it drains from the focus after 72 hours it reaches the Active stage (Force 6) and begins to drain the weapon focus at the rate of 1 point every 24 hours.

The virus also affects dual-natured creatures and astral entities. The gamemaster makes a Success Test using the Force of the Strain III against a target number equal to the creature's Essence. One success allows the virus to begin to feed on the victim's magical energies. When the Strain III reduces its victim to 0 Essence, the victim dies.

Even if a player deactivates an item before entering an area infected with Strain III, the gamemaster may choose to make a Success Test to determine if the residual magical energies attract the virus. Make the test described above, except add 1 to the target number for every hour the item has been deactivated. One success means the virus will linger near the item for a number of hours equal to 12 + the Force of the item. If the character does not activate the item within that time, the virus dissipates without damaging the item. If the magic item is activated during that period, the virus begins to feed and eventually drains the item; however, if the character then deactivates the item before the virus drains it, the virus subsequently will dissipate within a number of hours equal to 12 + the Force of the item (remember to subtract the number of Force Points the virus drained while the item was activated).

Destroying Strain III

Strain III can be destroyed two ways: by using the Sterilize or Cure Disease spells in astral space, or by denying it food. While in astral space, a mage or shaman can cast the Sterilize or Cure Disease spell on the item on which the Strain III is feeding, but

must increase the target number for the spell by 1 per Force Point of the virus. For every 2 successes, reduce the Force of the virus by 1. When the virus's Force is reduced to 0, the virus is destroyed.

When its magical host is reduced to 0, the virus searches for a new host. It will float in astral space for a number of weeks equal to its Force Rating. If it fails to find a new host within that time, it then begins to lose 1 point of Force for each subsequent week in which it fails to find a host, until it feeds again or dies. If, after feeding, the virus has a Force of 10 or higher, it must split apart into smaller entities. The gamemaster may choose how the virus divides, but all of the "babies" must have a Force of 1-5 (the Dormant stage). For example, the virus may form ten Force 1 entities, two Force 5 entities, and so on.

Threat Options

The gamemaster can introduce Strain III as a threat specifically designed to frustrate over-confident magic-users or as a way to reduce the power of foci, spells and other astrally active constructs controlled by the players in his game. Perhaps Strain III will only ever manifest its effects in a laboratory environment, a development that would make the virus the focus of the Awakened world's most bitterly fought corp wars. Like the antagonist of any good virus movie, however, Strain III is most effective when it causes panic. The magic-users who understand the implications of this virus all view it as an astral version of VITAS, capable of decimating everything that makes their lives worth living.

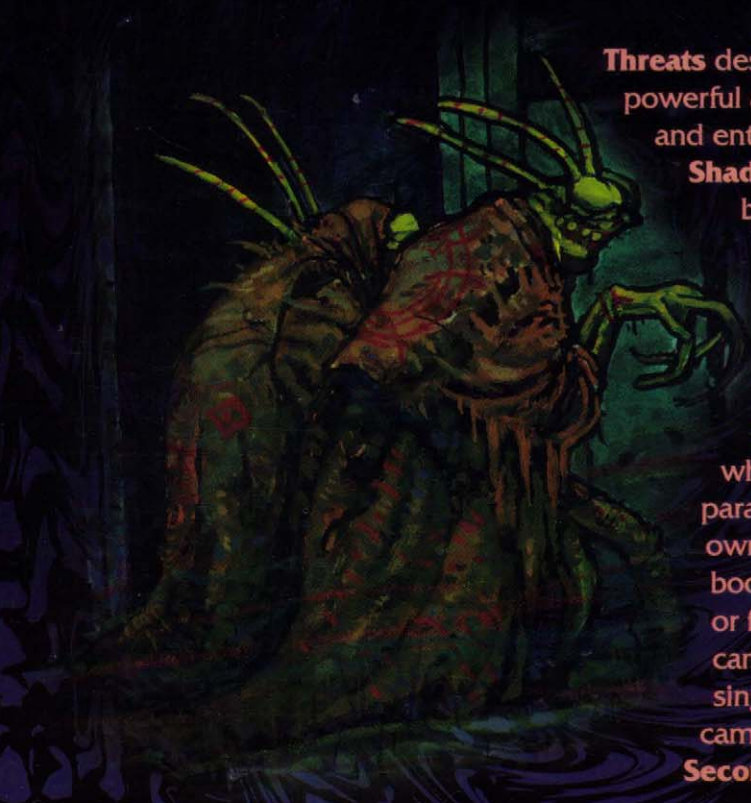
The gamemaster may customize the effect of Strain III on his campaign to suit the playing style of his group. A game that relies heavily on the use of magic might see a generally higher occurrence of the virus than a game oriented more toward technology. The gamemaster also can localize the virus to certain areas of the Awakened world, especially areas whose residents are known for frequent use of astral space. Such concentrations may be as big as the Los Angeles area or as small as Aztechnolgy's magical research facility on the outskirts of Everett.

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