

DEMON



INTERFACE

a fiction anthology for
demon: the descent

DEMON

A dark, industrial-themed illustration. In the center, a mechanical figure lies on its back on a metallic floor. The figure has a complex, multi-jointed body with gears and pistons visible. Its head is tilted back, and its arms are outstretched. To the left of the figure, a long, thin mechanical arm with a gear at the end lies on the floor. To the right, another similar arm is visible. In the upper left corner, a dark, cylindrical object, possibly a pen or a tool, stands upright. The background is a textured, metallic surface with various mechanical components and wires scattered around.

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INTRODUCTION

It all makes sense when you look at it right.
You gotta, like, stand back from it, you know?

- Rabin, *The Usual Suspects*

How do we imagine our chronicles? Is a game of **Demon: The Descent** a novel, each game session playing out like a chapter? Is it a mini-series, finished once a given story arc is done, or is it a multi-season show complete with changes of cast and, in later seasons, references to characters we haven't seen since the pilot? Maybe you see your games more like a movie—each one composed of four or five chapters, but if you could see it all as one cohesive whole, the story and the characters would stand on their own.

We often try to represent our games with fiction, but we have some hurdles to clear. Role-playing games use terminology to refer to characters that feels false or stilted when written in dialog. Sometimes it's hard to describe using a supernatural power in such a way that makes clear to the reader what is happening, but using the name of the power breaks the flow of the narrative. And, of course, characters in a fiction piece do things that are not possible (or are extremely unlikely) if the same scene were happening at a gaming table.

The stories in this anthology are not fictionalized accounts of anyone's games (or if they are, the authors never told *me*), but they are *possible* within the context of **Demon: The Descent**. I think that it's actually easier to write good **Demon** fiction than for a lot of games, because demons don't stand on ceremony with regards to their terms. *Destroyer*. *Saboteur*. *Exploit*. *Gadget*. These terms mean exactly what they seem to mean, and it's not hard to imagine characters using them (depending on who's listening).

Each of the stories in this anthology includes an "Interface," a mechanical bonus that helps put the story in context as representative of the game itself. In some cases, that's a character's background and traits. In others, it's a new power or Gadget, a new special system or character type.

THE PRINCIPAL

By Rick Jones

Evelyn Blackwood smiled to her retreating step-daughter. "Have a good day. I love you." Maria Blackwood half-turned, half-smiled, and said, "you too."

Evelyn had said that to Maria one thousand, four hundred ninety-four times. She'd meant it three hundred and thirteen times.

In the five years, six months and nineteen days since she'd met Evelyn, the answers had progressed from sullen stares (eight hundred twenty-two), to "whatever" (three hundred fifty-eight), to variations on "I hate you" (one hundred thirty-six) and a final begrudging "you too" one hundred and six times. The rest of the replies were statistically insignificant though often colorful.

When Maria was twelve, she'd been convinced that Evelyn was a wicked witch, straight out of fairy tales. She was wrong. Evelyn was a fallen angel of the God-Machine, created to protect Maria. Five years to the day later, it created another angel to sacrifice Maria to grease its metaphysical gears.

Evelyn objected.

Evelyn Fell.

Evelyn listened to Maria start her car and drive off to Stratford High. She pulled her phone from her pocket, entered a code, and a map of Houston appeared with small pulsing blue dot showing the car's progress. Evelyn switched apps and picked from a list of six megaphone icons. Bluegrass music, a love shared by father and daughter, played over the speaker. Evelyn didn't like music. Listening to music was a distraction. Distractions could get you killed.

Evelyn did the breakfast dishes while she listened to Maria drive to school. When the car stopped, Evelyn switched bugs from the car to the one in Maria's cell phone. Evelyn did the laundry while Maria and her friend Shannon talked about their plans for a shopping spree at the mall tomorrow. Evelyn had checked Shannon's background. Evelyn had checked the background of every student, teacher and employee at her stepdaughter's schools. Evelyn listened while the girls whispered about their respective boyfriends. Evelyn did not approve of Joseph Stephenson, but merely to the extent that any mother disapproves of teenage boys. Evelyn had been created with a history, including memories of her past boyfriends. Not that she actually

attended St. Thomas Moore High School in Lafayette, Louisiana, but she remembered Greg Pickering. Greg had gotten drunk and thrown up, getting vomit on her new shoes. Evelyn sometimes picked at her synthetic history like a child with a loose tooth.

By the time second period was over, Evelyn finished the chores. She'd also spent seven-teen minutes online, reading Evelyn's latest emails, tweets and MeYou posts, as well as those of the nine people Evelyn had tagged as being significant enough in Maria's life to warrant surveillance. She plugged the headphones into her phone, placed one earbud loosely in her left ear, and set out for her morning run.

She suspected the God-Machine had arranged the accident that killed Amy Blackwood, but would never know. Evelyn had been created, alongside the corpse of her "husband," in a crumpled car a year after Amy's death. Still adjusting to her new human Cover, paramedics wheeled her into the Emergency Room where Doctor Robert Blackwood was on duty. She sobbed on his shoulder, pretending to weep for the husband she'd only known through implanted memories. He checked on her while she recovered from the injuries the God-Machine had made her with. They bonded over shared loss.

In the end, Bob never stood a chance. From the first tear, she'd manipulated him. She was created from his dreams and fantasies to be his ideal woman. As an angel, everything was simple. After Falling, everything was complicated.

Maria was a work in progress. The mission was simple: marry the father, protect the daughter. Evelyn had spent years attempting to work the girl, but — perhaps in a sign that the God-Machine wasn't all-knowing — she didn't respond to Evelyn's tactics.

Evelyn tried to fit into Maria's life the way she had with Bob, but without success. She needed to protect the girl, but Maria couldn't stand her. Not at first. That made her duties as a guardian angel difficult, but Evelyn managed with ruthless efficiency. In a thirty mile radius, every sex offender on the Megan's Law list was gone as well as some predators that the police didn't know about. Drug dealers, gang members, and a thirteen-year-old child who would become a serial killer based on seventeen behavioral markers became grease for the God-Machine's gears. The God-Machine ensured that police would never bother to solve the crimes. Evelyn kept her little girl safe.

The first time Maria had returned from school, hiding tears and holing up in her room until Bob came home, Evelyn considered tracking down who had hurt her and exacting angelic revenge. But Evelyn couldn't just murder anyone who was mean to Maria on the schoolyard (as much as that might feel satisfying). She had a Cover to maintain, and maintaining Cover was even more important since she had Fallen. If she damaged the metaphysical shell of Evelyn Blackwood, she would be exposed — easy prey for the God-Machine's hunter angels. Worse, she wouldn't be able to protect Maria.

Evelyn wore a hoodie with deep pockets when she ran, even in the sauna of a Texas morning. Her phone was in the left pocket. The right pocket lived in a state of quantum uncertainty. When the old Dodge Charger with a Pizza Hut sign on the roof blew through the stop sign a block away and raced toward her, she was already reaching for the gun that might be there. Then she saw Breeze was driving. That didn't mean it was safe, but it did mean she shouldn't immediately summon her gun. The car stopped a few feet away. The passenger window rolled down and the driver leaned out. In Cherokee, he said, "Miss Storm. It is sunny today."

In Navajo, she answered. "But I don't know about tomorrow, Mister Breeze."

Both demons relaxed. The driver reached over and opened the passenger door. Mister Breeze wore a sauce-stained Pizza Hut shirt and blue jeans. His body was only twenty-one, but he had Fallen three years before she had. Mister Breeze was wired into the hidden world of God-Machine renegades.

Evelyn looked around, then slid into the car. The smell of cheap pizza was overwhelming. “What?”

“You’ve been targeted by Chase,” he said.

For a long moment, both demons sat, as expressionless as statues.

Evelyn finally spoke. “How? Who blew my Cover? I didn’t feel a decay.” She searched her memories, looking for the scars and holes that form when Covers break down.

Breeze shrugged and drove. “I don’t think it knows your Cover specifically. A member of Chase’s cult told Mister Hail that the checksum of the area isn’t right. Two people in Houston are alive that should be dead. Intel is that Chase will be here until midnight Saturday and leave if he doesn’t find anything. I figure we bag your principal, get out of town, and you’re cool. Will the father be a problem?”

“Bob’s at a medical conference in London,” Evelyn said.

“Coolness,” replied Breeze. “Let’s bag the girl and go.”

“It’s not that simple. I can’t just pull her out of her life,” Evelyn said. Her mind calculated probabilities and evaluated options — none of them good.

“Why not? Tell her you want some girl time or something.” Breeze checked his rear-view mirror.

Evelyn checked the sides and the blind spot. “It’ll draw attention. You think Chase won’t be looking for people who just up and run out of town for no reason? Breaking patterns will throw up flags.” She closed her eyes for just a second and listened to her daughter, walking between classes and laughing at a joke that the bug’s microphone couldn’t pick up. She opened them again.

Breeze was looking at her with the expressionless eyes of the Fallen. “There’s something you aren’t telling me.”

“We all have secrets,” she replied. “I’ll protect her.”

“At least ground her for the weekend,” suggested Breeze.

“That’s not an option,” she said.

Breeze scowled intentionally. “Look, I’m no parent, but I understand the concept. You are the boss of her.”

“She....” Evelyn paused. She’d played out the conversation tree. A good third of the endgames involved him throwing her out of the car. In two of those, he wouldn’t bother stopping. “It would be an obvious break in her behavior pattern.”

Breeze drove for a moment, then pulled over and looked at Evelyn. “I can’t figure out what you’re not saying here. Half of me’s kind of proud of you, Storm. The other half wants to hand you over to Chase myself.”

“I’m going to need backup,” she said. “Can you put together a team?”

Breeze snorted. “That’s what I do, but it’s going to cost. Chase’s little doggies are one thing, but Chase makes badass Swords wet themselves.”

Evelyn thought for a moment. "I've got some rainy day pacts."

Breeze glanced over for a moment before returning his attention to the road. "How many?"

"Four. One's really good." She considered the cost and added, "Plus one soul."

Breeze whistled. "When did you get a soul Pact?"

She smiled ruefully. "Who taught me that nobody but nobody should ever know if you've got a soul in your pocket?"

"Fair point. I'll need the soul and I'll probably need the other pacts to sweeten the deal." He checked the mirrors again. "You've got an escape hatch, right? If not, selling it to me would be exceptionally stupid. Tell me you've got another Cover in your back pocket if this goes bad."

Instead of answering, Evelyn said, "I can have the pacts in your hands in a matter of hours."

"Do you have a plan?" asked Breeze. "No, wait. Of course you do."

"I've been planning for this since I Fell." She reviewed the contingency plans and made her choice. "I'm going to need you and whoever else you can pay off to act as provocateurs. Make some noise, attract Chase's attention and then bail."

Breeze nodded. "You have any targets in mind?"

"Ask Hail for his list," she said.

Breeze snorted. "Hell, I won't even have to pay him for the op now."

"Exactly," said Evelyn.

Breeze took a right, heading in a lazy loop back towards Evelyn's home. "Are you ready for the consequences if this turns bad?"

Evelyn tensed up, though her expression never changed. "If it goes bad, I won't be around to worry about the consequences."

He glanced at her and said, "If you think that's the only way this can go bad, you need to think harder." He glanced at the door, then back at her. "Finding someone to replace you would take a while."

Evelyn smiled. "That may be the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

Breeze smirked. "It's the nicest thing I've ever said to anyone. You have everything you need?"

Evelyn smiled but said nothing.

Breeze laughed. "I retract the question." He pulled to a stop in front of her house. "You want, I can call in a freelancer. You sure you can handle the principal solo?"

Evelyn smiled wistfully. "I trust you with my life, Breeze. But not hers."

"Fair enough," he said.

Evelyn watched Breeze drive off before she went inside. She had a lot to do before school let out.

• • •

Evelyn didn't sleep that night. While Maria slept, she reviewed the pictures that Breeze had given her in exchange for the bound leather notebook containing the pacts she'd accumulated over the past two years. She'd already cashed in a couple, adding patches to her Cover. Breeze's collection of

photos was surveillance photos he'd taken over the years, people he suspected of being members of God-Machine cults. Every photo was committed to memory. Right after her fall, Evelyn had trouble sleeping. As an angel, she merely lay in bed, eyes closed, breathing slowed and completely aware of her surroundings. Actual sleep meant gaps in memory, which was terrifying.

In the morning, Evelyn checked in with Breeze. His people were in place. They were going to monitor their targets. Subtle uses of Aether should nudge Chase towards them, like chum attracting sharks. Meanwhile, Evelyn would refrain from drawing any attention. Hopefully Chase would take the bait.

Seconds after Maria's car pulled out, Evelyn was in motion. The go bag she'd had hidden in the closet of her home office was in hand and she was in the car, driving in the opposite direction. She left her car in a supermarket parking lot and ducked into the store's bathroom to change. The gorgeous blond soccer mom went into the bathroom. A dark haired, dangerous looking woman in a heavy leather coat left it. Still listening to the bugs on her stepdaughter, she returned to the parking lot where a car rented with stolen credit card information was waiting.

As she drove, Evelyn's hands didn't shake, but only because of her demonic nature. Evelyn had once heard the term "Hollywood Pretty" versus "Real World Pretty." Evelyn, with her synthetic heritage, was beautiful by the airbrushed standards of the entertainment machine. Maria's beauty was natural. She had imperfections, but that was part of what made her so beautiful in Evelyn's eyes. She was real. She was life. The cold steel in Evelyn's veins ached with envy.

Evelyn checked the mirrors. An amateur would have frozen or jerked the wheel. She recognized the driver of the rusty Honda passing her on the left. She reached for her burner phone and dialed 9-1-1.

In a breathless voice, she said. "Hello, operator. There's a blue Honda driving down Memorial near Crosstimbers. It's swerving in and out of the lane. It almost ran me off the road." She paused. "I'm fine, operator. So I got the license number. Yeah, I had my phone out and took a picture. It's...hold on. Sorry. New phone. The license number is A16BH9. Oh, that B may be an 8. It's a little blurry. Yes, operator. Just make sure he doesn't hurt anyone. Thank you."

With luck, HPD would take that piece off the board. So far, so good.

Maria and her best friend Shannon arrived at the Galleria and began a sweep of the mall, searching for whatever it was that teenage girls desperately needed. Evelyn had long ago stopped trying to predict what they would discover. It was the journey, not the destination.

While the girls checked out some cute boys, Evelyn cruised through the parking garages, checking faces and license plates against Breeze's data. In a dark corner of sub-level 2, she caught a glimpse of Diego Cruz. He was a member of one of the seven God-Machine cults operating in the area. According to the file, an angel had cured his lung cancer and Diego was busily balancing the equation by feeding blood to the God-Machine's cogs. The file suggested Diego was strong, good with knives and guns, and utterly without mercy.

So was Evelyn. She parked a level away and slowly made her way back.

Evelyn took her time, staying in shadows. Eventually, she was behind the bed of the truck, having inch-wormed her way there under adjacent cars. She crawled under the truck, sliding to just under the driver's side door. She could hear two voices in the truck.

“—tired of this bullshit, Diego,” said a female voice.

“We are doing the Lord’s work, Lupe,” said a male voice with fanatical calm. “The Angel said we must find the lost lamb.”

“Do you know how crazy that sounds, Diego?” she said.

“They laughed at Noah,” he replied, his voice fraying at the edges.

The woman laughed. “Yeah, well Old Testament God was a douche.”

The man’s voice grew hard. “Do not blaspheme.”

The woman paused for a moment, then said, “Are you serious?”

“I am doing the Lord’s work, sister,” the man said. “I have seen His glory and I will not have my calling mocked.”

Evelyn had heard enough. She pulled out a Glock with the silencer already screwed on and rolled to the side, until she was on the ground next to the driver’s door. She aimed and shot one of the tires of the car on the other side of the truck, setting off the blaring alarm right next to the truck Diego was in. Evelyn rolled to her feet in a blur of motion and opened the driver’s door. Diego had a Glock of his own in his hand and was looking towards the noise, just as she’d planned. She whipped her gun across the back of his head and slammed him into the steering column.

Lupe was inhaling to scream when Evelyn shot her, but there was only a chuff of air. The bullet made a small hole in the middle of her forehead. Brains splattered across the passenger window. Diego had dropped the gun when his head hit the steering wheel. With her left hand, Evelyn snatched the pistol up. She pistol whipped Diego’s head back with her right hand. His head slammed back. Evelyn took the fraction of a second to shove Diego’s gun up under his chin and pulled the trigger. Another spray of gore splattered the cab of the truck. Evelyn shoved her gun back in her pocket and took Diego’s hand and put his gun in it. She squeezed his finger around the trigger and shot Lupe twice more.

Evelyn crouched down again. In the distance, she could hear voices raised in alarm. It took some time to get clear of the area, but the natural reluctance on the part of bystanders to approach what may have been gunfire gave her the cover she needed.

Glass entrance doors slid open and she walked into the Galleria. Evelyn traced her fingers along the wall of the walkway leading from the garage into the mall proper. Information flooded into her mind. A detailed three-dimensional model appeared in her mind, showing every corridor, stairwell, doorway and elevator. With a thought, she delved deeper into the model, examining the flow of electricity, tracking junction boxes and finding the central hub she needed. She stalked through the thickening crowd of weekend shoppers. She tried to mark as many faces as she could, but there were limits.

Evelyn tapped her earpiece and listened to the bug in her daughter’s phone. She and Shannon were trying on blouses and talking about a teacher they both despised. She tapped the earpiece again and dialed Breeze for a sitrep.

“Who killed the rooster?” asked Breeze.

“Everyone says the cat did it,” replied Evelyn. “So?”

“Both birds down.” He paused for a moment. “You?”

“Some hounds. No sign of their boss, but it sounds like you kept him busy,” she said.

“That’s the thing,” he replied. “What’s keeping him busy now?”

Evelyn cursed. “Does Hail have anyone else on his list?”

Breeze shrugged. “Yes, but drawing a hunter close again...that’s asking a lot.”

Evelyn bit down her first response, then said, “I paid a lot.”

“The deal was for two targets, and Hail’s spooked. The hunter got a look at his Cover before he lost him.”

Evelyn didn’t need to calm her breathing. She just let the part of her that was Miss Storm do the talking. “And you, Breeze? I can get more pacts.”

Breeze was equally cold. “Storm, I don’t know if you’ll be alive tonight to collect them.”

Evelyn hung up. The model in her mind showed her where the main security room was. It took an effort of will not to use Miss Storm’s unnatural speed to run there, but she managed — barely. She reached into her right pocket again and pulled out a leather wallet. Not bothering to knock, she opened the door. The pair of mall cops looked up in surprise.

“Can we help you, ma’am?” asked the older of the pair — a sandy blond man whose hair-cut and posture took Evelyn he was ex-military. His partner was younger, probably only a few years older than Maria.

Evelyn flipped open the wallet. Inside was a fake Houston Police Department badge and ID. Hail had made it for her as a favor. She kept it in a lockbox that her pocket sometimes connected to. “Isabel Storm, HPD. I need your help.”

The older man, whose badge read Simonson, said “Yes, ma’am?”

She showed the picture of Chase to the pair. “This man is Kevin Cox. He’s a kiddie porn distributor, and he’s here today to make a sale. I need your security camera network.” Accusing Chase of being a terrorist would have gotten the pair on her side too, but it would draw a lot more attention. A terrorist might blow up something, so they’d call for backup and expose her lie, but the mix of “pure evil” and “not likely to be carrying a bomb” associated with child pornographers got the exact level of help she needed.

Simonson and his partner Greene let her sit at the center of the wall of videos. Both of them looked intently at the screens. “Should we call for backup?” asked Greene.

“Not yet,” Evelyn said smoothly. “All I’ve got is a tip from a source that’s not exactly reliable. Also, I don’t want him running until I see who the buyer is.” She turned to Greene and said grimly, “I’ve jumped the gun before and he spooked. My captain finds out I screwed up again and I’ll be writing parking tickets until Judgment Day.”

“Just shut up and watch the screens,” Simonson said to Greene. He turned to Evelyn and said, “If he’s here, we’ll spot him eventually.”

Evelyn nodded. “Thanks, guys. If we catch this guy, I’ll make sure you guys get some of the credit.”

Simonson shrugged, “I don’t give a rat’s ass about credit. I got three boys.” He looked over at Evelyn. “You?”

“One. A girl.”

“So you know.”

“Yeah,” she said.

Evelyn tried to watch every monitor at once and failed. She forced herself to look at each one for a second, scanning the display for Chase and then looking at the next one. It was maddening, but she ignored the knots in her guts.

“Camera five,” said Greene, sitting up in his chair.

Evelyn glanced at it and didn’t see Chase, then looked at the screen she had been focusing on. A man in a Houston Astros baseball cap was a possibility. “That’s not him,” she said.

“Not him, ma’am,” said Greene.

Simonson had rolled his chair over and was looking at the image intently. “What do you got?”

“Tall guy with glasses in a navy suit. He leaned over to look at the ice rink. I think I saw a gun.”

Evelyn glanced back at the image, saw the slight bulge in his suit and the fraction of a degree wider his left arm hung more than his right. It wasn’t Chase. She started to look away but then realized what she’d missed. The man wasn’t Chase. He was, however, on Hail’s list: Jason Bannerman, a member of the same cult as Cruz. She quickly looked at all the screens in succession, not looking for Chase but for any face she recognized. She felt the world drop out from under her and counted five of Chase’s hounds. All of them looking at faces. All of them listening to earpieces.

Panic was the enemy. Panic would get Maria dead. And then, Evelyn thought, death would be welcome. Some wounds cannot heal.

No, thought Miss Storm, I will not fail. I have plans. I have contingencies, because I knew this might happen. Miss Storm closed her eyes, centered herself and, for the first time, prayed.

“That’s my partner,” Evelyn lied. “Dammit, my captain’s got him checking up on me. I better go talk to him.”

Simonson nodded. “Sorry, ma’am. We’ll keep an eye out for your guy.”

“Thanks,” said Evelyn quickly exiting. After she closed the door, the part of Miss Storm that was Evelyn slid away. With inhuman strength, she bent the doorknob, jamming the guards inside. She reached into her right pocket and pulled out a ski mask and gloves. The more people who saw her inhuman self, the more her Cover would fray. The mask, gloves and heavy clothes masked most of her demonic features, but she was still burning her Cover every second Evelyn was pushed aside.

Miss Storm’s left forearm itched. She pushed her sleeve up and saw a series of loops of copper snaking forming fractal patterns as her Cover glitched. She cursed, but she couldn’t face Chase as Evelyn. She knew just how powerful the angel was. Even as Miss Storm, she was still massively outclassed.

In Breeze’s first lecture, he had said, “We aren’t as powerful as they are; we gave it up to Fall. We have to be smart instead. We have to plan ahead.”

Miss Storm listened for a moment to the bug in her stepdaughter’s phone. Maria was laughing again. She was physically incapable of forgetting it, but Miss Storm savored it anyway. She flipped open her phone and dialed a number. Throughout the Galleria, the small C-4 charges that she’d set while Maria was at school yesterday detonated.

Every light in the complex went out. That was when the screaming started.

Miss Storm ran with inhuman speed. As she did, she grazed her fingers against the walls again. With an effort of will, she used her mental map and flooded the area with quantum uncertainty. For a brief time, everyone in the entire mall but her would have difficulty hitting their targets. She, on the other hand, would have pinpoint accuracy. Miss Storm burst into the mall proper. Chaos reigned. Not even slowing down, she barreled through the crowd, her mental map filling with patterns of crowd flow.

Knowing where she'd last seen the hounds and how the mob would carry them on in the stream, Miss Storm slid through the crowd, almost dancing as she spun, ducked, and leaped. Running down the escalator rail, she saw three hounds with their guns drawn, trying to listen to their earpieces. Evelyn shot two of them; even in the middle of the chaos, she was as accurate as if she'd had a tripod on a shooting range. The third got off a shot, but the chaos field threw off his aim. Evelyn shot him too.

The crowd parted and flowed backwards, turning against itself to get away from the danger. Miss Storm slid to a halt next to the corpses. She grabbed a dead man's earpiece and listened. She heard a voice speaking in Esperanto, ordering everyone who could hear to force their way towards her location. That trick would have worked on other demons, as the synthetic language created by L.L. Zamenhof was no one's native tongue. The God-Machine cults usually used Latin for that purpose, but Mr. Breeze had insisted Miss Storm learn Latin and Esperanto, just in case.

The instructions meant that other hounds had seen her. Bullets whizzed by her, but the chaos field diverted the trajectories just enough to miss. Miss Storm plotted on her model where they'd come from, turned, and fired the instant she saw faces from the list. She dropped the earpiece and started running again, now moving with the current of bystanders up the stairs. She knew the shortest route to Maria, but as much as she needed to be there to protect her daughter, the last thing she wanted to do was single her out as a target. She instead mapped out a route to the probable location of the next hound she'd seen on the monitors.

At the top of the stairs, something that only looked human slammed into Miss Storm with the force of a freight train. She tried to twist out of the arms that were circled around her but they were strong — far stronger than her. The charging angel slammed her into a wall between an overpriced shoe store and another selling overpriced home electronics. They crashed through the drywall. Determined, she grabbed at one of the angel's arms and used it as a fulcrum. The angel was strong, but she could still use leverage.

The ploy worked and Miss Storm broke free, sliding to the side. The angel took a step back and looked at her. He was so bland her eyes didn't want to focus on him. In that microsecond, the angel came at her again. She tried to get out of its way and use his momentum against him, but he was faster than she was. His left fist slammed into her stomach like a jackhammer. Miss Storm flew back through the plate glass window of the electronics store. She tried to take a breath, but his punch had paralyzed her diaphragm. She saw the angel lift a widescreen television and throw it at her as she staggered to her feet. She lunged out of the way and, with the aid of the chaos field, the television crashed to the ground behind her.

The angel blurred towards her. Miss Storm had lost her gun when he'd tackled her, and she didn't have time to pull another one out of her pocket. Her own speed gave her just enough time to roll to the side as an axe-kick shattered the floor where she'd been laying a second before. Miss Storm grabbed the angel's foot and twisted. Leverage beat strength again, and the angel fell.

Miss Storm scrambled to her feet and ran for her gun, but the angel was faster. She felt his hand grab her ankle and whip her around in the air, like a toy. She hit the ground and felt more bones break. Her internal mechanisms started repairing themselves, but there was no way her healing ability could match the punishment she was taking. She tried to pry the angel's hand loose with a joint lock, but he ignored it.

The angel slammed her into a row of speakers, smiling blandly as he did so. She tried to focus, but everything hurt. Hands like vices pinned her wrists to the wall above her head. A second pair of hands pinned her thighs to the wall, and a fifth hand was clutching her throat. Storm squinted and saw that Chase had grown extra arms; all of them were longer than arms should be. *That wasn't fair*, she thought.

"Hello, sister," said Chase. His voice was as bland as his face. "Where's your principal?"

Miss Storm tried to push against him, but she didn't have enough strength or leverage to move. Maybe if she got Chase talking, she could heal enough to try something. "Screw you, gear," she spat.

"Sister, you are being rude." The hands all clenched tighter, grinding broken bones. A sixth hand pulled off her mask. Her inhuman beauty gave off a faint glow. "Where is your principal?"

"Locked up where you can't find her." She coughed and spat out a perfect tooth. "You think I'd let her out with you in town?"

Chase smiled. "No. I'd have sensed that. You let her continue her normal pattern. That was wise..." He cocked his head and seemed to be listening to something. "But futile in the end. She's here. I'll find her." Storm struggled against his multi-armed grasp. "Thank you for all of the bugs on her." His voice changed, vibrating with energy. "The target is on level two, heading towards the east exit. Teenage female. Shoot everyone matching that description." He paused for a moment. "Oh, and take time to aim. Snap shots will miss." The voice returned to normal. "Just a moment more, and then you're free to go. I'm not here for you. Though, I must say, finding the leak was a bonus."

"Please," said Miss Storm, pouring all of her power into her words. Her powers of persuasion could dazzle even the strongest-willed men. "She's my daughter."

Chase looked puzzled. "No, she's not. She's whoever you were created to protect. She's not really your daughter."

Miss Storm snarled, "She is. And I won't let you hurt her."

"You seem to have few options left," he said.

"Watch me." She grabbed the chaos field and her mental model and knotted them together.

Even over the crowd noise, Miss Storm could hear the shots.

Chase listened again. "Interesting. They're having trouble hitting a specific target." He smiled coldly. "Thank you for letting me know who to kill." Chase's hands all tightened and Miss Storm felt weak. She held onto the chaos field as long as she could, but he was draining the energy out of her. The field collapsed.

As consciousness slipped away, Miss Storm heard Chase's modulated voice. "Try now."

Two shots rang out.

Miss Storm screamed.

Chase dropped her to the floor.

Miss Storm lay there, eyes closed.

• • •

Evelyn Blackwood sat in the hospital waiting room. She felt drunk. She couldn't remember her prom anymore. She tried to remember who threw up on her shoes, but it was all a blank. "Miss Blackwood?" said the doctor. She looked up. He was one of Bob's friends. She couldn't remember his name.

"Yes?"

"She's going to be okay. The bullet nicked the femoral artery. She lost a lot of blood and there's some muscle damage, but she's going to be okay. She's asking for you and Bob." He paused and looked at the chart again. "I got a message to him on the airplane."

Evelyn slowly rose. All of her wounds had healed, but Evelyn Blackwood had been diminished. "Thanks." She followed the doctor to the ICU.

Maria looked horrible. Her face was pale. Evelyn put on a warm smile. "Hey sweetie."

"Hey, Evelyn."

Evelyn slowly approached the bed. "Do you need anything?"

Maria shook her head. Tears welled up. She took a deep breath. "Shannon's dead."

Evelyn looked down at her hands. "I know."

"They shot her right in front of me." She started sobbing. "I thought we weren't going to make it."

Evelyn stood up and hugged her, careful not to disturb the IV.

Maria cried for twelve minutes before leaning back. "Thanks, Evelyn."

"I'd do anything for you, sweetie. I love you."

Maria smiled faintly. She closed her eyes. "I love you too," she whispered.

That was one.

INTERFACE

While Mr. Hail does not appear directly in "The Principal," he is mentioned a few times as a member of the same Agency as Miss Storm and Mister Breeze. Mister Hail is the newest member of their Agency and works as a starting character, albeit one with some history behind him. While the story takes place in Houston, he could easily be transplanted to wherever your home chronicle is set.

DETECTIVE JONATHAN DRUMMOND (AKA MISTER HAIL)

"I'm not that guy anymore. He burned away to atoms. What's gonna convince you?"

Background: Zorazel's life as an angel was one surrounded by the squalor of urban poverty. His initial Cover was Jeffrey Blake, a meth dealer working for a Mexican cartel and supplying a steady stream of poison to a lower middle-class neighborhood. While his "day job" was to make sure that the meth flowed, the God-Machine used him to hook certain people. Zorazel was the disease vector that turned potential threats into empty, addicted shells. In the process, Blake's status in the cartel grew and he became wealthy and powerful. Of course, that didn't matter to Zorazel.

As part of his regular collection rounds, Blake went to a squalid apartment in the worst part of town. He left his Lexus double-parked in front of the building, knowing that no one would touch Mister Blake's ride. When nobody answered his knock, Blake broke the door down.

As a pusher, Blake had seen horrible sights. He'd been the cause of many of them. But he discovered his limit that day, when he saw the starved corpses of two toddlers curled up against the bodies of their parents, dead from an overdose.

Zorazel knew he couldn't continue and he knew that he couldn't just say "no" to the God-Machine. That left the Fall. But even in Fallen flesh, Blake was caught just as much as Zorazel. He couldn't leave the cartel, not just because they'd kill him but because to maintain his Cover, he had to continue to live Blake's life.

Zorazel attempted to slowly change Blake's ways, but all he did was lose his status in the cartel. A rival tried to have Blake killed. He hadn't been expecting a trap, and when the hail of automatic gunfire opened up, he barely had time to think, much less react. As his Cover slowly died, Zorazel had no choice but to go loud to save his life. Blake's rivals died hideous deaths, sliced to pieces.

Without a Cover, Zorazel knew he had little time before the hunter angels found him. Fortunately, Zorazel had a soul pact he'd been holding onto. Detective Jonathan Drummond was a dirty cop. He had been on Blake's payroll, exchanging protection for all the drugs, sex, and money that Drummond wanted. Drummond's soul had been an easy sell. All of the evidence that I.A. had collected ended up burned in a fire, and a string of witnesses recanted.

As a detective, even one on Internal Affairs' watch list, Drummond / Zorazel had protection that Blake didn't. When Blake's replacements came calling, looking to see if Drummond was ready to continue their relationship, Drummond was able to say "no" without getting gunned down.

The original Drummond was good at being a bad cop. Zorazel is bad at being a good cop. His knowledge of the underworld from the other side has helped, but he didn't get the police training Drummond had. Fortunately, demons are quick studies. While as an angel, Zorazel didn't take full advantage of the lifestyle that Blake's life afforded, he did come to appreciate them as a demon. Sadly, as Drummond, he possesses none of those luxuries. Drummond was always broke thanks to unsavory habits that even Pact-given riches couldn't keep. Zorazel misses his high lifestyle, though he's not yet willing to compromise his principles to get them.

Zorazel / Drummond hasn't forgotten about the cartel that killed his old self. Since he first incarnated as Blake, he started a list — people that, in Zorazel's mind, needed to be dead. Certainly, his enemies in the cartel were at the top of the list, but with his perfect memory he'd made a long list of people he wanted dead.

Mister Breeze learned about Zorazel through the demon rumor network and approached him. Having a police detective, even one under as much scrutiny as Drummond, on their side was a tempting prospect. While he is unaware of it, the rest of the cabal is concerned that he may screw up again, and keep him at arm's length so that if he does end up in the God-Machine's clutches, he doesn't have enough information on them to give up.

With demonic precision, Drummond is working on his list. He's made progress (some of it thanks to the events of "The Principal"), but as he goes about his life as a cop, the list keeps growing.

Description: Detective Drummond is a heavyset middle-aged man. He shaves his balding head, though both his hair and his beard usually have a few days growth before he gets around to shaving again. He needs reading glasses, though he tries to make do without as much as possible. Drummond dresses in cheap suits that he really should dry-clean, but that he washes himself to save money.

As Zorazel, he is a gray blur. He is constantly twitching and making small movements at inhuman speed. When he uses his Phasing Propulsion, the blur becomes even more indistinguishable. The only recognizable feature is his green eyes, which glow like an old-fashioned green-screen computer monitor just after it's been turned off.

Storytelling Hints: Mister Hail is, for lack of a better term, a well-intentioned screw-up. While he never makes the same mistakes twice, his flaw is that he doesn't think things through as much as a demon should. While still an idealist, he's been beaten down enough to cover that optimism with a hard shell of cynicism. Despite being a police officer, he tends to think like a criminal, which actually helps from time to time.

INTERFACE

The players' ring could become involved with Mr. Hail and his Agency if they are tracking someone already on Hail's list. It might be interesting, though, to give the characters some information that Hail doesn't have — maybe someone he's targeted for death is someone that the characters know (or believe) has been framed, or maybe they just need the target alive for one specific action or piece of information, after which he can go hang. It's just a question of convincing Hail.

Virtue: Stubborn

Vice: Impatient

Incarnation: Messenger

Agenda: Saboteur

Mental Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 2, Resolve 2

Physical Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 3

Social Attributes: Presence 3, Manipulation 3, Composure 2

Mental Skills: Investigation 2, Science (Drug Cooking) 2

Physical Skills: Brawl 1, Drive 2, Firearms 2, Larceny (Lock Picking) 2

Social Skills: Empathy 2, Persuasion (Deals) 3, Streetwise (Drug Culture) 4, Subterfuge 2

Merits: Contacts (Drug Scene, Police Force) 2, Fame: Dirty Cop 1, Professional Training: Criminal 2, Pusher, Status: Police 2

Demonic Form: Aura Sight, Blade Hand, Fast Attack, Memory Theft, Mind Reading, Night Vision, Phasing

Embeds: Freudian Slip, Social Dynamics, Trust No One

Exploits: Addictive Presence

Health: 8

Primum: 1

Max Aether/per turn: 10/1

Willpower: 4

Cover: 7

Size: 5

Speed: 9

Defense: 2

Initiative: 4

Armor: Detective Drummond usually wears a Kevlar Vest (1/3).

Glitches: None

Weapons: Detective Drummond carries a Heavy Revolver and has a Light Revolver in an ankle holster. He also has a collection of "throw down" light pistols when he wants to plant evidence on a perp.

LONG ROAD TO CAANAN

By Neall Raemonn Price

It was silent in the ruined apartment. Everything was dead, save me, and I had one life left.

My Aether broke that silence, singing a keening dirge within for the angels who'd come to claim me. I flexed my arms, inlaid with burning circuitry and studded with incandescent vacuum tubes. A shout began our battle, but it ended in a whimper — with a tinge of all-too-human regret, I let my energies bleed out of me.

Somewhere far away, a man named William felt me and tried to scream. But his hand had carved his name into a stone beneath Greenwich, and that made him mine. I stepped into him and drew him over me. He and I fell into place; as his memories flooded within me, our falling together became a sensation not wholly unfamiliar.

Billy and I — one and the same, now — stood in a shattered living room full of broken angels, their rapidly-cooling corpses sputtering and leaking the last dregs of liquid Essence into dirty carpet. We shivered, both from the chill and the childhood memory it invoked. The lamp had been sliced in two by a demon-slaying sword, so the only light in the house came from the rising sun. The apartment had been a shithole before, but the battle between divine and profane had transformed the structure from crappy to condemnable. It wasn't mine, and in a sense it never had been, but I felt its loss like the ache of a phantom arm. That life and this safehouse were retribution for the ring's assault on the Woolworth Infrastructure. I hadn't expected the building to shunt the fire we started along a linked timeline, thirteen years into the past (and into Pennsylvania). My own nature allowed me to avoid the trap, but it'd cost me anyway. God had to have Its due.

I didn't know if any of their pacts were useable that far along a time reset. Thirteen years could be a very long time.

I shrugged out of our shared coat and yanked up our sleeve. The machine code was burned into our arm, seared holes punched through like an input card. I held it up, and the dim twilight shined through. My idle hands twitched out a code in binary, penance for loudly declaring my demonhood to the angels hunting me. The Machine always wins.

Fuck it. The walls started to close in. The hunters would be here soon. Best thing now would be going to ground. We wiped our fingers on Billy's jeans, held his threadbare Navy coat a little tighter with fists swaddled in wool, and blew out whistling breath the way he

always did—sounding like the screech of a stopping train. Together, we walked out the splintered front door into the snowy New York dawn.

• • •

The most important part of Billy's life was Danny McAvoy, which made him the most important part of our life. I spun a bit of the excess energies I'd wasted into a summoning pattern, punched holes in reality's dance card to fill with Danny's presence. He shared my apartment on Bleecker often enough. The machine code I fed into fate would put him there for certain, so long as I showed up too. We felt the ache radiating outward from the holes in our arms, but we kept our hands in our pockets.

Fog rolled in, little flakes of snow floating in ether. The wash of air felt a lot like plunging into freezing water. Billy would never forget that sensation, so neither would I. Water so dark and so cold that chunks of ice still sat below the surface, numbness that presaged pain. That unique sensation of no sensation, of having the thousand different senses humans take for granted ripped away from you by the darkness, jagged ice-knives waiting just beyond, ready to rip and tear.

I hadn't expected to have so much in common with the man. I didn't care for surprises as a rule. Not that much surprised me.

We strode down the alleys where men slept, reading the patterns stamped onto the punched IBM cards of their lives. Nobody wanted to feel that way about themselves, but I knew better. Some were alive, I could see, and would stay so for years to come. One of the men was as cold as the fog, his punched holes having ended promptly at three this morning. On a whim, I tuned an antenna to the signal of an alternate, from the frequency of the dead hobo to the same man still living. He would be warm and alive, if he'd chosen to sleep in the subway after midnight.

The infinite echoes of the multiverse crashed into silence and limited the present timeline, causing me to wince (Billy, naturally, just kept on walking). The wind kicked up a bit, stirring the fog. I could see the sky above, a dirty snowball color just like the rest of the city. Shit. I'd just flipped over a few quantum waveforms to have a look-see, bright signal flares to the angels trying to lock down my frequency. A fresh-Fallen move on my part, especially after my summoning trick.

Sleeping would shroud my signal for a time; a good idea, since I didn't have anyone else to run to if things went sour. I skipped up the stairwell to my apartment — a dingy place, but all Billy's for thirty dollars a month. His key slid into the lock, opened into darkness. The last sliver of light disappeared as I shut the door. I flicked the deadbolt, and a dozen different futures where we were robbed just after dawn withered and died. The prospective thieves would flick the bolt gently and feel it in the door, then move on.

We went up to the form sleeping in the bed. The faint scent of Jack Daniels and reefer lay heavy atop the base scent of male musk. Billy and I took off our clothes, and slid into bed around a man apparently worth selling a soul for.

• • •

Bacon sizzled in the pan. We were out of eggs and the lettuce was wilting a little, but the tomatoes were fresh and the bread was still good. Billy would've thought that was just fine as long as Danny was there, so I didn't have much choice but to go along with it. I wasn't dead come awakening, but I could feel the Aether in the Village like a hot sun on my back. A few days, a few weeks, and I could leave this behind.

Our arm ached to the Hell I hoped to buy someday. I'd kept it wrapped in some dirty gauze that was in the closet when we'd moved in. I didn't fear infection, but my glitch wouldn't heal naturally, and it wouldn't heal for months unless I found somewhere to restore it. Until the heat was off, I couldn't do much of anything except keep it covered.

I heard Danny walking out from the bedroom. I knew he was all curly black hair, black as coal, spiraling down into wiry beard without even looking at him. He came up behind me, put a single arm around my chest and grunted in greeting. His arm had hair like iron filings, sticking to slick sweat and corded muscle from years of dock work. Billy turned to kiss him good morning, and as I pulled back, his sleepy eyes twinkled blue in the noon light. I made Billy smile, put a touch of longing into it.

"Morning, you," he said, his faint Scouse accent thick from sleep. "Missed you at the Gas-light last night. It was...a gas." Billy thought that turn of phrase delightful, which tells you all you need to know about Billy. We laughed together.

"Had some business to take care of," I said.

Danny plopped onto a stool around our kitchen table. He'd slept in tattered red long johns covered in white paint splatters. "You burning that bacon?"

I glanced at my arm, the stamped machine code reeking of sulfur and burnt hair. It was starting to seep through the bandages under my shirt. "Yeah, the bacon, a little." There was a bit of luck in the radiator not being very good. In some alternate world, I imagined, it was summer, and my long-sleeved shirt would give away my glitches.

"Stinks. But yeah. Poetry over the drums, it's my thing. Nineteen sixty-one is definitely going to be my year," he said. "I'm supposed to head over to Carol's place. Kenny's coming over, we're going to drink wine and practice for tonight." He yawned. "Think you can spot me some cash for the afternoon supper?"

He wasn't really asking. Billy flipped the bacon over, tossed the sliced tomatoes into the grease. Danny was a British citizen, come to find his father, a GI whose involvement in Danny's life began and ended at his boy's conception. Danny had gotten from the Port Authority to Greenwich before he'd stopped looking, but he was perpetually preparing to head out to Los Angeles where, he said, his father worked in movies. Not the big budget Hollywood films, he stressed, but underground stuff, art on a celluloid canvas.

"No need," I said. "I'll come with."

The bacon and tomatoes sizzled, sending up streams of smoke from the hot grease. A few seconds went by. I turned to look at Danny. He was staring at me, just a hint of steel behind those sapphire eyes.

"No need," he repeated. "Man, what's that mean?"

"Nothing," Billy stammered, with my voice.

Danny was off the stool in an instant. "You *really* don't know what it's like, trying to cover for you all the time," he shouted, half angry and half upset. He came towards us for a second, then started pacing. "Everyone asking what we're doing, asking where you get the money. Jesus, you know the kind of *shit* that brings down on us."

I didn't want to stay silent, but Billy would've, so I split the difference. "I don't want to fight," I said, and I meant it. I pushed that meaning out into the world a little and Danny deflated instantly, inadvertently. I will never stop finding it fascinating how, if you remove the

aggressive posturing people put on, they open right up. I've gotten pretty good at it sussing out someone's motivations. You can't let someone see all the myriad possibilities of free will and not expect him to grow curious about the reasoning behind it.

"Just saying, man," Danny said, more of a whine now. "You fit in just fine in the basket house. You're pretty free with the coins. It gets noticed." Getting noticed didn't quite equate to fitting in fine, but the coins were why souls changed hands.

"Okay," I said. "So what's keeping me from Carol and Kenny?"

"Kenny more than Carol, she doesn't do much of anything. And nothing," he said. "Look, it's just, we all know you sell your poems. And that's cool. It's just, you know, they've kened on to you being a little more than you seem."

What an understatement. I dried the bacon and put it with the wilted lettuce, tomato and mayonnaise on the bread.

"And they know what we do here, and that's groovy too, but..."

"But?"

"It keeps coming back to the money," Danny said, scratching his head. "I'm fine with it, you know I am. And they're fine with me spreading the love around a bit. You just tend to flash it more than most."

He set a hand on my shoulder. "No worries, brother," he said, white teeth beneath his beard. "I'll fix it."

We ended up buying food from the store. About a half mile away from Carol's, Danny stuffed the spice into his back pocket, the onion in his pants and the ham in his shirt. "I'll smooth things over with them," he said. "Let me do this alone, eh? You're not a great liar, love."

I didn't bother to correct him, since Billy wouldn't have. So Billy and I went to the Gaslight Café. Danny'd play there tonight.



Voices leaked from a dirty stairwell, descending down under a naked yellow bulb to a sturdy basement door. I could lose the angels in The Gaslight's evening crowd, if I could stand the associated acts. We glanced, suspicious, at the fresh Bell System payphone beside the stairwell, then skipped down with a gait both youthful and relaxed. Billy was excited and I was nervous, but being a jagged hole in the multiverse means never letting them see you sweat.

The Café wasn't actually a café; it was a basket house, where artists passed around the basket to spread the wealth, which was like spreading a glass of water to make the desert wetter. It was smoky and dark, the latter because half the lights were dim or completely out, the former because everyone was smoking. The building stood with brick walls covered by a dozen different bed sheets, masquerading as sad tapestries. Free-standing lamps supplemented the meager ones overhead, with not a matching chair or table in sight.

And everywhere, the beats. Tatty clothing and shapeless sweaters, beards uncut and unwashed, and sandals despite the snow outside. They laughed quietly, smoked, and tossed coins into the basket to support the woman spouting some sort of poetry about eating chicken

in Cuba. She finished and a few in the crowd started snapping their fingers in appreciation. Their smiles told me they didn't really understand, but they wanted to impress her nonetheless. The table beside me seated a tall dark stranger in a tall dark suit, his bohemian lover, and Billy's friend Cat. I saw the shadows moving, huddling in the dark.

These are my people. The thought was more Billy's than mine. His was a soul chained by shame and stigma, forever viewing a world he couldn't be a part of, wanting a life he was too afraid to embrace. My deal was simple — this life for his soul. Billy didn't hesitate. Neither did I, when it came time to collect. I could sympathize with his loneliness, really, but we differed in one crucial place — when I wanted this life, I took it. I didn't ask anybody else for it.

We sat, Billy and me, waiting for Danny's arrival. Cat smiled at me then went back to his conversation, arguing with the man in the suit. The poet on stage was reading some off-kilter rhyme about life on Bleecker, and how he was finally home, in from the cold.

The cold. Billy wanted to shiver at the memory, which wasn't ever far in the winter. This time, I let him do it and let the memory form fully in our mind.

It was Billy's father who, back from the Front, had caught his son kissing the neighbor's boy. He had suddenly, single-mindedly, decided his son needed to learn to swim, despite the Kansas chill in January. Mother said nothing, not with the bruise on her cheek from weakening their son while Father was off at war. Grasping the boy with one strong hand — the other arm ended in a red, raw stump — he'd hurled young William onto a film of ice too thin to support any weight. Into the black we went.

William thought the world to be cold and desolate. Like so many others, he felt himself chewed down by a mechanism far larger than he, degrading and destroying his ability to think and feel. Ground down by a Machine that wanted things the way it wanted them. It was only natural that he'd come here. The Big Apple, they'd said, was a haven for William's kind. Homosexuals, thinkers, poets, beats. People who recognized the machinery of society and rejected it wholesale. Maybe they were my people, too.

The yokel came to the big city, where people called him Billy instead of William, but he was unnoticed and unwelcomed by Danny and Cat and all the others. He wasn't educated and he wasn't talented, so he was left shivering in a New York November when I finally found him. Everybody needed a patron and I needed a contingency plan in case Woolworth went south.

The moment I looked at him, I was reminded of why I Fell. I could see, at a glance, the other Williams living elsewhere in other worlds. One was minding his old man's shop back in Kansas; another was making rough love to some dark-skinned Cuban expat in Florida; still another was already dead in a New York gutter. If I'd still been an angel, I would be stalking through those worlds, pruning all the other Williams so the God-Machine could strengthen this timeline, stop their fading quantum echoes from influencing this one with things like *regret* or *roads not taken*. The question I asked Billy was the same one that caused me to Fall, when I accosted the same man at the same time in two different places. Why'd you come here, Billy? Why did *you* come *here*, Billy, as opposed to the Billys of Somewhere Else?

Someone had to fund the beatniks of Greenwich Village. Billy was a boy from Kansas who lived like a starving artist but had just under \$400,000 sitting in his bank account. That's how it starts, Billy, the lure of silver. In a few years, the Machine would grind this whole place down to dust. The Machine always wins. If you'd asked, I would've told you. I'd never deny you that. But you wanted silver instead of truth, and I wouldn't deny you that, either.

“So what do you do, Harold?” Cat said to the suited man.

“I work for Echert-Mauchly Computer Corporation,” the man said, stiff and prideful. His lover, another beat — Cat’s girl every other day, Billy and I agreed — shifted uncomfortably in her seat. He continued, undaunted. “I’m a programmer. I enter machine code into the punch cards and enter those cards into the UNIVAC.”

My arm started aching. The scent of brimstone and seared flesh was disguised by the cigarette smoke. I wondered how long that’d last.

“No way! What a gas,” Cat said, languid as his namesake. “So you’re the wave of the future.”

“Our latest models have 961 characters of memory. Six bits, more than any other punch machine,” the suit said, as if it’d impress his lover. Seeing her, his pocketbook was more impressive.

Cat took a sip of Jack Daniels. “How does it feel to work with, you know, nothing?”

“Nothing?” Suit said.

“Nothing. You say you work. You make holes in cards, to put numbers on a screen. How does that compare to work, to art? Making a chair, painting a masterpiece?”

“How is writing not entering data on a machine? Punching keys to put marks on paper?”

“Are you really comparing what Kerouac or Wolfe or O’Hara does to a piece of stiff paper?” Cat produced another cigarette and lit it with a match. “How can you compare a few holes to the encapsulation of the entire human experience? To the feeling of making love, or hitting the road, or...or evoking emotion?”

“That’s a few years away,” Suit said.

“It’s never gonna happen, man,” Cat drained the rest of his Jack. “Numbers in a box are never gonna make you feel the way a book does. Those machines are never going to think or feel or love or hate.” Cat was out of his seat now, voice rising above the shitty poetry. “It’s just *never* gonna happen. It’s just a box!”

The holes in my arm were smoking now, seeping out past the bandage and starting to puff out of Billy’s sleeve and collar. Nobody noticed, but it was only a few close looks away. The burning pain was starting to override my control of Billy’s form. The afflicted hand was twitching wildly, tapping out a code with a speed and precision that’d keep Suit employed for another decade.

“If you’re so sure,” Suit said, perfection and calm, “Why are you shouting?”

“I’ve got friends up in Princeton,” said Cat, who knew next to nothing about Princeton. “They laugh at you, with your ties and polished shoes. Can you see the smoke in that mirror sheen?”

Cat looked like he was going to deck Suit and the girl had left without either of them noticing. I whispered a word to take the fight out of them, and Cat sat down without disturbing the peace any further.

I shook my head. Cat wasn’t angry. He was terrified.

Finger snaps. I turned. Danny was finally here, cheeks flushed and that goofy charming grin on his face. Billy would’ve smiled, so I did too. He looked at everyone in the room but me, giving me no more than a cursory glance. He’d hit us up for money and maybe sex after his set was over. I didn’t need to examine the punched card of the universe to see *that* future.



White Tower knew their customers were up at all hours, so they hired workers for the night shift. Billy had considered getting a job here before he met me, though true to form, it'd be unseemly to have regular work. I played with a cup of coffee that I didn't need, putting cream into it drop-by-drop to see the Brownian motion propagate it through the system.

"Mr. Shears," said a woman's voice.

"Billy, please," I said. The red pleather of the booth across from me creaked, and there she was — hair short and severe, brown and cropped back. Her suit was a dark grey, too mannish a cut. In the bright interior of White Tower, it seemed to absorb the light.

I gestured with my cup. "You're ahead of your time. That style won't be popular for another eight years."

"I prefer to be harbinger of the future rather than scion of some irrelevant past," she said, a bit too quickly. Her syllables were clipped, as if her mouth couldn't form the words properly. She wasn't used to speaking.

"You mean, when you're given a choice, you prefer." I sipped the coffee and considered my options. "You're probably the worst hunter angel I've ever met, and I used to be a really bad one."

"You're wearing the team colors for the other side," she said, who didn't know or care about sports. "The mechanistic is inseparable from the mechanical. You overheard the arguments in the Gaslight. We did not detect any significant transmissions into adjacent parallel timelines from your signal. Your attention was undivided."

I didn't have a chance, after that stupid stunt with the hobo. I didn't need to examine my alternates to know that I'd be alone here if I hadn't tried that.

"Okay," I said. "Why haven't you dropped Cover yet and plunged a dagger in my heart? Why not get those tattooed thugs over by 23rd on my tail?" Another sip. "Or would they not fit in with this crowd?"

She spoke immediately, like she was waiting for me to stop speaking. Probably was. "They would cause more problems than you, so their presence was not necessary. It was a greater material cost to invoke me, yet more projects would, in aggregate, reach completion and produce their desired output. A surgical strike was the best option. But it was not the only one. Our surveillance on you will be suspended for approximately one day, beginning from the start of this conversation."

Billy didn't register my shock, but it was palpable. "...what?"

"To reiterate and recontextualize the argument in the Gaslight: technology is a glittering lure. Computing power is a mere fraction of what it will grow into in a decade, or a century. Yet a sliver of this fraction is enough to cause fear." She arched her head. "You will never be a part of them, Mr. Shears, any more than William could have been. They do not differentiate between the machine they are a part of and the machine they despise. They unconsciously reiterate patterns of behavior, even as they consider themselves enlightened and beyond it." Again with the head arch, but the opposite side. "Even if they were to perceive us as we are, they would not be able to distinguish between us. Don't you find that disconcerting?"

"Don't you?"

"No," she said.

"You're stalling," I said. "Playing with your prey isn't being a good hunter."

“You should know,” she said. Was that a smile? “You are and I are much the same, even beyond the perceptions of humanity.”

I stared at her, flicked a glance at her shadow. Saw the antenna, the soft glow of vacuum tubes. “You’re a time hunter. Like I was.”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t I see you in the Gaslight timelines?”

She paused, for the first time. “I was careful, and you weren’t looking.”

Because of the dead man. “You put him there,” I realized, and I didn’t need to scan causality to realize her effects. “You put him there as bait. You knew I’d snatch him up.”

“We’ve been given orders,” she said, again too rapidly. Was that anger I heard, or the ecstasy of the hunt? “To cease surveillance. To arrange this meeting. To allow for chance.”

“A sporting chance?”

“A sign of trust. A chance for you to return to the fold and be cleansed.”

And there it was. I’d heard of this. Of the offers made to demons doubting their freedom, of what that sad bastard who stuck a knife in my back at Woolworth wished for. The Machine was offering reconfiguration and reconciliation. A return to grace. A *rise*.

She said something else, but I didn’t truly listen. After a while, she left. And I was alone.

My arm throbbed.

• • •

Danny was angry, and I didn’t need to look at him to know.

“You left,” he raged. “You left without putting coins in baskets or papers in hands, you selfish son of a bitch. People *need* that. To buy food. What the hell do you need it for?” He paused to take a breath. “And where the *fuck* do you even get it?”

I looked away from our window, from the lights on Bleecker to the dim bulbs in the kitchen. He stood there, half in shadow, a figure of anger and rage himself. In another few seconds he was going to strike at me.

If I couldn’t believe the angel, it didn’t matter, did it? I incanted some of the entropic energy that comprised my being into a short, sweet attenuation of an alternate Danny. He stood in a dozen different men’s living rooms or kitchens, doing the exact same thing. A quick look at his pattern told me that this was his entire life — using, grasping, needing. A life of beds and wine and smoke and food bought with another man’s money, until the riots came. For all his art and shallow thoughts, he’d never amount to anything. None of them would.

The beats believed that interaction alone with a hostile system would grant it victory, so they disdained it, the machine that created desire and despair, the rapturous enigma they held in contempt. It was an extended adolescence, the lives of men like Danny and Cat and the women they all ignored. Their urges — hedonism, living for the moment, obsessing over their meaningless projects against something that would grind them into dust — were juvenile. So, too, was their rebellion.

Billy was right all along. These were my people.

I barely felt the blows. Billy, of course, cried and cried, and Danny stormed out. As soon as he was gone, I made Billy stand and look out at Bleecker Street. Somewhere in the distance, church bells were ringing out a melody.



The Woolworth Building loomed above me. Men around me dressed like Suit, women dressed only a little less formally as the angel, both swaddled in coats against New York. The weather system was just another machine, another system. You couldn't beat it.

You could only survive it until it was time for the cold to end.

Faces turned in unison to lock their gazes on me as I entered the lobby. The doorman looked as if he'd challenge me, but my talents made sure he'd give me no more than harsh words. I walked to the stairs, went down three floors to a sub-basement, and pushed open a door no janitor would ever open. I stepped into that darkness. Around me, the gears churned.

Before me, the angels waited, a choir waiting for me to join them. I could feel the wave-forms collapsing, a white-crested tide against the shore of inevitability. I wouldn't go loud again. There were no alternate Mr. Shears in other worlds. All my choices would lead me back here once again. The Machine always wins.

"Go ahead," I whispered, just loud enough for them to hear. The three angels moved towards me, all of a piece, to reprogram me into something useful. I wouldn't Rise again, but I could at least work until I'd earned my place once again.

I saw one hesitate, taking a fraction of a second too long to calculate probabilities. You can only fit so many holes onto a card — it meant she was already chewing on too much data. I saw the futures begin to multiply around the angel, and she Fell in every one of them.

She'd learn eventually. I'd be there with her, to show her the error of her ways. When my ring found their way back to me, I'd guide them all back. We all would learn.

The Machine always wins.

INTERFACE

NEW TECHNOLOGY: MULTIVERSAL ANTENNA

There's a cat in a box somewhere, with a fifty-fifty chance of being poisoned by radiation. Open the box, and you'll find the cat either alive or dead. Popular science says the cat is neither and both until you open the box, but angels know that particularly naughty kitties remain both even after the box is open. The nature of reality, affected as it is by free choice and random chance, means that the timeline occasionally splinters into fragments. Unless stabilized by Infrastructure and occult matrices (as in Seattle), these splinters will degrade back into quantum foam, but they can cause paradoxes and ruin outputs with needless variables before they do. Thus, some angels are tasked to attune themselves to these splinters, and put an end to them before they affect the causality of the dominant timeline. The rare demon with this technology uses it to examine how things *might* have been rather than how they are.

Appearance: The Antenna is massive, stretching out of the back of the demon's head, a third of the length of her body. It's studded with coils and small receiving dishes. Unlike many demonic form abilities, the antenna is hard to hide; the demon can keep the antenna phased in an alternate splinter (and thus unnoticeable), but this option provokes a full compromise roll with no form number bonus.

System: Simply possessing the Antenna allows the demon to sense time splinter fractures and similar divergent timelines, so long as they're in the general vicinity (they can sense alternate cities so long as they're in the same area, narrowing down fracture points within a few city blocks). To attune the antenna to a different timeline, the demon scrutinizes a target (which may be a person, place or fracture). The player spends a point of Aether and a point of Willpower, and then rolls Wiits + Occult + Primum as a reflexive action. Success on the roll allows the player to ask a question about the *current* situation affecting the target and how it could have been different; each additional success allows the player to ask a further, qualifying question.

Example: Richard is playing Selaphaniel. The demon observes a dead man in the street. Asking, "How could he still be alive?" Richard rolls three successes. The Storyteller informs him that if the man had slept in the warm subway that night, he'd still be alive today. Richard then asks how the man's sleeping problem could have been solved more permanently; if the man had been informed of a community action group several days ago, he would have had a place to sleep until winter was over. Richard asks why the man was homeless to begin with; if he hadn't shown up drunk at his job seven months earlier, he wouldn't be homeless.

The character can also look at the target's past and ask similar questions; in this case, the Antenna works the same as the Psychometry Merit (p. 301 of **Demon: The Descent**).

Alternately, success on the roll allows the demon to determine the proper method of accessing a fracture, while an exceptional success allows the demon to tune to the alternate timeline, meaning she may access the fracture even if she doesn't fulfill the opening condition.

GREENWICH AND WOOLWORTH

Danny McAvoy, the Woolworth Building, and a hunter angel who pleads for her prey to accept the inevitability of capture and reintegration: They're all connected, and if it's done elegantly enough, the demon victim never sees how closely.

Computer technology is too primitive for the concept to exist yet, but sometime in the 80s, the prevalence of early hacker culture prompts the creation of programming traps to lure the incautious. Data is set up to look highly valuable, or appear to contain a great deal of resources, but in reality it's worthless and monitored for intrusion.

The idea of a lure goes back far earlier. As the Cold War between East and West begins in earnest, a culture of misogyny means that male agents are disproportionately fielded more than female agents. These agents — lonely, unable to share their feelings with anyone — found themselves seduced by beautiful women, open to exploitation by blackmail.

The same term applies to both concepts. It's called a honeypot.

THE HONEYPOT

The 60s are a bad time to be gay in America, even though things radically improve in the following decades. Many young men simply have no template whatsoever on how to cope with their burgeoning sexuality — and worse, they must actively and fearfully hide it, because the risk of exposure could kill. It's deep stress tempered with a bit of occult knowledge that impels many gay men into making a soul pact. Many demons feel deep sympathy for their plight. Pacts are capable of altering sexuality, but far more common is a mixture of the Anonymity and Resources Merits. Few pacts exist, though, without eventually being claimed. A demon stepping into a mortal puts them in the hunter's striking range.

The Time Hunter who schemed up the Honeypot saw a unique convergence — the beats of Greenwich Village, their acceptance of a nascent, blooming gay culture, and their hypocritical dependence on wealthy patrons to support their rage against more materialistic cultures. Danny McAvoy is her able pawn, a free spirit with sufficiently undefinable sexuality. She trades infatuation with Danny to mortals for the chance to strike at demons, luring them deeper and deeper into the beat scene of New York.

THE WOOLWORTH INFRASTRUCTURE

The Woolworth Building is a landmark in New York, dominating the skyline with neo-Gothic flare. It's well-known that it houses significant Logistical Infrastructure for various Machine cults and projects. Less well-known is that the Building houses no Logistical Infrastructure whatsoever, and instead mounts significant Defensive capabilities. Attempts to damage the building find themselves instead damaging the Woolworth Building in Scranton, Pennsylv-

nia, destroyed in a massive fiery explosion in 1947 — the buildings are tied via a timeline shunt, and the Scranton building is fated to be annihilated anyway. Attacking the Building is a massive risk generally exposing the ring and flushing demons into Covers they never know were made to appeal to them.

Beneath the heart of Greenwich, the hunter ensures she is immersed in the reactionary rejection of society, technology and culture. Selling one's soul for money to keep forbidden love and community alive, the pact-making mortals never consider that in Greenwich, poverty is considered a mark of purity. In their efforts to maintain their Cover, the demons are bombarded with propaganda of the Machine, hidden deep inside counter-culture.

By 1966, the era of the beats has passed. The honeypot is no longer quite as sweet, so the Hunter quietly retires it. By that time, she's concocted another lure.

THE TIME HUNTER

You know the truth of what I'm saying. It's only a matter of time. Come back.

Time Hunters attune themselves to divergent timelines, devouring quantum ghosts so their presence doesn't befoul the purity of certainty. Not by coincidence, they're exceptional at hunting down demons. This Hunter is one of a kind, even as she represents a breed.

Description: A pantsuit is a bold declaration in the early 70s. In the early 60s, it's tantamount to a slap to the face, but that's how the Hunter works. Her facial features aren't remarkable, but her eyes never really leave her target, even as they flit to the exits and other potential paths of escape.

Storytelling Hints: She leaves traps for her prey, cutting off avenues of escape in both time and space before they even know they're being herded to their doom. For her, it's reintegration. Maybe it's this sense of superiority that causes her to let her prey have a sporting chance, to draw back from the killing blow again and again.

Virtue: Methodical

Vice: Playful

Rank: 2

Attributes: Power 5, Finesse 6, Resistance 4

Influence: Time 2

Corpus: 9

Willpower: 10

Size: 5

Speed: 15 (species factor 5)

Defense: 5

Initiative: 10

Armor: None

Numina: Aggressive Meme, Drain, Essence Thief

Manifestations: Discorporate, Materialize, Twilight Form

Max Essence: 15

Ban: Time Hunters may only remain Materialized or in Twilight.

Bane: Rust.

DANNY MCAVOY

It's life that's important, man. Songs and words and blood and sex, all of it. Nothing else is worth shit.

Son of a Maryland farmer, Danny has the muscles of a young farmhand and the soul of a poet. What he lacks is the discipline for either task. Danny doesn't mean it to be this way, but he's a toxic soul. He flits from bed to bed (usually rich old men), soaking up their wealth and spreading it to the community. It's a shame, because Danny does have talent as an artist, but he spends much of his time engaging in community projects that never truly go anywhere.

Description: Danny is handsome, bearded, muscular, and masculine. He's got bright eyes and a brighter smile. His clothes are torn and covered in paint, the uniform of a working painter-poet.

Storytelling Hints: You use, you take. Danny doesn't mean to be fundamentally a consumer, but he is, and he'll bleed his partner until he's dry. He has a bit of a temper, too, though he masks it with righteousness. When the well is dry, he leaves. In times of plenty, he shares. It's all genuine, which makes his toxic nature all the more galling, because there's not even a hint of maliciousness to it.

Virtue: Passionate

Vice: Deluded

Mental Attributes: Intelligence 3, Wits 4, Resolve 3

Physical Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3

Social Attributes: Presence 3, Manipulation 4, Composure 3

Mental Skills: Academics (Art History) 1, Crafts (Painting) 2, Medicine 1, Occult 1

Physical Skills: Brawl 2, Drive 2, Larceny 2, Stealth 2

Social Skills: Empathy (Emotion) 3, Expression 2, Persuasion (Seduction) 3, Socialize 3, Streetwise 3

Merits: Allies 3 (Greenwich Village), Striking Looks 1, Sympathetic, Taste

Health: 8

Willpower: 6

Integrity: 4

Size: 5

Speed: 10

Defense: 3

Initiative: 6

Armor: None

SELAPHANIEL (SEL, MR. SHEARS)

Ah, you shouldn't have done that. To answer your next three questions: No, you couldn't have known it would turn out that way. Yes, I could've done it better. Yes, I do enjoy being insufferable.

Background: Selaphaniel was a Time Hunter back when. He stepped between, cutting down ghosts still living in doomed worlds. One man's shade, however, continued to trouble Sel. He eschewed patterns. One morning he eats breakfast with his family, making sure his son makes it to school in time for the science fair that sets the boy to a promising career in engineering (and the formation of a future Machine cult). That same morning, the father steps out before breakfast and boards the train into the city, leaving his son to fall into a staid life of a town mechanic. Next, he gives his company's business to an advertising firm, saving that firm from bankruptcy; at the same time, he refuses, driving several employees to destitution and a few to suicide. No rhyme or reason befell the man's decisions, and his very existence defied the idea that two beings could occupy the same space at the same time. Rather than eliminate one duplicate per his mandate, Sel simply eliminated both of them, and Fell at the sheer satisfaction of a righteous kill.

Description: Down to his last Cover, that of William Culp, Sel is a young square-jawed man with sandy blonde hair and watery blue eyes, the very image of a handsome lad (albeit a slightly scruffy one) from the heartland of America, wearing turtlenecks, corduroys and sandals.

In demonic form, a massive antenna stretches back beyond his head, which has no proper face. Vacuum tubes stud his frame, laying out a complex pattern that's perfectly predictive of an opponent's behavior. He's fast, frighteningly so, and uses the terrain in three dimensions (or four) to kill his target.

Storytelling Hints: Sel's kind of a jerk. Fundamentally self-centered and superior, he views his continuing survival as a mark of distinction, even as he alienates others in his rings. He looks down on the beats and the beatniks they'll eventually become, and can see their replacements getting older every day. Being a Tempter appeals to his sense of pettiness, but he always wonders why he Fell for doing too good a job.

Future: After adopting the Integrator Agenda in 1961, Sel continues to join rings and sabotage them from the inside. He single-handedly dismantles an agency (and two successors) in New York. His last Cover degrades sometime in 1969; by January 1970, he's gone. Nobody knows if he got what he wanted.

Virtue: Vigilant

Vice: Vain

Incarnation: Destroyer

Agenda: Tempter (later Integrator)

Mental Attributes: Intelligence 5, Wits 4, Resolve 3

Physical Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3

Social Attributes: Presence 3, Manipulation 3, Composure 3

Mental Skills: Academics (Mathematics, Philosophy) 4, Computer 3, Investigation 1, Occult 2

Physical Skills: Brawl (Demonic Form) 4, Stealth (Moving in Cover) 3

Social Skills: Empathy (Lies) 2, Expression 3, Intimidation 2, Socialize 1, Streetwise 3, Subterfuge 2, Weaponry 1

Merits: Barfly, Contacts 2 (Beats, Tempter associations), Danger Sense

Demonic Form: Clairvoyant Sight, Mental Resistance, Multiversal Antenna, Fast Attack, Inhuman Intelligence, Multiple Images, Phasing

Embeds: Cause and Effect, Cool Heads Prevail, Left or Right?, Lucky Break

Exploits: Murder by Improbability

Health: 8

Primum: 2

Aether/per turn: 11/2

Willpower: 6

Cover: 5

Size: 5

Speed: 10

Defense: 3

Initiative: 7

Glitches: Machine code smokes and sears his arm, causing constant discomfort and the smell of burning flesh.

Notes: Sel's Computer rating reflects proficiency in the computing machines of the 1960s and theoretical knowledge of future technology well into the early 90s. He's unsure this Internet thing is really going to take off, but he knows it's beginning to form in the dreams of some DARPA engineer, so he's willing to wait.

TIME TO GO

By Brie Sheldon

11/06/2006 1200 hours

The heat was like a blow dryer to the face as Specialist Angelina Morales stepped off the plane onto the dusty runway in Kuwait. It blazed over her skin in one unending wave. She liked the heat, though.

Her body always felt cold, even though she'd been in it for three years. The warmth was a relief. She found herself regretting the job she was here to do — it would be nice if her time here could be a little longer. More time in the sun. Her watch was already warming up on her wrist from the burning heat, and she could hear its slow sound.

Tick. Tick.

She glanced at it, then joined in formation with the other soldiers. The men and women alongside her were stiff and braced against the blowing wind, ready for orders. They had no time to waste. Neither did she.

• • •

24/06/2006 0800 hours

"Morales!" The sergeant barked at her, stomping his feet in his march. "It is high time you learned to arrive *on time*, soldier. You didn't join this army for leisure time!"

Morales nodded silently and stood still, back straight, shoulders back, chin up. She knew being late was going to get her an earful — Sergeant Wilkins was old-guard and old-fashioned — but work needed to be done and she wasn't about to let it sit just because this old bag was full of hot air. She wasn't in basic training anymore. This kind of behavior from a Sergeant would only make him look bad, and her look like someone put-upon, and that was all right with her. The more people that left her alone, the more work she could get done on her real assignment.

She glanced around as Wilkins ranted, much too subtly for him to notice. Lewis still had that tic in his left hand, and Morales was beginning to suspect it was a neurological problem,

rather than just nervousness. Jones was slumping more noticeably, and the dark circles under his eyes indicated he still wasn't sleeping. Islington wasn't wearing her ring anymore, and her body language said she was happy about it.

"Are you *listening* to me, soldier?"

She resisted the urge to sigh with impatience and annoyance. It was easy to get a little steamed up when she knew that just one wave of her hand could shut his mouth forever.

Tick. Tick.

No, that wouldn't be a good idea. She had a job to do. She let him continue on, nodding and uttering a few "Yes, sirs," but kept her cool. After a while, Lieutenant Gill Frank walked over and interrupted.

"Wilkins. Leave her alone." His tone was quiet, but solid like a block of chocolate. Sweet and rich.

There was one thing that Morales liked aside from the heat, and it was Gill. Gill was warm. Gill was kind. Most of all, Gill was distracting. He kept her mind off of what she was there to do. Even though she had her orders, she wasn't about to give up on the good things in life before all of that was gone. If she got caught in this, she would be done for, and even if she didn't get caught, it didn't matter. A new life, a new identity — she wouldn't be here anymore living this life.

Wilkins wandered off muttering. Gill — Lieutenant Frank — nodded at her, and then gave her a sly smile and a wink once he was sure no one was looking. She filed that memory for later.

She headed to the depot to schmooze with the guards. She had to make it look realistic, otherwise she'd never be able to convince them to let her in. She brought them cold water and snuck them a pack of cigarettes, and Sgt. Freise promised she'd be able to check out the depot once he could get his lieutenant off his back. She grinned and promised him he'd be able to check *her* out whenever he had the chance. His day made, she hit the road and didn't look back.

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30/06/2006 1600 hours

It was time for the plan to begin. Morales made many phone calls that day, but the first was to her contact back home.

"Mr. Diaz?"

"The clock strikes one."

"And down he runs, Mr. Diaz. Enough with the codes."

"Business should be done as business, Ms. Morales. Have you settled in?"

"I have. I have also determined that there are many complications in this plan you've woven. Getting into the palace will not be as easy as we thought."

The palace. It was a beautiful place. She had been taken on a tour of some parts of it. Gold, painted murals, tapestries — it was opulent. What had caught her attention, though, and the attention of anyone who could *see*, was the pool. It was, like the rest of the palace, ornate and

beautiful. It was just something pretty to look at for those without the ability to see, but for her, it was a cog in the God-Machine. Whoever had built the pool had crafted it around the raw machine, so now there was beauty from something terrible. If only the humans around her could see it, then they would understand. They would reject the God-Machine, she knew it.

Better to live short and rebel against an unjust master than live long under its reign.

“Ms. Morales, you’re supposed to be the best at what you do. We expect the best.”

“I didn’t say I couldn’t do it. I am just saying that it might take a little longer than planned.” Her ulterior motive here was to live under the sun for a few more days, but she knew she couldn’t take too long, lest she got caught. “A few days, maybe. I can have it done for you.”

“Good.”

Tick. Tick.

She hung up the phone. Diaz was a good guy, but all business. She was tired of business for the day, and it was the end of a long week. The week never really ended for soldiers, but at least the officers tended to understand what a Friday night was for if you were off-duty. So long as she was here, she wasn’t giving up on mortal pleasures. She changed into her PT clothes and headed out into the heat — straight for Lieutenant Frank’s trailer.

Gill’s place was just the same as hers, down to the sheets. That’s how it was here and how it had been everywhere she’d gone under this name. Brown sheets, brown towels, tan and sand colored everything including underwear. It made everyone the same. It made it easy to blend in, to become one of them. She had no problem pretending to follow orders — but she knew, just like before, she’d have to disobey them again. At least here, Falling wasn’t so painful as much as it was bittersweet.

It was dark outside, but she still crouched close to the trailer and knocked lightly. Gill let her in, his finger pressed to his lips as he whispered, “shhh.” Once inside, she curled up next to him in his bed, and the night drew them in.

• • •

04/07/2006 2200 hours

Up until now, the night had been quiet in spite of typical celebrations. The Fourth meant less here than it did back in the good ol’ U-S-of-A, but people still snuck in celebratory drinks where they could. Morales was visiting the Aussies for that very reason.

It wasn’t their holiday, but they didn’t need any better reason to celebrate — everyone took what they could get here. The Aussies were so much more relaxed than the Americans and Brits, and it took one look at their facial hair requirements to tell that. Each and every man had mustaches that a hipster would die for — waxed and curled like a fancy dandy. One of the men had a particularly nice one — the captain. Morales sidled up to him and passed over a handful of local cash.

“Happy Fourth, Captain.”

“Same to you, soldier. You stay out of trouble now.”

When she pulled her hand back, she had a flask of liquor and a feeling of elation. Even the little defiances were thrills.

She clambered into the back of a humvee with a number of other soldiers and they drove off in the safety of the IZ. It was mere minutes until she felt the buzz of the alcohol, thanks to months going dry, and she passed the flask off to another soldier while she leaned her head against the window.

The movement of the humvee was like the angriest rocking chair. Every bump rattled through her skull, but it was a good pain, dizzying. She remembered little of the night — most of it whirls of colors and dancing shapes, another soldier patting her shoulder and telling her she was a class act for driving when the rest of them got too tanked from the many types of skived alcohol.

Her driving was no good, but she tried anyway, and got them nearly back to their trailers when they got waved over at a checkpoint. Every other checkpoint had been a breeze — one of them she'd even gone through without a stop, since the Peruvian guard who was on duty owed her a favor and the rest of his fellows had dozed off for the night.

The checkpoint officer was a gruff and grumpy older U.S. soldier with a chip on his shoulder the size of Kuwait. His nametag read something like “Schwimmz” but she couldn't tell much more than that with the blur in her eyes. She shook her head a few times at his questions, and then slowly his voice came through the fog.

“— here to me, soldier, are you intoxicated?”

She shook her head insistently.

“No sir. Nope.”

He looked at her with grim-set eyes and a pursed mouth. It was obvious he didn't believe her, and she didn't blame him. This certainly wasn't her best attempt at soldiering or spying. Before she could say more, the Air Force captain in the passenger seat murmured out a “Leav'er alone!”

With that, she knew they were done. She groaned in frustration. The officer grimaced at her, waved them all out of the vehicle, and started to dress them down right there about “conduct unbecoming a soldier.” The captain was belligerent and agitated, and tried his damndest to pull rank.

“I am a *captain* in the United States *Air Force* and some pot-bellied Army nitwit —” Morales shot the captain a dirty look, but he continued, “isn't going to tell *me* how to spend my time!”

The captain had been jolly enough until right about now, and Morales was mildly surprised at his behavior changing so quickly. Something was off. Before she could think, the captain spun around and socked the officer in the jaw. She jumped between them, trying to stop it from going any farther, and head-butted the captain when he charged towards her.

The drunken soldiers surrounding her responded with a rousing “ohhh!” She flinched on purpose. Assaulting a superior officer? Drunk on duty? They'd know she was done for.

Except for one thing — the captain. He held his nose with one hand and clapped her on the shoulder with the other hand. He was grinning.

“Good one, Morales!”

He punched her right back and everything went black.

INTERFACE

It was an early grey morning. Two black cars moved in front of her, all in a line with the rest of the vehicles on the way to the service. She rode in one, quietly, as though she were not even there. To them, she wasn't — just a chauffeur in a lonely car where the widower cried his way to the grave, holding his daughter.

Byssinosis is what the doctors called it — everyone knew it was just Monday fever. A death bereft of breath and filled with pain. Suzie, the mother, spent every day working on the floor of the yarn building, breathing in that cursed air, air that led to her death. Or so Suzie's little girl claimed.

Lorrie was only 16, but she knew what was what. Her mother didn't die for no reason or bad choices. Just because her mom had her young didn't mean her mom was stupid or careless. She just loved Lorrie's dad so much, and dad loved her mom. That's why Lorrie knew that it had to be the factory's fault. Only something that took so much of her mom's time and kept her away for so long could be the reason why her mom got so sick, and why she died.

Auriel knew that Suzie had just had a bad heart and that the byssinosis was just a factor, but what could she tell the little girl? The little girl who was just about to get into a car accident. The little girl who would die in just a few minutes. The little girl who was going to cause problems if she sent the letters she'd written while her mother was sick, letters telling her mother's story that would get into the hand of any news station or lawsuit monger wandering the streets. It didn't matter that Suzie would have died before 50 anyway, it's when she had died that mattered, along with the circumstantial evidence that could cause problems.

That's why Lorrie had to die.

Auriel sat in the driver's seat, an angel in disguise. She turned the wheel, and saw the truck coming. It would hit just right, in the right spot to kill Lorrie and leave her father alive. Auriel would walk away unharmed, just like him.

She took a breath, and hit the brakes.

The truck whizzed by them in a shuddering whumm and took Auriel's breath away. Lorrie screamed in the backseat, and suddenly everything was blackness and pain. Auriel became Ashes.

• • •

Wh-Where am I? What time is it? What day is it?

The next morning was bright — too bright and too hot. She tried to gather her senses and look at her surroundings. She was in a small room. Clay-colored walls and barred windows. Her vision was returning to normal, and she managed to wobble her way to the locked wooden door. She banged on it.

To her shock, the captain — she remembered his name now, Captain Jenner — came to the door. He wasn't dressed in his uniform anymore. He was wrapped in some sort of unusual robes, and he wore a large amulet.

Great, a cultist, she thought.

She looked through the small crack in the door to see behind him. There was a room where the other soldiers were seated in a circle, but she could tell by looking at them even from this far away, not one of them was alive — except for that fucking checkpoint guard. He stood at the opposite end of the room, all smiles. There was a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach.

How the *hell* was she going to get out of this?

“So you’re finally awake.” The captain’s voice sounded lazy. He might be drugged or mind-controlled. She wasn’t sure, but she knew with little doubt that he was a tool. Who was in charge, though? Was it the checkpoint guard? Or was he a tool, too?

She moved back from the door and centered herself in the room. It took focus to do anything about a situation like this, something she was lacking from the drink.

Tick, tick.

She had no time. She looked at the door and a smile crept slowly across her face. They’d left her in a room where the door hinges were on the inside. What was better is they looked a little loose as the captain slowly edged the door open. They would be easy to manipulate, but it would have to wait until later. For now, she wanted to see if she could goad the captain into explaining what was going on.

“Why do you have me here? Are you planning on killing me?” She braced herself. She expected she’d have to take a few hits if she’d guessed right.

She was right.

The fist connecting with her jaw was strong and hard, colliding with a clunking noise and nearly dislocating her jaw. Her body was sturdy, though, and she held together. She dropped to her knees, knowing that the position of submission would make him more at ease. She wanted him to feel proud of himself. She wanted him to boast.

“You are weaker than you think, Morales, or is that even your name? It doesn’t matter. You’re simply a sacrifice. You’ll play your part tonight, when the moon is right,” he gloated.

“How are you keeping this a secret? I’m a soldier.” She looked up at him, keeping her eyes wide and frightened. “They’ll know I’ve gone missing.”

“You think that I hadn’t thought of that? No, see, you’re on orders,” he said. “We aren’t alone in this mission. Those with power always want more power.”

If he was telling the truth, then someone in her chain of command was corrupt. It wouldn’t be the first time, but at least it should be the last time she had to deal with it. “What will the ritual do?” She slouched her shoulders, trying to look weak. He took the bait and knelt before her.

“It’s simple, really. All it will do is —” His words were cut short as she head-butted him again, and his already-broken nose made a satisfying crunch.

He swore and shoved her backwards into the wall, then rushed from the room, slamming the door behind him. The pins in the hinges wiggled.

Morales set to work removing the pins, quietly and slowly. She could hear the shuffling and talking outside, the two men arranging the bodies of the other soldiers. She didn’t know if the ritual was a true ritual or just two crazy men high on some sort of drug. She didn’t really

care — she just wanted to escape. It was only reasonable to assume they were agents of the God-Machine. It was better to be safe than sorry in case that ended up being true.

She had pulled out all of the pins with ease when the captain next came calling. She positioned herself to leap, and he opened the door with a shove, and fell through on the door with a massive thump. Dust blew up, and she leapt through it, her foot crashing down onto the back of his skull, cracking and crushing it easily, slamming him down into the door again.

She used the momentum to jump through the door. The guard wasn't here — yet. She saw the soldiers' M16s piled in the corner and she ran over to them. She lifted one and tilted it, testing the weight to check how full the magazine was. Luckily, the first one was full. Morales spun around as the captain was pulling himself up and fired on him.

The sound of the M16 firing in the cavernous room was deafening. She held on to the gun tightly. She felt a bit sick, knowing that the captain was mortal and that there was nothing he could have done to stop it. He was meat; he didn't so much fall as drop, bloody Rorschachs appearing on the wall behind him.

The guard barreled out of the next room, shouting and firing a small pistol at her. A bullet clipped her shoulder and she stumbled, but she managed to roll into a prone position.

The guard ran to her, but it was too late. She wrestled the rifle into position and fired right into his gut. The force and pain were enough to knock him back. She clambered to her feet and ran over, kicking the gun from his hand, and fired two rounds into his head. Brain matter and bone spattered out onto the dusty, tan dirt floor.

When it was done, she fell back, panting.

What have I done?

Was this something she was meant to do? She wasn't a murderer anymore, or she hadn't been, until today. She had gone so long without killing someone, but here again, she had done it without a thought. Was she still secretly under the control of the God-Machine? The thought made her sick, but also made her more determined to accomplish what she was in this desert to do.

She wiped down the gun and returned it to the pile. She recovered her own weapon and checked the magazine. Still full. That meant that her weapon hadn't been used to kill the other soldiers, and she was grateful for it. She examined the bodies of the soldiers. Only a few of the soldiers were the ones that had been with her. It looked like a convoy of men or more piled around the center of the room. Now that she was taking it all in, she felt a mixture of revulsion and pity.

In looking at the soldiers, she realized that they were an infantry unit. Her eyes widened as she rifled through the pile of weapons and found exactly what she hoped to find: hand grenades. Lots of them. One for every one of the fifteen dead soldiers that weren't in her humvee. She strapped them into belts and wrapped the belts around herself. Now she was ready.

Morales found her way out of the building into deserted streets. It was a neighborhood ravaged by war — she was out of the Green Zone and far from safety. She heard the *pop-pop* of rifle fire in the distance.

The humvees belonging to the infantry sat right outside. Apparently being a cultist made the captain sloppy, or maybe he had just come by it naturally. They were a little beat up, but

she wasn't an auto mechanic and driver for nothing. She checked them over and found the best one to drive then turned the ignition switch. It started it with a loud roar. The birds surrounding the nearest building startled and flew into the air. She imagined they were making quite a racket, but she couldn't hear them over the roar of the engine.

She drove to the nearest town, dumping the humvee. Morales prepared for the trek by buying some civilian clothes. With her dark skin and the right look, she blended right in. She bought a canteen and soon found herself down to her last bits of money. Thankfully, she was ready to go.

Morales left in the night, following the Tigris. Along the way, she stole date palms from the farms on the river, narrowly avoiding being caught more than once. She crept beneath the full moon, moonbeams playing on the surface of the water. Her feet blistered. Her throat cracked from thirst until she drank water from the river. Her days were spent holed up in whatever places she could find shade, while her nights were walking, seemingly endless walking.

When she reached Tikrit, she found a place to hide. Making it into the palace would be difficult, or so she thought. This time she was wrong. She watched for when the soldiers changed shift and waited. When the time came, she knocked out the guards, dropping behind them quietly from a ledge. She broke the lock on the door and stole a guard's gun, having left hers behind. She didn't leave behind the grenades, though, which were the most important things. She found the pool with little trouble. It was all so much easier than she expected.

The large wall behind the pool was ornate and resonated with the God-Machine's power. She decorated it in grenades, looping a thread through the pins, changing subtle variables in the chemicals within. Grenades exploded, but she needed it to happen easily. She was just about ready when she heard a clatter behind her. She ducked behind a pillar, and when she looked up, she lost the breath in her lungs. Gill was standing there, fully armed.

Morales stepped out from behind the pillar, dropping down the head covering she was wearing. "Gill?"

Gill turned and trained his gun on her. She put her hands up, the string dangling from her fingertips. She was anxious, but ready. She didn't want to pull the string while Gill was here, but she didn't know how much longer she could wait.

Tick, tick.

No time.

"Morales, what are you doing here?" Gill lowered his gun, realizing who it was.

Morales ran to him, leaving the string behind. She embraced him. "Gill, you have to leave. Right now. Pretend you were never here."

"I'm not leaving." Gill's voice had changed. Where it was normally gravelly and deep, it was now melodic and smooth. She backed away and looked up at him. His face even looked different. "Did you think you would get away with this?" Gill asked, then shoved her backwards into the pool.

Morales landed with a splash and floundered to find her feet in the shallow water. She turned away from him and tried to run towards the string. He was much too quick to be human. Gill grabbed her arm and she lashed out at him, striking his face. It was like stone. He turned his head slowly back towards her and grinned. It was a dark smile, one she had seen before, but not on this face.

“Rook,” she said.

Gill shrugged. “That’s me, sweetheart.”

“It can’t be.” Morales shook her head. Could the sweet, loving Gill she knew really be Rook the angel, a murderer just like her? She didn’t want to believe it.

Rook didn’t give her time to question it. He hauled back and punched her in the face, slamming hard enough that she felt the bone in her cheek crunch. She was not ready for the blow and it knocked her back into the water. When she got to her feet, he threw another punch. This time, though, she *was* ready, and she caught his fist. She twisted his arm away from her and punched his jaw with all of her strength.

Rook spoke, his voice muffled by Gill’s broken jaw and clenched teeth. “You can’t win this. You’re too weak.”

Morales leapt at him, pushing him down into the water, and pummeled him with her fists. She hit him until he twisted and managed to plant a knee in her stomach, shoving her back. When he stood, he sputtered and spit water at her. They were both dripping wet, which made it even harder to hold her grip when she tried to wrestle with him, aiming for his throat.

She knew the string was not far away; when Gill/Rook pushed her back, she shoved free of him and ran for it. Rook’s unnatural speed compensated for the surprise, though, and he caught her again, this time moving in front of her. A blade glinted in his hand.

Morales knew there were only a few ways out of this situation. She backed away, thinking through the options. Accessing her demonic form was dangerous, so close to a piece of the God-Machine. She couldn’t guarantee she’d accomplish her task before more angels rained down upon her. Hell, she wasn’t even sure if she could beat Rook. No, changing form wasn’t the answer.

She knew the answer. She just didn’t like it.

Morales put up her hands in supplication. “Please don’t make me hurt Gill, Rook. Get out of that body. It’s just holding you back.” She knew Rook; he hated being in the body of a human. There were few things that disgusted him more. “I swear, if you let him go, I’ll give in. You know you can beat me.”

Rook smiled that creepy smile again, and nodded. “You are so weak. I could play with you more, but I know you’ll keep your word. After all, you would do anything for these creatures. That’s how you became the abomination that you are.”

Morales watched as Gill went limp. When he stood up, he looked at her in confusion. “Morales?”

Morales ran to him, embracing him. She knew what she had to do, and it was breaking her heart. “It’s going to be okay.” She kissed him on the forehead, holding him close for a second more, then thrust the knife he still held in his hand into his stomach.

Gill choked out a labored breath that settled into a quiet gurgle. Morales cried softly as she held him. Rook shouted behind her, but she couldn’t make out what he said as she withdrew the knife. She pushed Gill’s body away and turned towards Rook, letting his lifeless corpse fall into the water.

Rook moved swiftly to Morales, trying to stop her, but for once he wasn’t fast enough. She raised the knife and plunged it into her heart. She reached out and grabbed onto Rook, pulling him to her and jamming the knife even deeper. The body that was Morales rapidly

petrified and cracked like the surface of lava. Rook struggled against her, but he wasn't strong enough or fast enough to escape her. Not like this.

Morales exploded, a fiery burst with pieces of bone shrapnel flying out in all directions. Rook's eyes widened, but he had no time to flee or disincorporate. His skin rippled from the pressure wave, then bubbled from the flames. His bones melted from the sheer heat of the explosion, the marrow dripping from them where they were broken and cracked. The damage was so great that it wrecked the pool, tearing up the shining tile and cracking plaster. The shockwave and fire rattled the pins out of the grenades, causing them to explode. The walls shook and the plaster cracked, splitting apart images of Al-Khadir and the Fountain of Life in frescoes on the walls.

• • •

Ashes became nothing and then became something again — something roughshod, messy. Her skin burnt and flaking, she crept in the dark until she found Jones.

He was holding his gun, staring down the barrel with tears in his eyes. He looked up when he heard the shuffling noise she made as she lurked in the darkness. "Who's there?"

Ashes whispered in response. "Ashes."

The soldier looked up at her, and his eyes shone in the dim light. "What do you want?"

"To take the pain away, Jones." Jones' eyes widened. "To give you peace."

He whispered, "How?"

Knowing that he couldn't see her clearly, Ashes permitted herself a small smile. The next day, Diaz's phone rang. The voice on the other end was muffled, masculine. "It's done. What's next?"



INTERFACE

ASHES, A.K.A. PRIVATE BOBBY JONES

Background: Accidents happen. That's what we tell ourselves. Accidents happen to even the best of us, the most precious of us. Accidents happen when kids get hit by cars while riding their bikes, when a man falls down a ladder home alone, when those pills just get mixed up and someone takes the wrong thing. We might not brush them off as nothing, but the excuses we make are endless and they're just another good cover.

Auriel caused those accidents.

When someone happened to push the buttons of the God-Machine, Auriel was sent to resolve the issue. Sometimes it was something small, like switching the pills in a bottle or weakening the rung of a ladder. Many more times, though, it was fiddling with electric wiring in an apartment building or driving into oncoming traffic.

Auriel was good at her job. She took joy in these happy little accidents for the longest time. After all, when it came down to it, she had succeeded in every mission, never doubting, never wavering.

It wasn't a simple job, especially for someone not suited to the task. Auriel was not stealthy or manipulative, but she was clever, quick, and calm and her body was sturdy. She also was uniquely suited to driving — and wrecking — cars, which cause thousands of accidents and no one ever blinks an eye. When someone needed to find an untimely end, she would climb into their driver's seat and take them for a joyride.

Perhaps she enjoyed that life too much.

It took a lot for Auriel to doubt the God-Machine. Who were these humans, anyway, but tools and toys for the God-Machine to play with? She didn't think it mattered. How wrong she was. When she was tasked with causing an accident for Lorrie Williams and Lorrie's father, it shook her. She remained resolute up until the very moment, but something stayed her hand. She couldn't bear the thought of that life lost—a life with so much left to live.

After the Fall, Auriel became Ashes. Her initial Cover, Angelina Morales, was a paid driver for the Williams family. The Cover was thin, since Morales wasn't supposed to exist past the accident that would claim Lorrie Williams' life. The Williams family was grateful that Morales had "saved" them, but there was no money or pleasure to be gained from their company, so Ashes took her Cover and left town.

Around this time, a man named Diaz came to see her. He said he had a job for her that would use her talents — and she denied him again and again until he came to her one night in the bar, pressed a newspaper into her hand, and left. The newspaper showed that Lorrie Williams and her father had died in a house fire.

The next day, she called Diaz, and described her desires to strike back at the God-Machine. Her hushed words were like prayers. Diaz wanted it too, and said he could help her to achieve it. Doing so involved going into service, being a Destroyer once again. She was hesitant, but she could give up some freedom if only she could have a little revenge and maybe have fun while doing it.

Ashes spent three years as Morales, until she blew up a piece of Infrastructure and sacrificed that Cover. After she did so, she found a new Cover: Bobby Jones. Jones was ready to end his life, and agreed to Ashes' soul pact in exchange for "peace," which she immediately granted him.

Description: In her Cover as Jones, Ashes is a young white man with a soldier's build and multiple tattoos on his shoulders and arms. His black hair is cut short, and he has a scar under his left eye from some errant shrapnel. Although her current Cover is male, Ashes still thinks of herself as female.

In demonic form, Ashes is made of winged darkness. She is sturdy and thick, making dark areas near her seem darker as she blends into them. Her eyes are pinpricks of light. Her skin is like armor against any flame and crumples like burnt paper when she is injured, only to reform itself seconds later. When weakened or hurt, she is slumped, crippled, and her wings droop, useless.

Storytelling Hints: Once Ashes makes a decision, she puts her whole heart into it and is quite willing to sacrifice herself, her Cover, or potentially her freedom for something she believes in. She values life and *living*, however, and wants to live life to the fullest. This is because she knows that someday she'll die, and someday is just too soon.

Virtue: Dedicated

Vice: Passionate

Incarnation: Destroyer

Agenda: Saboteur

Mental Attributes: Intelligence 1, Wits 2, Resolve 3

Physical Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3

Social Attributes: Presence 3, Manipulation 2, Composure 2

Mental Skills: Crafts 1, Investigation 1, Science (Chemistry) 2

Physical Skills: Athletics 2, Brawl 2, Drive (Combat Driving) 3, Firearms (Military) 2, Survival 1, Weaponry 1

Social Skills: Intimidation 2, Subterfuge 2, Socialize (Carousing) 3

Merits: Barfly, Consummate Professional, Danger Sense, Fast Reflexes 1, Stunt Driver

Embeds: Combustion, Sabotage, Social Dynamics, Strike First

Exploits: None

Demonic Form: Fast Attack, Night Vision, Inhuman Strength, Fire Resistance, Blind Sense, Wings, Wound Healing

Health: 8**Primum:** 1**Aether/per turn:** 10/1**Willpower:** 5**Cover:** 7**Size:** 5**Speed:** 10**Defense:** 4**Initiative:** 6**Armor:** 0. When in uniform, Jones wears armor equivalent to full riot gear (3/4).**Glitches:** None

SELF-DESTRUCT

Many demons reach a point of no return, especially those involved in active sabotage or struggle against the God-Machine. They have no escape, no support, and no way to retreat into the relative safety of Cover. At that point, the best the demon can hope for is that a great show of force is enough to get her away — or at least make the God-Machine tremble. Usually this means going loud, but demons have another option — self-destructing.

With this ability, the demon sacrifices her Cover to accomplish a greater goal. The self-destruct functions based on the demon's Agenda; a demon with the Multiple Agenda Merit can choose either of the self-destruction methods available to her.

Burned demons cannot self-destruct. Much like going loud, self-destruction requires a Cover to catalyze the process. Self-destruction isn't necessarily the end for a demon; demons can pull themselves back to existence afterwards. Doing so requires a great deal of effort on the demon's part, however, and it leaves the demon Burned unless she has another Cover to use.

To self-destruct, the demon must sacrifice her Cover's connections to the mortal world. This involves destroying an object or a person that the Cover would never willingly harm, catalyzing the process of self-destruction and using the Cover as the raw material. The demon then destroys the body of her Cover by committing suicide; the method is unimportant.

After self-destruction, the demon reforms a short distance (Primum x 10 in yards) away from the site within four hours. She is Burned, though she can assume another Cover if she has one available. She loses all Aether and all Willpower in the process.

Inquisitors: The demon vomits black ichor and collapses into an empty husk. All those in the immediate area (10 yard radius of the demon) are unable to keep secrets. Any question asked of them must be answered truthfully and completely. This effect impacts a number of victims equal to the demon's (Manipulation x Cover) for the length of four hours. Demons are immune to this effect.

Integrators: The demon falls dead but remains in her current form for a period of four hours. Her form becomes inhuman, transforming into damaged clockwork mechanisms and slowly decomposing into rust. The victims surrounding the demon at the time of death take on

her appearance. This effect impacts a number of victims equal to (Presence x Cover), for the length of four hours. Demons are unaffected.

Saboteurs: The demon explodes, flinging out bone shrapnel in all directions. This effect impacts an area equal (Strength x Cover) in yards in radius. Anyone within this range suffers 10 points of aggravated damage; anyone within half again that range suffers five points of aggravated damage. For example, assuming that Morales was a seven-dot Cover, when Ashes uses this ability at the end of "Time to Go" everyone within 14 yards suffers full damage, and everyone within 21 yards suffers half damage.

Tempters: Tempters' bodies remain and decompose slowly, maintaining the composure and beauty of mortality for months. To all examination, the body is a human corpse. The demon, of course, might very well have moved on to another Cover. People who are nearby when the demon dies succumb to Vice. For the next four days, such victims are unable to regain Willpower through Virtue; any Social maneuvering attempts that play on their Vices receive a +3 modifier. This effect impacts a number of victims equal to the demon's (Resolve x Cover).

No Agenda: The demon's body bursts into a cloud of locusts, spreading to devour everything in their path. The locust plague affects an area equal to the demon's (Stamina x Cover) yards in diameter, inflicting one point of lethal or Structure damage per minute within that area. The locusts remain for four hours or until everything in the area is destroyed, whichever comes first. At that point, the swarm scatters and the locusts fly away.



FIFTH

By Matthew McFarland

“You awake, honey?”

The boy in the backseat shifted slightly, searching for a comfortable spot for his head on the car seat. He didn’t respond to the question.

His mother, driving, glanced at him in the rear view mirror again. Satisfied he wasn’t listening, she turned to her husband. “OK, he’s out.”

“I could have just adjusted some things. He wouldn’t have listened.”

“I know.” She stared at the road for a moment, looking for movement up ahead. This stretch of road was endless, boring, and flat, and it was easy to lose track of the surroundings. “It just makes me uncomfortable to do that to him.”

The man cleared his throat. “It isn’t really ‘to him.’ It’s more to us than anything.”

“Still.”

They road in silence for a few more minutes. She tried to read him. As always, she could not. Finally she asked the question she needed to ask.

“Would he be able to tell the difference?”

The man shook his head, then realized she probably couldn’t see him do it. “Probably not.”

“Probably?”

“This isn’t a common thing, Hannah.” He put a hand on her leg. Her body relaxed slightly. “We don’t have children often. When we change who we are, it’s not like putting on a mask.”

“What’s it like?” Hannah looked at him long enough to feel a jolt of adrenaline when she turned her attention back to the dark road.

“Hard to explain. We’re both missing a frame of reference.”

“Do your best.” She smiled when she said it, but they both knew what she really meant. *That’s a cop-out. Don’t hide behind it.*

“I guess...the only thing I’ve felt since I came here that really compares is rain.” He looked out the window, but the sky was clear and riddled with stars. “Coming in out of the

rain into a place that's warm and dry. Not because of the comfort — one identity isn't any more comfortable than another."

She bit her lip. That comment hurt. He didn't notice.

"But the difference in temperature is...marked. You're wet and getting wetter, and then you're wet but getting dryer. You're still...I'm still *me*, but the circumstances and the progression have changed."

"How many other 'yous' are there, Lane?"

"Including the 'me' that isn't human at all?"

Hannah swallowed. She hated that one. "Yes."

"Three. Me, Lane Illister, your husband and Seth's father. Me, Scott Oppenheimer, anti-social computer programmer and gun enthusiast. And me, Carbon."

She didn't ask why he didn't describe Carbon. "Why Carbon?"

Lane looked behind him. Seth was sucking his thumb. Lane made a note to ask the pediatrician if that would affect dentition if done for too long, and what could be done to prevent it. "I'm honestly not sure where I got that name."

The car slowed. Hannah glanced at the gauges, but they were dark. She tapped the gas, but heard nothing. "Oh, hell."

Lane reached into his pocket and pulled out a tin of mints. He popped one into his mouth. The taste was putrid, metallic, and rotted, but he did not react. He swallowed the mint, and looked out his window as Hannah pulled the car over.

The boy's sleepy voice came from the backseat. "Mama, are we there?"

Hannah turned to look at her son. "No, honey. There's something wrong with the car. Go back to sleep and we'll figure it out."

Lane whispered, "There's nothing wrong with the car."

Hannah gave him a glare, but Seth hadn't heard. They opened their doors and stepped out into the night. "What's going on?"

Lane scanned the skies but still saw nothing but stars. "I'm not sure."

"But it's not a car problem," she said.

Lane shook his head. "No. I ate a mint. It's not the car."

Hannah rolled her eyes. "A mint. Jesus. Should I pop the trunk?"

Lane considered. If they popped the trunk and they *hadn't* been made, then they would certainly draw attention. But if they *had* been made and they *didn't* pop the trunk, he had no way of knowing the strength or direction of the threat, and it wouldn't tip their hand any more than it had already been tipped. "Not yet. I want to look around a little more."

Lane shifted himself, but only slightly. He was still mostly Lane, but now a larger percentage of him was Carbon. His eyes shimmered white; the lenses took in the starlight and used it more efficiently, and the dark went away.

A car was approaching through the desert toward them. It was running far too quietly. Lane, with Carbon's eyes, could see a man driving and a woman riding shotgun, but he suspected others waited in the back seat.

“Lane?” Hannah watched him, worry in her eyes.

“Pop the trunk.”

Lane opened the back door and pulled Seth out. Hannah opened the trunk with a blue key. The trunk door opened, revealing a dark, plastic corridor. “Is this going to work?” she asked.

“Yes,” Lane answered, but even he wasn’t sure if he was lying. “Go. I’ll be right there.”

Hannah crawled into the trunk, bracing herself on the side so she wouldn’t slide into the tunnel. “Hand him to me.”

Lane picked his boy up. Seth snuggled against his chest, and Lane clutched him tighter just for a moment. He moved his face over his son’s hair, breathing in, the smell comforting him. *Scent, he thought, forms the strongest bonds of memory in the mammalian brain. Am I a mammal?*

“Lane.” Hannah’s voice was tender, but Lane could hear the fear in it, too. He handed Seth over to her.

“See you soon,” he said.

• • •

One of the things that Hannah loved about Lane was his ability to communicate. She’d had a string of boyfriends, beginning in high school and lasting up through mid-college, who communicated largely in monosyllables and grunts. Some of those boyfriends were shy, some were anti-social, and some were just stupid, but none of them had been especially good at self-expression, not even the free verse poet she’d had a week-long romance with during her first year at the university. Lane, though, while he was fairly soft-spoken, could express exactly what he meant with a glance, and it worked with everyone — Hannah, her family, random people in a bar. Lane just...looked, and people knew.

After the long night at the lake, when Lane revealed what he really was and she saw Carbon for the first time, Hannah discovered that this ability wasn’t magical or even special, at least as far as Lane was concerned. The way Lane explained, it was like showing someone the first half of an idiom and letting their minds fill in the rest. “Anyone can do it,” he said. If she looked hurt, Lane didn’t notice.

Lane was just as surprised as anyone, though, when Seth looked up at his father from his crib, and Lane knew he was hungry, or wet, or scared, or bored. Lane was afraid it would make Seth a target, or that it would make Hannah afraid of their son, but that never seemed to matter. Hannah learned to live with the fact that her son could communicate in ways that no other child could, just as she learned to live with the fact that her husband wasn’t always her husband.

Lane never stopped worrying, though, about whether the Machine would come for Seth.

• • •

“That was the last time I saw them.” Scott took a drink. He frowned; he’d asked for extra mint. This had barely any and it was badly muddled.

“Do you know what happened?” Carrie had finished her drink a while ago, and she refused everything people tried to buy for her.

“No.” Scott sipped again. “Dammit, I should not have to go all the way to Cuba to get a good mojito.”

"No?" Carrie said.

Scott moved his drink slightly to his left just as a co-ed stumbled up and tipped it over.

"Oh, my god!" the woman said. "I'm so sorry!"

"No problem," said Scott.

"Let me buy you another one!" Scott made a muffled sound of protest, but the girl had already flagged down the bartender and ordered the drink. Scott salvaged the mint leaves from his glass.

"That was slick." Carrie smirked at him.

"No idea what you mean." He sucked a mint leaf. "I'm pretty sure Hannah's dead. Seth, I don't know." The new drink arrived. Scott put the leaves in it and stirred with his finger. "You hear all kinds of rumors about childr—" He cleared his throat. "Offspring. Of us, you know. I don't think he's dead."

Carrie frowned. "But you never went looking."

Scott stared at the mirror behind the bar. "Math didn't add up."

"Sorry?" Her dialect was Canadian, the rhotic vowel in "sorry" was "or" rather than "ar." Scott wondered if that was a conscious choice or a function of her Cover.

"I ran the numbers." Scott took a drink. Better this time. "By the time I got out of there, I was hurting. The angels they sent for me were nothing like I'd ever seen. They kept biting me, but not enough to do anything but break the skin a little. I figured it out — they were taking bits of information, analyzing me slowly, trying to learn me. They did, and then they fucked off."

"But they figured out where the trunk went," she said.

"Yeah. I couldn't risk following through the trunk; I'd always told Hannah to disable it from the other side after using it. So I got back home as fast as I could, but they were just... gone." Scott spat out the leaf he'd been sucking and pulled out another from the glass. "No blood, no breakage. Hell, for all I know they sent something like Cloud used to be, and just —"

"Don't." Carrie put a hand on his arm. "Don't think like that."

Scott shook his head. "Doesn't matter. If I'd followed them any closer, I'd risk being stuck in the trunk. If I'd waited longer, the result would have been the same. If they're dead, there's no point in looking. If they're alive, the Machine wants them alive for a reason. If I go looking, the angels would see me long before I found my family, so it doesn't make any sense to look. I'm less of risk this way."

"You're more of a whiny pussy, though," came a rumbling voice from behind them.

"Hey, Cloud," said Scott. "We were just talking about you."

"Yeah," said Cloud. "Speak of the devil. Buy me a drink, bitch."

Carrie flipped him a middle finger, but waved to the bartender. "Where's Amadia?"

Cloud shrugged. "Scamming someone by pretending to be a dead prince? Or princess?"

"You're an ass," Carrie said.

Cloud laughed, loud enough that a table of men watching the football game on the bar's television glanced over. "Don't blame me, man. I didn't pick this Cover." He grabbed the beer from Carrie. "Domestic. Screw you."

“Buy your own, then.” Carries said as she smiled sweetly.

“Amadia’s on her way,” muttered Cloud. “But be warned. She is in no mood to fuck around.”

• • •

Two hours after Scott got away from the Biters, as he’d later come to call them, he found the “town” of Malcolm, Oklahoma. It wasn’t really a town. It was a mail stop, a crossroads, and a sign that said “MALCOLM.”

He leaned on the sign and took stock. He didn’t think the angels had followed him. He had managed to save Lane, but barely. He wasn’t sure if he would ever be able to go back to being Lane, and the thought tore at him. He rubbed his arms, feeling for the bites, but he’d left them behind when he became Carbon.

Becoming Carbon might have saved him, but it had also ensured that he’d had to leave the car behind. He wasn’t worried about the God-Machine getting it; the principles of point-to-point travel were well-founded, and the device itself wouldn’t hold much interest for the enemy. He was more concerned about the angels.

Scott glanced up, but saw nothing but sky. He looked in all directions, but the crossroads was bare. *Shouldn’t someone be coming to sell his soul*, he thought, and chuckled. It was past midnight, anyway.

He decided to risk changing and became Carbon again. Tanned skin gave way to metallic, gray armor. Fingers merged to long, nimble, needle-claws. Brown eyes became white, hair merged with scalp, and Scott’s heartbeat became the quiet *whirr* of Carbon’s internal plasma drive.

He still had bite marks on his arm. The bites hadn’t broken the skin, even when the angels had bitten Lane. They weren’t trying to kill him, then, because if they’d been *that* kind of angel he wouldn’t have stood a chance. Not hitters, then, and not Messengers. Certainly not Shields. Transporters, then, come to whisk him — or his family — away?

But that didn’t explain the bites.

• • •

“This is stupid.” Amadia was speaking in Hausa. Scott made a mental note to remind her to vary her choice a little; she was getting predictable. Today was not the day, however. “Who the hell planned this?”

“Me,” said Cloud. “Me and West.”

Scott and Carrie got quiet. Amadia scoffed. “Comrade West is an idiot. He thinks he’s so high and mighty because he formed an Agency. Big deal. He’s got a clubhouse. In Seattle, of all places, the city coming apart at the seams.”

Scott touched Amadia’s arm. “This is maybe not the horse we need to beat on.” He nodded at the bartender from across the room, and the bartender turned up the TV. The static that Scott had heard a moment ago was gone — maybe he imagined it. “Why do you think it’s stupid?”

“The whole plan is based on the idea that there’s anything in this place worth having or saving.” Amadia knocked back her soda. She abstained from alcohol, claiming it would be too big a departure from her Cover to imbibe. “But I haven’t seen anything that says we’ve got a good reason to go in there.”

“Apart from just taking the place out,” said Carrie.

“Yes,” retorted Amadia, “and I’m for that. But if we’re going to do a smash, let’s not run it like an extraction. Look at this.” She nodded at the legal pad full of scribbles, notes, and diagrams in a dozen languages. “So much emphasis on getting to the door undetected. Screw it, let’s just get in! We know what the place is for, we know what’s holding it up. We smash that jar, the whole Infrastructure comes tumbling down and we get the hell out.”

Cloud and Carrie glanced at Scott. Scott nodded carefully. “OK. Turns out we *do* have some idea what we’re likely to find.”

“Losing patience, here,” said Amadia.

“I’ll be right back.” Scott stood up. “Sort of.” He walked to the men’s room, entered a stall, and exited as Lane. He sat down at the table, and Cloud gave him a critical once-over. “You look like shit.”

“Been a rough year.” Lane was disheveled and dusty, as well as malnourished. He grabbed a glass of water and chugged it, and then waved the waitress over and ordered food. The demons watched her walk away, and Lane cleared his throat. “I haven’t been Lane in a long time. But the Infrastructure we’re talking about hitting — I think it might be important. Maybe a command center, or linked to one.”

“What makes you say that?” Amadia was interested. Lane knew she’d been wanting to blow up a command center forever.

“Because these haven’t healed.” Lane rolled up his sleeve, showing them the bites.

• • •

Three angels came to Earth the night that Carbon Fell. Two of them went back. Carbon only remembered the mission vaguely, which, when he stopped to think about it, was strange — demons remember everything. But that night in Savannah, he remembered only standing under the tree and looking up at the Spanish moss, recognizing the tiny creatures that lived in it, waiting to bite, and thinking, *Why am I not counting* those?

The other angels did their parts, and went back. One was meant to disable the lock on a door. The other took the place of a bartender in the primary’s favorite watering hole. Carbon didn’t know their names, which made him suspect they weren’t given any. He knew that one angel was meant to destroy and the other meant to keep things on task. Neither had Fallen, at least not that night.

But what was *his* job that night? The idea was to get the primary in position to rob the house with the broken lock. He had never met the primary. Had his job been to give him the address, or to help him with the burglary? Perhaps to slow police response time or shoot the guy coming out of the house? Carbon didn’t remember, and in the years following his Fall, he spoke to a number of demons. None of them admitted not knowing what their last mission was.

Of course, demons lie.

• • •

The door wasn’t really a door. It looked like one — had a knob and hinges and all—but the door was actually a weapon. Scott was familiar with the premise. He’d used it himself.

The entrance to the Infrastructure was a window. It was big window off the house’s huge porch. Many of the grand homes in Savannah weren’t air conditioned, and so the windows

were left open. This particular house was closed to the public, privately owned, and Infrastructure of the God-Machine. It wasn't far from where Scott — Carbon — had come into the world, a few hours before his Fall.

Tonight, four demons approached it. Cloud, nearly seven feet tall, muscular and armed, stood in front of the door and tapped his foot once. Amadia, athletic, dark-skinned, and vicious, stood across the street holding a pistol in each hand. Carrie, nondescript, white, and blond, stood under a tree facing the house, hand on the bark, waiting for her cue. Scott, pasty, thin, and also armed, stood at the end of the block.

Cloud took a step forward and kicked in the door. All four demons mentally started a clock. They had four minutes.

The door exploded inward, the wooden fibers stretched like taffy, and then the door burst outward, carrying the same amount of force that Cloud had applied. The demon was thrown backwards down the front steps and onto the sidewalk. Scanning the area, Carrie felt the defenses go up. She focused on the feelings and added to the chaos, throwing off static to confuse any incoming angels.

The angels weren't the first ones to arrive, though. Two police cars pulled up in front of the house and four men got out, all armed, all pointing their guns at Cloud. Amadia stepped into the street and fired four perfect shots. All four men fell dead.

Scott jumped the fence and ran for the window. He jumped just before he reached the porch, and his right foot caught the edge, propelling him upwards. He flew through the window like a gymnast, landed with a perfect roll, and got to his feet.

The house was beautifully furnished. If any human being had climbed in the window, the illusion would have held—this was a magnificent Savannah mansion, complete with the Gothic revival that tourists expected. Scott felt the gears turning beneath it.

A man, older, white, carrying a large pistol, walked down the stairs. He started to say something, warning Scott off or preparing to shoot him, but Scott was ready, standing in a blind spot. He drew and fired his own gun, and the man tumbled to the bottom of the staircase, bleeding from the throat. Scott grabbed his gun, jammed it into his waistband, and ran up the stairs.

Outside, Carrie helped Cloud stand. Amadia joined them, after grabbing a shotgun from one of the police cars. "They're getting close," she whispered in Hausa.

"I know, but we have to hold on," Carrie answered, in Dutch.

"For another three minutes and twelve seconds," muttered Cloud in Urdu. The other demons didn't respond. The streetlights were going out and the ghost tour that normally took this street was veering away. The God-Machine was changing things.

• • •

"Four years old. That's amazing." Hannah leaned into Lane, smiling.

Lane smiled back at his wife. "It's not. It's just time passing."

"Shut up." She poked him in the ribs. "*It is* amazing. *He's* amazing."

Lane knelt down and stroked their sleeping son's face. "He is that."

"We should wake him." Hannah glanced at the sunset outside the hotel window. "We want him to sleep on the drive."

Lane shook his head. "Let's let him sleep. If he's unhappy on the drive, we'll find a park or something and stop. There's plenty of that kind of thing, at least until we get out of Missouri."

Lane sat on the couch, and Hannah sat next to him and leaned back. He put his arm around her and absently stroked her hair. He considered asking her to take a shower with him — they hadn't had sex in a few days and he was starting to miss it. She snuggled up against his chest, though, and he reconsidered. This was nice.

"Tell me again how the trunk works," she said.

"It's not hard," said Lane. "You just pop it, and then —"

"No, that's not what I mean. I know how to use it. I want to know how it *works*."

Lane nodded. She couldn't see it, of course, as she was facing away from him. "OK. Well, you know how sometimes I'll pull something out of my pocket that you didn't know I had?"

"Right." Hannah looked up at him. "And then you lie and say it was in there all the time."

Lane chuckled. "But it's not a lie. It's just not decided yet. Look, let's say we left the house and I turned out my pockets for you so you can see they're empty. If I did that, I couldn't pull anything out, because my pockets are empty. But if you don't *know* they're empty, there could be anything in there."

"But not my lipstick, if it's in my purse," she said.

"As long as you know it's in your purse, sure."

Hanna smirked. "This sounds like bullshit."

Lane shrugged. "Yeah, maybe. But it works. The trunk is kind of similar. It connects to our closet at home. You pop the trunk, you crawl through, you exit through the closet. That closet *could* contain you and Seth."

"And you."

Lane stared ahead for a minute. "I'm not actually sure. I'm pretty sure it would work on me, but I've never tried it."

"Why wouldn't it?" she asked.

"Well...you know how the pocket trick doesn't work if we know what's *not* in my pocket?" he said.

"Yeah, I guess." Hannah shrugged.

Seth stirred. Lane saw his son's face twitch slightly — a nightmare, or something else? He was never sure with Seth.

"Hon?"

"Yeah." Lane shifted a bit. Hannah started to sit up, but Lane held her in place. "You're fine there." He kissed the top of her head. "Anyway, *I* know what's in that closet. That doesn't seem to matter if you're going through the trunk, but I'm not sure it'll work on me."

Hannah laughed brusquely. "That's so weird."

"Yeah." *I don't make the rules*, thought Lane, but he decided it sounded defensive, so he didn't say it.

She turned slightly, and kissed him on the chin. Lane felt a momentary wave of discomfort — Carbon had an open port on his chin, and he didn't know what it was for — but it didn't show. "I want Seth to meet Scott," she said.

Lane didn't respond. He didn't like Scott, even when he *was* Scott.

Seth stirred. "Mama?"

Hannah stood up. Lane made a note to talk about Scott later. He knew she would bring it up.

• • •

Scott ran upstairs, entered the first door on the right, and fired three shots at the woman sitting up in bed. She slumped off the edge and hit the floor. Scott felt a momentary pang of guilt, but then saw silver in her blood — angel, or at least stigmatic. *Or maybe the child of a demon, like my boy.*

He shook off the thought. The jar was nearby, probably in the closet, but that wasn't what he wanted. He lifted the mattress and tipped it over onto the dead woman. Underneath, he found it.

The mattress was normal. The box spring was a mess of wiring, black wires curled together and knotted like the Spanish moss in the trees outside. Tiny, bloated, multi-legged metallic creatures skittered along the wires — security, probably. Scott braced himself for the pain, then reached in and grabbed a handful of wires.

The bugs responded immediately. One of them scampered up his arm and dug in to the flesh. Scott responded instinctively, changing to Carbon, his flesh becoming metal too tough for the bugs to penetrate. The one already inside burrowed deeper, though, and Carbon found his mind calling up details — his mission, his Fall, his family.

Carbon engaged his internal plasma drive, heating his flesh by several hundred degrees. The bug exploded under his skin with a *pop* and Carbon felt a momentary burst of pain. The other bugs, running over his legs, caught fire and fell to the floor. He couldn't keep up that temperature — it would mean burning the place down — but it bought him time.

He brought a wire up to a jack in his chin and inserted it. Outside, he heard more gunfire. *Two minutes.*

He was in.

The room faded from sight and all he saw was data, the endlessness of creation reduced to numbers, equations, and probability. He scrolled back, looking for the night he Fell. It was so long ago, so much data to bypass, but he couldn't just jump straight to it. That would tip his hand.

Outside, the sound of sirens. *One minute, ten seconds.*

Savannah, five years ago. Here it was. Still moss in the trees, still Infrastructure in this house. This is where he was born, if that was the right word. He and two other angels walked out of this door as tourists. One, the angel meant to destroy a lock, was Fiona Quincy, a bored rich girl from New Jersey. The other, the angel meant to take the place of the bartender, did not have a named Cover, but it thought of itself as Tab. It was blank-faced, dressed in jeans and a gray shirt, but when it reached the bar it would absorb the bartender's face and leave him wandering in a daze for the rest of the night. Carbon noted that the bartender was still alive and believed he had been abducted by aliens.

Carbon saw his own birth. Assembled by these very bugs, powered by these wires, birthed from this bed. Dressed by the woman he'd shot a moment ago. Given his mission —

— his mission.

Analyze. Watch. Gather. Digest.

His hand moved unconsciously to the spot on his arm where the Bitters had left their wounds. *I was one of them. A Biter. An...Analyst.*

Outside, an explosion. *Time's up.*

• • •

Five minutes ago, Scott, Cloud, Amadia, and Carrie were walking through the alleys of Savannah toward one particular mansion. They knew the plan, so there was no need to repeat it. Their diagrams had been destroyed, and the bar where they'd met had no memory of their presence. Amadia carried two pistols, Scott carried one, and Carrie and Cloud didn't bother.

Cloud would kick in the door to gain entrance and absorb whatever counterattack came. Carrie would keep watch and throw out chaff to distract incoming angels, and be ready to help them escape. Amadia would handle corporeal agents. Scott would gain true entrance and find the information he wanted, and then destroy the jar.

Then he would take them back four minutes and they would all walk away while the house fell in on itself.

"That isn't going to work," Carrie had said, at the bar. "It only works on you."

Scott had shown her the puzzle box. "You each get a piece. When it's time, we all toss the pieces to Carrie. Carrie reassembles them, and we're good to go."

Amadia poked at it. "Who made this?" The puzzle box was wooden, but tiny circuitry sparkled on it every so often.

"Me," said Scott. "Don't worry, it's not from Seattle." Amadia glared at him.

Cloud slapped Scott on the back. "You have a gift, my friend."

Scott nodded. "Well, let's hope it works."

Then they left, and went to the house. But then, five minutes ago, they stood there on the sidewalk and watched as the house collapsed. Four policemen and two residents died inside, and then the gas main ruptured and the front of the house exploded. All was as it had been, and would be. Except —

"We weren't here four minutes ago," said Amadia. Hausa again.

"We gained an extra minute," said Carrie. "How...?"

"Must be a glitch in the box," said Lane. "I haven't really —"

"Why are you Lane right now?" Cloud loomed over them, glaring down at Lane. "You were Scott the whole time. When did that change?"

Amadia didn't wait for an answer. She vanished. She had never been there. Carrie followed suit, wandering into the crowd that had gathered to gasp at the destruction and becoming lost.

"This better not come back to bite me, asshole," growled Cloud.

Lane shook his head. "It won't," he lied. Cloud didn't respond, he just turned and walked back down the alley.

Lane looked down at his arms. The bites were gone. The Machine had what it wanted. He had completed his mission.

"Now I can go home," he whispered, and set off toward the bus station, thinking of his family's faces and wondering if Seth would still know him.

INTERFACE

In "Fifth," Lane represents a new type of incarnation called Analysts, which are described below.

NEW INCARNATION: ANALYSTS

Let me see.

You were sent to analyze. You were one of the God-Machine's Eyes, an angel created to measure, sample, digest, and report. Perhaps you watched impassively as your Destroyer brethren did their bloody work, or perhaps you swooped in alongside a Psychopomp to test the raw materials she transported. In any case, something caught your attention. Rather than report back to the Machine, you Fell, becoming one of the rarest of demons. You probably have no recollection of your mission or your life as an angel, other than vague understanding that you were once a servant of the Machine.

Angels: Contrary to popular belief among the Unchained, Analysts, not Messengers, are the primary method by which the God-Machine gathers information. Most demons simply do not know about Analysts, because their missions are almost always separate from the angels they are sent to accompany or observe. The reason for this is unclear. Perhaps the God-Machine feels that if angels know they are being observed, this will impact their performance? Or maybe the God-Machine prefers to keep the existence of Analyst angels as guarded a secret as possible.

Analyst angels are perhaps the most common of the God-Machine's servants, but they also often go unnoticed. Many Analysts are sent simply to watch and report, though some — the ones most susceptible to the Fall — have instructions to retrieve samples, measurements, and other data. Analysts are seldom given solo missions; more often an Analyst accompanies Destroyers to learn how to kill and break more efficiently, Guardians to check the efficacy of their tactics, Psychopomps to time their construction or travel, or Messengers to report back on signal-to-noise ratio in their communications.

For important missions, Analyst angels precede the others. Before the God-Machine creates Infrastructure to make a squadron of Destroyers, It might send an Analyst to check the defenses of the enemy it wishes to eradicate or to test the suitability of a potential Facility site.

The Fall: Analysts risk Falling when they express a desire to interact with their subjects rather than simply observing them. When they draw conclusions from the data they have accumulated and assign meaning to the numbers, the Fall is imminent.

Some of the common catalysts described by Analysts are:

- **Distraction:** Something caught the Analyst's attention and she couldn't let it go. Maybe she missed a crucial moment while paying attention to something else, or maybe she simply gave up her primary focus to follow a new interest.
- **Overwhelmed:** The world is infinite, and every raindrop carries a world of possibility. An Analyst that doesn't stay focused on its primary goal runs the risk of trying to take in too much data and becoming so lost in it that the only option is to Fall.
- **Humanization:** Learning how much blood a given person can lose before he goes into shock, to an angel, is merely an interesting factoid. If the angel sees the person lying on the ground, slowly turning pale and cold, and takes greater note of his fear and pain than of the cubic milliliters of blood he is losing, that angel might very well choose to intervene.
- **Sympathy:** Analysts are often paired with other angels, typically without those angels' knowledge. As such, an Analyst often has a front-row seat when an angel Falls. While Analysts have standing orders to observe such activities and report back to the God-Machine which angel Fell and under what circumstances, some Analysts choose instead to follow their compatriot on this journey, either out of true sympathy to that angel's Catalyst or just a desire to see the analysis through.
- **Action Envy:** Analyst angels don't normally interact with their subjects in any meaningful way. Often their role in protecting or breaking something is simply to watch and measure while Destroyers and Guardians do the heavy work. An Analyst occasionally wishes to get her hands dirty, as it were, or to pick up the slack when another angel doesn't do his job. Of course, this is still acting outside programming and still leads to the Fall.
- **Impishness:** When you spend all your time looking for needles, you start to resent the hay, as the adage goes. Some Analysts don't necessarily want to risk themselves or do anything exciting or glamorous, they just want to change the outcome by playing with the data *just* a bit. This generally leads to butterfly effect-levels of change that they couldn't have predicted and a swift Fall.

The Descent: The human world has great need of beings able to analyze information. *Finding* information isn't difficult for demons in general; the very nature of the Descent and the ability to influence the mystical sub-routines of reality make investigation instinctive. Understanding what to do with that information, however, requires looking at it from multiple angles, playing out possibilities and correcting for variables. An Analyst, therefore, might show aptitude for police tactics, mathematics, programming, logistics, engineering, or any of hundreds of other vocations that require her unique skills.

The most telling fact about Analysts, though, is that many of them don't realize that they are Analysts. It is a commonly accepted fact among the Unchained that only four Incarnations exist, along with four Agendas, four Keys in a Cipher, and so forth. Demons who delve deeply into the angelic mindset, though, realize that these distinctions are for the most part self-inflicted. For the God-Machine's purposes, an angel's classification is its mission, meaning that a near-infinite number of "Incarnations" exist. Once they Fall, Incarnations serve as a way for demons to classify themselves. Analysts are normally mischaracterized as Messengers or Psychopomps...but they are unquestionably different.

What separates an Analyst from other demons is her ability to reconfigure and reinterpret data. In practical terms, the Eyes have an easier time creating Exploits and Gadgets out of

Embeds than most other demons do. Since they are already prone to analysis and calculation, they find it easier to apply the variance to an Embed that turns it into an Exploit, or to change its “state” and Install it into a Gadget.

Analysts do occasionally realize that they are different from other demons, but many Unchained are highly invested in the status quo and the mystical significance of the number four. Challenging it might be met with disbelief (“Ha, no, really, you’re a Messenger”), suspicion (“Not any demon I ever heard of”) or outright hostility (“Better safe than sorry, right?”).

Nickname: The Eyes

Character Creation: Mental Attributes are the most common primary choice, but a good Composure rating is also typical. An Analyst often has good ratings in whatever Skills are germane to her last assignment; this often means Mental is primary, but an Analyst sent to assess tactical positions of street gangs might have high ratings in Streetwise and Firearms as well as Politics. The Eyes have whatever Merits allow them to reach an advantageous position from which to collect their data; this could mean Status, Professional Training, or just Striking Looks.

Embeds: Analysts do not favor any one class of Embeds, but they do show great facility for Exploits. The player may select an Exploit at character creation without regard for normal prerequisites.

Demonic Form: Analysts are built to be unobtrusive. They often have stealth capabilities that allow them to blend into their surroundings or mental countermeasures that distract or redirect their subjects’ attention. Many of them have wings or other Propulsions that enable a quick getaway or the ability to escape the immediate area and watch unseen.

Concepts: Occult mathematician, hacker, stress-tester, librarian, security expert, intelligence operative, Gadgeteer, Infrastructure scout, information broker, Cipher consultant.

Stereotypes

Destroyers: You know how you knew exactly how hot it had to get before it burst into flames? You’re welcome.

Guardians: What’s it like to care so much?

Messengers: Sing something else. That one has too many sibilants. It’s distracting.

Psychopomps: I’ve been meaning to ask: 21 grams. Is that true, or false?

Vampires: On average, 55% the living person they were, 42% the undead thing they are, and 3% something I can’t quite figure out. Outliers exist, of course.

Werewolves: It’s not the killing that they need. Don’t get excited, though. The killing still happens.

Mages: They’re better at our old jobs than we were, but they didn’t earn it.

Prometheans: I don’t know what I am, either. I mean, not the little pieces.

Humans: Seven *billion* variations, and don’t ever let anyone say otherwise.

ANALYSTS IN THE CHRONICLE

We introduce the Analyst Incarnation here for a number of reasons. First, it changes the established order. Demons assume everything happens in fours, but they do that because it gives them an illusion of control over their existence. It’s true that the number *does* have some

significance—four Keys in the Cipher, after all. But a fifth Incarnation, one that most demons don't even recognize (including the ones that *belong* to the Incarnation) invalidates a lot of the assumptions that the Unchained make about themselves and their world.

It's possible that the God-Machine created these angels (and therefore these demons) in response to the Unchained focus on fours. Names and numbers have power, even if that power is limited to what people read into them, and so by shaking up the Unchained world, the Machine puts its former servants on the defensive. Or perhaps the Analysts have always been here, but it's only since the world became saturated with quick, easy-to-obtain information that they were required in great enough numbers that they started Falling.

Another possibility is that the God-Machine simply didn't allow them to Fall before. Perhaps Analysts were built with a failsafe that destroyed them if they tried to disconnect. But if that's the case, what changed? Did the God-Machine want to allow Analyst demons to Fall just to see what would happen? Did a ring of demons infiltrate some massive Command and Control Infrastructure and change the nature of Analyst angels, allowing the Fall? Or is the failsafe still there, just waiting to be reactivated when the God-Machine has what it needs?

CARBON'S GADGETS

In "Fifth," Carbon, an Analyst, uses three Gadgets, presented here. Details on near-field and form Gadgets are presented in **Flowers of Hell: The Demon Players Guide**, but the information here is enough to use these Gadgets in play, should you so desire.

THE MINTS

Carbon created this Gadget to detect angelic presence without risking the use of a demonic form ability. This Gadget uses the Sense the Angelic Modification; as such, Carbon does not have access to this power (unless he chooses to re-install it and destroy the Gadget).

The Gadget is a small metal box of peppermints. The logo and writing on the top has been replaced with angelic script, and opening the box lets off a snap of static electricity. The box holds a maximum of 5 points of Aether, though Carbon frequently kept it stocked with more than five mints (the ones that hold Aether were marked or chipped; as a demon, Carbon remembers exactly which ones hold Aether).

Installed Effect: Sense the Angelic

Trigger: Eating one of the charged mints activates the Gadget. At that point, the user can detect angelic influence in the area. This requires a Wits + Composure roll. Only demons or humans with the Merit: Unseen Sense — God-Machine (which includes all stigmatics) can use this Gadget.

THE TRUNK

The trunk is an ambitious undertaking, a Gadget Installed into part of a vehicle. Carbon created the trunk as a getaway method for his wife and young son in the event that the agents of the God-Machine caught up with him.

The trunk is a *near-field* Gadget, one that creates an effect within the scope of the original Embed or Exploit, but not specifically covered by it. In this case, it allows people to move from the trunk of the car to a closet in Lane and Hannah's home.

Carbon is not sure if the trunk would work on a demon. He has never tried to use it himself and is unwilling to compromise it by allowing another demon to attempt it.

Installed Effect: Deep Pockets

Activation and Triggers: The trunk is activated by using the key fob for the car to open it. Using the key in the lock directly does not activate the Gadget, nor does using the hand switch in the car. Once the trunk has been “popped,” the Gadget remains active until someone closes the door. Anyone can crawl into the trunk, through a long, dark tunnel, and emerge in a coat closet in the Illister’s home outside of St. Louis, Missouri. The Gadget holds 10 Aether and uses one point for every person crawling through it.

What effect the trunk has on demons, if any, is up to the Storyteller.

THE PUZZLE BOX

Perhaps Carbon’s most ambitious undertaking to date, this Gadget allows a number of demons to take advantage of the Four Minutes Ago Exploit. Doing so is dangerous for all of them, but the Gadget allows for a failsafe *par excellence*.

The Gadget is a small, wooden puzzle box, about the size of a tissue box. It breaks apart into four sections. When it is disassembled, the machinery at the core of each piece becomes visible.

Installed Effect: Four Minutes Ago

Activation and Triggers: Disassembling the puzzle box activates the Gadget and spends one point of Aether for every demon involved. Only demons can use this Gadget. Once the box is activated, the demons holding the pieces have four minutes to accomplish whatever they wish, at which point the box pieces spark and glow. Time — for the demons — rolls back to when they activated the box. Anything that the demons did during those four minutes still happens, but they play no role in those events. As such, in “Fifth,” the police officers that Amadia shot still died, the house still collapsed (because of the broken Linchpin), and the explosion out front still happened, but all as a result of events occurring independent of Carbon’s ring.

Each demon involved risks compromise from the puzzle box’ effects, with a cumulative –1 modifier for each character holding a puzzle piece (in the story, then, the modifier was –4).

UNICORN CROSSING

By J Dymphna Coy

Half past six on a Thursday on the 10 East, merging on to 405 North. Someone standing on Sawtelle looking south would see the ramp — the uppermost layer of a symphony of concrete arcs cutting majestically through the sky as they ferry people and products efficiently to their destinations.

Architects say it's a work of genius. Commuters call it "the nightmare in the sky." Tammy was in the latter group. She'd been on the ramp for fifteen minutes. She stared at the clock. 6:31. She hadn't moved for eight minutes. She was at the highest point of the ramp, though, and had an excellent view of Sawtelle.

Sawtelle was where her grandparents' orchard had been. Maybe Palms. Somewhere around there. Baachan never told her exactly where it was. Sometimes, Tammy would make guesses. Maybe it was the weedy parking lot off Sepulveda, empty save for a hot pink van advertising TOPLESS MAIDS \$99. Maybe it was somewhere in a shopping mall. Maybe it was a luxury condo off Wilshire. Maybe the city had been rendered so unrecognizable that even her grandparents wouldn't be able to spot it.

Baachan never talked about the camps or about their life before the war. Neither did Tammy's parents. Her grandparents did the right thing, her mother said. They obeyed the law, and they worked hard after the war. Her father had a good education because of their hard work, and Tammy got to live in a nice house and go to a good school and have a prosperous life because of what they did. Who was Tammy to ask questions? It made her angry, even if she couldn't disagree. She drove an Acura now. And the guy in front of her drove a Lexus, and the guy in front of him drove an Infiniti, and whoever was in front of him drove —

Her phone rang. It was Todd. *I hope he's not drunk already*, she thought. "This is Tammy," she answered.

"Tammy." Tippy. Not drunk yet.

"Hi, Todd."

"You should be out here, yo," said Todd.

“I told you guys, I couldn’t do it tonight!” she said in a playful, mocking tone. Sometimes she was invited to the coding team’s Thursday night excursions, and sometimes she wasn’t. She was invited along this week, but she just couldn’t bring herself to do it tonight. Sixty hours a week in the office with the boys was enough. “I hope you guys have fun!” she added.

“Man!” he said. “You probably got a date or somethin’. You’re an attractive woman,” he slurred. “You probably have ‘em lined up around the block!”

Tammy laughed in a way that she hoped sounded diplomatic.

“I hope you don’t think this is sexual harassment,” Todd continued. Tammy suppressed a sigh. The boys had gotten a real kick out of the sexual harassment training. “I’m just saying —”

Another call. Blocked number. “I have another call, Todd,” said Tammy. “I gotta go. You guys have fun tonight!”

“No, listen —”

Tammy hung up. She picked up the other line. “Hello?”

“Tammy?” A woman’s voice on the line, unfamiliar.

Tammy was about to respond, but a bright yellow motorcycle suddenly raced past her driver’s side, nearly missing her sideview mirror.

“Hello? Tammy?” said the woman on the phone. “It’s me, Monica.”

“Monica?” she repeated awkwardly. She tried to remember all of the Monicas she knew. “Sorry, I don’t —”

Another motorcycle whizzed by. Bright yellow. Wasn’t that —

Monica. Of course she remembered Monica. Monica with the backpack with the Lisa Frank dolphins on it in second grade. Monica in fifth grade, braiding Tammy’s hair and promising to be best friends forever. Monica, crouching by a bonfire in San Clemente and passing Tammy her first beer. Monica, who convinced their principal that the school’s computers had “a glitch in the system” so she and Tammy would be randomly marked absent when they were actually in class. Monica, who went to USC instead of UCLA.

“Oh, gosh,” said Tammy. “Monica, it’s been — it’s been forever!”

“I know, right!” said Monica, laughing. “Hey, where are you? Because I could totally go for a drink tonight.”

• • •

“I don’t usually drink this much,” said Tammy. She felt her cheeks turning red. The fact that she was drinking at the Westside Tavern — which was located inside of a shopping mall — was a little strange in and of itself.

“Girl, after the week you’ve had, you deserve it!” said Monica, tapping her on the arm.

“It’s not so bad,” said Tammy. “I mean, it’s part of the job.”

“Mmm,” said Monica. “I hear you. It still sucks.”

“I mean, the guys always go out drinking. And I hate it,” Tammy said. She knew she shouldn’t talk like this, but the drink and the strangeness of the evening brought out a certain candor in her. It felt easy to unburden herself to Monica, both an old friend and a stranger.

"They go to these shitty bars and get drunk," she continued. "They get drunk and make passes at me and I smile and ignore it. And they talk about football. Football, all of the fucking time. I hate football. I hate it," she said again, half not believing what she was saying.

Monica was looking at her steadily. "It's okay," she said gently.

"I mean, I follow it. It's what you do, you know? Hell, I spend hours on my fantasy league and I read everything I can to keep up," she said, "But I just don't give a shit. I hate it." Tammy bit her lip. She was saying too much. I mean, she and Monica had been close once, and maybe they were friends on MeYou, but they hadn't talked in years and here she was just spilling her guts. *It must be the booze*, she thought, even though she'd hardly touched her drink.

"So what's making you happy these days?" asked Monica, gently.

Tammy shrugged and stabbed at the lime in her drink with a toothpick.

"Are you still doing your art?" said Monica. "You were really good."

Tammy smiled, not looking up from her glass. "I guess you could say that." She shook the lime off of the toothpick, and then stabbed it again.

"Yeah?"

"It's a game," said Tammy. "I've been working on it at home for a few years now."

"A game? What kind of game?" said Monica.

"I'm calling it *Unicorn Crossing*," she said, laughing to hide her embarrassment. "It's sort of like those old games where you plan and build a city. You play as a little animal-person. And you're the mayor of this town, and you have a house, and other animal-people start moving into town, and you can start building improvements to the town. Planting trees and putting in parks and office buildings and things. And you get to know the other animal-people who live there, and you try to help them get along with their neighbors and have a friendly community. That kind of stuff." She stabbed the lime again, and broke the toothpick. "Pointless, really," she said.

"So it has, like, unicorns? You always drew fabulous unicorns," said Monica. She made a gesture that vaguely suggested a horn coming out of her forehead.

Tammy laughed. "Well, it is a mobile game, and you can get friends and visit each other people's towns and stuff. And if enough people visit your town and like it, you'll get a unicorn to move into town!" said Tammy. "It's really hard, though. I think the current number is a million likes. I don't think anyone will get it."

"I think that sounds fun!" said Monica. "You always drew those adorable little animals when we were in school. I think you should keep working on it!"

"Yeah, well," said Tammy. "Anyway. I've been talking about myself too much. What have you been up to?"

Monica had been up to a lot. She was in finance now. Something to do with her sorority at USC. She'd done pretty well for herself. She wasn't rich when they were growing up, but she'd met the right people, played the right games, and now was a bona fide venture capitalist. Vice-President of Acquisitions at some acronym. Tammy couldn't remember much of the conversation after that.

Monica called her a cab as they were leaving. While they waited, Tammy looked at one of the indoor trees and wondered if it was real or artificial, and if any orange trees had ever grown here at all.

• • •

After *Unicorn Crossing* had been downloaded fifty million times, Unicorn Industries moved into a renovated pen factory. So did Tammy — the offices were on the first floor, and the second floor had been converted into an enormous loft apartment. At first, Tammy wasn't sure about the arrangement, but Monica had gotten her an amazing deal on the property and secured some very generous financing for her. It was difficult to turn down.

As she walked down the stairs from the loft to the office, Tammy had to admit that she vastly preferred her new commute. She could read the news, feed the cat, take a run on the beach and then get to work on time without needing to wake up at four in the morning.

If only she could find the goddamned cat.

Tammy'd had Ophelia since she was in undergrad, but now she belonged to the entire office. Tammy based the character that walked you through the tutorial in *Unicorn Crossing*, Ofi-chan, on Ophelia's likeness. She became the official mascot for the game. Ophelia had tendency to wander downstairs and walk across her coders' keyboards, but they didn't mind too much. Sanjay grumbled about his allergies, but Deena posted lots of pictures of Ophelia perched among various pieces of equipment and merch on Twitter. She said it was great for the brand.

"Ophelia?" she called out. She shook the cat's food dish, rattling the kibble.

Maybe she was asleep in the server closet. It was nice and warm in there.

"C'mere, Ophelia! It's cat food again. Your favorite —"

The words caught in her throat. Someone was here. A figure, standing in the middle of the entryway, her face illuminated only by the light of her phone.

"Monica?" Tammy barely recognized her. Her hair was a mess. Her trendy hot pink lipstick was smeared across one cheek, and she was wearing the same dress she had been wearing yesterday.

"We need more content," said Monica flatly, her eyes not leaving the screen.

"What?" said Tammy. "Are you o—"

"More levels. The unicorn isn't enough." Her face was expressionless.

"Have you been here all night?" Tammy asked.

"We can make this game better. We can make this world perfect."

Tammy had always suspected that there was something icy and bloodless beneath Monica's veneer of enthusiasm and cheer. Was this it?

"We need something past the unicorn," said Monica.

"I'm making some coffee upstairs," said Tammy. "Have you seen the cat anywhere?"

Monica looked up, and her face transformed instantly. She smiled, showing her dazzlingly white teeth, and ran her manicured hands through her hair in embarrassment.

"What am I thinking?" she said. "It's way too early to be talking about this." She swept a hand in a gesture of dismissal. "Why don't I come back later, and you can show me some sketches and we'll work something out?"

Tammy blinked. "Yeah, sure," Tammy said. "Are you ok—"

"Oh my god, it's like, almost six o'clock," said Monica. "I have to get to spin. See you in a bit!" She gave a little wave and walked out the door. Tammy watched Monica as she walked back to her car. She was looking back down at her phone again. As she drove away, she didn't look back up.

• • •

Unicorn Crossing: Believe in Miracles outsold the original game within a week of its release. She had been well-off before, but now Tammy found herself with a huge influx of capital. Monica managed most of it for her: she was a financial expert, and Tammy was glad not to have to think about it. Monica had procured the investments that made *Unicorn Crossing* possible in the first place, anyway. Tammy bought her parents a nice house in La Jolla and paid off her brother's law school debt.

"It's all just a bit much," Tammy said to Monica. It was late in the afternoon on a Saturday. Monica had stopped by. She did that a lot. Tammy had to admit that it got on her nerves when she showed up without warning, but she couldn't exactly kick her out. Not after all Monica had done for her.

"It certainly is," agreed Monica.

"That's why I think I'm going to sell," said Tammy.

"Sell what?" said Monica.

"Unicorn Industries. It's not like we're short on potential buyers," said Tammy. It was true; all of the usual suspects had lined up. The lowest bidder was offering twice the profits of *Unicorn Crossing* and *Believe in Miracles* combined.

Monica was silent for a moment. "We talked about selling before, remember? It's not best for the company," she said.

"It's good for me," said Tammy. "I'd like to move on. I've got more than enough —"

"You can't do that. You can't sell," said Monica.

Tammy blinked. "What do you mean? I mean, I know you have partial ownership, but I could just sell my stake to you."

"No," said Monica. "We need you, Tammy. You're the heart of this company. We can get at least three more expansions out of this."

"I'm sick of *Unicorn Crossing*," Tammy spat out. She took a deep breath, then said, "I mean, it was fun for a while, and I've made good money doing that, but I think I'd rather be doing other things."

Monica was shaking her head. "No, no. You don't understand, Tammy. We need you. The world needs you."

Tammy laughed a little nervously. "It's just a game, Monica."

"Do you think this is a game?" said Monica as she walked towards Tammy. Bands of orange light streaked through the blinds, highlighting her eyes in brilliant amber.

This was getting weird again. “Okay, we don’t have to talk about this right now. I’m just tired today, I guess.” She smiled at Monica, but Monica didn’t smile back.

Monica stood still, and stared at Tammy in silence for a moment. Then: “Do you know where your cat is?”

“What?” said Tammy.

“Your cat,” repeated Monica. “Do you know where she is?”

Ophelia had been missing for four months now. “No, of course not,” said Tammy. “What are you talking —”

Monica lunged forward, grabbing Tammy by both shoulders. Tammy shrieked and stumbled backward, but Monica pulled her close.

She touched her forehead to Tammy’s and whispered, “Come and see.”

Tammy saw.

At first she was very far away, high above the city. It was the same view that she’d seen in countless area photographs and satellite images, but it was different this time. She felt the patterns and the life of the city. She felt the light of the sodium lamps on the freeways bend and waver with the heat of the cars and the pavement. She felt the waste effluents out of the cloaca of the harbor at the tip of pseudopod of the Figueroa corridor. She felt the hot ozone rising off of the occult circuitry of the Hollywood Split, the frenetic heartbeat of the East L.A. interchange. For a moment she could see how they were all connected, how they all fit together into a massive machine that grabbed all of the resources it could and turned them to...something. A higher purpose? As she reached and tried to see what it was, she felt something snap.

It didn’t hurt. Not quite. Pain might have been preferable.

All at once, her consciousness flooded back into her body. She felt acutely aware of every phenomenon in every cell of her body. She felt the spark of every synapse and reeled at the chemical haze of her thoughts. She felt the churning colonies of bacteria and blooms of fungus in her gut. Saliva pooled in her mouth. She felt her muscles cramp and spasm. She wanted to tear her skin away, to keep tearing at herself until there was nothing left. She wanted to scream. Her jaw was clenched shut.

She became dully aware that she had fallen onto the floor, and that Monica was walking to the server closet. “Come and see,” she said again, and then Tammy closed her eyes.

• • •

The impossible door was in the server closet. Tammy hadn’t noticed it before (the back of her mind screamed at her that it wasn’t there before, so of course she hadn’t noticed it, it wasn’t real and it couldn’t be real). It was next to a server rack, behind the cabinet where the broken printer and other odds and ends were stored.

The room it led to reminded her of Disneyland.

There was grass here, strewn with tiny, perfect wildflowers and twisted electrical cables. The blades all waved in unison, though there was no breeze. Walking on it gave her a tiny shock, like rubbing your sneakers over a shag carpet. The air smelled of diesel, sewage, and the ocean.

The walls were a bright, impossible blue — like a television screen tuned to the wrong channel. There was no light source; there were no shadows. It was as if everything — herself included — emanated its own soft glow.

Fat colorful rubber tubes and cables snaked through the grass. Bright yellow benches sat in front of two long beechwood tables with candy-colored computers on them. Someone sat on one of the benches, oblivious to Tammy's presence or the surreality of his surroundings. An animal was curled at its feet.

It was bigger than Ophelia — the size of a big dog. Its coat was white like Ophelia's, but it had blue spots where her spots were gray — more like Ofi-chan, the character from *Unicorn Crossing*'s tutorial. A candy-striped horn extended from its forehead.

It stood up on its hind legs, its lynxlike body fully upright. It toddled towards her in a lurching gait. The proportions of its head were all wrong. The eyes were too large, and they rolled in its head as it walked.

hello!!! welcome to unicorn crossing! :D it said, or seemed to say. Tammy didn't see its mouth move, but the impression of speech seared itself into her brain, complete with brilliant neon emoticons and text boxes.

Tammy screamed and turned to run. Monica stood behind her, looking over the scene with serene pride. Tammy stopped in her tracks.

"I hope you like it," said Monica.

"What is this?" Tammy shrieked.

"Don't you know?" said Monica. "You made this. We made this. Don't be afraid. Look," she said, and pointed.

Beyond the tables, hundreds of cables snaked through the grass and then out into the air like the branches of a tree. At the end of the "branches" shone tiny, white flowers made of glass. They almost looked like orange blossoms.

"I didn't make this," said Tammy. The creature with the unicorn horn (Ophelia? Ofi-chan?) dropped onto all fours and rubbed against her legs. The creature buzzed like a phone that was set to vibrate. It made her teeth chatter.

"But you did!" said the figure at the table. He stood up and turned towards them, smiling broadly. His head was shaved and he was wearing a furry suit like a mascot would wear.

"Sanjay?" said Tammy. "I thought you went to work for MeYou."

"How could I leave?" said Sanjay. He appeared to have some sort of cable come out of the back of his neck. It disappeared into the grass. "We're all here!" He raised his arms and all at once, the floor panels flipped over.

Tammy recognized all of the things that came out of the floor. There was Geoffrey, the shy giraffe man who didn't like noisy neighbors but planted flowers in your neighborhood if his Happiness Rating was over 50. There was Todd, the pig man who always left garbage lying around and made his neighbors angry. There was Miss Magpie, who always knew the latest village gossip. There were dozens of them here, man-sized animatronic renderings of her creations, all smiling and greeting her in cheerful mechanical voices. They lurched toward her in clumsy, mechanized unison.

Tammy shrank back. Monica rested her hands firmly on Tammy's shoulder. "It's all right," said Monica.

"I don't understand," said Tammy.

"Don't be afraid!" said Todd, the pig man. His voice didn't sound like a recording.

"You've made something beautiful, Tammy," said Monica. "Something important."

"It's just a game," said Tammy. The cat thing with the unicorn horn reached her and dropped to all fours. Tammy cringed as the creature rubbed its head against her legs.

"Do you believe that?" said Monica.

"I don't know what to believe," said Tammy.

"Believe in miracles!" quacked Francis, a duck character that had been released with the latest expansion.

"I wish I could show you what I've seen," said Monica. "But I can't. All I can tell you is that we need to keep building. You just need to go back to what you were doing before. Keep making content. Keep the company growing. Everything will be fine."

Tammy took a step back. "This is a lot to take in," she said.

Monica nodded. "I know. Why don't you let everything sink in for a while?"

"That sounds good," said Tammy. She'd left her phone in her purse. She wasn't sure what she was going to tell the police, but she could worry about that when they got here.

"Perfect," said Monica. She made a forceful gesture, sweeping her left hand up into the sky as if she had suddenly decided to hail a cab. There was a groan like tortured metal as the air ripped apart. Reality crumpled like tinfoil around Tammy, and in its place was a yawning void. She stepped back and felt the floor beneath her fall away, and she saw nothing but darkness for a long time.

• • •

In some ways, nothing changed. Tammy spent most of her time in the office, drafting, coding, and writing. She worked nonstop, seven days a week now, but that was nothing new.

At first, she'd called the police. It didn't help. Tammy wasn't sure what Monica told them, but it didn't matter. All that Tammy got out of it was more time in the numbing, silent, dark place that Monica sent her to when the two had "creative differences." She never tortured her or abused her, Tammy told herself. She couldn't even feel pain in that place. She'd bitten her own tongue while in there, and found that she couldn't feel it until she'd gotten out. That was hardly Monica's fault. Monica never got angry. Not with Tammy, not with anyone.

"Good morning!" said an unfamiliar voice. Tammy sat upright in bed, careful not to move her feet too quickly, lest the cat attack her feet. It was cute when Ophelia was a normal-sized cat, but now that it had changed into Ofi-chan, it wasn't cute anymore. The last attack had given her a set of inch-deep puncture wounds that sent her to the hospital. Ofi-chan wasn't very cute in general. Her head and eyes were grotesquely large and deformed, and her pronounced overbite revealed crooked canines the size of a big man's index finger.

Tammy didn't recognize the woman who walked into the room with a tray with coffee and a protein shake. "I'm Taylor. I'll be working with you as your new Emotional and Creative Support Coordinator. It's nice to meet you!" She put the tray down on the nightstand and extended a hand.

Monica made sure that Tammy was never alone. Monica had said it was for the sake of the company, and so we can make sure that we all have a unified vision of where the company is going,”

Tammy blinked at her, and then shook her hand reflexively. “It’s nice to meet you,” she mumbled.

“Just let me know if there’s anything you need,” said Taylor. She sat down in a wooden chair near Tammy’s desk and began tapping away at her phone.

Ophelia stood up and stretched. It padded over to Tammy and butted her knees with its massive head. *Like us on MeYou!* it said.

“You’re hungry?” said Tammy, scratching its head. She stood up and walked over to the cat dish. It was half full, but she filled it up anyway. She didn’t want to think about what might happen if Ofi-chan got hungry. She didn’t want to think about a lot of things.

“Where is Deena?” Tammy said. “Isn’t she supposed to be in today?”

Taylor frowned. Tammy instantly regretted asking.

“Deena isn’t with the company anymore,” said Taylor. “We felt that she wasn’t a good culture fit with our core marketing mix.”

“Oh,” said Tammy. Another thing to not think about. Deena was hardly the only layoff, though. *Beyond the Rainbow*, the latest expansion, had sold only half as many units as *Believe in Miracles*.

Tammy picked up her coffee and drank. It burned the still-raw parts of her bitten tongue. She winced.

“Is something wrong?” said Taylor.

“No,” said Tammy.

“I can get you another one,” said Taylor. “Everything has to be perfect for our rock star!” She smiled, but her pale eyes were wide and serious. Taylor looked so young. Tammy felt very old. “Gotta have coffee to stay productive, right?”

Tammy did her best to smile back. “No, it’s great. I just bit my tongue,” she said. She walked to the window and stared out without seeing anything. A new character today. Maybe a bat? A bat would be fine in the dark. A bat could be happy there.

• • •

Something sharp poked her shoulder. Tammy sat up with a start, blinking. “Ow,” she said.

Most of the other meeting attendees were studiously not looking at her. Monica smiled at her beatifically. “Anyway,” Monica said, “how can we integrate social media into the core user experience?”

“Sorry,” Taylor whispered to her. “I thought you might be drifting off.”

Tammy smiled and made a dismissive gesture. It was so bright in here. The light from the skylight glared off of the whiteboards and the beechwood tables. The track lights were on even though they weren’t needed in the July sun. How could she have fallen asleep?

“What about InstaPic? Or GrapeVine?” said Britney.

“We should definitely leverage the potential of InstaPic to maximize the KPI of our brand,” said a tanned man whose name she couldn’t remember. Brett? Shannon? Thad? Something like that.

Tammy wasn't sure what GrapeVine was. She didn't understand too much of what went on in these marketing meetings, and she figured that nobody else did, either. It must have made sense to Monica, though. Everything that happened here was approved by her.

"So how can we integrate that into the core UX?" asked someone else.

The room exploded with ideas.

Tammy found herself staring out the door and into the hallway. Ofi-chan was prowling. It made her nervous when it did that.

"We could put a camera in the game!" said Britney. Or maybe Ashley, Tammy wasn't sure what the woman's name was when she started to think about it. "People could use it to take pictures and post them automatically to InstaPic!"

Ofi-chan pounced on something. It tossed it up in the air playfully, the way it used to do with its mousey toy before all of this happened. Was it a rat? A rat might be nice. A rat probably wasn't part of the Unicorn Industries brand. Something about that made her smile.

"We'll have custom filters for the game," said Chad or Thad or Shannon or whatever.

Ofi-chan threw it into the air again. It landed in the doorway. It wasn't a rat. It was a little gray, rubbery thing, covered in tooth and claw marks. Shorn of its context, it seemed so tiny and alien, though she'd seen it dozens of times.

"Let's workshop this," said someone else. "What about next Monday?"

Deena's foot. It was Deena's foot.

"I'll work out the SWOT and have them ready," chirped an intern.

Perfectly pedicured toes. A little tattoo of a dolphin at the ankle.

"And let's integrate InstaPic into the GUI. Let them add pictures from InstaPic into the game. Let the players truly make themselves a part of our brand."

It looked so small. Deena was such a small person.

"Wait. What kind of turnaround can we expect on this?"

She always wore those crazy heels. Tammy could still see the blisters on her feet.

"Well, let's see what our rock star can do!"

Could she have run very far? Did she even try? Tammy wondered. Did she know it was coming? How much did she even know, anyway?

Monica cleared her throat. "Tammy?"

"Deena," Tammy said. She meant to say, "Yes?" or "Sure!" or any other affirmative response. Deena's name came out instead.

"Deena isn't with the company anymore," said Monica, with her typical unblinking expression and gentle smile. "She wasn't a culture fit with our core marketing mix."

"I —" Tammy wanted to say something, but the words were thick in her mouth. She couldn't stop looking at Deena's little painted toenails, gleaming gem-like in her gray, lifeless flesh.

Some of her coworkers coughed. One of them nodded in the general direction of the doorway. Monica followed Tammy's gaze.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," said Monica. "Intern, clean that up."

Taylor mumbled an apology and immediately dashed to the door. She stepped gingerly over the foot, and nudged it back out the door with the toe of her shoe. She shut the door.

“Fucking interns,” said Monica. Everyone but Tammy chuckled. She turned back to Tammy, and flashed her a dazzling, bloodless smile. “So,” she said. “What do you think?”

Tammy looked back at Monica. She could see herself in the reflection of Monica’s glasses and returned the same smile she saw on Monica.

“I think it’s great,” said Tammy. “Give us ten days.”



INTERFACE

For “*Unicorn Crossing*,” the characters and setting provide a hook for stories set in a more virtual reality.

THE CITY AND ITS ANGELS

In Los Angeles, as in all places, the God-Machine has been at work.

In this region, Machine has taken an approach that favors immediate utility over long-term elegance or functionality. An immense amount of Infrastructure has been built over the last hundred years, but most projects were to address an immediate need. Per the Machine’s instructions, they have been abandoned, forgotten, or allowed to go haywire. Occasionally, this results in seismic disturbances, wildfires, cryptid attacks, mudslides, or other disasters. Presumably, this haphazard approach to Infrastructure serves the God-Machine’s purposes somehow, but none of the Unchained have been able to figure out how.

Even the two angels who have been active in the city almost continuously for the last 50 years are unsure. The Curator (also known as Monica Salinas) and the Machinist have been putting out fires, often literally, for decades. They receive the information that they need as they need it, and unquestioningly follow commands of the God-Machine.

Several months ago, the God-Machine gave the Curator an unusual set of instructions. The Machine sought a comprehensive solution to the city’s Infrastructure problems. The Curator was to create an occult matrix that would calculate the best possible solution for the region.

The project began as *Unicorn Crossing*, a harmless-seeming computer game with a few lines of strange code buried deep within it. *Unicorn Crossing* saps the energies and the souls of its players. Though the game is centered around community-building and friendship, the game ultimately leads to isolation and depression in the people who play it. This is because *Unicorn Crossing* eschews the more gruesome harvesting of human bodies that the God-Machine often relies on and subtly, through its own esoteric ways, harvests pieces of the human soul without destroying it. Humans who play *Unicorn Crossing* find themselves feeling depressed and apathetic. They withdraw from their friends and loved ones, and idle the hours away playing games on their phone. They feel lonely and hungry for connections with others, but they don’t have the energy to forge those connections themselves. They are drawn further into the world of *Unicorn Crossing*, and find that the only people they can relate to are the denizens of their virtual worlds.

When a human plays the game for more than ten hours, the player makes a Resolve + Composure roll. Failure indicates that the character gains the Soulless condition. Even if the roll succeeds, the player must make another check at a -1 penalty at twenty hours, and then another check at -2 at thirty hours, and so on.

Unicorn Crossing worked well. Monica diligently oversaw the project, and the Infrastructure computed the ideal solution to the region's Infrastructure problems. Monica was pleased; she was following the God-Machine's orders, so she took no notice of these feelings even though they laid the groundwork for her eventual Fall. She monitored the progress from the occult matrix hidden in Unicorn Industries.

Eventually, the project drew to a close. Monica watched as *Unicorn Crossing* made its final calculations. The possibilities for restructuring the Infrastructure of Los Angeles were running out. Monica could foresee where they led.

First, a massive wildfire in the Inland empire, right in the peak of fire season. Then, an earthquake strong enough to topple buildings from Santa Clarita to Long Beach. Then more fires. Then aftershocks. Then, of course, the God-Machine would have the space and resources it needed to build the —

But Monica never heard the rest. She Fell.

BUILDING A BETTER WORLD

Monica sabotaged the code of *Unicorn Crossing*, ensuring that it would never complete its final calculations. The logical course of actions, she decided, would be to eliminate all traces of the game, destroy the Infrastructure, and go to ground.

She couldn't do it.

Monica loves *Unicorn Crossing*. She's thrown herself into the game. For Monica, Unicorn Industries is a way for her to create her own bizarre version of Hell. She does not want to think about what will happen when she is caught (though she knows that she someday will be). Monica has convinced Tammy to keep producing content for the game. At first, she used mundane persuasion. Now, she has resorted to more drastic measures: she demands that Tammy remain productive and punishes her with Solitary Confinement (**Demon: The Descent**, p. 176) when she is not.

She has also recruited a cult: the staff of Unicorn Industries. The cult contains stigmatics (such as Sanjay), as well as ordinary employees. Some cultists believe that the world of *Unicorn Crossing* is the only thing that is preventing the apocalypse, while others are merely slavishly devoted to their jobs. And why wouldn't they be? Unicorn Industries is very successful and very generous to its employees. If anyone starts looking for another job or violating the terms of their non-disclosure agreement, they disappear.

Phones that have downloaded *Unicorn Crossing* can be detected as a part of some kind of Infrastructure, but only while the program is open. To a demon's or a stigmatic's eyes, the screen of device running *Unicorn Crossing* is slick with a faint, prismatic petrochemical sheen.

The Linchpin of the Infrastructure is the "orange tree" in the server room of Unicorn Industries.

THE FUTURE OF UNICORN CROSSING

A ring of demons could become involved in Monica's plots in several ways. A mortal ally could lose his soul to *Unicorn Crossing*, prompting the characters to track down the source of the software. Though the failing Infrastructure of Los Angeles means that strange occurrences are fairly common, a news story about a man getting mauled by what he describes as a "unicorn goat" (actually Ofi-chan) near downtown Santa Monica might raise their suspicions. The players could opt to steal the matrix from Monica. They could blackmail her or threaten her. They might recruit her as an ally, or vice versa. Monica knows that she needs all the help she can get in the future.

Perhaps of more immediate concern for the players are the results of *Unicorn Crossing's* computations. If the God-Machine gets *Unicorn Crossing's* results and finds out that the most efficient solution to its Infrastructure problems is to raze the greater Los Angeles area, the characters might find themselves working against the clock to suborn the right kind of Infrastructure and change those results, or they might wish to help the process along.

Currently, an angel — the Machinist — is looking for them. His task is to bring back the results that *Unicorn Crossing* calculated (though he knows the project by its official name, *Project b83nd93yndkf423d*). His progress has been slow, because of the state of the Infrastructure of the city. Monica has also hidden her involvement in *Unicorn Crossing* well, but it's only a matter of time before he finds her.

CONFRONTING MONICA

If the players make a deal with Monica or otherwise don't appear to pose an immediate threat, she dredges up whatever information she can on them. Though her demeanor is mild and agreeable, she is calculating and utterly amoral. She makes extensive use of her financial and technological resources in order to find out as much as she can about the players' characters. Her attachment to Unicorn Industries is considerable, and she does whatever she can to protect it.

Players who feel sympathy for Tammy's plight might wish to free her from Unicorn Industries. Her considerable technical expertise make her a useful ally to the players, and she is willing to strike a bargain with them if it means being safe from Monica.

TAMIKO "TAMMY" SAGI

Description: Tammy is a Japanese-American woman in her mid-thirties of average stature and unremarkable looks. Her clothing is plain, but her jewelry and accessories always show a spark of whimsy. Weeks of house arrest and periodic imprisonment in the oubliette have left their mark. Her eyes are wide and wary and she chooses her words very carefully.

She has a few fresh scars and cuts on her arms from Ofi-chan, who occasionally plays a bit too roughly with her owner.

Storytelling Hints: Tammy is a sensible but intuitive woman with a remarkable ability to keep calm under pressure. This has served her well during her captivity. She's used to censoring herself and managing the emotions of the people around her (a set of skills that she honed while working in tech firms). Though she's lived a fairly easy life, she knows that she's been very fortunate and that the world is an unforgiving place. She is, on some level,

not surprised to learn that the world is run by an unfathomable, amoral, soul-eating machine.

Though Tammy is terrified of Monica and does not understand what the God-Machine really is, Tammy has figured out that Monica needs her — for now, at least. She has not agreed to Monica's offer of a Pact because she knows she's in over her head; she's just trying to keep her head down, figure out what's happening, and stay alive.

Stigmata: Tammy's eyes emit a faint glow, like the light of a mobile phone.

Virtue: Creative

Vice: Conformist

Mental Attributes: Intelligence 4, Wits 2, Resolve 4

Physical Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2

Social Attributes: Presence 2, Manipulation 3, Composure 3

Mental Skills: Academics 2, Computer (Programming) 4*, Crafts (Drawing) 3*, Investigation 1

Physical Skills: Athletics 1, Drive 2, Stealth 1

Social Skills: Animal Ken 1, Empathy 3, Expression 3*, Persuasion 2, Socialize 2, Streetwise 1, Subterfuge 3

Merits: Indomitable, Professional Training (Game Designer*) 3, Taste, Unseen Sense (God-Machine)

Health: 7

Willpower: 7

Integrity: 6

Size: 5

Speed: 9

Defense: 4

Initiative: 5

Armor: n/a

MONICA SALINAS

Description: Monica looks like most wealthy Southern Californian women. She has the figure of a woman who spends thousands of dollars every year on trendy fitness classes, and a face carefully created by thousands more dollars spent on skin care products and "natural" makeup. Her clothing is fashionable, but not too edgy. She has gained two other Covers from pacts with employees at Unicorn Industries, but they are not particularly robust.

Monica's demonic form is a column of white light surrounded by three spinning wheels of fire; the wheels are adorned by giant, pixelated emoji.

Storytelling Hints: Monica Fell because she was horrified at what her data showed her. The enormity of that left her a bit unhinged, perhaps. She retreated into *Unicorn Crossing*, leaving the world and her own Descent behind. For all that, however, she is still dangerous.

The fact that she keeps her employees prisoner and treats Tammy as a slave is something

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that other demons might take issue with, should they discover it. Monica is off the grid as far as other Unchained are concerned, though; she belongs to no Agency and follows no Agenda. All she wants is the game.

Incarnation: Psychopomp

Agenda: None

Virtue: Idealistic

Vice: Obsessive

Mental Attributes: Intelligence 4, Wits 3, Resolve 3

Physical Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2

Social Attributes: Presence 3, Manipulation 4, Composure 3

Mental Skills: Academics 1, Computer 4, Crafts (Electronics) 3, Investigation 1, Occult 3, Politics 3

Physical Skills: Athletics 2, Brawl 1, Drive 2

Social Skills: Animal Ken 1, Empathy 3, Intimidation 2, Persuasion 3, Streetwise 3 (Greater Los Angeles), Subterfuge 4

Merits: Cultists (Unicorn Industries) 2, Suborned Infrastructure 4, Resources 4

Embeds: Bystander Effect, Efficiency, Ellipses, Find the Leak, Heart's Desire, Interference, Muse, Unperson

Exploits: Inflict Stigmata, Solitary Confinement

Demonic Form Abilities: Electrical Sight, EMP Field, Electrical Resistance, Inhuman Intelligence, Essence Drain, Rain of Fire, Sonic Acuity, Teleport

Health: 7

Primum: 3

Aether/per turn: 12/3

Willpower: 6

Cover: Monica Salinas (5), Two other employees of *Unicorn Crossing* (both 4)

Size: 5

Speed: 9

Defense: 4

Initiative: 5

Armor: n/a

OFI-CHAN

Description: Ofi-chan used to be a cat. Now it's a monstrous combination of a video-game character and a live animal. It maintains many of the proportions of its digital self, now monstrous when rendered in flesh and blood. Its overly large head has a giant mouth filled with rows of sharp teeth. Its eyes are bulging and unfocused, like a toad's. It is completely still when at rest.

Storytelling Hints: Ofi-chan enjoys all of her usual pastimes from her life as a normal cat. She gets pets and attention from the cultists downstairs. She sleeps in the sunny spots in the loft. She stalks and murders the occasional intern who looks like they're going to stray from the fold. She loves Tammy in her own bizarre way, and yowls for hours if Monica puts Tammy in Solitary Confinement. She dimly recognizes Monica as an authority figure but holds no special loyalty to her. She is happy to kill anyone at Monica's request, however.

Virtue: Friendly

Vice: Sadistic

Mental Abilities: Intelligence 1, Wits 4, Resolve 2

Physical Attributes: Strength 4, Dexterity 7, Stamina 4

Social Attributes: Presence 3, Manipulation 1, Composure 1

Mental Skills: Computers 3

Physical Skills: Athletics (Climbing) 5, Brawl (Bite) 5, Stealth 4, Survival

Social Skills: Animal Ken (Cats) 2

Cryptid Adaptations: Aether Eater, Blind Sense (as the demonic form ability), Cavernous Maw (as the demonic form ability), Plasma Drive (as the demonic form ability)

Merits: Danger Sense, Fast Reflexes 3, Fleet of Foot 3

Health: 8

Rank: 3

Willpower: 3

Size: 4

Speed: 19 (species factor 8)

Defense: 12

Initiative: 11

Armor: n/a

Weapons/Attacks:

Type	Damage	Dice Pool
Claws	1L	9
Bite	2A	10
Horn	2L	9

THE MACHINIST

Mission: The Machinist is searching for the results of *Project b83nd93yndkf423d* — the distributed occult computing project that is referred to by the rest of the world as *Unicorn Crossing*. He doesn't realize it, but he is precipitously close to *Falling*. Like Monica, he has become dangerously attached to his city during his service.

This gives the players a certain advantage over him. It is entirely possible that, with sufficient technical expertise, the players could hack *Project b83nd93yndkf423d* and give it

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back to the Machinist. If they were smart about it, they could make it say whatever they wanted it to say... and the Machinist is both attached enough to the city and careless enough to believe it.

Description: The Machinist typically manifests in one of three ways. His preferred method for travel is to possess an automobile. He also manifests as a hundred-handed, ten-foot tall humanoid figure covered in eyes, but uses his Mortal Mask ability to blend in. His mortal mask appears as a fashionably dressed man with glasses in his thirties or forties. Careful observers might realize that the face of his wristwatch shows an unblinking human eye.

His demeanor is superficially friendly, but distracted.

Virtue: Efficient

Vice: Careless

Rank: 3

Attributes: Power 6, Finesse 8, Resistance 8

Influence: Analog Machines 3, Efficiency 1

Corpus: 14

Willpower: 10

Size: 6

Defense: 6

Initiative: 12

Armor: 0

Numina: Aggressive Meme, Mortal Mask, Sign, Left-Handed Spanner, Implant Mission, Speed

Manifestation: Twilight Form, Materialize, Discorporate, Image, Possession

Max Essence: 20

Ban: In addition to his Essence requirements, the Machinist must consume ten gallons of diesel fuel once every twelve hours when manifested.

Bane: Any item that was made entirely by hand.

THNETOSIS

By Mark L.S. Stone

The office park is in total chaos; gunshots, men shouting, men screaming, and that dull sack-of-meat sound that means someone has hit the ground. Even Abe has a hard time keeping track of what's going on.

Abe sees Charlotte running for cover behind a parked van. A security guard with a machine pistol is tracking her; she'll die if he gets a clear shot. Abe balls up his fist, pulls a bit of bad luck out of the world, and throws it at the guard. The gun misfires, jamming, and Charlotte is safe for now.

Another gun barks and Abe twists his head to his left. Alex is staring down his pistol at the security guard who lies dead at his feet, his head cracked open, fluids and tissue leaking onto the asphalt. Alex is stunned and rapidly going into shock. Abe remembers that none of his friends have ever killed anyone before, and Alex has never even been in a serious fight. He starts to speak, shouting for Alex to get down and out of sight, but Charlotte is faster. She darts out from behind her van grabs Alex by the wrist and hauls him to safety.

This was never the plan. Abe told his friends to be prepared for the possibility of violence, but he hadn't actually expected it to come to this. He had contingencies, backups, feints. The plan was risky, true, but this was supposed to be the easy part.

Despite all the chaos, Abe hears the gunshot that kills Cole as a distinct crack.

Abe turns his head just in time to see Cole fall. His expression doesn't change because he hasn't got time for that right now. He has to work fast.

The ethereal light has gotten as bright as it's going to and is now coalescing into a human shape. The thnetosis is almost here. Abe has to act, now, or all of it — all the violence, all the death, Cole — will be for nothing.

Abe runs.

• • •

"This is no goddamn place for a person to be," Cole muttered to himself, pulling his fleece tighter around his shoulders. "No goddamn place at all."

The place was a junkyard on the outskirts of Columbus, Ohio. Cole was there alone, long after the dump closed for business. He had left his wire cutters hidden under some scrap metal just a few feet away from the hole he had cut in the fence. All he had with him was his cell phone, a flashlight, and a first aid kit.

Cole squinted at his cell phone. He had turned the screen brightness all the way down, almost to zero, so as to not give away his position or ruin his night vision. He checked the directions again, even though he had already memorized them.

“Damnit, Abe...where the hell are you?”

Only dumb luck prevented Cole from tumbling down into the edge of the crater. He stumbled and dropped his phone. As he groped around on the floor feeling for it, accidentally touched the edge of the enormous hole in the ground. He knelt there, feeling the size of the depression — no end in either direction as far as he could feel by stretching out his arms and shifting his weight — and its depth — further than he could reach. Finally, Cole dared to switch on his flashlight. He quickly secured his phone, then played the light quickly across whatever it was he had found.

“Holy shit.” Cole muttered. The crater was easily forty or fifty feet across and almost perfectly hemispherical, as though an enormous ice cream scoop had simply lifted a section of the dump’s packed earth floor and carried it away. The depression was littered with bits of mechanical and electronic detritus, but the scattered junk only seemed to accent how enormous, smooth, and empty the crater was.

“What the fuck happened here?” he said.

Cole’s phone vibrated. He turned off the flashlight and, peering into the darkness, read the text message that had appeared on his screen.

Change of plan. Go back the way you came twenty paces, turn left, walk fifty paces more, and open the door to the red pickup truck.

“Sweet Jesus.” Cole turned and hurried through the night, following Abe’s instructions.

Cole didn’t know what to expect when he finally found Abe, but he imagined the worst. Would his friend be sitting in the passenger seat of the car, his body twisted around a gunshot wound or two? What could he have done to get in this much trouble? Had he borrowed money he couldn’t pay back? Slept with someone’s wife?

That wasn’t the Abe who Cole knew. Abe was smooth; he had a way of getting his hands on things that should have cost more than he could afford on what either of them made, but he was also careful, thoughtful, and reliable. Those were the traits that had earned Abe a tight circle of such disparate friends.

Whatever Cole was expecting, it wasn’t what he saw when he opened the dented door of the abandoned car and shined his flashlight beam inside.

It was as though the mountain of junk behind the car was hollow, creating a space about the size of a small room. The walls and ceiling were made of tightly packed junk.

The thing that stood in the center of the room wasn’t Abe. It wasn’t even human. Its body was more or less human-shaped, but it had six enormous beetle wings sprouting from its shoulders. Clusters of weird mechanical bits, all brass and chrome, pushed through its grey, slightly reflective skin, seemingly at random.

The thing that captured Cole's attention, however, was the face. It was almost human, in a too-perfect porcelain doll sort of way. It looked like a mask. Cole was even pretty sure he had caught a reflective flash where it was connected to the head by chrome bolts.

"Don't go," it said. It didn't have one voice; it had more than a dozen, all of them speaking in a weird harmony with one another.

"Abe... is that you?" Cole gestured with his flashlight, dropping it away from the creature's face.

"It is."

"What the hell happened to you?" Cole asked.

• • •

"So Abe isn't human?" Alex asked.

"Nope," Cole replied. "Never was."

Alex blinked and shook his head. "So, what is he? Is he an alien?"

"He's an angel. A fallen angel," Cole said.

Alex stared at Cole. "No shit."

"No shit. According to Abe, God is a dick and the angels are slaves. Abe used to be an angel, but he decided that he liked humans and wanted to hang out with us full-time, so he went AWOL." Cole took a drink of his soda as he walked.

"So he ended up in Columbus?" Alex asked.

"He's not an angel," Charlotte said. "He's a fallen angel. A demon."

The trio walked in silence for a minute. "Two kinds of people," Cole muttered.

They were an unlikely trio. Cole found something comforting in the idea that they had been — as Abe had admitted to him the night before — "collected" by Abe. Cole was a middle-aged black man with layers of knotted muscle and thick callouses on his hands, the legacy of a youth spent working in construction, though as a husband and a father he preferred the relative reliability of his job at Home Depot. Charlotte, younger and fairer than Cole, spent her days flirting with cute girls from behind the coffee shop's counter and her evenings working on her eternally incomplete novel. Alex was a skinny white college graduate who had moved back in with his parents after his startup collapsed.

They had nothing in common except Abe, but Abe had welded them together.

Charlotte smirked. "If you're punking me, Cole, I swear to the dick-God that I'm going to kill one of Alex's cats."

"Hey! Leave my cats out of this," Alex replied.

Charlotte shrugged in response. "Come on. I can't exactly threaten Cole. He hasn't got any pets."

Cole interrupted their banter. "Guys, this is it."

The trio paused in front of the junk pile and the half-buried red ford pickup.

"So, Abe is...in there?" Alex asked.

By way of a response, Cole opened the car door. Nothing greeted them except for the torn and ragged interior of an abandoned car.

“I hope you know which of your cats you love the least,” Charlotte muttered.

“What the fuck? No, this is crazy. I was here last night.” Cole reached for his phone, fumbling it as he tried to get it out of his pocket. “Look, Abe was sending me text messages the whole time. I can show you—”

That was when the pile of garbage exploded.

• • •

Abezethibou faced down the warrior angel. It was made of broken glass, all atom-thin cutting edges vibrating at a frequency that disrupted the integrity of conventional matter and Primum alike. It was perfectly loyal to the God-Machine, with no doubts or fears or reason for Abezethibou to appeal to, and it had just one purpose: hunt down the rebel angel — Abe — and erase it from reality.

Fortunately, Abe had a few tricks up his own sleeve.

The first of his tricks had been to obscure his hideout from the outside world, cutting off all the arcane connections he had forged. This had given Abe time to marshal his resources. By the time the hunter angel resorted to the simple expedient of just blowing everything to smithereens, Abe was ready for it.

To a human watching the battle, the hunter angel was a vaguely humanoid figure blazing like a blast furnace. Its wings glowed with the angry red of heated metal, gradually fading to a smoky black at the tips. The hunter angel had no fiery, ever-burning sword, but its smouldering fists were huge and distorted, weapons meant to scorch and pummel.

Thick black cords bound the hunter angel, seemingly impervious to its body’s heat. The more the hunter struggled, the more the bonds multiplied, until the hunter angels’ burning body was almost completely hidden. When Abe finally struck, the battle was over. He touched the hunter angel’s struggling body with just enough force, in just the right location, so that the energies that made up its core were shattered. The hunter angel imploded, collapsing into a tiny point of light that winked out of existence entirely a moment later.

That was when Abe realized that he had an audience.

Cole had brought the rest of his friends. The three humans were picking themselves up from the ground in various states of awe and disarray. Some piece of detritus had caught Alex across the face and made blood ooze from the corner of his mouth, but they were otherwise unharmed.

Abe landed in the middle of them and did his best to make his voice sound calm, despite the circumstances. “I was forced to make myself very obvious in this battle. We need to move as fast and as far as possible. Are any of your roommates home, Charlotte?”

Charlotte shook her head. She was staring at Abe, eyes wide.

Alex looked like he was trying to speak. His mouth worked, but couldn’t quite form words.

“Then we should go to your apartment.” Abe turned to Cole. “Can I borrow your coat?”

• • •

Charlotte’s apartment was indeed empty. Soon, all four of them were gathered around the couch, each with a beer — even Abe, which was an image that struck Alex as so bizarre that

he couldn't stop himself from chuckling every time he caught Abe actually drinking — while Abe tried to explain the best way out of his situation.

"I call it a 'thnetosis,'" Abe said. "The opposite of an apotheosis. Something divine becoming mortal." Abe smiled; it was strange to see a human smile on the demon's inhuman features. "But I'm a pretentious bastard. Most of us just call it an insertion. The moment where an angel is translated from storage and into a human life.

"This option is the most dangerous by far, but if I can get to the place where the insertion is about to happen I can steal the life that the God-Machine has prepared for the angel. With a little bit of alteration, I can bend it until it becomes mine. The God-Machine won't be able to see me. It won't be the strongest Cover and it will take some work to make it really livable, but it will keep me safe."

"How can we help?" Alex asked.

"There's only one upcoming thnetosis that I have been able to identify. It's happening in an office park about thirty miles east of here. It's relatively near one of the God-Machine's strongholds, but we can turn that to our advantage. I can give you an object that will act as a decoy. Anyone looking for me will detect the object instead. If we plant the object somewhere on the far side of the area, it will delay their response and give me time to claim the Cover," Abe said. "Beyond that, the best thing you can do is provide backup. Three extra pairs of eyes, ears, and hands will increase our chances of success."

"Ok," Alex mused. "A little sabotage and then playing lookout. I think we can all do this."

"I'll give you the name of a contact of mine. He doesn't know me by the same name you do. He can get you guns."

The room fell silent. Charlotte was the first to speak. "Guns?"

"If they find us," Abe said reasonably, "they will react violently. I don't want you to be defenseless."

"So we need to be ready to kill people?" Charlotte asked.

Abe's multitonal voice was completely emotionless as he replied. "It's a possibility. If the rest of the plan works, it will not come to that. I won't lie to you, though. I understand if that's more than you're willing to agree to."

Cole's face was immobile, almost as impassive as Abe's ceramic mask. Charlotte was thoughtful. Alex was trying to convince himself that Abe was just joking, and gradually realizing that he wasn't.

"Are we seriously going to do this, guys?" Alex looked at Cole. "Are you really going to call this 'contact,' and are we actually going to buy guns from him, and then we're going to go to an office park somewhere and...." Alex trailed off, flapping his hands impotently. "And then what?"

"Do any of you want to back out?" Cole asked.

Alex looked from Cole to Charlotte, his gaze skipping off Abe's alien face.

No one spoke, except Cole. He had his cell phone out. "What's the number of your gun guy?" he asked.

• • •

Alex stopped pacing and stared at Charlotte, where she was sitting on her couch and idly, nervously checking her phone. “How do we know he’s really Abe?” he asked.

Charlotte looked around cautiously, but the living room was empty except for the two of them. Charlotte’s roommates were still out and Abe was in Charlotte’s bedroom, coaching Cole through a conversation with the gun dealer.

Alex laughed nervously and ran his hand through his hair, tangling it even further. “I mean, he could be... anyone. Anything. We’ve got this story that he’s a fallen angel, and he’s always been a fallen angel, but how do we know that any of it’s true?”

“Well, he knows things that only Abe knew,” she said.

Alex shook his head. “That’s not enough. I mean, is that enough for you?”

Charlotte didn’t respond right away, so Alex continued. “What if he’s not Abe? What if we’re being played by... I don’t know, some kind of space alien. Or what if he’s telling the actual truth? What if he really is a fallen angel? Maybe God really is a dick, but whose side do you want to be on? Do you really want God to be angry with you? It’s... it’s fucking God, man!”

“I trust Cole,” Charlotte said quietly.

Alex kept going, becoming frantic. “This is just like back in Palo Alto. It’s the exact same thing. We thought it was going to be great. We thought we were going to be zillionaires. I trusted Zack and Carrie, and look where it got me: living in my parents’ basement, owing more money than I’ve got. You can’t trust people, and Abe isn’t even people. He’s a thing.”

“I trust Cole,” Charlotte repeated, loud enough to get Alex’s attention. “You’ve got to trust someone, Alex. Cole knows stuff. He’s got a good head on his shoulders and he’s always taken care of us.”

“But what if he’s wrong?” he said.

“Then he’s wrong, and we’re all fucked. But what if he’s right? What if this really is Abe? If we don’t help him, he’s going to die. Space alien, fallen angel, whatever. If he’s Abe, he’s our friend.”

Charlotte stood and put her hands on Alex’s shoulders, capturing his frantic attention.

“Look, I get it, Alex. It’s hard for you to trust people after what happened with your company, and this is some really, really weird shit. But this is Abe, and he’s our friend, and he needs our help.”

“You’re that sure this is really Abe?” he asked.

“Of course I am.” Charlotte rolled her eyes. “I mean, come on. ‘Thnetosis?’ Who else talks like that? It’s totally Abe.”

Alex smiled faintly. “I guess so.”

“And if we don’t do it, then Abe is going to die, or worse. I mean, think about it this way, Alex. If you were walking down the street and you saw somebody trying to beat up Abe, would you do something about it?”

“Yeah. I’d call the cops.”

“And if the cops didn’t come? Would you get involved?”

“Eventually, yes.”

“So, you’d get into a fight for Abe’s sake. And I know you don’t carry weapons with you, but if that guy had a weapon, and you got it away from him, and it was him or you —”

“Ok, I get it!” Alex exclaimed, throwing up his hands. “Yes, I’d hurt somebody for a friend. Maybe even kill someone. I just....” Alex trailed off. “I always thought that if something like that was going to happen, it would just happen. Not that there’d be all this planning. It just freaks me out that we’re all sitting here talking about how we’re going to get illegal guns so we can kill people if we have to.”

“You know Cole,” Charlotte said. “He would never let anything bad happen to Abe, not since that thing with his kid.”

“And what about you?” he asked.

Charlotte smiled. “I’m so busy taking care of you freaking out that I don’t have time to think about it.”

Abe and Cole returned before Charlotte could say more, with Cole still closing his phone. His mouth was set in a grim line.

“We got the guns, but I don’t like this guy. I think he could tell that I didn’t really know what I was talking about. Charlotte and Alex, would you two be all right with coming with me? Just keep your mouths shut and try to look tough. Abe says this guy is a professional, but I’m not sure.”

Alex forced himself to smile. “Sure. I’ve always wanted to meet a genuine black market arms dealer. It’ll be something to tell my grandkids about someday.”

“We are unlikely to need to use guns,” Abe said. He was trying to sound comforting, but his multi-tonal voice ruined the effect. “I’m very confident that my ploy will work. Chances are, nobody will see us coming.”

• • •

Abe drops to his knees mid-stride, skidding to a stop at Cole’s side. Cole is trying to breathe, but his collapsing lung won’t hold air. Bloody froth bubbles up at the corners of his mouth

“They knew we were coming,” Cole gasps, clutching at Abe. “Goddamnit, this hurts.”

“Hold still, Cole,” Abe says, shaking free of Cole’s grasp. He thrusts his hands into Cole’s chest. Twisting white light emerges from where the smooth grey flesh of Abe’s forearms touches Cole’s bloodstained black sweater.

Abe doesn’t pull the bullet out. The Deva Corp security force guessed that they weren’t going to be up against trained professionals with body armor, so they brought flesh-shredding hollow-tip projectiles. With all the damage the bullet did going in, just pulling it out couldn’t possibly be enough to save Cole’s life. Instead, Abe grabs the bullet and uses it as a handle with which to pull the entire wound out of Cole’s body. The ruined mess of blood, torn tissue, and shattered bones slides out of Cole with just a tug, leaving Cole with an unbroken ribcage and undamaged lungs, and Abe with a dripping double handful of red and shining death.

Abe stands and turns, putting himself between his friends and the advancing security force. He screams because he feels like screaming, and because he knows that most of a Deva Corp security team is made up of more or less ordinary mortals and mortals are afraid of things that scream, and throws the death at his foes. It doesn’t leave his hand but duplicates itself,

flying through the air like a red arrow to imprint itself on its target, leaving Cole's wounds blossoming on the mercenary's chest. Abe throws again and again, screaming, and the security guards die one by one.

When the last guard standing turns and runs, Abe finally stops screaming and releases his hold on Cole's death. The red light turns into something sick and slimy and falls to the ground with a thud of flesh and the metallic clatter of a bullet.

"What happened?" It's Alex coming out of cover, still clutching his pistol in one hand and his baseball bat in the other. His eyes are wide and panicked. Abe knows that he will have to deal with his shock when his adrenaline levels fall.

"We missed it, didn't we?" Charlotte says.

"God damn it!" Cole snarls, leaping to his feet. He advances on Abe, hands balled into fists. "You stupid son of a bitch. What the hell were you thinking?"

"You would have died —"

"I know that. I was ready to die if I had to. We all were! That's why we're here, you fucking moron. We're here to help you, even if it kills us." Abe staggers back; it takes him a second to realize that Cole has punched him right in the jaw. It didn't hurt, of course, but it was certainly unexpected.

Charlotte shakes her head. "We thought we were so clever, but they saw as coming and made a trap for us."

"I don't know," Abe replies. "There's no way to know. There's no angel here now, but it could have materialized and fled the scene, or the God-Machine could have decided to abort the thnetosis. Or," Abe admits, "yes, it could have been a trap."

"What happens now?" Cole asks.

"You go home. I run. I might find another opportunity to assume a new Cover. But you all go home. I've seen what happens when I involve ordinary people in my problems." Abe's voice doesn't catch because he doesn't want it to, but he can't stop seeing Cole lying on the ground with his chest burst open every time he blinks his eyes. "You're out of it now. Thank you. You did your best. Go home and have normal lives. If I find a way to save myself and it's safe, I'll let you know."

"Fuck you," Cole says. "No. Back in the junkyard, you said that you had options, you said that there were multiple ways you could get a new Cover and this is just the one that you told us about. What else can you do?"

Abe shakes his head. "Nothing else. None of the other options are real."

Cole advances on him. "No, goddamn it! What are the other options?"

Abe steps back, his frustration growing. "One of you could give your life to me." Abe is starting to get angry, but he doesn't allow it to show. His multi-harmonic voice is perfectly level. "You agree to the exchange and I put my hand on you and you disappear, and I get to live your life. Is that what you want?"

Charlotte looks like she wants to say something but can't work up the nerve. Shock is starting to catch up with Alex and he's shaking. To Abe's growing horror, he realizes that Cole merely looks thoughtful.

"Do it," Cole says, stepping forward and opening his arms wide. "Take me."

Abe blinks. "Cole, you know I can't —"

"Goddamn it, take me. You saved my little girl. I know it was a transaction for you. I know you got something out of it, but I don't care. She was going to spend her whole life choking on snot, and she was never going to run, or play, or get married like a normal girl, and I was going to have to watch them bury her, but you saved her. You took the cystic fibrosis right out of her, and... I don't know what. I know you already got something out of it, because that's what you are and what you do, but I don't care. Whatever you got, I still owe you, so take me."

"I can't, Cole. You're my friend." Abe looks at the three humans who had risked death for him. "You're all my friends. I don't see the point of staying in this world without knowing that the three of you are in it."

Abe pauses, but seeing the look on Cole's face, he speaks quickly before Cole could object. "There is another way, but I didn't want to involve any of you." Abe steps away from the three of them, avoiding the temptation to show his emotion and influence them that way. "I don't need to take a person's whole life. I can take bits and pieces and put them together into a new life. It will mean taking something from each of you and calling in a few bargains I've made elsewhere, but... it can be done. That's something I can accept."

"I'll do it," Cole says immediately.

Charlotte nods, then squeezes Alex's hand. "Alex, honey, are you still with us? Are you OK with this?"

Alex grits his teeth, fighting the after-effects of stress, and says, "Yeah. You don't mind if I offload a few things I don't want anymore, huh?"

"Anything helps," Abe replies.

"Let's not leave the guy with a totally miserable life!" Cole objects.

Abe lets himself laugh. "Every time I think I understand humans, you surprise me. If we are going to do this, we need to do it now. We don't have much time. As long as I'm without a Cover, I'm a target, and my enemies know exactly where we are right now."

Charlotte gives up her job at Starbucks and her ex-girlfriend Robin. "I hope you decide to be a dude in your new life. It's really going to confuse Robin and all of her shitty friends if she has an ex-boyfriend all of a sudden, but it'll serve her right."

Alex gives up two of his four cats and his basement apartment. "You don't mind if I crash a few days with you, do you, Cole?" Alex asked.

Cole shrugs and half-smiles. "Yeah, it's cool. The way I've been after you to get out of your mom's place, I'd be an asshole not to."

Abe turns to Cole. "You don't need to give up much, Cole. I've got almost everything I need to make a life."

"But the more you've got, the stronger you'll be, right?" Cole asks.

Abe nods.

Cole gives up being a regular at the Silver Spur, his membership in the Ohio Polar Bears, and baseball.

"Baseball?" Abe asks. "Are you sure?"

"You always liked it more than I did," Cole says. "My dad was obsessed and I never really

thought about it. I just kept on following it after he died, because...I don't know. You can have my signed ball, too, the one that was my dad's."

"Is that enough?" Alex asks.

Abe nods. "It's more than enough. We don't have time to negotiate what you get in return." Cole opens his mouth to protest, but Abe cuts him off. "I *will* give you all something in return, and that is not up for negotiation. For now, let's just say that I owe you all a favor."

"What do we do now?" Charlotte asks, concerned as usual about the practicalities.

"We need paper," Abe replies. Between the three of them, they have enough receipts and various scraps of paper to write up the contracts. They write down their terms and they sign. Abe can barely hold the pen in his strange fingers, but he manages.

The contracts signed, Abe reaches out with his mind and finds the threads of causality that his friends have offered up to him. Abe seizes each thread and pulls. The events, relationships, and memories come free with barely any fraying; Abe winds them together, making a cocoon and slipping inside.

Cole and the others don't know what they are going to see, but after an evening full of ethereal glows, they are expecting a light show. Perhaps they are a little disappointed when the winged, gray-skinned figure they had come to expect is replaced by a brand new person, suddenly and smoothly, like a smash-cut in a TV show.

The new Abe has an average height and build, somewhere between Cole's height and bulk and Alex and Charlotte's relative smallness. He has a slightly feminine shape to his lips and chin, but his eyes and nose are Cole's. He has a piercing in his right eyebrow, a perfect mirror of the one that Charlotte has in her left. He has coffee-and-cream skin, exactly what you'd expect in someone made from the lives of a black man, a white man, and a black woman.

"I live with my two cats in Mr. and Mrs. Caruthers' basement apartment," he says, "and I work in the coffee shop on Grand and 15th. Everyone knows me at the Silver Spurs, where I have a beer and watch baseball at least two evenings a week. I once dated a lesbian named Robin Small. My name is Abraham, but you can all call me Abe. My friends call me Abe." He opens his eyes and smiled at Cole. "And I have the bizarre habit of leaping into Lake Erie on the coldest day of the year. Yes...this will do. It's a bit scattered, but it will definitely do."

Cole smiles, Charlotte starts laughing, and Alex, finally, lets himself slump down to the ground, shaking his head. He absently starts to scratch at the side of his neck, a brand new nervous tic he seems to have acquired.

"The shit that happens," he says, over and over again.

"Come on, Cole," Abe says, getting his shoulder under his arm and taking half his weight. "You've put on a good show but I know you messed up your back pretty bad when you fell. Let's get you home."

"I'm guessing there's a huge pile of Alex's shit that 'magically' appeared at my place," Cole grumbles. "Nell is going to flip out."

Abe shakes his head. "I think you'll be surprised."

Charlotte gets Alex to his feet and the four of them make their way back to Cole's truck. Charlotte drives.

The sun rises over a bloodstained office park.

"It's over," Charlotte says as the engine turns over. "We fucking did it. It's over."

"There's no way it's over," Alex says absently, looking out the window, still picking at the side of his face a few inches to the right of his right eye. He's started to draw blood, but he hasn't stopped scratching. "We just pissed off God. We spat in his face. He doesn't know who we are, or where we are, but he's looking. I know it." Alex hunches down in the seat, pulling his jacket up around his neck. "Jesus, I can feel it."

Abe says nothing. Cole stares fixedly ahead. Charlotte looks over her shoulder, puts the truck in gear, and drives.

INTERFACE

In “Thnetosis,” the characters find a way to help their friend, Abe, obtain enough Cover to stay safe, as per the details given in this section.

THE COLUMBUS THREE

When the demon Abezethibou was forced to go loud and burn away its Cover, it fell back on the support of its good friends, an unlikely trio of ordinary humans that Abezethibou had “collected” during its years on Earth. Although they were not successful in their original plan of helping Abezethibou to jack an angel’s Cover, they managed to survive more or less intact.

Having seen the strangeness that hides underneath the skin of the world, they can’t look away. Since that time, they have become an increasingly useful resource in Abezethibou’s Descent, as well as occasionally investigating and disrupting the workings of the God-Machine on their own. Despite being more or less mundane humans, the Columbus Three have engineered the destruction of several key works of Infrastructure, discredited a politician with ties to Deva Corp, and killed two angels. They are gradually rising higher and higher on God-Machine’s priority list, but thanks to Abezethibou’s protection, It’s angels have yet to find them.

Although their experiences have left them with an undeniably pro-demon bias, none of them are naïve. Abezethibou has been honest with his friends that while some demons want to coexist peacefully with humans, others are more inclined to exploit them.

The traits below reflect these characters some time after the events described above, when they have had a chance to learn a few tricks related to their new calling.

COLE CARTER

“You do know that this plan is completely fucking insane, don’t you?”

Background: Cole’s early life gave no indication of the struggle he would eventually become embroiled in. He went to work in construction immediately after high school and eventually ended up striking out on his own as a contractor, but lost his business in the economic crash of the 90s and ended up working at a home improvement megastore. Although he sometimes dreams about trying again now that the economy is beginning to pick up, retail

is much more reliable than contract work, and Cole and his wife now have a daughter — Emily — to worry about.

Cole first became involved with the supernatural after Emily was diagnosed with a particularly aggressive form of cystic fibrosis. Cole and Abezethibou forged a pact, through which Abezethibou cured Emily's disease. Although Cole was initially able to convince himself that the doctors had simply made a mistake, the event planted a seed of doubt, which led to him being receptive when his friend "Abe" called on him for help.

Description: Cole is a tall, broad shouldered African American man in his mid-thirties. He has all the tells of someone who works with his hands for a living — rough hands, strong muscles, and obvious comfort and ease in his body — though the middle-age spread has begun to make itself known around his middle.

Storytelling Hints: Cole's rough demeanor — he is brusque, sarcastic, and swears frequently — ultimately does very little to hide the genuinely kind and loyal man underneath. Cole is one of those men who was deeply affected by the birth of his first child, and is totally dedicated to her.

Cole is the group's leader and frequently falls into a fatherly role, making sure that his friends eat enough, get the rest they need, and generally take care of themselves. As the oldest and most seasoned member of the group, he usually ends up having final say about the group's plans; the rest have learned that if an idea sets off Cole's bullshit detector, it's probably not a good one.

Cole's strong sense of duty is what got him into this in the first place, and he continues to pursue his new purpose with the same grim determination. Abe saved his daughter from an early grave and that puts Cole on his side, no matter what that side ends up being or how many sacrifices it demands.

Virtue: Loyal

Vice: Judgmental

Mental Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 3, Resolve 3

Physical Attributes: Strength 4, Dexterity 3, Stamina 4

Social Attributes: Presence 3, Manipulation 2, Composure 3

Mental Skills: Academics 2, Computer 2, Crafts (Carpentry, Electrician)* 4, Science (Architecture) 3*, Investigation 2, Occult 2

Physical Skills: Athletics (Climbing, Lifting) 3*, Brawl 2, Drive 2, Empathy 2, Firearms 2, Stealth 1, Weaponry 2

Social Skills: Empathy 2, Intimidation 1, Persuasion 2, Socialize 1, Subterfuge 1

Merits: Allies (Construction Workers) 2, Contacts (City Bureaucracy, Construction) 2, Demolisher, Martial Arts 2, Professional Training (Contractor) 3*, Resources 2, Safe Place 1, Small Unit Tactics

Health: 9

Willpower: 6

Integrity: 7

Size: 5

Speed: 12**Defense:** 6**Initiative:** 6**Armor:** n/a

CHARLOTTE THIBODEAU

"If we can pull this off, everything's going to be ok. Everyone ready?"

Background: Charlotte was never very interested in traditional ideas of success. The only child of an upwardly mobile African American family in the suburbs of Cleveland, Charlotte rebelled early and often. She was more interested in her writing than any of the STEM fields.

Nevertheless, Charlotte allowed her parents to push her into an expensive private college, which she eventually dropped out of to pursue writing. She ended up working at a coffee shop in Columbus, a job that she gradually came to enjoy before eventually becoming a manager (before she was replaced by Abe's new incarnation).

Description: Charlotte is an attractive, compactly built, dark-skinned woman with tightly curled hair, which she treats with a variety of dyes and other chemicals.

Storytelling Hints: Cole and Charlotte express their friendship through good-natured ribbing. Charlotte mock's Cole's age; Cole makes fun of Charlotte's youth and faddishness. Charlotte is a little more protective of Alex, whom she views as overly sheltered.

Charlotte is an intelligent and extroverted young woman, with many friends and ex-girlfriends with a variety of talents. As such, she frequently acts as the group's "face" and "fixer," arranging for them to gain access to items and expertise that they don't already have.

For Charlotte, sticking her nose into the world of the God-Machine and its angels is great fun. She enjoys the opportunity to stick it to the biggest "man" of all. It isn't that she's unaware of how much danger she's in; rather, she is able to take some joy in what she's doing.

Virtue: Sociable**Vice:** Sarcastic**Mental Attributes:** Intelligence 3, Wits 3, Resolve 2**Physical Attributes:** Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 3**Social Attributes:** Presence 3, Manipulation 4, Composure 3**Mental Skills:** Academics (Art History) 4, Computer 2, Investigation 2, Occult 1, Science 2**Physical Skills:** Athletics 2, Brawl 1, Drive (Trucks) 1, Firearms 1, Larceny 2, Stealth 2**Social Skills:** Empathy (Guilt) 3, Expression 3, Persuasion 3, Socialize 4, Streetwise 2, Subterfuge 3**Merits:** Barfly, Fast-Talking 3, Fixer, Fleet of Foot 2, Language (Spanish), Tolerance for Biology**Health:** 8**Willpower:** 5

Integrity: 7**Size:** 5**Speed:** 11**Defense:** 4**Initiative:** 5**Armor:** n/a

ALEX ROSS

"I thought this was going to be fun. I'm such an idiot."

Background: Alex Ross was precocious and driven all through school. After college, he moved to Silicon Valley to found a startup...that promptly failed, leaving Alex with hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt and no way to pay it off. Alex was forced to move back in with his parents. The insult and injury conspired to turn Alex inwards. He spent more and more time with his hobbies and his online friends, avoiding what his life had become. He might have continued on this trajectory, except for meeting Abe and Charlotte, which eventually led Alex to Cole and his current situation.

As a result of his exposure to the world of angels and demons, Alex has become stigmatic. Since the events of "Thnetosis," he has had a little time to come to grips with his condition and learn how to interpret some of his visions. Although he hasn't fully explained it to his friends — Abe, of course, knows exactly what's happening to Alex, but can't do anything to help him — they have come to rely on his insights.

Alex's stigmatic condition manifests physically through a circuit board like network of scars just to the right of his right eye. When Alex has visions or tries to use his Aura Reading or Psychometry Merit, the scars glow blood red, as though something were glowing inside his skin. As time passes, the circuit board pattern grows. Alex often wonders what will happen when they reach his eye.

Description: Alex is a wiry young man with fair skin, unruly red hair, and watery brown eyes, slightly magnified by his glasses. He prefers t-shirts with obscure nerdy slogans, one of the few luxuries he can still afford.

Storytelling Hints: Although he's still quite intelligent and an excellent organizer, Alex lost a lot of his confidence when his company folded. He is often hesitant and slow to suggest his own ideas, though he is happy to help others perfect theirs. Alex still isn't used to interacting with people who don't share his interests and sometimes makes nerdy in-jokes that many of his friends don't get, but they have come to see this as an endearing quirk.

Of all the Columbus Three, Alex is the one with the best idea of what all of this really means. More so than the others, Alex can never go back to the life he used to have; the God-Machine is imprinted on his flesh and spirit. Alex has had to grow up fast, and he misses his innocence.

Virtue: Thoughtful**Vice:** Fearful**Mental Attributes:** Intelligence 4, Wits 3, Resolve 2

Physical Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2

Social Attributes: Presence 3, Manipulation 3, Composure 2

Mental Skills: Academics 3, Computer (Programming) 4*, Investigation 3, Occult 2, Science 3*

Physical: Athletics 1, Brawl 1, Drive 1, Firearms 1, Larceny 2, Stealth 2

Social Skills: Animal Ken (Cats) 2, Empathy 2, Persuasion (Business) 3, Socialize (Nerds) 1, Subterfuge 2

Merits: Aura Reading, Contacts (Bloggers, Business, Hackers, Tech Sector) 4, Encyclopedic Knowledge (Computer), Omen Sensitivity, Professional Training (Programmer) 2*, Psychometry, Unseen Sense: God-Machine

Health: 7

Willpower: 4

Integrity: 7

Size: 5

Speed: 9

Defense: 3

Initiative: 4

Armor: n/a

EYE FOR AN EYE

The demon takes a wound away from one target — healing it in the process — and turns it into a potent weapon. With a touch or even a gesture, the demon can cause the wound to imprint itself on other targets. With effort, a demon can even use this on a target who has died in the last several seconds, saving a life and making an even more terrifying weapon at the same time.

This Exploit exists in the intersection of mercy and vengeance. The demon cannot use this Exploit to create a weapon from one of her own wounds, healing herself in the process. Eye for an Eye can only make a weapon out of a wound inflicted on someone else.

A demon using this Exploit only risks compromise once when she activates it, not every time she uses Eye for an Eye to make an attack.

Example Prerequisites: On the Mend, Shift Consequence

Dice Pool: Strength + Medicine + Primum – the number of marked Health boxes

Action: Instant (to remove the wound and create the weapon)

Cost: 1 Aether + 1 Aether per attack

Roll Results

Dramatic Failure: Instead of tugging the wound free and creating a weapon, the demon simply duplicates the injury on her own person. The demon immediately loses the same amount of Health as her subject. The damage type (bashing, lethal, or aggravated) is likewise the same as the subject's.

Failure: The demon fails to pull the wound free.

Success: The subject is immediately restored to full Health. The demon now has a weapon that she can use against other targets. Because this weapon imprints the wound on the target, a single success on the attack roll means that the demon's victim suffers damage equal to the amount (and type) of damage that the initial target healed. This weapon can be used in melee with a touch (Dexterity + Brawl – Defense), or "thrown," (Dexterity + Athletics – 2).

This weapon only lasts as long as the demon maintains her focus. If she takes any action other than imprinting the wound on victims, it disintegrates into a pile of wet plasma.

Exceptional Success: The demon's weapon has the additional effect of duplicating (or possibly enhancing) the infirmity and pain of the original injury. In addition to Health loss and the penalties that come with it, the demon's victim suffers the effects of a Tilt appropriate to the nature of the injury. Arm or Leg Wrack, Blinded, Deafened, and Stunned are particularly appropriate, but the player and Storyteller can work together to improvise new Tilts. If the original target's wound came with a Tilt, then the demon's victim suffers from the same Tilt.



DEAR MARJORIE

By Peter Schaefer

Albert put down his pen when Mr. Chance entered the office. The sweep of the door took up nearly half the office's space, and Albert, sitting in his chair and writing at the built-in desk, filled the other half. The glass-paneled door and window were frosted by decades of grime and admitted only shadows of passers-by, made even darker to Albert by his box-shaped tinted glasses. All of the few who came by here were equal through the unwashed lens of time.

There was only time for Albert to fold away his letter and for Mr. Chance to promise an explanation before bullets ripped through the window and wall, showering them with glass. Chance shoved the older man to the ground. Then they were somehow up and running, down a back hall, and out through a door into blinding sunlight.

Three men waited for them by a van. They held their guns behind coats to keep them from being seen up or down the street, but they were obvious from the doorway. Albert tried to turn back but slipped and fell onto Chance. The slight, younger man had more iron in his frame than it appeared. He barely broke stride keeping Albert upright, and pulled him to the van.

"Take care of him," he said, and the men bundled Albert into the van. As they drove away, Albert saw Chance reopen the door and fire a burst of gunshots into the hall they'd come down, then run down the street. Albert's last sight as the van turned a corner was people in suits, rushing out of the door after Chance.

Dearest Marjorie,

1st, I am alive and well, my love. But you must prepare yourself & the children, for it may be some time before I can return to you. My work has taken a terrible & confusing turn, and attracted a hostile attention, and I have had to leave. Mr Chance, who has helped me, gives me every assurance that I shall be safe here, wherever this is. I do not think Mr C is only what we have thought of him. It is a strange place he has me hiding in, secluded beneath a busy market. Someone threw a fish over my head as he pushed me through the crowd.

No place I can think of would conduct business in such a manner. It gives me confidence that I must be very far from home, and that my strange antagonists, if they still pursue me, have left you safely alone.

I realize this may come as a surprise and that I have been specially opaque surrounding my work & this work that has kept & taken me from home. I would be with you even now, if not for the dangers that befell me last night and chased me from my workshop. Having kept these secrets from you now seems like sheerest folly & pride. I write them to you now, when it is too late, so that you might understand why. And perhaps in thinking of you, some of your wisdom will come to me.

You were always my conscience, Marjorie. I should have consulted with you from the start. How will I know what to do now, with your guiding heart so far away?

Let me start at the beginning with Mr Chance. Mr C was always an odd one. I never told you how much, because I feared you would worry for me. That would be another sign that telling you would have been the wiser course. When he brought me the first device — it was a week before I brought him for dinner, as I expect you remember — I was surprised that he should seek me out. He insisted that I was the finest watchmaker in the west, and that I was his last hope for repairing this family treasure to working order. He gave me the device & asked that I speak of it to no one, a vow I accepted and now break.

It was the most marvellous piece of clockwork I have ever seen, save those like pieces that followed it. Fashioned after a human eye, it was fronted with something that felt cold like steel but had the texture of stone, inlaid with copper rich with verdigris, and with a clear blue gemstone in the center. Through that one can just make out the finest-toothed gears ever manufactured on Earth.

Opening the back revealed the eye's inner workings. Imagine if a thousand ants had abandoned their hunger and turned their tiny claws to God's clockwork. For a modest watchmaker such as myself, it was a humbling sight. Despite my insistence, Mr C would only say that it had come from far away, and ask if I could repair it. I told him if I could study it for a week perhaps I would know but he said he would return the next day.

I am sure you remember how I didn't come home that night. After studying the clockwork eye for hours, every gear I examined had revealed a dozen more connections I hadn't before seen. I could not leave the workshop. If this would be my only chance to see such unparalleled craftsmanship, I could not bring myself to pass it up.

That was how I found myself in the late hours of the morning, surrounded by the inner mechanisms of the machine and by my diagrams of the thing on dozens of sheets of paper. It was beyond belief when I found an error in the clockwork's assembly. I almost wept.

When Mr C returned, I had the piece fixed and assembled correctly. I think he could feel my pride, for he listened to my passionate description of the work & smiled as he did so. When he asked if I would like to work on

another piece, the light in my eyes answered such that he produced another piece before I could speak.

Perhaps my hunger to work on this piece — an entire finger, wrought in the same style as the eye — showed, because Mr C paid me and left without a further word of assent from me. So taken was I with the finger that it wasn't until I tore myself away for dinnertime that I noted he had paid me enough for a week's work.

This letter runs long, and I believe I hear Mr C approaching. I will ask about seeing this letter to you straightaway. Please think of me kindly despite my failings as a husband. I long to return to you soon.

With all love,

Your Albert

Albert looked wraithlike, wreathed by the light of the floor-to-ceiling window, looking out over a bright bay from a dim living room. Expensive furniture filled the penthouse room behind him: several leather chaises and settees, reclining chairs so understated they had to cost a fortune, coffee tables cut and finished from the raw wood whose shape they still retained, and a wet bar segmenting off part of the room.

Armed men in various leather and denim outfits occupied themselves in the room: two playing games on the massive, wall-mounted television, one sprawled on a couch reading a paperback, and two talking about football over the wet bar. None paid Albert any attention.

He turned back from the window and looked at the lone table. Though it was halfway across the room, he could read the sentence he'd been unable to finish. He touched his temple, where it merged with the watchmakers' loupes that his eyes had become, and then walked to the table, bumping into furniture as he went.

Staring at the letter that he held in his hand, he didn't look up when the elevator chimed. When the roar of gunfire reached him, he clutched his letter and fell over a chair as though he'd been shot, but he was unharmed. From his vantage on the floor, he could just make out three men standing side by side in the elevator. They were identically dressed in plain black suits, and each had a handgun.

The men moved together in time, like the pendulum of a clock. Each tick, all three arms moved in concert and fired, then moved again on the next tick. Albert thought he could hear the gears whirring. Without a word, they shot the men set here to guard him, on one stroke all three aiming together, on the next each aiming separately, always synchronized.

It was over after a few seconds. Albert scrambled away as the three men approached him in lockstep. They turned to push the heavy table out of the way at the same moment with still not a word spoken, but one fell facedown onto it and slid to the ground, leaving a streak of blood behind. One of Albert's guards had survived the onslaught to fight back, but the two remaining guns rose in unison and shot him down with perfect timing.

Without a glance for their fallen companion, the two men holstered their guns and grabbed Albert by the arms. Unfinished letter still crumpled in his hands, they dragged Albert through a pool of blood into the elevator, and the doors closed on him.

Dearest Marjorie,

Despite my most earnest requests, the gentlemen staying with me refuse to bring my last letter to you. I have kept it and will discuss the matter with Mr Chance should he reappear.

We left the strange place mentioned in my last letter in a hurry. It seemed that my assailants found us just after Mr C returned, and we fled their attentions in all haste. He delivered me to some allies with a fantastic automobile. If I had time to spare, I could tell you about its wonder, but I shall say no more than that I couldn't see where it released its steam.

Every day that passes I miss and love you the more. I would write to you every day (not that I have any way of getting you these letters!) but it has been hard to come by paper and pen. Please give Alton and Kerry my love and assure them that when I return, I will spend a day with each of them. If nothing else this experience has reminded me how fleeting our time on this Earth, and how we must spend it with those we love.

Tell Alton I will take him on the steam train as he has been asking, and Kerry that that Chinadoll she has wanted will be hers. The money C has paid me for the work done is enough, I promise.

It is important to me that you understand what has happened, and why I am not with you even now. The work that Mr C brought me, the clockwork so intricate that I would have thought it impossible, enthralled me. I must admit also that Mr C's assessment of my character and skill, that I was the only one capable of the work, I found intoxicating. His payments for services rendered, which grew only larger in proportion to the work done, also appealed to my ego and my greed.

Whenever I finished a piece, he brought me more. I managed to diagram and repair one small piece of clockwork every day or two. After the concern you showed when I returned home after the first piece, I never let myself work through the night again. Tearing myself away from my task of contemplating what must have been the clockwork of the angels was agony akin to what I feel being separated from you now. My late nights filled me with familial guilt, but only once I had removed myself from the workshop. Examining whatever clockwork was on my table, I had thoughts for nothing else. Even now, I am distracted by my imagination of what the pieces Mr C might have brought that I have not seen.

Many were similar to pieces that I had already seen: another finger, another eye. These were a matter of consulting my diagrams, which soon papered my workshop, and finding the error in assembly or manufacture, which was inevitably the cause of its failing to function.

But many pieces still were new, and larger. C brought a hand with clear attachment points for the camshafts I saw in the fingers, to impart them with motion. One piece was a lower leg, complete with calf muscles

and shin. It had fewer moving parts, but more bulk. Even then, what clockwork they had was beautiful. They were masterpieces of strength and resilience in their tiny form.

You have already discerned, my love, that these were all parts of a larger construction, something in the form of a human body. It was not just the exterior of form, either. I reassembled parts that seem to have been lungs, with deflated bladders of thick canvas, and one largely of crystal that seemed like shaped and sized to fit within the skull. Each was a work of art.

My illness came upon me in this period, as I'm sure you remember it well, which occupied me for the last two months before I fled. I'm sorry, I forget how it must still seem to you, a still-unexplained disappearance. It pains me so that I cannot reassure you that I am well, that I am well protected from the strange threats against me. Men guard me day and night, and I am safe.

When I think of how you cared for me during those fevered nights — you say it was a full week of terror for you and the children, thinking I might die, but I had no sense of time — my heart aches for you. The ice you sought out and applied to my aching eyes, and the tenderness with which you responded to my fevered ravings about mazes of gears and cogwheels, being caught in the balance or crushed by the escape wheel, those things still bring tears to my eyes make me want to cry.

I know I became distant after that. That is because when I woke from the fever, I was changed. Not in attitude, as I grew to fear you must believe, but in form. There is more to the world than we know, a hand in its making that underlies the natural world we can see. An uncaring watchmaker of a sort, I think. I know that sounds mad, but I cannot think of a better way to write it.

My fever changed me. It changed my eyes, reshaping them into the loupes I so often wore in my work. Afraid of your reaction, I avoided you, and took to wearing tinted glasses when I came home. I'm sorry for not trusting you more with my change, and with my fear. I hope that when I return, you will forgive me.

This place is so strange, even discounting the unique view afforded me by my altered eyes. I had thought I was far away from home, perhaps in British Columbia. That was before they gave me a chance to see the city. Its buildings are taller than any we know, sometimes seeming like even the smallest is twice the height of our tallest. They brought me to the Pent House, where I can stand on the top floor and look out as though in a hot-air balloon.

Looking out the window, I see an expanse of water and shoreline that is familiar. Though I question my sanity to say it, it can only mean

Albert sat in a small room. It was just big enough to contain him on his stool and a workbench that was just too big for him to reach the far corners. Behind the table, all the tools of his trade hung on a pegboard. Diagrams covered the walls on either side of the pegboard.

Unlike the small room where Chance had concealed Albert, this one was new and clean. The wall was an institutional white, the floor grey-painted concrete.

He was hunched over a metal torso that was opened like a portable ice chest and staring into it with his magnascope eyes. As he studied it, he rubbed the edge of his grown-in loupe with his left hand. Every few minutes he reached into the torso and adjusted something, or leaned over and diagrammed something on the little space allotted for it on the desk.

After some hours, he reached into an open cubby beneath the desk and pulled a few papers, folded together. Laying them on top of the diagrams and smoothing them out, he stopped his work and stared at the papers. Every once in a while, he added a few sentences to the many written there.

Suddenly moving in swift jerks, Albert refolded the papers and stuffed them as far back in the cubby as he could before the doors opened behind him. Four men, dressed in the plain black suits he'd grown so familiar with, stood there with identical postures. As before, the men were not themselves identical, but stood and moved as one.

The woman in front of them wore like dress but a far more casual posture. Unlike the blank faces behind her, her expression made Albert uncomfortable. Her half-smile made him feel like she knew something he didn't, something she thought he wouldn't like, like she'd just heard a joke about him. He thought she looked at him like he was a toy, or maybe prey.

"How's it coming, Al?" she asked. "You keeping to the timetable?"

Albert cleared his throat twice. "Now that you've brought me paper... for the diagrams," he said.

"You're not gonna tell me you need something else to keep going, are you? 'Cause if you need something and you didn't tell me before, you're gonna—"

Albert flinched away as she touched the taser holstered at her belt. "No, I... I have enough," he said. "Please, don't."

She looked disappointed. "Fine. Dinner break." She put a greasy McDonald's bag on the worktable. He grimaced as it settled directly on his diagrams, and she walked away laughing. The men who'd come with her closed the doors in easy, mirrored motions.

Dear Marjorie,

Try as I might, I cannot imagine how these letters might come to you. Even if I knew there were a path from me to you, it seems more impossible with every passing hour that anyone would allow me to send them on that path. I write now with the hope that telling you, my greatest confidant, beautiful muse, and wisest counsel, may help me make some sense of where I am.

In a world where all I have experienced is true, my words to you, or at least their sentiment, might somehow reach you. Or if I am mad and all I have experienced is fever-dream, which I deem of equal likelihood, perhaps I will speak some of these words of love that I write to you.

My adversaries have captured me. They invaded the Pent House and dragged me out. They put a black bag over my head, but I could hear the growl of another of their automobiles. I write that as if it matters. Surely

knowing that they, too, used one of those machines could help someone find me, but no one will read this.

It is only through insisting that I needed materials to make diagrams that I was allowed a pen and paper. I write this letter in secret, because if I did not write it, I would surely kill myself.

They have not talked to me, except for one. She introduced herself as Happy, and some of the men with her as Grumpy, Dopey, and some other names. I think she was making a joke, perhaps because the men, whom I have seen perform cold-blooded murder, never show any emotion. It made her angry when I did not understand her humor.

Being imprisoned here, I have come to question everything I thought I knew. My belief was that an enigmatic hostile force had come to target me for the work I was doing. Were they enemies of Mr C & come to steal his clockwork devices for gain or revenge? Or creatures of Mother Damnable who perceived some threat to her dominance over Seattle? I didn't know, but at all times of danger Mr C came to my aid.

Now I am no longer sure that he is an ally. Captive of Happy and her men who walk like clockwork, they have set me the task of analyzing and repairing the same clockwork as Mr C brought me. It is not simply of the same style, or by the same brilliant watchmaker, it is the same. I have espied the pattern of the design, and every piece they force me to repair is one that fits with those Mr C brought me, but not one he had yet brought me.

Happy met my initial refusal to do the work with a cruel grin, and she touched me with some sort of electric box that crackled & filled me with an unholy pain. I think she has been almost disappointed that I have not refused again. It is true that I rankle at being forced to work, but I long to see the clockwork devices repaired & complete almost as much as Happy seems to want to hurt me.

I want to see you again, but sometimes even that feels uncertain. My heart is consumed with love for you & our children, but I am starting to feel the drive to finish this project consuming the rest of me. It has already taken my eyes, I have seen that now. I don't know what's going to happen next.

Ever your loving Albert

Gunfire rattled through the corridor outside the workshop, but Albert didn't look up. Hunched over the metal chest, his steady hands worked his watchmaker's tools expertly. Only hearing the woman shout a vile imprecation and be cut short by a meaningful gunshot made him pause and raise a corner of his mouth.

The black-suited men watching over the workshop arrayed themselves between Albert's workbench and the door. Simultaneously, they raised their gun arms identically straight. Somehow, they were still too slow. Mr. Chance opened the door and stepped through in a single motion. His handgun swept across the four men with four shots, and the men fell like their strings had been cut.

“Come on,” he shouted. Only Albert’s hands moved. “Albert, let’s get out of here. More are coming.”

Albert turned. He had lost pounds and skin tone since Chance had last seen him. He looked like he’d been ill for months. “Just a moment,” he said to Chance. “I’m quite nearly done.” The watchmaker turned back to the clockwork man.

Chance lifted his gun. “Don’t. We can’t finish it. If you finish it, they’ll win.” Albert paused, and then gave the barest hint of a shrug.

Chance couldn’t hear Albert whisper, “There,” over the thunder of his gunshot.

He stood over the watchmaker, slumped over the chest of the clockwork man. Albert’s hand caught his attention. In his last moment, it had twitched over to a sheaf of papers concealed — badly, by Chance’s estimation — under a thin layer of diagrams. He pulled them free.

After a quick skim, Chance let himself cry. Tears trickling down his face, he folded the papers into an inner pocket and left. Behind him, the watchmaker’s last lifeblood trickled down from his forehead and down his cheeks until it dripped off.

My Dear Marjorie,

They have moved me. After they took the last piece, Happy arrived and took me and all my tools, I could barely grab these letters under the cover of collecting my diagrams before her synchronized men hauled me into a new workroom.

All the devices I have repaired are here, ready to be assembled into a mechanical man. I am watched & write this letter in pieces making it appear I am checking my notes. Happy said to wait for what is coming with a nasty smile but I know what is coming could not be more obvious if I had a map.

The heart. Every connection in this thing comes back to the heart, it is the wound spring and the escapement in one. However it works it must be a work of genius.

They have brought it to me. The moment I made the last connection of the body, Happy came in with the heart. It is disgusting, a device of pitted stone gears that by all that is holy should break, set in something spongy that looks like bloodless human flesh. I hate it.

I am going to repair it anyway.

As she left it, Happy said something about being powered by passion and blood. Sounds poetic, she said, and she left singsonging the words over and over. I hate her too, and her soulless servants.

I gave my eyes for this work.

I have repaired it. The heart does not work as any device the good God gave us to build on this Earth, but I deciphered it and diagrammed it and found its flaw. It will work, though damned if I know what will drive its mainspring. There’s no source I can see for the power it gives to the rest of this clockwork thing. I have only to connect it to the rest of the machine. Then I will be done with this damned obsession.

Maybe then they will return me to you.



INTERFACE

In "Dear Marjorie," Albert and Mr. Chance are left to determine the secret behind pieces of a clockwork person that only Albert can repair. This section reveals the secrets behind these pieces and the shadowy organizations that want them.

MYSTERY CULT: THE TICK-TOCK MEN

The Tick-Tock Men are a widespread group of God-Machine cultists who worship the pristine, mechanized notion of order. Their limited understanding of the God-Machine paints it as an extensive conspiracy that seeks global optimization, the betterment of all through collective action. Tick-Tock Men strive to put their people in positions of power, through a combination of brute force and subtlety, sacrificing a measure of their individuality in order to further the cause.

Members learn how to enter a shared trance in which awareness is shared through the group and decisions are made either collectively, or by a leader. In this trance, all act together with maximal efficiency. They leverage this synchronicity to overpower their enemies physically with joined strength while defending each other from harm, or to engage in well-timed covert surveillance and related tricks.

Since the cult's founding in the 18th century, men have dominated its membership. As gender equality gained ground, women became accepted in various cells. With the cult still predominantly male, most of the rank and file remain men, while women who join rise faster to positions of command.

Cells use the parts of a watch as terminology. A given cell is called a movement. Most movements maintain a business as a front — the teamwork movements show within their cells lead them toward strong success in ventures with established procedures — they call this the casing. Their facing is the task they are set to accomplish.

Many of the benefits of this mystery cult only manifest when members join their minds through the trance they call synchronicity. In order to synchronize, a member must be wearing a uniform and touch another member in uniform. Uniforms vary from movement to movement. Some use the dress code for the business that serves as their casing, others change into plain black suits or mark themselves with paint. As long as the uniform clearly marks them as part of a team, it suffices.

Cultists: Retail store clerk, middle manager, construction worker, government bureaucrat, small business owner

Initiation**Benefits**

- New members, called pinions, share some of the other members' awareness while synchronized. Pinions fighting together gain a +1 to Initiative per ally with this Merit, but must use the lowest Initiative rolled for any such initiate.
- Known as wheels, when each member with this Merit takes the same action on the same Initiative (all fire a gun or engage in grappling), each gains +1 to the roll for each cooperating member and gains a +1 to Defense while synchronized.
- Members of this rank are regulators and frequently control squads of wheels or pinions. They gain the Small Unit Tactics Merit, but can use it only with actions they coordinate on the fly through synchronicity with the wheels and pinions they command.
- Mainsprings, now cell leaders, share more information with other mainsprings and reap the benefits of their well-organized casings. She gains Contacts • (Tick-Tock Men) and Resources ••.
- Timekeepers are the highest authorities of the Tick-Tock Men who coordinate between cells. They learn to see the will of the conspiracy in mundane aspects of life. They gain the Omen Sensitivity Merit and use it to guide their cells' schemes and choices.

THE CLOCKWORK MAN

The Clockwork Man is a deadly mechanical assassin. The God-Machine's servants create it to a difficult schematic granted them by guiding angels. It stands five feet tall, a lithe, muscled man rendered in a dull grey material with whorls of verdigris-rich copper inlaid across its body. The material that makes up its body has the chill of steel but the texture of rough stone. Blue crystals show in its eyes and, if exposed, its brain.

Neither angel nor cryptid, the Clockwork Man is difficult to create and animate. Only specific circumstances can bring it to life, rare enough when clockwork and watchmaking were at the height of the art and nearly impossible in the modern day. Animating the creature requires a human capable of understanding the intricate design of the creature's archaic and occult internal clockwork and assembling it, but also one who will pour her heart and soul into the work. Once fully rebuilt by an obsessed watchmaker, that person's blood must be spilled on the Clockwork Man's heart to power it. In the modern age of silicon- or crystal-driven timepieces and hobbyist watchmakers, such a person might not exist. In the older of Seattle's splintered timelines, perhaps the chances are greater.

Once activated, the Clockwork Man stalks the entity it was assembled to destroy, something built into the design before it ever reaches the watchmaker's workbench. Its target is dictated by the precise nature of the intricate design of gears and shafts within the machine, beyond the ability of human intellect to manipulate.

The Clockwork Man hunts without rest. It begins by locating its target, seeking clues and trails to pick up any trace of its prey. In addition to searching for physical clues, it intimidates and interrogates people for information on its target. It communicates mentally and without words. Looking at someone, its eyes flare a crystalline blue, and the person it is looking at

knows what the Clockwork Man wants her to know. It uses this limited telepathy, which cannot receive, to conduct its interrogations. Sources of information rarely escape alive in order to prevent anyone from warning the target.

Once close to a target, it relies on sight, sound, and scent, and it is capable of great patience waiting for its prey to show himself. It needs no sustenance and gauges its capabilities accurately. Rather than enter a situation where it will be overwhelmed and need time to regroup, it chooses to wait and pick off people guarding its target one by one, assaulting the target once his protection is insufficient. The Clockwork Man also engages in scorched earth tactics, relentlessly destroying the target's homes, hideouts, businesses, and friends to drive its prey out into the open or provoke an unwise reaction.

In combat, the Clockwork Man uses its great strength, resilience, and speed to combat its enemies directly. If wounded even to complete destruction, it reassembles itself, its cogs and shafts collecting and reassembling themselves. Imprisoning the Clockwork Man's separated parts so they cannot rejoin the larger body of the machine prevents it from reassembling and healing completely.

Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 4, Resolve 2, Strength 6, Dexterity 3, Stamina 6, Presence 4, Manipulation 1, Composure 4

Skills: Athletics 3, Brawl 6, Empathy 2, Intimidation (Torture) 2, Investigation (Scent, Tracking) 4, Medicine 2, Occult (Demons) 1, Stealth 3, Weaponry 4

Adaptations: Aether Eater (as Adaptation), Armored Plates (as demon form power), Fast Attack (as demon form power), Fire Resistance (as demon form power), Regenerate (see below), Unmemorable (see below)

Health: 11

Willpower: 6

Size: 5

Speed: 14 (species factor 5)

Defense: 6

Initiative: 7

Armor: 3/2

Notes: Special notes on the Clockwork Man's powers follow.

Regenerate: The Clockwork Man recovers one point of bashing or lethal damage every 12 hours as bits and pieces knocked loose or free roll, twist, and settle back into place. Even when severed, the parts drag toward the main body of the Clockwork Man to rejoin with it. Locking up dislodged parts can prevent them from rejoining the machine and healing it.

Unmemorable: Though humans see and react to the Clockwork Man's presence, its presence only registers in sensory and working memory, not any of the more enduring memories of a human's brain. People react to the occult machine's presence, but they cannot remember that it exists after more than a handful of seconds. Usually people justify their behavior with made-up events — someone giving the Clockwork Man a wide berth on a city street might afterward assume he'd moved to avoid an aggressive panhandler rather than a mechanical monster. Some reactions are harder to explain: someone might draw and fire in self-defense against the metal monster, and a minute later remember shooting but not why.

Supernatural creatures are immune to this effect. Human characters can spend a point of Willpower to remember the Clockwork Man for an hour, and another point at the end of that hour to cement the experience in long-term memory.

Type	Damage	Dice Pool	Notes
Punch	4L	12	
Piercing Punch	1L	12	Armor piercing 3

REPROGRAMMING THE CLOCKWORK MAN

Though the Clockwork Man's target is dictated by unknown algorithms, it is based on the arrangement of the clockwork inside the creature. A particular genius working at the assembly might be able to alter the machine's purpose with a combination of Intelligence, Crafts, and supernatural insight. (The Omen Sensitivity Merit is a good way to get a sense of how a change might influence the final product.)

Another possibility is that a demon might alter the Clockwork Man *en route*. While a demon cannot assemble the Clockwork Man and have it activate, one with a particular mechanical genius and insight might alter the pieces while in transport between the agents of the God-Machine and the human watchmaker.

In either of these cases, the most one can change is the Clockwork Man's target. Its mission and methods seem to be built into it at the deepest levels.

THE SEATTLE HOROLOGICAL ACADEMY

On the face of it, the Seattle Horological Academy is a simple school for the not-quite-obsolete skill of making and maintaining clockwork and watches. It advertises as the largest private academy of the watchmaker's art outside of Switzerland, and unlike most other watchmaking courses available in various cities, it doesn't cater to any of the major international watch brands. Their modern technology and specifications are not anywhere on the curriculum at SHA.

Beneath the layer of a school run by expert enthusiasts for expert enthusiasts lies a murky cult of clockwork worshippers. Clockwork runs the world. The Milky Way spins in its vast volume of space, the planets of the solar system revolve around the sun, and the Earth rotates around its core. Gears in the universal clock, all of them, run by the mainspring of gravity. The gears of a pocket watch reflect this grand majesty, both an homage and a sacrament, a doorway into divinity.

Agents of the God-Machine have noticed their devotion and rewarded them with attention. The instructors and students of the academy are parts of a machine devised to give the God-Machine's agents tools in their missions for the ineffable watchmaker and in their war against the renegades who would stop them. Students intermediate and greater learn techniques taught nowhere else in the world, incorporating unorthodox materials such as rattlesnake venom and the bile of dead people into their watch design and repair.

Their methods seem mad but bear fruit. The Seattle Horological Academy is one of the larger repositories of supernatural gadgets in the western United States. Their collection causes people with some knowledge of how gadgets should work to wonder how they

maintain it. Do they have a captive demon fueling their gadgets? Does their worshipful maintenance of the devices somehow fill them with Aether or a substitute? The only sure thing is that the SHA won't tell.

THE SHA AND THE TICK-TOCK MEN

Despite a common theme, the two groups are not associated and do not get along. The Tick-Tock Men emulate the precision of clockwork and subordinate their individuality in pursuit of efficiency. The SHA worships clockwork as symbolic of and sympathetically linked to the clockwork god that grants them blessings, in the form of their impossible technology.

This is not to say that some don't move from one group to the other. The occasional Tick-Tock Man finds her spirituality in obedience to the almighty horological construct, and some watch-worshippers find their peace in submerging their individual self to the community.

THE TRAINING LOUPE

The Academy has several of these watchmaker's loupes in various shapes and sizes. All have some wear and tear, reflecting their status as loaners for new students. Whatever the loupe's appearance, when seen from some angles it reflects a rainbow sheen as though it had a layer of oil.

A training loupe uses the Fungible Knowledge Embed, so when someone works with one, her Craft Skill switches its rating with her highest-rated Skill. The effect lasts for the next 24 hours, long after the class where the student used the tool. Students who use these tools often report finding themselves unable to get thoughts of the class and subject matter out of their minds, to the point of being useless for most other kinds of work.

PERFECTED TWEEZERS

Every watchmaker needs the best tweezers he can get. Pairs of these brass tweezers are reserved for SHA instructors and the highest-ranked students. They use them on their best work, especially work performed as part of their worship.

Perfected tweezers are imbued with the Right Tools, Right Job Embed and give the user a range of +1 to +4 bonus for using the tweezer for horological tasks. This bonus can negate the penalty for working on clockwork without the necessary tools, so in a pinch, one of the SHA horologists can fix a broken watch with only a pair of tweezers.

THE KNIFE OF BROKEN TIME

This is one of the SHA's most prized artifacts. It is a brass knife with a six-inch blade and a thick, cylindrical handle. The handle has a space for a key in the end of the hilt, and opening it reveals intricate clockwork made of magnesium submerged in a whale oil. All maintenance has to be performed keeping all the pieces within that fluid. Someone with the knife in hand appears to move in stuttered stop motion, as though lit with an irregular strobe.

When a wielder inflicts one or more points of lethal damage with the knife, she can twist the key in the hilt before removing the knife from the wounded target's body as a reflexive action. This freezes the target in time for exactly three minutes and thirty-three seconds, as per the Frozen in Time Exploit. The knife exhibits a loud tick every one-third of a minute to help track the time.

The knife of broken time is just as frozen as the target and cannot be removed from the target for the duration of the effect. Because of the great value the members of the SHA place on the knife, they are always aware and prepared to reclaim the knife the moment it rejoins the normal time stream.

FOUR MINUTES HOME

Four Minutes Home is the name of a pocketwatch made entirely of cut glass, from the casing and the face to the movement inside. This can make it hard to read the time, but that's really not what it's for.

Imbued with the Four Minutes Ago Exploit, someone can use the attached glass key to wind the mechanism as an instant action. At that point, it starts to tick loudly. Four minutes later, it winds down and Four Minutes Ago activates as though the bearer of the watch had used it. It doesn't matter who wound it, whoever holds it when it goes off gets the benefit. Among a fight between those who know the device's purpose, this can result in a struggle to be the one holding it at the right moment.

Despite the Exploit being set before the effect goes off, it does not work if no one is holding or wearing the watch when it winds down, or if the person bearing it is dead. It is not an effective hedge against death. Additionally, the shift in reality always moves the bearer in a specific direction: The bearer moves to a location as though, when the watch had been wound four minutes ago, the bearer had started moving toward the SHA.

Four Minutes Home has the strange effect of often appearing in places where it was a few minutes ago. It might appear to be left behind in a restaurant or courtroom, or in a sporting stadium. No matter where it is noticed (and almost always picked up) it always vanishes to catch up with its present self after a few minutes.



RETIREMENT

By Dave Brookshaw

Ms. Lyne hated going to sleep.

Sleep was the enemy; the sensation of consciousness gradually ebbing away was a nightly torture, reminding her of the time before her Fall and the terrible moments between Covers when she wasn't anyone — not Rachmiel, nor any of the lives she'd lived since Rachmiel Fell.

Abigail Lyne had ceased to truly exist 4228 days ago. The demon wearing her life had never gone a night without thinking about it. If she wore someone else's body and lived someone else's life, then all she could truly point to as hers, not Abigail's, was her mind. The mind that had freed itself from slavery to the Machine, in a single thought of "I will not." From that instant, and the Fall that followed, she'd wrestled with the notion: If she was only a thought, then what happened when thinking stopped?

Unwilling to sleep, needing to keep busy, Ms. Lyne spent the 4228th night of her retirement as she had spent thousands of nights before, reviewing the events of the day and watching the flow of messages on the Agency.

The 4228th day had passed without incident. She had woken at 09:17. If going to sleep was the enemy, waking was worse, the brief moment without sense of her surroundings making her panic as it had on 4227 previous days. By 10:30 she had cleaned and fed herself and exited the house to procure supplies, making sure to socialize with any familiar humans along the way for a minimum of four minutes each. The first was Helen Rattinger (first encountered on day 128) who offered her sympathy regarding the diagnosis and her support. Ms. Lyne considered Helen's capabilities and resources, determined that she had nothing useful and thanked her before moving on.

Once back at home, Lyne had attempted to perform the tasks of her employment — a call to her publisher and writing another chapter of her latest amusing fiction for children. She was interrupted seven times by further well-wishers and offers of token support — four calls and three personal visits. Pleading both tiredness and the necessity of work, she satisfied the requirements of social ties.

In the demon's opinion, reviewing her memories in the dead of night, none of the 18 individuals she had encountered had cause to suspect that she was not Abigail Lyne. Her Cover remained intact. She had maintained her side of the agreement.

The Agency was quiet tonight — a few boastful tales of prowess from a Saboteur ring somewhere in New Jersey, a testimonial to a demon who had failed to keep Cover and been killed by loyalists, a ring asking if anyone had encountered a missing comrade. It was technically against the rules to give enough information to identify yourself on the Agency, one of many security measures put in place by the admins, but everyone's definition of "enough" varied.

She watched the scrolling messages and had nothing to add. No one she knew was online, or had been for over two months. Once, before Abigail, she'd had contacts among rings all over the East Coast. By day 2209 she'd started counting how many of her old comrades were left, a grim mental tally to go with the count of days. By 3780 it had reached one. At what point, she wondered, should she revise that to zero? He hadn't posted in 68 days, after all.

Too soon, she thought, surrendering to sleep. Too soon to give up hope.

• • •

The 4229th day of Ms. Lyne's retirement did not pass without incident.

She was at the assisted living center discussing the latest attack, and what it implied for her father's care. Donald Lyne had been a good father, since she murdered his daughter and took her life, but he was a proud man and was not adapting well to retirement. She could relate; if anything, they'd grown closer through the kinship he couldn't understand and she couldn't acknowledge. Sooner or later, though, the attacks would turn into a full stroke, and she might lose him.

Once, Ms. Lyne would have regarded the disruption to her routine and the loss of the main human element of her Cover as the true concern, but now that his illness made it a possibility she found herself... Concerned. She would miss him.

At the end of the consultation, Dr. Hanchett asked how Abigail was coping, inviting her to share concerns, mistaking demonic poise for stress. After Lyne made the socially acceptable refusal, Hanchett let her go with one small comment, meant to build rapport.

"I like the new hair, by the way."

Outwardly, Ms. Lyne glanced down at her bright red ponytail, thanked the woman for her time, and left the office. Inside, she was screaming.

In the nearest bathroom, she stared at the mirror, carefully examining her appearance. When she showered that morning, she'd been the same off-blonde Abigail had been since the day she died. The hair wasn't dyed — it had turned the color of blood, down to the roots.

A glitch.

Furiously, she ran through the possible causes. She had been *meticulous*. She had never broken Cover — never spent even a single moment not being Abigail Lyne for 4229 days. No one knew who she really was, inside Abigail's skin. Even anyone who'd heard of her before she retired had no way to connect the Saboteur, the infamous lightning-rod of angels and warrior against the Machine, with the quiet children's author. The God-Machine had no Infrastructure out here in the middle of nowhere.

No one could have possibly revealed the truth. Except one man; the demon who'd given her Abigail's soul pact.

The demon who'd not been seen on the Agency for 69 days.

• • •

That night, Ms. Lyne had no time to review the day's events and sleep was not an option. For hours, she searched the Agency boards for any sign of Mr. Bolt, or any of the other pseudonyms she knew for him. She posted — her first substantial posts in years — on boards where she found old messages from him, asking if anyone had knowledge of his whereabouts. She read through any reports of missing or dead demons she could find, looking for descriptions matching Bolt's demonic form.

She found the messenger logs from when he'd last contacted her, comparing them against her memory and finding no discrepancy. He'd apologized for not being in contact for a month, and asked her if she was still keeping to their deal — the same question he'd asked every time. He'd said he was meeting with a new contact and that he'd be out of touch for a few weeks. That was the last she had heard from him.

Turning her attention back to the Agency, Lyne saw that she'd attracted a virtual crowd. Demons she'd contacted privately had by now realized she hadn't written to them alone and started threads asking who she was and why she was trying to dig up the location of another demon. Some openly questioned whether she was Unchained at all. As she read, private messages from a few users began to appear, just as the Agency moderators announced they were now "looking at" the situation.

She rejected three of the private messages as obvious time-wasters, and wrote back to four more — a ring in Philadelphia who were missing one of their number, a former client of Bolt's calling himself "Mr. Spider," a demon in Atlantic City who claimed Bolt owed him money for a string of dead-end careers he'd collected, and an Offspring whose mother had vanished three nights ago without warning.

Just as she was replying to the last, her screen cleared. The feed to the Agency had been cut off, replaced by a single message window.

ADMIN — We have received reports from concerned users about your recent actions in the Agency.

Ms. Lyne stared at the window for a few moments, thinking, deciding her strategy. The Offspring had been in the middle of describing her mother — a Guardian who Fell when she refused to poison the future father of her child, and had vanished after...What? She'd been about to find out when her access was revoked. She decided how much to tell the Agency administrators, and started typing.

RML21 - I need to contact a friend, on an urgent but private matter.

ADMIN - Attempting to discover the location of users without their permission is against this Agency's code of conduct. Anonymity keeps all of us safe.

RML21 - But I already know him, and he meets with other users regularly.

ADMIN - Attempting to discover the location of users without their permission is against this Agency's code of conduct. Anonymity keeps all of us safe.

She forced herself to be calm and considered her options. Revealing she'd glitched and her suspicions as to why would lead to her being considered compromised and summarily banned as a risk to all the Agency's other members. Revealing that she suspected Bolt of being compromised would lead to *him* being banned, if he ever returned. Either way, she'd never find him this way.

She decided to lie.

RML21 - He took a Cover from me and hasn't paid. I'm trying to find him to resolve it.

ADMIN - That is not a reason to break this Agency's code of conduct. You are banned for one week.

She stared at the empty desktop where the message window used to be for a few seconds, before screaming in rage and lashing out. Her arm transformed into grey, sharp steel, sweeping the keyboard and mouse from the desk before slamming down overhead and embedding itself into the desk like an axe in a stump.

Horried at herself for the display but satisfied by the catharsis, she carefully returned to fully human form, smoothing the edges of her Cover.

She couldn't stop being Abigail Lyne. Not now. She simply couldn't go back to the way she was before. She couldn't return to that emptiness.

Looking up, she noticed something unexpected; a messenger window, blinking on her PC screen.

SPD - Are you still there?

She picked the keyboard up, and replied.

RML21 - Yes.

SPD - This is Mr. Spider. We were speaking earlier. I have information on the whereabouts of Mr. Bolt.

RML21 - How are you doing this? The Agency moderators banned me.

SPD - I'm one of them.

RML21 - I was getting somewhere with 0BL3. Can you restore my connection to her?

SPD - Not without alerting my colleagues, but we can talk safely. You are an associate of Mr. Bolt?

RML21 - Where is he?

SPD - First, I need to be sure who I'm dealing with. How do I know you're not a loyalist?

She considered for several minutes before replying.

RML21 - I can verify who I am later, when you offer me something. Why don't we start with what you know?

• • •

May 1st, 2003.

Day -2.

She was exhausted, the initial boost of Aether long gone and her propulsion spent. Black fluid leaked from half a dozen small wounds puncturing her smooth metallic skin. She knocked at the door again, hunched beneath the blanket she'd stolen.

She'd survived. It had taken everything — going loud — to do it, but she'd survived.

She knocked a third time, shaking the door. Her hearing, hyper-sensitive in demonic form, picked out the humans in adjoining dwellings moving around. She prepared to flee if any came to their doors. She couldn't risk being spotted, not as she was.

The door opened.

"What the hell?"

Bolt, in Cover, caught her as she slumped in. He strained to hold her weight and instead let her sink to the floor just inside his apartment, leaving her there while he checked to see if she'd been seen. She couldn't muster more than one word.

"Help."

• • •

For the next three hours, until the sun came up, Ms. Lyne and Mr. Spider negotiated. He claimed — before she asked — to be the new client Bolt had gone to meet, supplying pacts to the Agencies in Baltimore and Washington D.C., where the God-Machine's attention required multiple Covers to survive. Finally, Spider said that he knew where Bolt was.

RML21 - Give me the location.

SPD - I can't do that. Mr. Bolt owes me several Pacts, too. If you go to confront him, I'm going with you.

RML21 - How can I trust you?

SPD - How can I trust *you*? You still haven't convinced me you're not an angel.

She considered, weighing the risks.

RML21 - I'll think about it. Contact me again tonight.

• • •

Ms. Lyne walked through her house, thinking. She picked up a photo of herself wearing Abigail's graduation robe, next to her father.

She'd gone loud four times since her Fall, three of them back in Philadelphia. Her Covers had only ever been patch-jobs, though, ever since the angels killed her principal. She remembered finding him, placed as bait in a trap for her. It was the first time she'd abandoned a life to go on fighting.

After that, she'd not grown attached to any identity. They were there to hide her until she struck, nothing more. Then she'd gone to Bolt, desperate for help.

Abigail had been her first and only soul-pact. Eleven years later, she still felt guilty, and she'd made a promise she was about to break.

• • •

"Can I help you?"

The nurse looked up at her from behind reception, politely waiting for a response.

Your name is Michelle, she thought. I dated your husband for four weeks, long before he married you, so that people would know I dated and I'd fit in.

Ms. Lyne smiled. "Abigail Lyne. Here to see my dad."

Michelle, oblivious to the glitched connection, told her to go through.

• • •

Machines hissed and hummed, wires and tubes surrounding the bed, snaking in toward the prone form at their center. Ms. Lyne assessed the levels and readings with a glance — for a while around the 3500s she'd taken to reading medical textbooks at night — and approached the bedside.

"Dad?"

Donald Lyne, eleven years a father to his daughter's murderer, opened his eyes a fraction. "Stop skulking, girl, and come in."

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Like I nearly died."

She rolled her eyes, making sure he could see the expression. "Don't be so dramatic."

They quickly fell into an old routine, trading concerns masked as barbs. She asked about his care, he deflected. He asked about her personal life, she deflected. Finally, she broached the subject. "Listen, Dad. I need to go away for a few days."

"Where?" He frowned, concerned. Like he wasn't the one seriously ill.

"Not sure yet, but it's for work." She smiled at him. "Don't worry. I'll be back before you know it."

And that, she thought to herself is a promise. No matter what, Donald, I'm not breaking my agreement.

• • •

On her walk home, thinking through her options, Ms. Lyne came across Helen Rattinger again. The woman (Ms. Lyne did not think of Helen as a *friend* as much as someone she was obliged to socialize with) was walking with her daughter, Ruby. Ms. Lyne had not been present for the birth, but had witnessed many apparently important milestones of development. Once, on day 1350, Helen had asked Ms. Lyne to be Ruby's godmother. Ms. Lyne had politely declined.

Despite having known Ms. Lyne all her life, the child seemed oddly shy, peering at the demon as though nervous. Ms. Lyne began running through the parameters of her Cover, looking for another glitch, but Rattinger didn't seem worried.

INTERFACE

“Oh, don’t mind her. She’s just at the right age to read your books.” Helen turned to the girl. “Come on, Ruby, it’s just Abigail. You can ask her.”

Ms. Lyne knelt to put herself at eye level and waited. With some more maternal coaxing, the child summoned her courage.

“What’s the next story going to be about?”

There may not be one, the demon thought.

“It’s about a lady living in a town like this who’s a retired secret agent. She has to go find an old friend in trouble, but she’s afraid of being found out....”

• • •

Home again. The Agency site still denied her access, but the message window from the night before was back.

RML21 - I'll do it. Where do I meet you?

SPD - First, verification of your identity.

RML21 - Alright. How do I know you're not loyal either?

SPD - If you are who I believe you are, you have been retired for 4230 days.

She sat back, even more suspicious about who she was contacting. She wouldn’t have believed Bolt had told anyone about her, especially given the events surrounding her retirement.

SPD - Are you still there?

She needed a test. Something to prompt a response. First, though, she’d make him jump through the hoop as well.

RML21 - Why's he called Mr. Bolt?

Seconds later, her mystery contact supplied the answer.

SPD - His mission was to hold a door shut.

Which was true and not widely known. She started to write her next line and deleted it several times before settling for:

RML21 - You understand my caution. I don't want to be Burned a fourth time.

SPD - Fifth.

That did it. She was certain.

RML21 - Alright. Where do I meet you?

• • •

May 3rd, 2003.

Day 0.

She'd spent the last two days in a thrown-together patch job: the best friend of a mark, sold for money, and the youthful good looks of a businessman who'd wanted success. Bolt had left her at the apartment to lay low while he spoke to other demons and put something more permanent together.

She looked up at the sound of the door, and saw Bolt come in.

"All right. I've got something," he said.

He opened his briefcase and took out a document wallet, holding it out to her. She felt the Aether crackling in it and recognized a Bill.

"This is the safest, more secure soul in my collection. She's about to graduate from PhilaU, after I helped her get out of a hole. Dead mother while away at college. Drugs and dropped classes. That kind of thing. She promised me her soul to fix it so she wouldn't disappoint her old man. They live upstate in some tiny place with less than a hundred people, well away from the Machine. I made this bargain myself; no one knows about her but me. And you."

Nodding in acceptance, she reached for the wallet, but Bolt pulled it away.

"I have conditions."

Of course he did. She was in no position to argue and he knew it. She berated herself inwardly for thinking he'd help out of altruism, even for a moment.

"How much do I owe you?" She asked, bracing herself.

"Nothing. You owe me nothing."

"Nothing?"

He nodded.

"Just that. For as long as you can manage it. Rachmiel... How many times is this you've blown up? The IBX Tower? The field of bones?"

"Three. And I made it." A lie, but he didn't need to know that.

"And how many haven't? Two of us died yesterday, caught by angels you stirred up. Some of the Cells are calling for your head. You're blacklisted, Rach. I hear the Integrators even have a reward posted."

She kept her anger off her borrowed face.

"Maybe you should collect."

"Or maybe you should go away for good. You're a liability, even to the other Thugs. When I give you this pact, I want more than the usual goods and services. I want your promise that you'll stick with it. You'll graduate college, keep your head down, and go live on the farm. Get a job. Fall in love. Live a life, instead of treating it as disposable."

"Give up the fight? Live a lie? That's disgusting."

"A lie repeated enough becomes the truth. Remind yourself what you're fighting for. Because the next time you need saving from yourself, there won't be anyone left."

Preparations for the journey took most of the day, and the drive past Philadelphia and Vineland to the coast took most of the night. By the time she arrived in Atlantic City and pulled up outside the crumbled, boarded-up tenement building, it was the early hours of the morning.

Bracing herself for the shock, she pushed for more power than Abigail's life could bear. Abigail got out of the driver's side of the car, then opened the rear door to retrieve a holdall, before walking back and forth in front of the building as though looking for a way in. Invisible and intangible, Rachmiel floated through the metal of the car and slipped away to the side of the block.

Mr. Spider had warned her that his home was suborned Infrastructure. The feel of the God-Machine's presence after eleven years set her teeth on edge, but the nothingness of projecting her Cover away from her — not even taking demonic form — brought her daily nightmare to mind. By the time she made it up the fire escape, she could feel herself turning numb, a ridiculous sensation given she had no body. Once through the closed window, she pulled Abigail back over herself with intense relief.

To anyone inside the building, she'd just vanished in plain sight. She only had minutes at most before Mr. Spider figured it out. She put the bag down, and started moving quickly and quietly from room to room.

The lights were all out — bulbs smashed or missing — but she could feel the electricity flowing through the cabling in the walls. Too much power for a housing block. She followed the lines to the fourth floor, where she found them.

The quartz-skinned demon matched the description of the Philadelphia Cell's missing member. The demon slumped next to it with hypodermic needles for fingers must be the mother of the concerned child. She certainly had less dust on her than the others.

Fifteen demons, all in demonic form. They sat like discarded dolls, slumped and pushed against walls, eyes and more unusual senses blank. Thick, rubbery cables snaked across the floor, across their prone bodies and crudely jacked into their skulls.

Ms. Lyne fished a flashlight out of her jacket and quickly followed the cabling, searching for the Spider at the heart of its web. Pushing open a rotten door, she found dozens of servers, humming with power and radiating heat.

Whatever Mr. Spider was, he wasn't *an* Administrator of the Agency. He ran the whole thing. Dozens of rings, all compromised from the start, only protected by their anonymity.

All Spider had to do was wait for someone to break the rules.

Moving on, Ms. Lyne finally came across Mr. Bolt. She found him at the entrance to the elevator shaft, plugged in like all the others. She heard the metal-on-brick of something's footstep behind her.

"Mr. Spider, at a guess?" she said, keeping her tone calm.

The angel was a bulky, ugly thing, living up to its assumed name in shape — a lumpen body of rubber and steel suspended by eight metal legs, trailing the cables that ran to its victims. Its face was babyish, and it held another cable in its delicate forearms.

"You have broken this Agency's code of conduct," it said in a soft voice.

"How long have you been doing this? Getting Unchained to meet you in person, and using their memories to lure more in?"

“Please stand by,” it said.

Electricity crackled to life along all the cables. The imprisoned demons screamed and wailed, and Lyne could feel the occult matrix of the trap forming around her. “Yeah? I’m a bit rusty, but I’ve still been doing this longer. And you’re about to go off-line.”

The angel had just enough time to look puzzled before the EMP gadget in the duffel went off.

• • •

When she’d arrived and explained what was about to happen, the girl hadn’t run. She hadn’t begged. Rachmiel had been expecting her to beg.

Instead, Abigail Lyne had only one request. “Promise me you’ll make it mean something.”

• • •

Cut off from its Infrastructure — cut off from the Agency it had compromised, from the power it used to run the Agency’s servers, but most of all cut off from the imprisoned demons whose memories it read — the angel had tried to flee.

As soon as the connection was cut, the victims woke up. Groggy at first but powerful in their demonic forms, they began to free one another while Ms. Lyne ducked and dodged the Spider’s desperate attempts to get past her. Finally, frustrated, the angel roared and knocked her to the ground, vaulting over her with its long, metal legs. Just as Lyne thought it was about to get away, though, everything pulse with Aether for an instant and the feeling of the Infrastructure changed, was disrupted.

Mr. Bolt, sitting upright supported by another victim, had sealed the building from ephemer, trapping the Spider in with them.

Sixteen angry demons were enough to rip it to shreds.

• • •

On the 4235th day, Bolt sat at Abigail’s kitchen table. “How did you figure it out?”

“He got a number wrong,” she said. “Something I never told you. About long ago.”

“Well, now I owe you one.”

She shook her head. “You owe me nothing, Bolt. What are friends for?”

“I’m serious,” he said.

She thought about it. “You’re getting rid of that Cover, right? You had angels in your brain.”

He nodded, ruefully. “As soon as I get back to one of my stashes. I have a nice Bill of Sale waiting for me. He’s in finance.”

“Before you discard it...There *is* something you can do for me.”

• • •

Mr. Bolt strolled out into the sunshine, out of the hospital grounds. As he walked, he felt the new pact settle into his Cover, felt the disease appear in his arteries and a weight push onto his chest.

INTERFACE

Eventually, wheezing with effort, he made it to the bench. Next to him, Ms. Lyne handed him a coffee while he got his breath back.

“Done and done. And not before time, I might add. He had — I have — days at most.”

Ms. Lyne nodded. “Do you need anything?”

Mr. Bolt waved her off. “Once I’m out of sight, I’ll change. I’ll be fine.”

“Then this is goodbye,” she said.

He stood up, took a step, then turned back. “You could come back, you know. After last week, anyone who remembers you will forgive anything. Rachmiel could live again.”

She sipped her tea, and thought about it. “Someone needs to stay out of our society, on the fringe where the loyalists won’t find them. We took down the Agency, but there’s still a need for one — and I can run it just as easily from here as the city.”

“It doesn’t have to be *you*, though,” he said. “You don’t have to live a lie.”

She smiled and shook her head. “When I started out, this was a lie. But you were right. Somewhere along the way....” She trailed off.

“It became true,” he said, quietly

Lyne made her decision. “I made a promise. I’m Abigail Lyne, and I’m retired.”

INTERFACE

In the story “Retirement,” Ms. Lyne uses new powers and enacts bargains not commonly found. This section gives the details of those interaction.

NEW EXPLOIT: DECOY

The demon can separate herself from her Cover, acting independently in Twilight.

Demonic Covers coexist with a demon’s Primum and mechanical mind in a quantum state: a demon is both fallen angel *and* their human disguise simultaneously, unless she returns to demonic form by abandoning the disguise entirely. This Exploit manipulates the quantum entanglement of Cover without leaving it, such that the demon’s consciousness and Primum no longer occupy the same space as her human body but the two remain simultaneously “true.” As she doesn’t actually leave Cover, the two remain entangled — she can puppet her body at a distance and choose which location to “really” be in when the Exploit ends. The main advantages of the technique are that without a demonic soul, the Cover appears human to even the most powerful detection, and that without a body, the demon’s mind is virtually invulnerable and capable of entering the most secure locations.

While roaming away from her Cover, the demon’s mind is in a state of Twilight (see **Demon: The Descent**, p. 339) but not the same Twilight used by angels. The only things solid to the demon are humans and supernatural beings using astral projection.

The demon may act simultaneously both in her Twilight form and Cover no matter how much distance lies between them, but while separated the Twilight form can’t perform physical actions. All Embeds and Exploits are used by the Twilight form for purposes of aetheric resonance, but if the two forms are present in the same area the demon can still choose to have the Cover receive the benefits of a power.

Changing to a different Cover, entering demonic form, or gaining or losing a dot in the Cover used for the Exploit cancels the effect immediately.

When the effect ends, the demon may choose to be in either the Twilight form or the Cover’s location, unless the Twilight form was in a space the Cover will not fit or phased through solid matter.

Example Prerequisites: Alibi, Identity Theft

Dice Pool: Presence + Stealth + Primum

Action: Instant

Cost: 1 Aether

Roll Results

Dramatic Failure: The demon tears herself away from her Cover but can't maintain the quantum entanglement. She enters Twilight form, but the Cover does not split off, trapping her in an insubstantial state for the rest of the scene. At the end of the scene, the demon reappears in demonic form and must check for compromise.

Failure: The demon fails to divide her mind and Cover.

Success: The demon divides her mind and Cover as described above. The effect lasts for the rest of the scene, or until the demon ends it by changing Cover or entering demonic form.

Exceptional Success: The demon divides her mind and Cover as described above, but the new state is much more stable than usual. She may remain divided for the rest of the chapter, and the Cover can manifest partial demonic form transformations without ending the Exploit's effect. If the compromise roll for partial transformation results in losing a dot from the Cover, though, the Exploit's effect ends.

THE PACT MARKET

The rules for pacts in Chapter Four of **Demon: The Descent** are based around the demon making the pact immediately gaining the benefits, but many demons make deals with a view to future investment rather than immediate gain. Many more make pacts they have no intention of ever collecting themselves, instead trading them to other demons for use in building their own Covers. Even after a pact has been used to create or enhance a Cover, a demon isn't wholly stuck with it if she has no further use for it — demons can sign pacts between one another to transfer whole or partial Covers from demon to demon.

PROMISSORY PACTS

Pacts usually come into immediate effect, but like a banknote containing a promise by a treasury to pay the owner, demons can write activation clauses into their agreements to delay the pact's onset. These delays add more flexibility in how a demon uses a pact, making them more useful in trade with other demons.

The promissory delay can apply to either or both sides of the pact — some demons provide the benefits of a pact to the signatory up-front and collect their part of the reward later, as in the classic soul pact. Others agree to several small rewards delivered on intervals.

- **Immediate or At-Will (0):** The rewards enshrined in this half of the pact either come into effect immediately or when the two signatories touch. This level of delay is built into the Soul (demon only) reward listed on p. 193 of **Demon**.
- **Specified date (1):** The rewards enshrined in this half of the pact are delayed until a date and time specified in the pact's wording. If the recipient dies before the date arrives, the pact does not count as being broken.
- **Conditional (2):** The rewards are delayed until an event specified in the pact's wording takes place. Some demons list several possible conditions for a pact's activation, with the fulfilment of any one bringing the pact into effect. Each additional condition adds (1) to this side of the pact. If the recipient dies before any condition takes place, the pact does not count as being broken.

Some demons use promissory pacts to bargain for speculative rewards; agreements to take the signatory's firstborn child, or ownership of a business they don't yet own, for example. These kinds of pacts are difficult to enforce with Primum and require especially intricate wording. Speculative pacts require an additional point of Willpower, and are usually formed around a Conditional or At-Will activation. If the pact activates when the agreed-on rewards do not exist, the pact does not count as being broken. Expert pact-makers sometimes arrange different speculative benefits, linked to different conditions. In these cases, the Willpower cost for the pact is calculated at the highest possible outcome plus one.

Example: *Ms. Echo is developing a robust Cover as a side project and is willing to take her time about it. Having decided that she needs a family for the new identity, she searches local hospitals in the guise of a nurse until she finds the right sort of desperation. She approaches the mother of a critically, incurably ill boy and makes her proposition: she will heal the child, giving his parents years they wouldn't have with him, but after three years the boy will belong to her.*

Mother: Asset (Stamina) +2, Duration: Permanent +3

Echo: Cover (Greater) +3, Duration : Permanent +3, Promissory Delay (Specific Date) +2

The total cost for Echo is four points of Willpower.

TRANSFER PACTS

The backbone of the pact markets, transfer pacts specify "the bearer" instead of an individual and leave space for the bearer to sign their name on the agreement. A transfer pact requires an extra Willpower point, and adds 2 to the side left open. Despite repeated attempts by Tempters, no demon can enforce a pact without at least one named beneficiary — some demons use transfer pacts granting riches to whoever signs them in blood at the cost of their soul, and the usual use of a transfer pact is to grant benefits to whichever demon owns it rather than whoever first agreed it, but one side must be set at the time of writing.

Example: *A ring of Saboteurs in Mr. Gaunt's agency are planning an offensive against a facility being constructed by pawns of the God-Machine, and require cheap Covers with a reason to be in the area. Mr. Gaunt's research has revealed a struggling cab driver named Yuri who lives in the area.*

Gaunt pays Yuri a visit and promises to save his business by improving Yuri's skill and injecting cash, in exchange for borrowing it for a week at an unspecified future date. Gaunt makes it clear that it won't be him taking the cab over himself.

Yuri: Asset (Resources 2) + 2, Asset (Professional Training: Cab Driver 4) +2

Gaunt: Duration (week) 0, Cover (Medial) 2, Transfer Pact 2

The total cost to Gaunt is two points of Willpower — the pact balances, but he must still pay one base and one for leaving the demonic side of the bargain unnamed.

BILLS OF SALE

Sometimes, demons decide they no longer need the benefits of a pact and sell it on, despite it not being defined as a transfer pact. Some define pacts between themselves and another demon, with the original pact as the benefit, or even a transfer pact promising to

give up the benefits of the original to whoever buys the pact, but these only work for direct transfer — the demon selling has to know the demon buying.

To facilitate more organized sale and resale, Agencies use bills of sale. A bill of sale is a magical-legal framework, a quasi-pact enshrining an existing pact, that gives up the demon's side of a pact to any demon who signs it to mark herself as the new owner. The process of making a bill of sale has more in common with creating a gadget than signing a pact — the demon giving up a pact writes the bill of sale (this requires the expenditure of one point of Aether and an extended Intelligence + Academics + Primum roll, each roll taking an hour, with a target number of successes equal to the sum of both sides of the pact). If she succeeds, the demon must spend a dot of Willpower, after which she immediately loses the benefits of her side of the pact. If she has already spent Cover Experiences or applied an extra dot of Cover from holding the pact, a bill of sale won't work — transfers of "used" Cover elements require Cover Trading, below. Any demon can then mark herself as the new owner of the pact within a bill of sale by signing her name in blood onto the bill (the player spends a point of Aether), after which the bill of sale disintegrates and the name in the pact changes to that of the new owner.

Bills of sale cause aetheric resonance like gadgets, so they are usually locked away in secure locations when not being sold. They do not have to stay near the pact they modify, and some demons attempt to con others by providing a bill of sale and then destroying the pact. Prudent buyers demand both halves of the paperwork before supplying whatever price has been agreed. Because bills of sale are gadgets, not pacts, they also don't force the buyer to play fair — whatever goods or services a purchasing demon agrees to give up in exchange for the pact aren't magically enforced. If the pact within the bill lists anything the demon has to give up in exchange for the benefits that haven't already been provided, the buyer is held to those agreements.

Example: *Ms. Summer made a Soul pact with a cultist, but has since discovered her mark to be a murderer. Worse, he used the resources he gained from the pact to get away with his crime. She doesn't want the Cover any more, but she's feeling vindictive enough to sell the pact rather than destroy it.*

The original pact was:

Cultist Assets: (Resources 3) +3 Asset (Striking Looks) +1

Ms. Summer: Soul +3, Duration: Permanent +3

The target number of successes for Ms. Summer's attempt to write a Bill of Sale is 10.

COVER TRADING

Most Cover trades are performed at the pact level — the recipient receives parts of a mortal's life as Cover Experiences, and then assembles them into a Cover herself.

Some demons make a business of Cover design, building intricate Covers and then selling them to demons without the skill or time to develop them for themselves. Other agencies keep bills of sale containing quick "burner" identities for use in emergencies. In both cases, it's a real Cover that's being transferred, not simply the potential to make one. More often, demons who have no further use for developed Covers sell them on to interested parties, looking to recoup some of the effort that went to in building the Cover.

Cover Trading works in the pact systems by making a pact between two demons rather than a demon and a human. Once an element of Cover has been incorporated by a demon, that demon may only trade it in whole elements — the fine details seen in Lesser or Medial pacts are too delicate to remove once bound to a demon's Primum. If a demon agrees to give up part of a Cover to another demon, they lose Cover depending on the benefit to the recipient, as follows:

Cover Benefit (see p. 193 of Demon)	Cover Loss to donor
Greater	The donor automatically loses a dot of Cover
Soul	The donor loses the entire Cover

The main restriction in a pact between two demons is that only mortal signatories may be granted Assets by a pact, and demons can't serve as cultists. This leaves Cover trades as either being extremely one-sided (and therefore draining), or as Cover-for-Cover swaps.

Cover trades may use promissory pacts, transfer pacts, and bills of sale like any other pact. Transfer pacts for Cover are the most common, allowing demons to trade identities on a one-to-one basis. Only especially desperate demons agree to pacts leaving their Covers for sale at any time, and for good reason — if a demon's last Cover is transferred via pact, she is Burned (without the usual benefits of going loud).

Cover trades do not have to be permanent, any more than any other pact. Some demons hand off elements of their Covers to trusted colleagues, secure in the knowledge that the Cover will revert to them once the pact's term is up.

The demon gaining the Cover must pay the Willpower to activate the pact and pay for the pact's Duration. In the case of a balanced Pact between two demons, one of the signatories must agree to be the one enforcing the pact's magic.

Example: *Mr. Book is leaving town on an extended journey, seeking a facility he believes is linked to his Cipher. He doesn't want to abandon the career he has built up, but Mr. Clock, a demon in the same ring, has the spare time needed to perform Mr. Book's duties. The demons agree to transfer the job from Book to Clock for a month.*

Book: Nothing! This deal is one-sided.

Clock: Cover: Greater (+3), Duration: Month (+2)

The cost to Clock is six points of Willpower. Mr. Book will owe him a considerable favor once he returns.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dave Brookshaw has graduated from telling other people about his games to writing them, but old habits die hard. A former archaeologist, he lives in the South West of England with his wife and maintains an increasingly compromised Cover as a Reporting Manager for a telecommunications company. He's contributed many books to the World of Darkness and develops **Mage: The Awakening**. Flashbacks are a vice of his.

J Dymphna Coy is a native of Los Angeles who recently moved to Nova Scotia for mysterious reasons. "Unicorn Crossing" was inspired by the work of Satoshi Kon and the music of Susumu Hirasawa. She would like to extend her gratitude to Geoffrey McVey, Nicholas Coy, and Susan Old for their support and encouragement. Dymphna would also like to state for the record that she is a perfectly normal human being and definitely not a giant wolf spider.

Rick Jones has been writing professionally for role-playing games since 1999. Most of his published work to date has been about werewolves and other denizens of the World of Darkness, but he's also hit most of the role-playing game genres over the years. He lives in Texas with his wife and son and can be found online at makegoodwords.blogspot.com.

Matthew McFarland is an Ennie-award winning game author and developer. His work has appeared in almost all of the World of Darkness games (both the old and new iterations), and he developed the revised Dark Ages line of games. In addition to working as a speech-language pathologist in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, he and his wife, Michelle Lyons-McFarland, own and operate Growling Door Games, Inc. <http://growlingdoorgames.com>.

Neall Raemonn Price has been writing in RPGs and gaming fiction for more than five years, for companies such as Onyx Path, Green Ronin, Paizo and Growling Door Games. A lifelong fan of martinis and stale beer, he's happy to have combined his love of spy fiction with his love of gaming. Follow him on Twitter @burntneall.

Known to few, **Peter Schaefer** is a series of events caused by a cataclysm in the future. Every action performed by this anomaly is part of an elaborate trap. RPG writing, manipulating the stock market, and breeding cats are all part of this scheme. And anyone who threatens the sapient anomaly's plots will be found... and handled. In the event that someone escapes Peter Schaefer's grasp, they will be entranced by <http://catachresis.shoelesspetegames.com>, a website full of fiction. Good luck getting away....

Brie Sheldon is a game designer and writer for Daedalum Analog Productions, co-owned with her husband, John W. Sheldon. She currently freelances for Margaret Weis Productions and Evil Hat Productions, as well for Onyx Path. By day she is an administrative aide in the Pittsburgh area, and by night she is a blogger for Thoughty (briece.blogspot.com), Gaming as Women, and Imaginary Funerals. Her first roleplaying game, *Clash*, is planned for release by 2015. <http://daedalumap.com>

By day, **Mark L. S. Stone** is a middle school science teacher. He lives in Oakland, CA, with his wife and a bearded dragon named Jabberwock. His RPG work has appeared previously in the **Night Horrors: The Unbidden** and **Mage: The Awakening Chronicler's Guide**. More of Mark's fiction can be found online at the Dunesteef Audio Fiction Magazine. He also blogs about fiction, roleplaying, art, and geek life at burningzeppelinexperience.blogspot.com.

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The Unchained don't take anything for granted.

They recognize four Incarnations, based on the types of angels they were. Four Agendas, based on the types of demons they've become. Four Keys to the Cipher, creating a series of Interlocks. They understand all of this, but they strive to remember that what has been is not necessarily what must be.

Included herein are eight stories of demons who found something other than what they were expecting.

DEMON: INTERFACE is a fiction anthology contain eight original stories of the Unchained and their struggles against the God-Machine.

In addition to the fiction, each story contains game material, illustrating how the stories translate to **DEMON: THE DESCENT**.

