

EGOICAN ANGELS



A SUPERVILLAIN ROLEPLAYING GAME
By Greg Stolze

THE WORLD SHALL BE MINE!

A demon gave you superpowers and it demands evil. No, not just evil—**EEEEEVIL!**

In *Better Angels*, you play a supervillain attempting ridiculous acts of villainy in order to control the demon that gives you amazing powers—and you play the demon for the player next to you, pushing that player's supervillain to greater and greater wickedness. Do too much evil and the demon might take control entirely. Too little, and—well, it's a demon. It will find ways to punish you.

Better Angels focuses on characters' moral stances. Is your villain Insightful or Devious? Are you Cunning or Patient? Is your Courage as great as your Cruelty? Those characteristics drive your superpowers. They shape your relationship with your demon and are shaped by it in every scene.

Get ready. There are diabolical inventions to create. Enemies and rivals to thwart. Plots and schemes to launch.

AN ENTIRE WORLD TO CONQUER!

All it will cost is your soul.

BETTER ANGELS

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The title "BETTER ANGELS" is rendered in a large, bold, black font. The letters are partially engulfed in a烈火 (flame) effect, with bright orange and yellow flames at the top and sides. The background behind the title is a soft, glowing white and yellow gradient.

BETTER ANGELS

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KOMODA

ESTHER MINGES AND THE VILLAINOUS NINE

Esther Minges was driving home from work in her Honda Fit, trying to figure out how to stretch her maintenance budget across five line items when there was really only money to do one of them properly. She was paying sufficient attention to the road, but not to the sky, which was why she was profoundly surprised when something swooped down, picked up her car, and wrenched open the roof like a hungry teen tearing into a bag of Fritos.

When she saw the distinctive mask of Desecrator Dread, well-known as the most forthright and direct of the Villainous Nine, she screamed, and she kept screaming as the razor spurs on the heels of his costume sliced through her seat belt. The car fell with a thunderous crash as

he plucked her out of it (like a single curled chip, to continue the Frito analogy, though corn chips don't scream) and swooped out into the night.

"AAAAAIGH! NO, PLEASE, I WANT TO *LIVE!*!" Esther shrieked.

"You'll live," Desecrator Dread replied.

"Let me go put me down please please please..."

"Not even a 'thank you'? Clearly I caved too soon on letting you live," he said, and then they'd arrived.

They were somewhere in the mountains. A campfire burned before her, and as her eyes adjusted she took in the bulk of the infamous Cat O' Nine Tails,

the air/sea/land assault craft of the Villainous Nine. She swallowed, hard, and then recognized the distinctive profiles of the seven figures emerging into the red glow. Ripperclaw. The Mess. Violator. The Big Shot. Guts and Brains, always more dangerous together than apart. And then, arising from the fire itself, their leader: General Null.

"Hi," Null said.

"Please let me go this must be some mistake I'm nobody important oh God please don't kill me..."

"No one's going to kill you," Null said, and she noticed that his frightful fanged faceplate was unsnapped on one side, dangling loose and revealing a slight

double chin and chapped lips. “Look, calm down. Violator, d’you mind...?”	da yadda, he’s being held in an impenetrable prison beneath the Earth’s crust and so on.”	“Angels are spirits that want to do good, and demons are spirits that want to do bad. That’s clear enough, right? So what happens when an evil spirit gets into the body of an evil person?”
“Right.” The Nine’s premier psychic nodded his peculiar helmet and said, “Hey honey, mellow out, it’s fine.” Esther found herself clear-headed, so calm it was almost eerie.	“I caught that, yes.” “So we’re one short.”	Esther blinked. “You... think I can help you get him out? I can’t... I mean, I run a homeless shelter.”
“So,” Null continued. “We’re bad guys. You know this, you’ve seen us rob banks, hold various nations hostage, kidnap heads of state, threaten to blow up the moon and so on...”	“Doing a fine job with limited resources, too,” Brains added, and Guts grunted in agreement.	“EVIL!” The Mess barked, his breath making her flinch. “The rider I got in me, Shaklakar the Potent? Used to have Genghis Khan as a host. Genghis. <i>Khan</i> . Rampaged across Asia and Europe leaving piles of heads and thousands of rape victims behind him. Sure, I’ve burned down a few forests, I killed the last Lesser Spotted Prairie Chicken, kept the Eastern Seaboard browned out for three days but I don’t think there’s anything on my conscience to compare with the Golden Horde!”
“Everyone knows you,” Esther said warily.	“You’re a good person,” Violator said, in that eerie echoless voice that always sounded as if it was right behind your ear. “Genuinely decent inside. Just like we were, once.”	“What?”
“Ever wonder why we do it?”		
“Um... I guess I just figured... er...” She trailed off.		
“Insufficient mommy lovin?’” asked The Big Shot in his distinctive Texas drawl. “Yer a social worker, right? Maybe even had some sympathy for us, I reckon.”	“Did you ever wonder where we all got these crazy powers?” Ripperclaw asked.	“Mess used to be a beat cop in Detroit,” Null said. “We recruited him after he was forced off the force for whistle-blowing. Like you, he was a normal, everyday good person.”
“What do you want?” she asked.	“I figured... radiation accidents, mutations, experiments...?”	“I used to teach in an inner-city high school,” Brains said.
“You’re surely aware that Doomslaughter got captured, right? Front-page news, triumph of good, yad-	“Naw, ‘s all demons,” Guts said. “An’ them damn fool heroes? Freakin’ angels. Lucky bastards.”	“Civic reformer,” Ripperclaw rumbled.
	“I’m not sure I follow.”	

"Null here was a for-real Zen priest," Desecrator said.

"I don't believe you," Esther muttered. "This is some trick."

"Do you have a better explanation?" Brains asked. "I'm a genius who invented a supersonic plane that runs on water. Along with a material that's stronger than diamond and flexible as tissue. And selectively adherent depending on what kind of electrical current you run through it. With a few patents, I could be a multibillionaire and then go about undermining small African nations for my personal amusement. Or funding genocides or making nukes for nuts if I wanted to efficiently maximize my production of human suffering. What have I done instead? The Chicago Giggles Plague? Holding Germany's *autobahnen* hostage? C'mon."

"You killed Morris Stanwick," Esther said quietly, and Brains looked away.

"Yeah," he said. "I killed Stanwick. Rider got the better of me that day... no way out." His voice had become sad, and bitter. "But the rest of those feds just got shot in the legs. Talked it into that, told it they'd suffer

longer and slow down the rest of the pursuit."

"So you see how it is," Null broke in. "You have to walk that line. Keep your demon... entertained. It loves death and sadism and carnage but... sometimes even more, it loves spectacle. If you're flamboyant enough, you hardly have to kill anyone at all."

"Do the heroes know this?" she asked, head spinning.

The Mess shrugged. "Some don't care. Some don't know. Some don't believe. They ain't the real problem anyhow."

"No," said Null. "They're not. The real problem are people who have demons and get along with them just fine. They're the ones who don't dress up, don't take wildly evocative names, don't rob armored cars with their bare hands or steal the Liberty Bell."

"Or people who fought the good fight, Hellbinders like us, who went over the edge."

"Doomslaughter," The Big Shot said grimly.

"They're covering it up, but those Lightning League candy-

butts couldn't stop him before he wiped out a couple dozen civilians. Hell, they wouldn't have even caught him if Null here hadn't shot him in the back with that bazooka."

"It's called the 'Nullzooka,'" the General said mildly.

"So you want me to... to be like you? A 'host' for a demon parasite?"

"Yep," Brains said cheerfully. "Think it over, but not for too long."

"Take this," Ripperclaw said, holding out a strange necklace. "If you're wearing that, it'll draw Doomslaughter's spirit when it gets loose."

"Wait, I thought you said Doomslaughter was... imprisoned, trapped beneath the Earth's crust. You said it was a prison that no one could escape."

"Oh, we're not going to help him escape," Null said. "That's flat-out impossible. But if we destroy the whole place, he'll die."

"No," Esther said, flinging the amulet to their feet.
"No, I won't. I can't."

"Okay," Null said, and turned towards the plane. "C'mon troops, we're burning starlight here."

"That's... that's it?"

"You were expecting a 'No one defies the Villainous Nine' speech? Nah. We have to leave right now to kill our old pal.' He paused, with his back to her, and when he spoke there was an edge of malice in his voice. "Of course, if you don't put

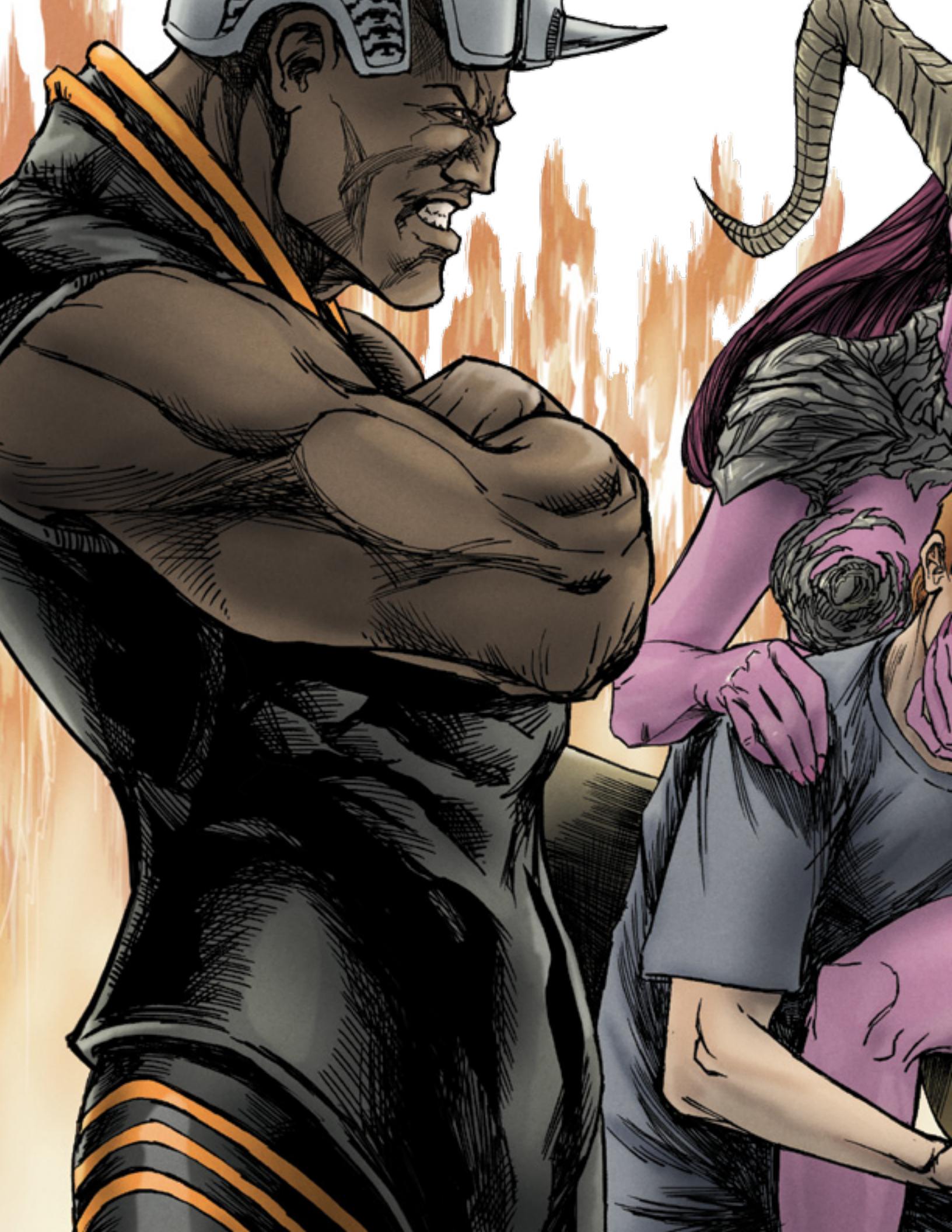
the necklace on, who knows what kind of host Doomslaug-
ter's familiar is going to find?
They aren't perfect judges of character, but ol' Doomy was a philanthropist surgeon who left a lucrative Boston practice to take penicillin to kids in the Congo. And he went ballistic after a while. But hey, if your faith in the average man is strong enough, roll the dice. Actually, it'll probably be the somewhat-less-honest-than-average man. But who knows?

The demon could screw up royally and wind up stuck in someone even better equipped to restrain it than a woman who has, if you'll pardon the observation, sacrificed her youth and her whole life to the downtrodden, addicted and insane. If you think that's likely, or that your conscience can handle the possibilities... sure, drop the necklace or give it to a co-worker or whatever. But don't think too long. We're icing him at midnight."

HIGHLIGHT LEGEND

- Critical
- Key Rules
- Key Themes
- For Players
- GM Advice







WHAT CHAPTER 1:
ARE WE DOING,
WHY IS IT FUN? AND

BETTER ANGELS IS A ROLEPLAYING GAME, which means it's a story built through conversation. You play it by making a series of choices, acting out the role of a supervillain. You could be a 'flawed villain with heroic elements' or a 'criminal with a heart of gold,' or you could portray a simple, straight-up monster. That's up to you. Your character is a primary one in this story, and you determine his or her choices.

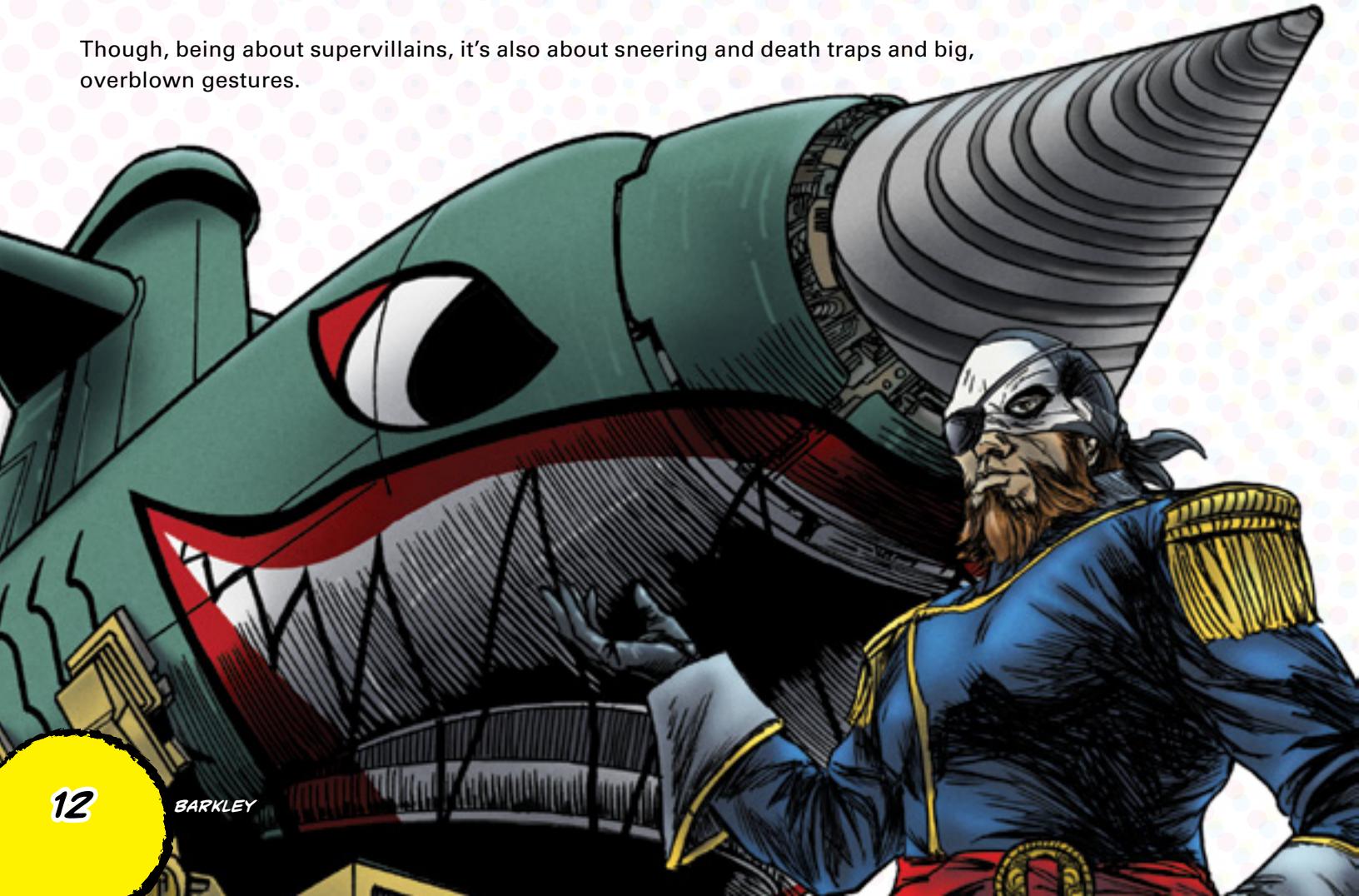
But you don't get to decide everything that happens. One of the other players is the Game Moderator or GM, who describes all those little people (Game Moderator characters, or GMCs—sometimes called non-player characters or NPCs) who aren't fortunate enough to have a player looking out for them, as well as the weather in the sky through which you fly, the behavior of traffic into which you throw superheroes, and the events that make all your decisions just a bit more complicated and dangerous.

So far, that's par for the RPG course. But *Better Angels* isn't just a game about bad people doing things that may or may not also be bad. It's specifically about people driven by demons, or by conscious malevolent forces with cruel designs that have weird powers. If that's not demonic enough for you, it should be. Every character has a human side, run by one player, and a demonic adjutant offering advice and infernal powers, also run by a player. The catch? It's a different player. This means that someone else sitting around the table is along for the ride, playing the part of the mind-parasite possessing you and trying to get you to sin, and sin boldly. It also means that, for one of the other people playing, you're the voice in his ear saying "Go on, do it, you won't get caught!"

Play your human well enough and you might even force your demon back to the bowels of the Hell that spawned it. Play your demon well enough and you could drag a mortal down to Hell for eternity.

Walking that balance, between good and evil and power and fear, is the heart of *Better Angels*.

Though, being about supervillains, it's also about sneering and death traps and big, overblown gestures.



SUPERVILLAINS ARE DUMB

A lot of supervillains in the comics are dumb. Even the geniuses.

Remember the Tinker from *Spider-Man* comics in the 1980s? A guy who can turn a waffle-iron into a ray gun is working out of a radio repair shop building weapons for supervillains? Why wouldn't he file some patents, get a few defense contracts and quietly reap the profits of Reagan's peace-time military buildup?

One answer is that, hey, supervillains had cash in hand for hovercraft and neural disruptors, which they then use to rob banks to pay for... hovercraft and neural disruptors. Sure, the real world has stories of people deploying cutting-edge technology in bank robberies—consider the North Hollywood shootout in 1997—but that hardly ended well for the robbers, did it? If you had personal flight technology, why break the law? It makes no sense.

But let's set aside the high-tech Doctors Doom, Octopus and Horrible. What about a regular everyday Joe who, what with one thing and another, grows a giant poisonous scorpion tail? That's a recipe for social maladjustment, ostracism and violent reprisal, right?

...if he doesn't decide to drop by the Mayo Clinic and volunteer for some research protocols in exchange for a venom-dripping-tail-ectomy. Killer Croc is a sad case, but there's no reason he can't end up like the kid in *Mask*.

EVIL VS. EEEEVIL

If you take a step back, or perhaps a step up, you can find a meta-reason for all this. The writers needed bad guys for their heroes to fight. The goals had to be simple enough for a single issue (or at least, simple enough to fit across several issues along with all kinds of action and derring-do and smart-alec banter). Goals that played into striking visual themes or elaborate fight-scene sets were huge plusses as well.

'I AM AN ABSOLUTE BEGINNER'

Welcome aboard! While all the rules and jargon and spindle-shaped dice may seem intoxicatingly complex, at the heart this hobby is about telling the kind of story you want to read. Keep that in mind, and keep in mind that everyone else has their opinions about what makes a story good, and you should be okay. Go read the article "What Is a Role-playing Game?" at www.arcdream.com. That goes into greater depth about how to play this kind of game.

Comic book villains aren't evil as much as they are eeeeevil, an overblown and fantastical burlesque of cruelty, greed and arrogance that bears only a passing resemblance to the wickedness we experience.

Real-life evil, on the other hand, has its dramatic outcomes, but it does its best work unseen. Hitler and Stalin didn't do their own heavy lifting. They passed orders downward, and their massacres were invisible at the top levels until after the fact. The tasks required to murder millions get divided and sub-categorized and assigned to hundreds of bureaucrats so that the chemicals are requisitioned by one clerk, received by another, co-ordinated with train stations by a third and only deployed by soldiers after events have so much momentum and official approval behind them that disobeying becomes incredibly difficult. Even if one soldier refuses, what happens? He might get a bullet in the skull as his reward, but just as likely his commander shrugs and finds another. The conscientious objector can get transferred to the motor pool. He doesn't need to be made an example because people who can stand up to the institutional evil of a Third Reich are so vanishingly rare that a government can afford to ignore them. One appalled guard isn't going to bring down the system of extermination camps any more than one lazy delivery boy is going to derail UPS.

Is this drifting from our original ideas of bad guys kitted out like cosplayers, sneering and making demands? Only by way of comparison. Great evil is done in aggregate. It's slow and amorphous, and it dilutes responsibility as much as possible. Eeeevil on the other hand is flamboyant and personal and catastrophically inefficient.

That's why eeeevil fails in the comics. Not because the bad guy is weaker or stupider or less intent on his goal—the writers often took pains to show that he was stronger and more intelligent and willing to break any law. It fails because the hero thwarts it but, honestly, could the hero have thwarted it if the villain had just taken some simple and obvious steps?

Eeeevil: "I relish the opportunity to face a worthy foe! Overcome me in traditional Finnish naval wrestling and you shall have your freedom. But if I win... your soul is mine! Bwah ha ha!"

Evil: "Have the guards take her out back and shoot her, like the others."

Eeeevil: "Only you can appreciate the genius of my plan. When I push that button, a meteorite of solid sodium, towed from the asteroid belt, will smash into the polar ice caps! The detonation will raise the sea levels worldwide and I, having prudently invested in inland territories destined to be the new fishing meccas, will be rich beyond avarice!"

Evil: "I've been sandbagging ecological legislation for decades."

Eeeevil: "With this spectacular covalently-bonded defect-free drill, I shall sail the depths of earth as a submariner sails the watery deeps! No buried vault, no hidden building, will be safe!"

Evil: "With this drill, I'm going to get all the oil on lot 722. If the people on it give us any trouble, I've paid off the local militia leader to drive them away."

THE BASICS

The story in *Better Angels* is the struggle between a good human and a demon trying to degrade, bully and control him. Because this is a game and not *Paradise Lost*, the score is kept mathematically, with a system of carefully measured sins and virtues, instead of agonized poetic couplets. (Though, no mistake, *Paradise Lost* is worth a read.)

"HELLBOUND"

Here's a key piece of terminology for the game, even though it's not related to the mechanics like "Strategy" or "*Nurture*." When you combine one human with one demon you get one of the Hellbound. (Also, on occasion, "Hellbinder.")

This is an important term because it's not synonymous with "Player Character" or "PC." That's one player, controlling the human, and trying to beat his diabolical tormentor two falls out of three. The Hellbound is played in tandem, mostly governed by one player, but with another playing the demon and sticking his oar in whenever it seems useful or hilarious.

If a PC breaks his bondage to his devil, he's still a PC, but he's no longer Hellbound. Whether you keep playing as an ordinary human or start a new Hellbound character is up to you.

STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

Every Hellbound character is a composite of demon and person, and when their drives are aligned they can accomplish incredible (and, usually, incredibly eeeevil) things. When their drives conflict (which is far more common), the haggling starts.

Strategies (always in bold green) and **Tactics** (always in italic purple) are characteristics that determine success and failure at challenging tasks. In the Hellbound, they determine who's in charge and how intense the conflict is. They form an economy of power where Faustian bargains can be struck.

SINISTER TACTICS

There are six rough categories of malfeasance, each with broad practical applications for all humankind. The more wicked you are, the stronger they become. These Tactics act, as you might expect, as a volatile combination of catnip and gasoline for demonic power.

- *Greed*: Taking what you want from others when they don't want to give it to you.
- *Espionage*: Learning or figuring out things that others don't want you to know.
- *Cruelty*: Physically attacking inferiors or striking from surprise.
- *Contempt*: Avoiding or overcoming physical trouble or obstacles.
- *Corruption*: Drawing out the worst in those around you.
- *Deceit*: Lying and standing by your dishonesty.

SINISTER STRATEGIES

The three Sinister Strategies are fundamental weaknesses or bad tendencies that you rely on to get things done quick and dirty. (Or just dirty.) The relative nastiness of a human's vices determines the intensity of some diabolical powers. You combine one with a Tactic to produce a dice pool, as we'll explain in just a little bit. You might use **Cunning Greed** to steal a car, for instance, or **Sly Contempt** to flee danger.

Here's what the Sinister Strategies say about your approach to a problem.

- **Cunning**: Seeking the quickest, easiest possible solution.
- **Sly**: Being sneaky (or agile).
- **Devious**: Controlling and manipulating, seeking to warp others to your way of doing things.

VIRTUOUS TACTICS

Arrayed against six sins are six virtues which can help make the world a better, gentler, wiser place. The nicer you are, the stronger your Virtuous Tactics get. But unlike Sinister Tactics, they don't have physics-defying badass powers attached to them. Not for the Hellbound, anyway.

- *Generosity*: Using your status and resources to help others in need.
- *Knowledge*: Education, research and technical problem-solving.
- *Courage*: Facing equal or superior opponents in a fight.
- *Endurance*: Keeping up a task that's exhausting or requires long-term skillful effort.
- *Nurture*: Drawing out the best in those around you.
- *Honesty*: Convincing others of the truth and standing by it.

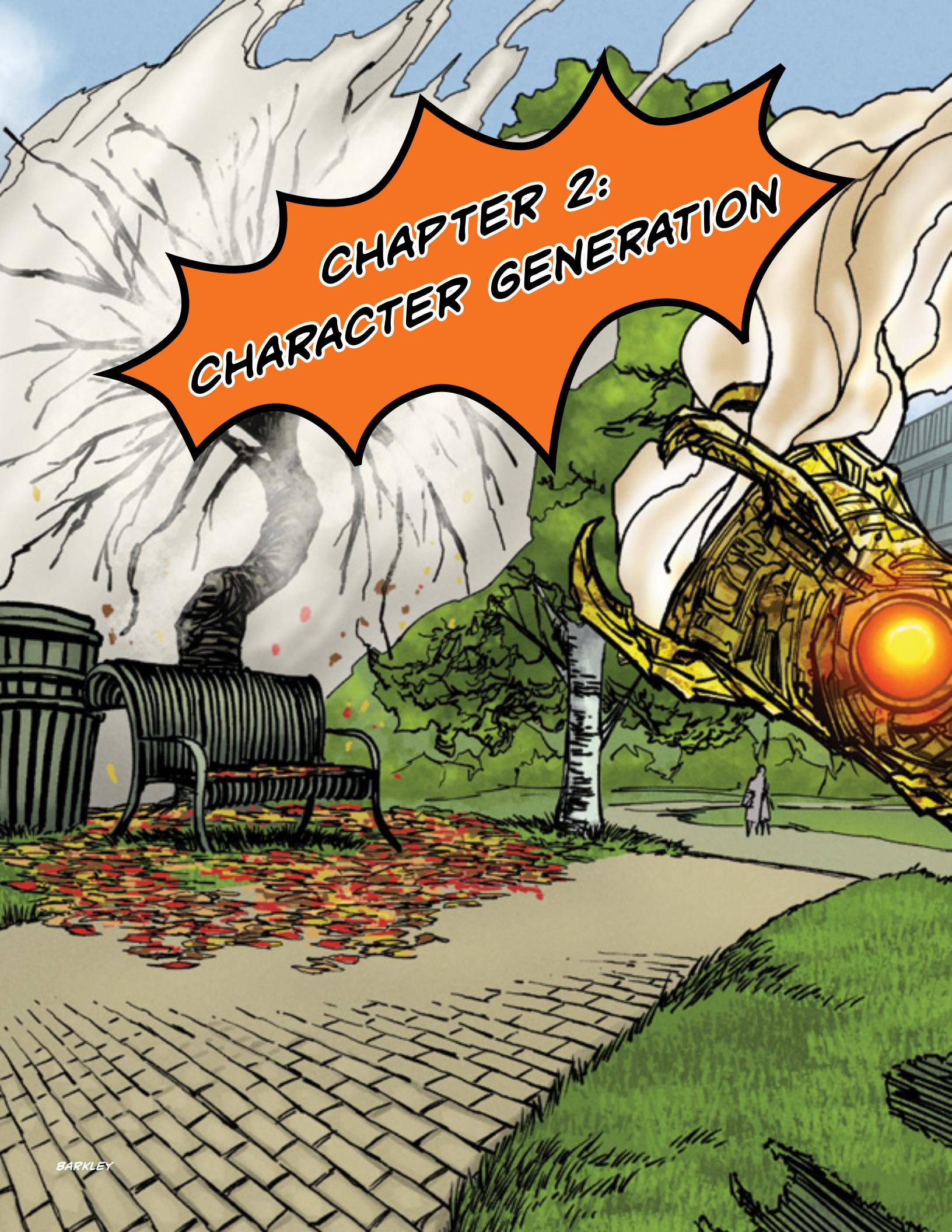
VIRTUOUS STRATEGIES

The three Virtuous Strategies stand athwart the three Sinister Strategies. They are broad methodologies that you employ to get things done in the best way. You also combine them with Tactics to produce dice pools, which is (again) explained real soon now: **Open Endurance** lets you run a marathon, and **Insightful Nurture** sees the very best that someone has to offer.

- **Patient**: Disciplined and resolved.
- **Open**: Physically straightforward and uncomplicated.
- **Insightful**: Seeing and accepting things as they really are.

MIXING THEM UP

In the game you frequently use a Sinister Tactic with a Virtuous Strategy or vice versa. *Greed* is usually **Cunning**, but sometimes it's **Patient**; and you can be **Sly** with your *Courage* by fighting from a distance. See Chapter Four for details.



CHAPTER 2: CHARACTER GENERATION



TO BUILD YOUR SUPERVILLAIN, you buy stuff off a menu with a budget of points. Then, you get to buy other stuff off a menu for the demon of the player on your right. The player on your left gets to do exactly the same for your demon. Not only does she get to define the impish beast who's making your life miserable, she gets to play it too. **This is fun.**

No matter what you're buying, Tactics or Strategies, you use the same price list.

TRAIT COSTS

- **Tactic:** 1 point
- **Specialty:** 2 points
- **Strategy:** 2 points

Now you just go through an easy, four-step process in which you define *both* the characters you control: Your human and someone else's demon.

STEP ONE: SPEND POINTS ON YOUR HUMAN

First things first: **Every character starts with one point in Open.** You need that to live. You don't get free points in other, less purely essential traits.

Next, you spend **twenty points** on qualities from the menu. Pay, write down Specialties, fill in dots. Easy. I'd just emphasize, very firmly, that you want to put a lot of this in the virtuous traits, especially each Virtuous Strategy, unless you want to start the game berserk or depressed. Or unless you want to start out under a diabolical thumb, and diabolical thumbs have big pointy talons.

The maximum for a Tactic or Strategy is 5, but you cannot start with any Strategy higher than 4. Also, the values for opposing Strategies (**Cunning** and **Patient**, **Sly** and **Open**, or **Devious** and **Insightful**) cannot overlap—you can't have more than seven points between each pair. If your **Cunning** is 4, for instance, you can't have more than 3 in **Patient**.

SPECIALTIES

Specialties are for things that most people don't even know enough to attempt. Nobody's going to defuse an A-bomb, pilot a B-52, translate hieroglyphics or perform an appendectomy without training. **If you want your character to have some narrow expertise like that, buy it as a Specialty.** It's basically a permission to attempt a roll for something that's normally beyond the pale. It doesn't add any dice or reduce penalties or anything, but if you buy 'Pilot' as a specialty, you can fly planes.

There are gray zones with this. Does a character need a Specialty to speak Spanish? Up to the GM, really, depending on how the game's going and what's already established about the character. If the character has definitively shown he does not know a language, he can't pick it up later, unless the GM decides to let him get the Specialty somehow.

Similarly, many people can pick out a passable tune on the piano, change the oil in a car, or knock together an end table if they have the tools and materials. Specialties aren't required for that everyday level of skill. To play a concert at Carnegie, rebuild an engine from the ground up or make a living as a carpenter, you need to specialize.

A character can never have more than three Specialties.

STEP TWO: PICK A PRIMARY STRATEGY, A POWER, AND AN ASPECT FOR YOUR DEMON

Pick one of the three Sinister Strategies as your demon's **primary** drive. Put a little asterisk next to that trait. If that Primary Strategy ever reaches 5, the demon can attempt to drag you bodily to Hell, which you won't enjoy. More on that in Chapter Eight.

The next part is far more pleasant. **Pick one of the powers** your demon can give you. There's a

whole big list of them, subdivided by Tactic, starting on page 71. Keep in mind that for that power to work well, it needs to have plenty of sin backing it up. Pick a cool power, but be aware that your demon is, in all likelihood, going to try to bully and cozen you into inflating the trait that drives it.

Finally, **pick one of the Aspects** listed on page 82. Aspects are temporary physical mutations your demon can invoke—sometimes when you don't want them to. They are not, as a general rule, subtle. Aspects are linked to particular Sinister Strategies. If the relevant Strategy gets too thin, you won't be able to use the Aspect, which may be a small price to pay.

STEP THREE: SPEND POINTS ON SOMEONE ELSE'S HUMAN

You get **another 20 points**, and you can spend them on the sinister traits (or, if you're too nice for your own good, on the virtuous stuff) of the

character to your right. It's just like buying stuff for your own character, but instead you get to decide what kind of character you want to see your buddy playing.

While you're doing this, the person on your left is buying up stuff on your character. **It's up to you (not your neighbor)** to explain how the character came to have these traits.

You can't buy Specialties for someone else's character. **You can't raise any of his or her Strategies to 5 either, any more than you could with your own character.**

STEP FOUR: PICK A POWER AND AN ASPECT FOR SOMEONE ELSE'S DEMON

Just as you spent 20 points on the character to your right, you now get to **pick out a power and an Aspect for that character's demon**—that is, the demon you're playing. The smart move is to pick powers that play off traits you've accented in the previous step, and Aspects that work off amplified Strategies.

THE DEVIL ON YOUR SHOULDER

The player who picks out Strategies and Tactics and such for you has an ongoing job. She's going to serve as 'Screwtape' to your character, embodying the capricious demon who provides all your paranormal abilities. You, in turn, serve that same role for another player.

This is great fun, but it is subject to a couple of limits. First off, unless your primary Sinister Strategy is greater than its opposite, you have no idea what's going on with your mortal, unless you're invoked. Even if it is higher, you're silent unless invoked, or unless he uses one of the powers you give him. Even then, it's often a good idea to leave him wanting to hear more from you, rather than risk him wishing he'd hear less.

AN EXAMPLE: KATIE, FRANK, & TOBEY

The three players for a new *Better Angels* game are (from left to right, because it matters) Katie, Frank and Tobey. They're sitting there, blank character sheets in hand, pencils sharpened and ready for step one.

Katie wants to play a footloose blues musician named Wanda. She fills in her free point of **Open** and decides to get another (2 points). Then she puts two points in **Patient** and three in **Insightful** (10 points total). She's spent 12 points already, and buys a Specialty in "Blues Musician" for another 2. With her six remaining points, she puts one each in every Virtuous Tactic.

Frank shakes his head at Katie's low Tactics. He's playing a highly strung neurosurgeon named Felix Barbarossa. He leaves **Insightful** empty for the moment and puts three dots on **Patient** (6 points). Then he puts two each in **Generosity** and **Knowledge** (4 points) before buying a Specialty in "Brain Surgeon" (2 points). With his remaining eight points, he buys a point of **Insightful** (2 points), and two points apiece in **Courage**, **Nurture** and **Honesty** (6 points).

Tobey hasn't read the book carefully but manages to struggle through. He puts a point each in **Patient**, **Insightful**, **Cunning**, **Sly** and **Devious**. (That's right, he's *buying stuff on the left side!*) That costs him 10 points off the bat. For the remainder, he puts five in **Courage** (5 points) and five in **Nurture** (5 points). He throws the name "Luther Christian" on his brave, pure soul and gets ready for the next step.

Katie figures that Wanda bargained with a demon for unbelievable musical skills, and picks the Impossible Beauty power as a good match. After all, while it's usually physical beauty, it could just as easily be melodic. She isn't crazy about the idea of changing into a monstrous freak, so she picks Invisible as her Aspect, and tags **Devious** as her demon's Primary Strategy.

Frank thinks the **Espionage** power Ineffable Defense sounds pretty useful and

picks that for his demon. This leaves him marking **Cunning** as his demon's Primary Strategy, which sounds like a good match for a smart guy like Dr. Barbarossa. He opts for Wings as his Aspect because, hey, you gotta fly, right?

As for Tobey, he's all about Telekinesis, not for any thematic reason, but because he thinks it sounds really versatile. He wants **Sly** for his demon, and goes for the Giant Aspect. It sounds plenty villainous to him.

Now comes the good part. Or, if the players were already enjoying their character shopping, here comes the cruelly good part. Everyone hands their character sheet to the left.

Katie looks at Dr. Barbarossa and plops five points into **Contempt** (5 points), just because it's across from his empty **Endurance**. She then puts four points in **Devious** (8 points) because she doesn't want to let him get too **Insightful**. Three points in **Cunning** (6 points), since it's Primary and it lets her wall off his **Patient** stat too. With one point left, she puts it into **Deceit** because hey, why not? She de-cides his demon is named "Kazoth the Guttering Flame."

As for Frank, he spreads his points on Luther broadly, adding two points to each Sinister Strategy (12 points), and then adding four points each in **Greed** and **Contempt** (8 points). Frank has plans. When Tobey asks him what the demon's name is, Frank has no ideas, so Tobey suggests "Murekabaäl." Frank shrugs and says that's fine.

Tobey, in the same way that he bought Sinister Tactics for Luther Christian, buys a few Virtuous Tactics for Wanda. Specifically, he adds two points each to **Endurance**, **Nurture** and **Honesty** (6 points). Three points in **Deceit** seems useful (3 points) and he decides to crank **Devious** because it's useful, it's Primary, and because he wants to use the Flame-Wreathed Aspect. He can't take it to five, but he goes to four (8 points). He dumps his last three points in **Espionage** (3 points). He names the demon "Terbat the Splendid."

Considering how physically weak Dr. Barbarossa looks, Katie decides his demon needs Ghost Form as its second Aspect. (She also privately figures

that if he has two **Cunning** Aspects, he might hesitate to risk that Strategy... which is Primary...) She also wants a power based on his **Open Contempt** so she's torn between Arrogance and Banish. She decides on Banish for its attack potential.

Frank, in the meantime, takes Summon as Tobey's second power and Darkness-Shrouded as

his second Aspect. He figures he's just made him the world's greatest thief.

As for Wanda's character, Tobey says she gets the Flame-Wreathed Aspect he was eyeing, and takes Telekinesis for her for all the same reasons he took it for himself. He also figures it's one less set of rules to remember.

LUTHER CHRISTIAN

Here's what Luther looks like when Tobey and Frank are done.

NAMES

Villain: To be determined

Mortal: Luther Christian

Demon: Murkebaäl (played by Frank)

Player: Tobey

STATS

Cunning 3, **Patient** 1

Greed 4, **Generosity** 0

Espionage 0, **Knowledge** 0

Sly 3*, **Open** 1

Cruelty 0, **Courage** 5 **Contempt** 4, **Endurance** 0

Devious 3, **Insightful** 1

Corruption 0, **Nurture** 5

Deceit 0, **Honesty** 0

Specialties: None

Powers: Summon, Telekinesis

Aspects: Darkness-Shrouded, Giant

* *Primary*

WANDA

Here's what Wanda looks like when Katie and Tobey are done.

NAMES

Villain: To be determined

Mortal: Wanda

Demon: Terbat the Splendid (played by Tobey)

Player: Katie

STATS

Cunning 0, **Patient** 2

Greed 0, **Generosity** 1

Espionage 3, **Knowledge** 1

Sly 0, **Open** 2

Cruelty 0, **Courage** 1 **Contempt** 0, **Endurance** 3

Devious 4*, **Insightful** 3

Corruption 0, **Nurture** 3

Deceit 3, **Honesty** 3

Specialties: Blues Musician

Powers: Impossible Beauty, Telekinesis

Aspects: Flame-Wreathed, Invisible

* *Primary*

DR. FELIX BARBAROSSA

Here's what Felix looks like when Frank and Katie are done.

NAMES

Villain: To be determined

Mortal: Dr. Felix Barbarossa

Demon: Kazoth the Guttering Flame (played by Katie)

Player: Frank

STATS

Cunning 3*, **Patient** 3

Greed 0, **Generosity** 2

Espionage 0, **Knowledge** 2

Sly 0, **Open** 1

Cruelty 0, **Courage** 2 **Contempt** 5, **Endurance** 0

Devious 4, **Insightful** 1

Corruption 0, **Nurture** 2

Deceit 1, **Honesty** 2

Specialties: Brain Surgeon

Powers: Ineffable Defense, Banish

Aspects: Ghost Form, Wings

* *Primary*



BARKLEY

**CHAPTER 3:
HOW THE CHARACTER
SHEET WORKS**

THINK OF THE CHARACTER SHEET

for *Better Angels* as the game board. On the right side, it's all sweetness and light. That side of the sheet is home to *Knowledge*, *Generosity* and *Honesty*. When the circles on that side are filled in, you're living right. On the left (or 'sinister') side you find *Corruption*, *Greed* and *Contempt*. If those circles are darkened, the devil is that much closer to dragging you under.

Your character sheet records how well your character does certain things and what his current abilities are. In most games, there are a few traits that fluctuate during the course of a game session—how close your character is to death, how much willpower he has left, how close to exhaustion he is, and so forth. And in most games, such traits only improve very slowly. In *Better Angels*, your abilities can change from scene to scene, tracking the alterations in your character's mood, condition and circumstances. Instead of a vague gauge of his skill at fist-fighting or telling lies, your traits reflect how good he is at it *right now*.

There are two kinds of traits on your character sheet: Strategies and Tactics. **Strategies** (always in bold green) indicate general methods of doing things. When you pick a Strategy, it broadly describes how you're approaching the problem. If you use physical trickery and agility, you're being **Sly**. If you're trying to help someone through an emotional appeal, that's **Insightful**. The Strategies on the left side are the nasty, sneaky, manipulative ones. Collectively, they're the **Sinister Strategies**. Those on the right are straightforward and are known as the **Virtuous Strategies**.

Tactics (always purple italics) are more specific. They represent what you're actually doing, not just how you're doing it. There are six **Sinister Tactics** on the left side of the sheet, for activities like stealing, spying, lying and performing enhanced interrogation. On the right side are six **Virtuous Tactics** that are the heaven-approved ways of trying to achieve your goals. They include goody-goody stuff like telling the truth, helping people, enduring trouble without complaint and the like.

Every action you roll for involves a Strategy and a Tactic. Tactics are smaller-scale and tend to be far more volatile. While

a Strategy may change two or three times every couple of sessions, some Tactics are likely to change in just about every scene. **All Strategies and Tactics are rated from 0 to 5. Someone who's average has a rating of 2 in each.**

There are also spaces for **Specialties**. They don't change your rolls or pools, they just let you make some rolls in narrow circumstances where you otherwise couldn't. They're explained on page 18.

Strategies come in pairs, as do Tactics. Take *Nurture* and *Corruption*, for example. If you look on the character sheet you see them as rows of circles, one above the other.

Corruption
○○○○○
○○○○○
Nurture

Very few people are completely giving or totally corrupt. Most are a little of both. On the sheet, that's represented by filling in circles. Start from the left for sinister, from the right for virtuous.

Corruption
●●○○○
○○○●●
Nurture

Someone who is exceptionally selfless is very good at tasks requiring basic human decency. He might have a chart like this.

Corruption
●●○○○
○●●●●
Nurture

Tactics and Strategies on the same line limit each other. Their filled-in dots can't overlap. That's what the overlapping circles are for. If you have *Nurture* 3 and *Corruption* 4, you can see that the line is filled up and you can't gain more of either without losing its contrary.

Corruption
●●●●○
○○●●●
Nurture

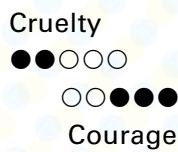
GROWING STRONGER OR WEAKER

Always fill in circles and mark lines in pencil. Tactics, and even Strategies, can move around a lot in the course of a game.

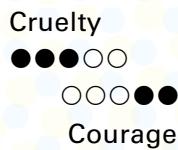
First off, they can simply **decrease**. If someone hits you hard, you might lose a dot of *Courage*. Erase it off your sheet and hope he doesn't hit you again. Losing dots is covered under "Combat and Other Rough Stuff," starting on page 47.

Secondly, they can **increase**. Any time the hell-bound does a wicked act, for instance, at the end of the scene his Screwtape (that is, the player controlling the demon half) can increase an appropriate Tactic. There's a whole big section on how this is done, starting on page 89.

Thirdly, and most commonly, they can **slide**. When you slide a Tactic or Strategy, it means the allocation of dots on the line changes, but the number of dots stays constant. For example, suppose your character gets struck in a brawl. It's not a serious blow, but it stings. Under the rules, this means you slide a dot from *Courage* to *Cruelty*. So if you had *Courage* 3 *Cruelty* 2 before...



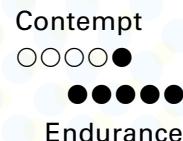
...when you get slapped, you have to slide to the left, ending up with *Courage* 2 *Cruelty* 3, like this.



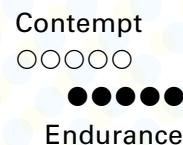
There are times when it's helpful to have more *Courage* and times when *Cruelty* is the right tool for the job. To understand this, you have to read the Tactic descriptions.

Stats never go above 5, and each half of a pair limits the potential of the other half. You can't be really generous and really selfish at the same time, though it's typical to have elements of both

in your personality. If a slide would push a trait over 5, it acts as if that dot was simply lost, instead. For example, a character with...



...is lectured about duty and responsibility and the stakes he faces. In game terms, the preaching makes him slide a *Contempt* dot to *Endurance*. But since *Endurance* is already at maximum (meaning there isn't a lot of malignant self-interest to erode), the *Contempt* dot just vanishes.



WHAT TO ROLL AND HOW

Better Angels is based on the One Roll Engine, in which you roll a number of ten-sided dice and look for matching numbers. The dice you roll is called a **pool**. We use "**d**" to indicate the number of dice, so "6d" means "six dice."

Determine the size of your pool by determining which Strategy applies, along with which Tactic. Add the two together. Pools can be improved with advantages like weapons and surprise.

When you roll, look for **sets**, which are just dice whose numbers match. Each set has **Width**, which is how many dice turned up that number. Each set also has **Height**, which shows the number which turned up. Sets are noted down as Width x Height.

Example: I roll five dice and get 1,3,6,7,10. No sets. I roll again and get 3,3,3,6,6. Two sets: a set of three threes, or 3x3, and two sixes, 2x6.

Width shows how quickly and intensely something happens. Height indicates how much circumstance favors the action, or how difficult it is to stop.

SIMPLE ACTIONS

Simple actions are those where there isn't active, adapting resistance to the action, but there's still an obstacle to overcome. Examples would include climbing a wall, building a zip gun, digging a grave without getting exhausted, or searching a room for a hidden letter. For these, you simply roll an appropriate pool. If any set at all comes up, the attempt succeeds.

CONTESTED ACTIONS

Contested actions are those where someone is trying to stop you. For instance, someone's trying to cheat you out of your house through bogus legal maneuvering, and you take them to court to stop them. Or someone tries to swing a shovel into your face and you duck. Or someone wants to make you doubt yourself through straightforward ethical arguments, while you want to retain your functional patchwork of rationales and justifications.

When a conflict of this sort arises, both parties roll the relevant pools. The person who's trying to act (the con man, the shovel wielder, the persuader) picks a set to use. The person on the receiving end picks a set as well, and those dice become **gobble dice**.

GOBBLE DICE

Gobble dice cancel out the dice in other people's sets. If a set get reduced to 1x, it's worthless—the action is completely foiled. (If your opponent has another set, he can use that instead—as long as you don't gobble it up too.) Once you define a set as gobble dice, the dice can be used separately, and the last one is just as useful as the first. This means that if the guy trying to hit you with a



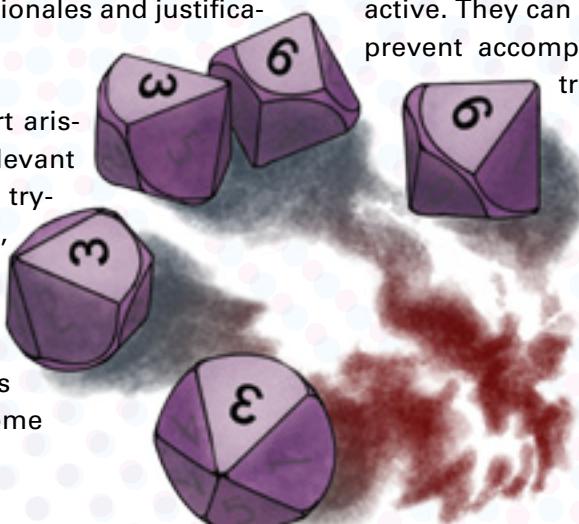
shovel has a buddy behind you with a pickaxe, you might be able to spend one gobble die to duck the shovel and one to dodge the pick. There are a few important restrictions on gobble dice, however.

The gobbler has to be high enough. Gobble dice can only mess with sets that are at their Height or lower. If you get a 4x4 and make it into gobble dice, it's not going to help you if the other fellow got a 2x8. There are enough gobble dice, but they're weak fours compared to his strong eights.

Sometimes, timing matters. In things like arguing in front of a court, it doesn't really matter who goes first and your 2x10 roll can give you enough gobblers to wreck a 3x5 set. But in things like diving behind a wall before getting peppered by gunshots, quickness matters very much. In that case, the 2x10 is just too slow to protect from that 3x5.

Gobble dice are powerful, but they're always reactive. They can never accomplish anything, only prevent accomplishment. But when someone's

trying to 'accomplish' your demise, you want to have them.

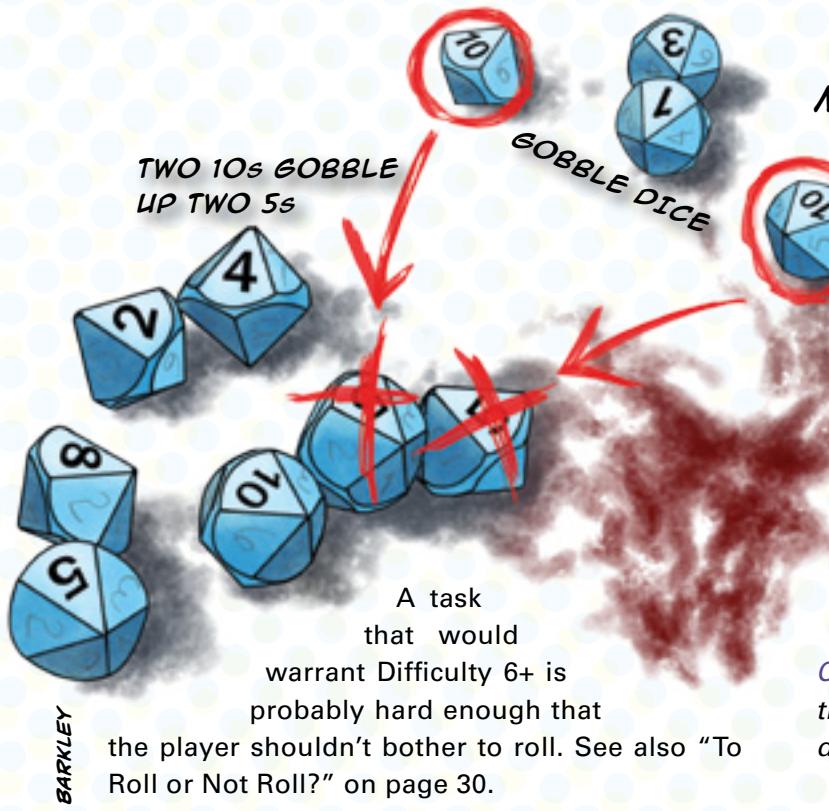


DIFFICULTY

Some things are hard. Most simple actions have a default **Difficulty** of 1. Any roll whose Height beats or matches the Difficulty succeeds.

Most of the time, then, any roll qualifies. But a more onerous task might have Difficulty 3. That means that x2 and x1 sets aren't good enough to get it done. If a task had Difficulty 5, only sets with a Height of five or better could manage it. But by and large, Difficulties should be the exception, not the rule.

A Difficulty should apply only when things are really tough, and should never be more than 5.



A task that would warrant Difficulty 6+ is probably hard enough that the player shouldn't bother to roll. See also "To Roll or Not Roll?" on page 30.

MULTIPLE ACTIONS

Sometimes you have a lot to do in a little time. (This is particularly true in physical fights.) If you want to try doing two things at once, you need two sets, and you need to pull them off with a penalty because your attention is split.

Knock a die out of your pool, roll, and look for multiple sets. If you get them, you can assign one to each action.

Example: While assassinating a deputy district attorney, Marco decides to shoot twice. Factoring in surprise, his weapon and his Sly Cruelty, Marco has a 10d pool. To fire twice in the time it would usually take for one good shot, he drops a die, rolls 9d, and looks for two sets.

If you want three actions or more, simply keep yanking dice for each extra action and looking for more matches.

What if you want to do two *different* things at the same time? Figure out what their dice pools would be, use the *smaller* of the relevant pools, drop a die, and look for two sets.

TAKING YOUR TIME

Picking a lock under pressure is **Cunning Greed**. Cracking a safe at your leisure is **Patient Greed** (if, indeed, the GM even makes you roll). But if your pool is low, you may want to increase your odds by taking your time to focus.

If you take twice as long to do something, you can take a point of **Advantage**, or cancel out a penalty. (Advantage is explained on page 28.) If you take a round to get your footing before you throw a punch, you can either add a die to your pool or take a Width boost. If you take *three* times as long, you get a second point of Advantage. That's the ceiling though. You can never get more than +2 Advantage by stretching things out.

This is a sort of uncategorized Advantage. It does not come from surprise, weapon or secret. Powers that nullify those sources of Advantage don't work on simple preparation.

GETTING FANCY

There are a few things you can do to try to get more mileage out of your pool. Here are the rules for them.

CALLED SHOTS

A called shot is when you want to get a set of one particular Height and you don't want to leave it to chance. You might want to get a Height 10 set (x10) to make sure it's hard to defend against. Or you might want to get a Height 1 set so that you can say (technically) that you did it while secretly hoping that the action fails.

If you want to specify a number, drop one die from your pool. Then take one of the dice that remains and place it on the number you want. Roll the rest. If a rolled die matches the chosen number, you've got the set you want. If you get a different set, you can use that instead if you wish.

Example: Having engineered a deadly fire for his boss and daughter, Carl wants it to look really dramatic when he rescues them. As he smashes down the door, he wants to get as meager a success as possible. His Open Contempt pool is a meaty 9d, so he drops one out, sets one of the remaining dice to 1, and then rolls the 7d which remain. Getting 1,3,3,4,7,8,10, he can make a 2x1 set—or, if he changes his mind, use the 2x3 set.

MASTER DICE

If you've ever played poker, you're familiar with the concept of a wild card. (Unless you only play Texas Hold 'Em by the purist rules, in which case you can put aside your sunglasses and dour expression to follow along.) It's a card that you can substitute for any other card you want. A Master Die is something similar for the One Roll Engine. You don't roll your Master Die (or MD for short). You wait until you roll all the others in the pool and then you set your MD to whatever you want. You naturally rolled a whole lotta nothin'? Set your MD to equal the highest naturally rolled die and you have a set. You rolled a 2x10? Make it a 3x10. You got a 4x5? Try it as a 5x5.

Master Dice are extremely powerful. Not only do they make it so you *never fail*, they can also improve marginal results or allow you to create a backup set in case you need one.

Naturally, you can't just buy these. Perfection is available to mortals only at a price. A diabolical price. It's explained on page 69.

ADVANTAGE

Sometimes, fights aren't fair. Most times, in fact. Sometimes a guy brings a gun to a fistfight. Other times, a guy brings a diabolical flame-wreathed carapace to a gunfight. So how do you model this? With a factor called Advantage.

Advantage is doled out in units from +1 to +3 (and very rarely more). If you have Advantage for a roll, you can use it one of two ways.

The easiest way is to **add it to your pool**. Nice, simple, safe... boring, some might say. Not me, though!

The other way is to gamble with it. You roll your pool unaltered, but if you get a set you can **increase its Width** up to an amount equal to your Advantage. So that barely-there 2x8 sucker punch becomes a terrifying 5x8 knockout blow if you have a +3 surprise Advantage. But this is a gamble, since your Advantage doesn't help a lick if you don't get a set.

Advantage bonuses are cumulative, so you could combine a +3 surprise Advantage with a +1 weapon Advantage for clutching a roll of quarters and add 4d to your pool, or increase a set's Width by a staggering four increments. Or, you can use some Advantage before and some after—if you manage to amass +4 Advantage, you can add two dice to your pool (making a set more likely) and then beef up your more-likely set with +2 Width. It doesn't matter how many sources your Advantage has, just split up the total. If your Advantage all comes from revealing a devastating (+3) secret, for example, you can still add one die to your pool and use the remaining points of Advantage for +2 Width.

SOURCES OF ADVANTAGE

Just as there are three categories of Strategy and Tactics (mental, physical, social), there are three sources of Advantage. If you're in a physical conflict, it's a **weapon bonus**. This can come from anything from satanic powers to a Saturday night special. If you're in a mental showdown, you get a **surprise bonus** by unveiling some unknown and unsuspected information to the person you're trying to startle or confound. In the duel of wits, it's the **secret bonus**, deployed by revealing something heinous, incriminating or humiliating.

In many cases, these bonuses can be cross-applied as well. If you're using **Devious Corruption** on someone to say, "Just stay out of it and you won't get hurt," an AK-47 with a bayonet could give its weapon bonus to your persuasion. Similarly, a rabbit punch to the back of the head is good, but it's more likely to land if you've carefully snuck up behind your unwitting target at the stadium urinal, giving your blow the surprise bonus.

DEGREES OF ADVANTAGE

By and large, Advantage comes in packages of +1, +2 and +3.

If you're dealing with secrets, a +1 is fairly minor. "Oh, that scratch on your husband's car is your fault?" "Dennis got so drunk at the Christmas party, it was hilarious!" A +2 secret is a different matter, it's something a person would go to considerable effort and expense to conceal or deny. "Your parents weren't married?" "You're actually

a superhero?" "Dennis got so drunk at the Christmas party, he's going to lose his job if anyone finds out what he did in Barney's desk drawer." A +3 secret is horrendous, the kind of thing that pushes people to suicide... or murder. "You're actually the supervillain who killed those Coast Guard pilots?" "The beloved hero of the city has powers fueled by *corpse-eating*?!"

It's the same with intellectual surprises. The harder a fact is to refute, or the more obscurely important it is, the more leverage it gives a *Knowledge* or *Espionage* or *Greed* or *Generosity* roll. For something fairly commonplace or circumstantial, it's +1: "We know the guard carries a large coffee in with him when he goes on duty, so we can just watch and go in when he takes a bathroom break." "This videotape clearly shows Dennis going into Barney's office on the night in question." "The blood at the scene was type O, and I know Hillary got sick after being transfused with AB blood." A more conclusive piece of evidence merits a +2 bonus: "The guard consistently hits

the can between 12:25 and 12:31, taking an average of eleven minutes and never less than eight." "Hillary is type O for sure, but she's O+." Really damning evidence, like for evolution, gets a +3 bonus: "Yeah, we've got a signed note from Dennis along with a videotaped confession." "The blood tests came back from Hillary and the scene sample. They match within 97% accuracy."

Weapons are the least complicated category. If you have a small weapon you can easily conceal and use in one hand, it gives a +1 weapon bonus. This is the realm of small handguns, switchblades, brass knuckles and rough, chunky half-bricks. A +2 bonus is for a serious weapon that you can't just lug around without getting some looks or doing some explaining. Large, bulky handguns fit in here, as do shotguns and long rifles and swords and axes. A +3 weapon bonus comes in from something really nasty, like a machine gun or a rocket-propelled grenade or a sword impregnated with demonic blood cells that provoke cancerous melanomas with every hit.

SNEAK ATTACK!

A popular use for surprise rules, especially to villains with no notions of honor, is to jump out and strike or shoot someone unexpectedly. If you want to ambush someone, then, here's how you go about it.

You roll *Cunning Greed* to sneak up on someone, and she rolls *Cunning Espionage* to notice. This is a contested roll, as described on page 26. The person creeping around rolls, and the person at risk of ambush tries to gobble out the set the sneak puts forward. If multiple people are sneaking, the set with lowest Width gets used. If multiple people are detecting, both the Widest and the Highest sets are applied. (However, if the sneaker gets multiple sets, he can use a backup set after the first set is ruined.)

If the ambusher gets a set of Width 3+ and the target gets no set, the surprise bonus is +3.

If the ambusher gets a set of Width 2 and the target gets no set, the surprise bonus is +2.

If both get sets, but the target can't ruin the ambusher's set, the surprise bonus is +1.

Otherwise, there's no surprise bonus.

TO ROLL OR NOT TO ROLL?

You don't need to roll for everything. If an action is impossible, there's no point in rolling for it. Similarly, if an action is absurdly simple, no roll's required.

Rolls are only required when it's dramatic and engaging for the outcome to be in doubt. If a character wants to seduce some unimportant minor character, and it has no relevance to the events at center stage? Let the player roll if he wants to let the dice decide whether he's going to play smug or frustrated. Otherwise, why not just let the player write it in? Particularly if the outcome reinforces the player's view of the character as suave lover man (or awkward loser).

This can be particularly important with mysteries. As Robin Laws pointed out with *GUMSHOE*, there are few great mysteries about what happens when the detective doesn't find the clue. The clue is typically given, and the detective has to figure out its importance. It's similar to video games where you have to stand in one particular location to open a door and continue. It's not fun to search for that spot while everything else grinds to a halt, just like it's no fun to be lost and uncertain because you failed a roll to get a necessary clue.

TOOL UP

If you want to fix, lift or vandalize something beyond easy repair, you reach for a hammer, lever or crowbar. It's just the same as a weapon bonus. Something small and cheap and commonplace, like a screwdriver or pry bar? +1 weapon bonus on relevant repairing, prying and jimmying. A more expensive and elaborate device, like a laser-guided circular saw? +2 weapon bonus, and so on.

Some efforts assume the presence of a tool and therefore get no bonus from it. You're not going to do any cyber-terrorism without a computer, any more than you're making *Sly Endurance* rolls to follow that cab unless you've got a vehicle of your own. In those cases, the basic and unimpressive stuff you can get easily provides no bonus. If you get something a cut above—a quick little dirt bike for the chase, or a tricked-out high-end PC for the hacking—you get +1. Spend hundreds of thousands on a crazy fast sports car or dedicated distributed bot-network? +2 weapon bonus. The sort of stupid overkill for which supervillains are justly famed, like seizing control of an NSA installation for your hacking, or stealing a Harrier jump-jet for your getaway? Take the +3 bonus. You've earned it.





CHAPTER 4:
HOW TO DO EVERYTHING

MANY RPGS FUNCTION AS PHYSICS EMULATION ENGINES. A randomizer (the dice) determines what happens within parameters of feet and inches, success or failure at specific, concrete tasks. Adjustments are made to tilt the randomness towards outcomes that sound plausible.

Better Angels has a different focus. The key struggles here are emotional or ethical, even when they're physically expressed. This means that a Hellbinder's ability to get something done is less likely to hinge on the mass of the weight he's trying to lift or the distance to the target he's trying to hit. Just as important is his spiritual condition. If he's been defeated and worn down, he's going to have trouble. If he's flush with victory and keen for more vengeance, it gets a lot easier.

There are three conflicts between Strategies, and six conflicts between Tactics. The tactical conflicts are tighter, more immediate and far more prone to fluctuation. Strategies take more, or stronger, effort to shift.

When someone takes an action directed against you, it targets a Tactic. It can be a physical attack, such as "I hit him in the groin." A mental maneuver like an artificial stock plummet could frighten a mortal into lost *Generosity*. Or, perhaps most common, emotional pressure can leach a mortal's purity away, leaving him adrift in a stagnant slough of lust and corruption.

Once a Tactic is completely exhausted, further successful attacks on it exhaust the Strategy governing it. Some very successful assaults (those of unusually large Width) go straight for Strategies, but they're less common than slugging away at Tactics. (This is covered at length in Chapter Five.)

CUNNING VS. PATIENT: THE MENTAL CONFLICT

The blessing of being **Patient** allows people to grind away at problems, approaching them with discipline and resolve. **Cunning**, on the other hand, looks for the quickest, easiest route and devil take the hindmost. If you're trying to make long-term changes, you need to be **Patient**. But when time is of the essence, a devilish shortcut may be just the thing.

If your **Patient** Strategy hits zero, you go **berserk**. You can't use *Generosity*, *Knowledge*, *Greed* or *Espionage*, and you can't use the **Insightful** Strategy for social tasks for the remainder of the scene. Mostly what you can do is launch spittle-flecked attacks, or else fulminate and bellow threats. At the end of the scene, you can slide a point from **Cunning** to **Patient**, unless you're also all out of **Cunning**. If that's the case, you have to spend the next scene berserk as well (or sit it out). At the end of that second scene, you can reduce any two of the mental Tactics by one each and regain a point of **Patient**. (So you could, for example, reduce *Greed* and *Generosity*, or *Espionage* and *Greed*, or any other combination, but not two off *Espionage*.) Should you have insufficient Tactics in your intellectual portfolio, you stay berserk until you get some. Good luck with that.

It is the mortal who decides which Tactics take the hit.

If your **Cunning** hits zero, there are no additional penalties.

GREED VS. GENEROSITY: POSITION AND POSSESSIONS

This continuum deals with social position and material possessions. *Generosity* lets you use what you have to help others, or just to make things easier for yourself in an equitable and appropriate way. *Greed* is more about taking what others have, obviously.

TASKS FOR PATIENT GENEROSITY

This is for long-term investments, things like funding a political party, building a library in an impoverished neighborhood or helping a friend get into Alcoholics Anonymous. Not just going with him the first time, but being there when he relapses and providing rides after he loses his license.

Perversions of *Patient Generosity* would include things like building a secret base on a volcanic island.

TASKS FOR PATIENT GREED

This is the domain of the long con, identity theft, online phishing and black-hat hacking. It's not actually *lying* to people (which is a job for *Deceit*) as much as manipulating systems to yield unearned or unjust payouts. If you have a Specialty in computer use, you can hack your way into whatever. (Just ask your GM if the game does hacking like real life, which also requires a heavy dose of deceit and manipulation, or Hollywood hacking where it's all just typing fast and saying "Oh, I know this.") If you want to fake your own death, forge a passport, get undeserved welfare benefits or crack a safe, this is the combo that comes into play. This is also what you use to get past high-tech security systems and closed-circuit cameras.

TASKS FOR CUNNING GENEROSITY

Instead of paying a fair price for an honest service, *Cunning Generosity* is about buying illegal things, passing bribes or throwing your money around to get results. Use this to score drugs or pay off a cop.

TASKS FOR CUNNING GREED

All manner of petty larceny falls under the rubric of *Cunning Greed*. If you want to pick a lock, pick a pocket, hotwire a car or shoplift a candy bar, *Cunning Greed* is your huckleberry.

ESPIONAGE VS. KNOWLEDGE: KNOWING AND SPYING

Just as *Greed* and *Generosity* are two sides of the coin for dealing with property (your own and other people's), *Knowledge* and *Espionage* are the two sides of dealing with information. *Knowledge* represents a very, very broad cross-section of education and ability. If it's something you can learn from a book and it doesn't require a specialty, it's probably a matter of *Knowledge*. Where are the boundaries? Ask your GM. Someone with high *Knowledge* is probably equally able to: change the oil in your car, re-install your computer's OS, tell if a scientific publication is reputable or B.S., and discuss Macedonian history at the level of an informed lay person. Without a specialty, though, he can't rebuild a transmission, drag data off a hard drive that was rubbed with a magnet, publish in a reputable scientific journal or unpick the nuances of how Macedonian current events reflect historical struggles.

TASKS FOR PATIENT KNOWLEDGE

Is it long-term brain work? Then it's *Patient Knowledge*. Finding the one proper incantation in an occult library, developing a course of treatment for an illness (with a medical Specialty), re-wiring a house, and knowing who wrote "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" are all matters best handled with *Patient Knowledge*. Because it's such a broad field of endeavor (basically "all academic knowledge"), it can be good to modify these rolls with Difficulty ratings.

TASKS FOR PATIENT ESPIONAGE

Where *Knowledge* measures what you know, *Espionage* shows how well you find out what you really shouldn't. Need to tap a phone, sort through someone's bills to figure out where the money went, clock that armored car route, check

your car for booby-traps or run a stakeout? Those are matters for **Patient Espionage**.

TASKS FOR CUNNING KNOWLEDGE

This is for cases where you need to know something *right the hell NOW*, not after a leisurely afternoon in the library. Defusing a bomb, fixing a busted car radiator with oatmeal or playing knowledge-based quiz games like *Jeopardy!* all call for **Cunning Knowledge**. This is really for knowledge plus pressure. Intuition if you like. Or ass-pull guesses. ("Cut the red wire!" "Why?" "BECAUSE RED MEANS CHRISTMAS!")

TASKS FOR CUNNING ESPIONAGE

How well do you handle observation when you're under pressure? **Cunning Espionage** tells you. The sort of paranoid hyper-vigilance that characterizes **Cunning Espionage** is good for spotting ambushes, realizing that a purse is unattended, identifying an undercover cop or, really, just about anything that involves spotting, noticing or a rapid search.

SLY VS. OPEN: THE PHYSICAL CONFLICT

Physical tasks seem a bit divorced from ethics, don't they? The 'right' way to lift a heavy weight is the way that doesn't strain your back, not the way that's just or kind. But *Better Angels* uses right and wrong to organize physical activities, and the rationales for moral position may make more sense than is immediately apparent.

An **Open** act is straightforward and ordinary, not convoluted or tricky. **Sly** moves rely on misdirection, sneakiness, agility and the sorts of maneuvers that make the big strong fit guy whine "Hey, that's not fair!"

If a mortal's **Sly** gets reduced to zero, there is no particular penalty, other than having nothing to add to Tactics for some tasks. Demons, on the other hand, have deeper issues. Being **Sly**—getting away with what they oughtn't—is, in some ways, their most defining characteristic. Therefore, when a demonic entity's **Sly** hits zero, further attacks on it start reducing **Open**.

When an ordinary (non-Hellbinder) mortal's **Open** Strategy hits zero, he's **dying**. If someone bothers to try and save him with elementary first aid, direct pressure, phoning an ambulance or even just clutching his hand and saying "hang in there!" he can survive to the end of the scene and then transfer a point of **Sly** into **Open**. But if no one's there to save him (or no one cares to), he dies. He might get a chance to shriek some curses and invective, but he dies. If he doesn't have a point of **Sly** to turn into **Open**, he's similarly doomed, which (I guess) shows that being a scheming little weasel has its place.

Demon hosts are tougher, whether their mortal carriers are duped, resisting or actively on their side. When a demon host's **Open** gets zeroed, further damage to it goes across the aisle and reduces **Sly**. Even if the demon is dormant, the host can continue to fight and run and tell lies until both **Open** and **Sly** hit zero. When that happens, though, he's toast for sure.

TAKING ONE HELL OF A BEATING

With human beings, taking physical hits of Width 2-3 eventually wears down *Courage* until it's zero (sliding everything over into *Cruelty*), then drains *Open* into *Sly* until the onset of death. It's different for mortals hosting demons, though, because they can keep running until both *Sly* and *Open* are voided. This can leave that last dot bouncing back and forth between the two physical Strategies like a ping-pong ball while the demon-possessed mortal soaks up an amazing number of bullets and truncheon-blows.

That's all right. It's how the system is supposed to work, leaving the hellbound protagonist greatly drained and ineffective but still alive. If his *Cruelty* is relatively untouched, he may still be dangerous, like a cornered beast. This keeps the game running.

But if it seems ridiculous, or if things are bogging down because one particular enemy just won't drop and it's getting boring, there are solutions and they involve increasing Width. Even with only four dice in your pool, you have a 50/50 chance of getting a set. If you can get something that gives Advantage (like two rounds of aiming, if nothing else), use that for a Width boost. Your eventual set then becomes a 4x set, sufficient to straight erase the final point.



CRUELTY VS. COURAGE: THE USE OF FORCE

Courage is what you use to face conflicts against equal or superior opponents. *Cruelty* is what you use to degrade, wound and humiliate your inferiors. Whether you're using guns, knives, fists or hellfire-infused battle axes, you attack with these Tactics.

Humans who have no supernatural advantage use *Courage* when facing angels or demons, no matter how many humans there are and how well armed. Similarly, demons always use *Cruelty* on humans. (Angels always use *Courage* to fight, though using it on inferior opponents may violate their angelic code, as described in Chapter Ten.)

A hellbound facing a supernatural foe uses *Courage* until he invokes his demonic ally. After that, he has to use *Cruelty*.

TASKS FOR OPEN COURAGE

Open is the Strategy applied for face-to-face, intimate fighting. It's what you use when you're too close to think of your enemy as a tidy, objective abstraction. Punching, stabbing, and wrestling are all *Open*.

Hellbound use *Courage* against supernatural foes when they don't have demons invoked, so *Open Courage* would be used for a Hellbinder with a dormant demon going hand-to-hand against an angel or demon. Honestly, I don't like his chances.

Normal people use *Courage* when facing any superhuman threat. Against other humans, they use *Open Courage* when they're outnumbered, or unarmed against a weapon-wielding foe, or when they're in a very structured, honorable duel.

Angels always use *Courage* against demons, and do so with great relish. Standard physical *Courage* attacks target the other fellow's *Courage*.

TASKS FOR OPEN CRUELTY

When a demon flogs, stabs or beats down a human from within the radius of casual blood-splat ter, that's **Open Cruelty** right there. Any time you jump out and attack from ambush, that requires *Cruelty* as well, but in that case it's **Sly**. Ordinary, physical acts of *Cruelty* reduce the target's *Courage*.

TASKS FOR SLY COURAGE

Fighting **Sly** means trying to avoid paying the sweat-equity for your win. It's when you enter the fray from far off and don't want to get your shoes dirty with the blood and spittle of the slain. Any

time you use a rifle, bola, bow and arrow, or envenomed blow-gun dart, that's an example of **Sly**. It's like saying he's not good enough to approach you.

Sly Courage, then is when attempting to attack long-distance against an equal or superior foe, as delineated under **Open Courage**. The one distinction is that you can't snipe someone from surprise with *Courage*. For that, use **Sly Cruelty**.

At the risk of repeating myself, attacks with *Courage* usually reduce the opponent's *Courage*.



TASKS FOR SLY CRUELTY

Assassinating someone from a great distance is the epitome of **Sly Cruelty**, but generally speaking any time you're far away and fighting some-one who qualifies for **Cruelty**, this is your combi-nation. As I've mentioned before, **Cruelty** attacks reduce the target's **Courage**.

CONTEMPT VS. ENDURANCE: ENDURING, DENYING

To paraphrase G.B. Shaw, "The sensible man accepts the world as it is, while the unreasonable man insists that the world change to suit his preferences. This is why all progress is made by unreasonable men." If you substitute 'contemptuous' for 'unreasonable,' you get a sense of what these contrary Tactics do.

Endurance sustains, strengthens and supports. To keep a car on the road, or hold up someone who's about to fall, or keep trudging through the desert despite your thirst and exhaustion, you have to humbly submit to the pain without cravenly stopping. **Contempt**, on the other hand, looks for the easy way out. It sneers at reality as it is, demanding it submit to its whims instead. In broad terms, **Endurance** keeps physical things happening. **Contempt** makes physical things stop happening.

TASKS FOR OPEN ENDURANCE

Outside of fighting, this is the pairing for strength or endurance based tasks that keep happening—that maintain the status quo. To stop someone from getting away on foot, or follow him relentlessly, never deviating from his tail, you use **Open Endurance**. It's also what you use to row for hours, or run a marathon, or keep a door shut by bracing it with your back. It keeps you going.

In combat, you can pin someone with Open Endurance, interfering with an attack or preventing him from getting away. To do this, roll a success. If your Height is greater than his **Open**, you knock one die out of all his attack sets for this round. If your Height is also greater than his **Contempt** he's momentarily stuck in place and can't run away until next round. If

you want to keep him stuck, you need to keep making rolls that exceed his traits. He, on the other hand, can keep trying things. If his action is timed faster, it means he got it done while you were changing grips or chasing him down. This maneuver does not do damage or alter his stats.

TASKS FOR OPEN CONTEMPT

Contempt is a broad Tactic that really applies whenever you're trying to change a situation. Paired with **Open** it means you're changing things using direct, physical force. Kicking down a door, out-running a pursuer, or blocking a kick to the head are all uses of **Open Contempt**.

In combat, you can block with Open Contempt. If you have a sturdy object to interpose between the peril and its target, you can protect yourself or another person. (For the purposes of parrying, having armor or supernatural defenses counts as 'a sturdy object.') Your block roll generates standard gobble dice.

TASKS FOR SLY ENDURANCE

Use this to trail someone in a car (where it's a matter of command and control instead of physical stamina), to keep him from getting away with that valuable object or to trick him into a trap.

You can also use it for any physical task where you're keeping something stable or unchanging using grace or perspicacity. Tightrope walking, keeping the juggling clubs in the air or keeping that dirt bike upright on the rainy curve are all jobs for the balance of **Sly Endurance**.

In combat, Sly Endurance can be rolled to disarm someone. All it takes is a set. If your Height is greater than his Sly, the weapon (or other object he's controlling) leaves his grip. If your Height is also greater than his Endurance, the object ends up in your hands.

TASKS FOR SLY CONTEMPT

When you're trying to achieve a physical goal by using coordination and physical grace, you roll **Sly Contempt**. For example, it's good for climbing over obstructions, escaping from bonds or wrestling pins, and throwing the idol to your loyal partner. (**Sly Cruelty** is what you'd use for

throwing the idol at your disloyal partner.) Anything showy or sneaky that isn't in the domain of *Endurance* or *Open* goes here. Like end-zone dances.

In combat, you can dodge with *Sly Contempt*. This produces standard, time-dependent gobble dice.

DEVIOUS VS. INSIGHTFUL: THE SOCIAL CONFLICT

The highly **Insightful** know who they are and accept it. They don't judge others harshly for their natures. But those who are manipulative constantly regard those around them as tools for their own gain, advantage, or amusement. The **Devious** don't trust others with spontaneous feelings: Instead, they attempt to control, cajole or derail genuine emotion so that they can better squeeze some benefit out of it. To **Insightful** people, what matters is what is. To the **Devious**, what matters is what they would have you become.

In addition, your **Insightful** rating has an important mechanical consideration. If someone's trying to manipulate you (either with *Devious Honesty* or *Devious Deceit*) your **Insightful** rating serves as a Difficulty to their roll. If the roll fails, something seems fishy to you. If they're lying, you suspect their lies. If they're telling the truth, you may generally trust it (but still doubt their motives). When someone fails at truth manipulation, it opens them to closer examination, as described under *Insightful Honesty* and *Insightful Deceit*, below.

CORRUPTION VS. NURTURE: RELATING TO OTHERS

Within the **Insightful/Devious** axis of "being willing to learn from things" and "insisting that things warp into your preferred shape," there's a second divide. When acting with *Nurture*, you are drawing on the best in those around you. With *Corruption*, you're drowning their best. The pure can make others better, while the wretched drag others into the mire with them.

TASKS FOR INSIGHTFUL NURTURE

This is for seeing someone at their noblest. Often it's a matter of finding what they're telling themselves: "It's only for a little while" or "It would hurt her more to find out" or "I'm serving God and country." This is one tool psychologists use to understand their clients.

To use this without penalty, you have to interact with someone for a fair amount of time—an hour of leisurely conversation (possibly spread over days or weeks), or twenty minutes of intense interrogation. Alternately, you can get some sense of someone just from how they dress, stand and present themselves, but that's a Difficulty 5 cold read. If you go through someone's house looking at decor and bookshelves and whether they're tidy or slobs, you can make a roll at Difficulty 3 to get some sense of their better nature—no Difficulty if you're willing to poke in their checkbooks, medicine chests and private diaries.

On the other hand, you can use this on yourself to stay strong in the face of temptation. If someone tempts you with sleaze, roll **Insightful Nurture** to remind yourself of your own resolve. This produces gobble dice you can (maybe) use against the attack set. In this instance, timing is not

important: You can use a 2x5 to ruin a 3x3 set because you have superior Height and it's enough to reduce it below a set. Even against a 4x3, you can at least decrease the impact. But if you try that 2x5 against a 2x6, you're out of luck. They hit you where it counts.

TASKS FOR INSIGHTFUL CORRUPTION

"I have a sixth sense for pleasing men in ways that are none of my business."

—Barbara Kingsolver, "Stone Dreams"

How'd she know to wear the Catholic schoolgirl plaid skirt? She just knew, you loathsome pervert. She made her **Insightful Corruption** roll to suss out what makes you tick and what makes you squirm.

This is the negative-universe image of **Insightful Nurture**. Where one pulls out the good, this dredges up the dreadful, the wicked, the concealed and squiffy. Anything you can do to understand someone's good side (or defend your own) with **Insightful Nurture**, you can do with **Insightful Corruption** on their (or your) weaknesses, temptations and shocking urges.

TASKS FOR DEVIOUS NURTURE

Devious Nurture is a very versatile combination, because you can use it to persuade people of just about anything... as long as it's something righteous. It's all about tough love, or the tender kind, depending. People are unique and special snowflakes and midwifing the birth of a new moral revelation is more art than science. But like art and science it's often lengthy, painful, and leaves a frightful mess.

Use **Devious Nurture** to plead for mercy and you can actually shift or erase dots from **Cruelty**. Use it to give an inspiring speech and you can erode **Greed**, to **Generosity**'s benefit, or leach **Contempt** over into **Endurance**.



In some rare circumstances it could even go in the opposite direction, but only in the service of helping someone do the hard, good thing.

Ordinary mortals can also attack any demon-host's sinister Tactics with a heartfelt exorcism using **Devious Nurture**. The sticking points on that are "mortal" and "heartfelt." Hellbinders can't exorcise, and only mortals who have powerful spiritual convictions can do it (as a shorthand, assume someone with any religious faith and an **Insightful** rating of 3+ counts).

TASKS FOR DEVIOUS CORRUPTION

Hey honey, have a seat. Drinks are on me. He'll never know. They'll be fine. It's just this one time. I'd do it for you. You're going to love this. Make yourself comfortable.

Use this to cajole, cozen, seduce and bewilder those around you. You can shift damn near any virtuous Tactic to its opposite with a good roll and a convincing rationale. For many villains, this gets far more use than any freeze ray or death trap.

DECEIT VS. HONESTY: RELATING TO THE TRUTH

What could be simpler than true or false? Those are the tests where you can even guess with a 50/50 chance of getting it right. Only it gets murky when you stake your banner on the side of falsehood. Suddenly everything's shifting and nuanced and you have to keep track of which story you're telling whom. But hey, what's life without a few challenges?

A milk-flavored festival of dullness, that's what. You deserve more, surely?



SUPERVILLAIN TOLD A LIE! World in Shock!

Commentary

EPIDEMIC CONTINUES TO SPREAD. FEMA URGES NATIONWIDE

KOMODA

TASKS FOR INSIGHTFUL HONESTY

When someone attempts to undermine your belief in the truth—not just lying to you, but attempting to make you doubt your own ability to be true—you can roll this pair to form gobble dice. Just as you can use **Insightful Nurture** to protect assaults on your **Nurture**, you can use **Insightful Honesty** to keep the truth of right first and foremost in your mind, and just as in that other case, timing doesn't matter for these gobble dice, only Height.

Alternately, if someone tried a **Devious** manipulation on you and it failed, you can counterstrike with either **Insightful Honesty** or **Insightful Deceit**. If you use **Insightful Honesty** for your riposte, you can get a sense of whether anything he told you was true, and if so, what. But you don't get any sense of his motives.

TASKS FOR INSIGHTFUL DECEIT

If someone's trying to persuade you that you're not really a rotten, slimy liar, you can roll **Insightful Deceit** to reaffirm your allegiance to false testimony. (Know thyself, indeed. "I'm perfectly comfortable with my chicanery and fraud!") This is a standard gobble die defense, with no timing dependency. She appeals to your better half, you assure yourself the joke's on her—you don't have one.

Insightful Deceit is also useful when you think someone might be trying to put one over on you, which is so ridiculous it's almost laughable. You know the old saying, after all. "You can only cheat an honest man." That's how it goes, right?

If someone's **Devious Deceit** or **Devious Honesty** roll failed (either by getting no sets or by being less than the Difficulty set by your **Insightful** rating), you get one chance to eval-

ate their statement with either **Insightful Honesty** or **Insightful Deceit**. Not both! Emphatically not both.

If you examine the statement with **Devious Deceit**, you're assuming it's all B.S. and you're trying to sniff out their murky motivations. It won't pick out the corn kernels of truth buried in the turd of deception, but it can give a general sense of whether they were trying to push you around from fear, greed, pity, lust, desperation, malice, or a misplaced sense that it's for your own good.

TASKS FOR DEVIOUS HONESTY

Devious lies on the devil's side of the character sheet, but in this instance it may be less a matter of cruelty, pride or treachery, and more a matter of that foolish denial that led them to defy a deity with the honorific "Almighty." ("I thought all the cherubim calling him that were being sarcastic!") When you use **Devious Honesty**, you're be-

ing painfully earnest. Really, you're entering that woe-begotten territory populated with put-upon girlfriends, fund-raisers for depressing charities and those well-meaning public speakers who think that appeals to the common good have a chance in an election year full of pandering. You're trying to pull people's good side to the surface against their will (or, at least, against a little resistance from sloth or self-interest or sheer contrary cussedness). You're telling the truth people don't want to hear, either because it's so unbelievable ("I was possessed when I kissed her!") or because it's so unpalatable ("I kissed her but I won't do it again, I promise!")

You can't beat someone's personality into a different shape with this. To reallocate their Tactics, use **Nurture** or **Corruption**. But if you succeed at your **Devious Honesty** roll, you can get a surprise bonus on a follow up roll, based on the Width of your set.

THOSE SURPRISE BONUSES FROM HONESTY AND DECEIT

You can't just blurt something out, roll well, and get a surprise bonus on any old roll you pick as a follow up. Sorry, but I'm going to have to insist that the bonus make sense.

*Surprise bonuses from **Deceit** and **Honesty** can only apply when you reveal something the target didn't already know or suspect. They have to be relevant to the roll you're undertaking. Because they're verbal, they only give their bonus to verbal follow-ups.*

*In the case of **Honesty**, you can give your bonus to the person you've surprised. If you finally convince that journalist that the secret identity of the superhuman she's been following for months is, in fact, her nebbish co-worker, you can offer her that bonus to figure out what he does next (since she can now put together a bunch of previously unrelated data) with, say, **Knowledge** (if she's assembling physical clues like the location of a hideout) or one of the **Insightful** rolls (if she's taking a psychological approach). Alternately, you could make your big reveal and, while she's stunned by her own foolishness, you could follow up with an attack on her self-confidence in one area or another. Then you'd get the bonus.*

*With **Deceit**, you can only use it for your own benefit.*

Surprise Advantage

Width 2-3: +1 Advantage

Width 4: +2 Advantage

Width 5+: +3 Advantage

Interestingly, you can also give the Advantage to the person you're manipulating, as long as it makes sense.

Example: *Dodd is in love with Trish but doesn't want to jeopardize their friendship by declaring his feelings, especially since she's in a turbulent relationship with Buck. But when he finds out that Buck is a villain's henchman, he talks himself into telling her. He's got a Devious Honesty pool of 6d and rolls 2,2,6,7,7,9. Her Insightful rating is 3, so his 2x2 isn't enough to convince her, but that mighty 2x7 gets through. "I don't want this to be true, but it is!" Dodd squeaks. With his pair, he now has +1 surprise Advantage to any follow-up roll he wants to make. He could also give her the Advantage if she decides to break it off with Buck and she needs a boost to resist the manly charms he sculpted with ten years of big house free weights.*

TASKS FOR DEVIOUS DECEIT

You tell lies with this.

As with **Devious Honesty**, you can't shift people's Tactics this way, but you can build up surprise Advantages on follow up rolls. The degree of Advantage depends on the Width of the lie's roll.

Surprise Advantage

Width 2-3: +1 Advantage

Width 4: +2 Advantage

Width 5+: +3 Advantage

Example: *Buck tells Trish that Dodd only rated him out because he's trying to get into her pants. (Ironically, while this is true, Buck's convinced that Dodd is gay. He rolls Deceit because he thinks he's deceiving her.) His Devious Deceit pool is a terrifying 8d, and he's also bargained with his boss (who has Cloven Hooves, as described on page 82) to keep Trish as his girlfriend no matter what. So he rolls 8d+MD, calling on his Faustian pact. He gets a 3x5 and uses his Master Die to make that a 4x5. He now has +2 surprise Advantage to use when trashing Dodd or (if the GM is generous) convincing Trish that he loves her and only wants to protect her...*



BARKLEY



CHAPTER 5:
THE PLAY'S THE THING

ALL STORY IS BASED ON CONFLICT: That's Lit 101 right there. Conflict can be subcategorized as "external" or "internal." External conflict is against something outside, be it a freezing night in the north woods, a Viet Cong ambush, or an office fax machine that just won't work right. Internal conflict is some emotional problem: I think I love her but she might be happier with Bobby; he deserves to die but should I kill him when he's helpless and praying?; if I leave home to follow my dream of being a lion tamer, my family will lose the deed on the farm they love and I hate.

The twist in *Better Angels* is that the internal conflicts are semi-externalized through the Screwtape. Half (or more) of the game can be zany supervillain hijinks of kidnapping astronauts and holding Arbor Day hostage, but just as much can be about the bickering and resentment (or stone cold hatred) between host and demon.

These two forms of conflict are handled very differently. Until the endgame process of hell-harrowing (page 101) or exorcism (page 98) there are *no dice rolled* between human and hell-fiend. Neither can really harm the other until they can *really* harm each other, if you get my drift. So it's all down to negotiation between man and monster—which is really negotiation between players, while the GM snickers into her Snickers wrapper.

THE BASICS OF EXTERNAL CONFLICT

Conflict is all about someone wanting something but being unable to just casually lay hands on it. There's uncertainty, so the dice come out.

INANIMATE OBJECTIVES

When a PC is trying to overcome a non-thinking, non-changing challenge, you pick the best fit of Strategy and Tactic, roll the pool and look for a set. If you get one, you succeeded. If the task is extra hard, the GM assigns a Difficulty. Trivially easy? GM should just let it happen. Impossible? The GM says it can't be done and everyone moves on politely without bothering to shake the dice. Taking time to add Advantage works well here, as does cooperation or finding clever ways to roll an alternative pool, but in the big picture, the GM should ask herself: Are both possibilities *useful*? Meaning, if the PCs succeed at this roll, does it unravel the story in one fell swoop and make any further effort pointless? If the answer to that is 'yes,' why would the GM ask for a roll? (Unless it's a climactic moment where all their efforts and striving come to focus on one roll.)

Then it's very cool.) Similarly, just because it's 'logical' to have a stumbling block in the PCs' path, that doesn't mean it serves the good of the story or the overall fun of the game. Sure, that door would, quite reasonably, be stout and firmly locked. But if it's the only way forward, what's the point of demanding a roll? It's either going to succeed (and the game moves on) or fail (and the game grinds to a halt until everyone's gnawing their knuckles from boredom and frustration).

In a well-designed adventure, one easy action doesn't produce disproportionate rewards. Neither does it include pixel-bitchy challenges where one bad roll stalls everything until someone justifies another way out. But gaming isn't an exact science, and sometimes you have to improvise. If letting them pick the door lock, regardless of skill, is the only way forward, let them succeed without a roll. If refusing to let them sink the enemy battleship, even if they could make a good go of it, is the only way to keep the play's momentum moving forward, the GM should regretfully explain that ship's off limits.

If you find yourself frequently having to block their attempts unreasonably, or having to give them passes when they're stuck, you need to reconsider how you're structuring adventures, what you're assuming your PCs are going to do, and what sorts of passive obstacles you're using.

COMBAT AND OTHER ROUGH STUFF

Hiccups in adventure design aside, the static obstacles are really the simple ones. Roll a set, maybe against a Difficulty, and move on. The more extended, detailed, and interesting conflicts are those against other individuals. Statted-up characters change and react and adapt to the assault. They need a more adaptive system.

PHYSICAL STRUGGLES

This is what you think about with supervillains: jaw-slugging and Kryptonite pistols. In this, you're attempting to degrade or eliminate your opponent's ability to fight back (or, in some cases, survive). Seconds count and timing is crucial, so we break down these showdowns into carefully-tracked combat rounds. Each round has three steps.

Step One: Declare. Everyone involved describes what he's trying to accomplish in the combat round. That can be as simple as "I hit Lumos Pantera" or as complicated as "I want to dodge the fiery sword, close the distance to the bank guard, and seize him in an unbreakable grasp!"

Some groups are casual and allow people to declare their actions in any old order, going back to change their minds as the situation clarifies. ("Whoa, if the Shining Diamond is trying to talk me out of fighting, I clearly need to defend against that by screaming obscenities at her!") If you want a firmer system, use this: The character with the lowest **Cunning** declares first, and then onward, with the highest **Cunning** declaring last, after hearing everything everyone else is doing. If **Cunning** is tied, **Knowledge** breaks the tie.

Make it clear if you're using a multiple action and get straight what pool you're rolling and how big it is after penalties, Advantage, bonuses and the like.

Step Two: Roll. Roll a number of ten-sided dice equal to your modified pool. Then sort them

looking for matches. If you declared one action, pick the set to use (should you have one). If you declared multiple actions and got multiple sets, split them up as you wish. If you tried multiples and only got one set, pick which action you're going to succeed at.

(Note well: If you try doing two things and one is the necessary precondition for the other, you have to assign the precondition—the set that acts first. If you only get one set, it has to go to the precondition. So if your multiple action is, "I'm going to catch the suitcase and open it," you have to catch it before you open it, and if you only have one set, you can only catch it.)

Once you have your sets sorted, add any Width bonuses from Advantage or other sources.

Step Three: Resolve. The Widest set goes first. If two sets are equally Wide, then Height serves as a tiebreaker. (If Height matches, the tie goes to whoever rolled the most dice; or just roll a separate die for it.) This is especially important for people using gobble dice to protect themselves. If a physical attack is timed faster than the defense, the defense does nothing. The punch happened before you could make up your mind to dodge. It doesn't matter that your **Sly Contempt** dodge was a 2x10. You can't ruin a 3x1 because it happens so fast.

If you're simply trying to accomplish a task in a fight, it's handled as described under "Inanimate Objectives" back on page 46.

If you're trying to affect someone, you alter one of their Tactics (or, if your set is huge, a Strategy). The result depends on the Width of your set.

Attack Results

Width 2-3: Slide a dot off the Tactic into its opposite. If it's already at zero, slide a dot off the Strategy above it.

Width 4: Remove a dot from the Tactic. If it's empty, take a dot off the Strategy above it.

Width 5+: Remove a dot from the Strategy above the targeted Tactic.

Moreover, any time you score a hit on someone, he loses a die out of one of his sets. (This is why it's useful to get multiple sets even if you're taking a single action: If you get hit, you can take it on your crappy set instead of your good one.)

This goes on until someone drops, flees, or decides to surrender, or until the situation changes radically.

HEALING AND DYING

When a mortal's **Open** hits zero, he's dying. He can't take any actions, other than maybe spitting defiance or pleading for mercy. If anyone present chooses to finish him off, it takes one round of action and doesn't require a roll, unless someone else tries to stop her (in which case the conflict continues against that still-active person).

By the same token, if someone present decides to stabilize the dying mortal, he squeaks through to the next scene, assuming no one goes for the closing move in the interim. (It's a lot easier to kill a dying person than it is to keep one alive, after all.) This, again, takes no roll and requires only an action.

It works just the same with hellbound, except both **Sly** and **Open** have to zilch out before they're dying. If your **Open** hits zero, you feel like crap, but your demon keeps you going because it isn't done wreaking havoc in the mortal world yet.

Healing up after being bludgeoned and mangled can be handled with a bit of hand-waving. If you raise your **Courage** or **Cruelty** back up to their previous levels, you're functionally healed. Even if you're covered with cosmetic bandages and are playacting how bruised and miserable you are, you don't need to change your rolls. This system doesn't care much about impeding you by giving specific penalties for that broken leg: You take damage directly on your ability to accomplish things, so additional penalties would be redundant. Keep the descriptions colorful but cinematic, not clinical, and don't worry about it.

STATTING UP MOBS

Individual superheroes and villains, amped up on otherworldly power, are always specifically handled and indi-

vidually detailed. Mobs of lesser mortals (and this applies for trained and organized military and police forces, too), while less interesting and less germane to the game's central ideas, are still dangerous. But making up individual stats for every minion in a secret lair is a *lot* of tedious bookkeeping. So rather than inflict that on the GM, here are some rules to handle groups of combatants collectively.

First off, **figure out how many people are in the mob**. Write the number down.

Second, **figure out the mob's dice pool**. It's equal to one die for everyone in the mob, up to 10d.

Third, **calculate its Advantage**. Give it a point of weapon Advantage for each of the following factors involved—they stack:

- A mob leader is armed.
- Many people within the mob are armed.
- They're cornered.
- They're mad at whoever they were fighting, and were even before the fight began.
- They're trained for conflict or have strong ideological motivation.

When the mob acts, roll its pool to form attacks, using Advantage however you want. They do damage to **Courage** and then to **Open**. **Mobs cannot defend themselves**. Even if you're an ordinary guy, there are good odds that you shake up one or two guys in the crowd before they trample you. If you're shooting into the mass or using superpowers? Well, it gets bloody fast. Assume that any power that could be used to attack one person's **Courage** can damage the mob—stuff like Terror and Dominator Strike are handled the same for mobs, by letting you roll. Even though Terror usually only hits one guy and doesn't do physical damage, assume it can scatter and even kill people in mobs, since the terrified person may shoot someone on his way out or fall and get trampled.

When attacking the mob, all you have to do is roll as if you're punching someone. If you keep a set, it removes a number of mob members equal to its Width. The reason they're out of the fight

USEFUL VAGUENESS

How far can a character move in a combat round? Exactly how much time does a single action require? How bad of an injury is it when you lose a point off Courage?

I don't know.

Rounds are an abstraction and thinking about them as representing a number of seconds is less useful than thinking about them standing for a quantum of intensity. If a fight isn't critical, if one side or the other is willing to cave after taking a few hits, then one round could represent a whole wrestling match. If it's to the death with the man who killed your daddy, you may want to have every exchange of blows as a round, because that's going to wear down the loser deeper and faster.

Given this flexibility, it makes no sense to bother with movement rates or exact descriptions of injuries. Negotiate politely and casually with the GM to decide if your character can make it to his goal in time for free in a round, or if he has to make a successful Open Contempt roll, or if he can get there with no roll by giving up his action. Accept her decision. If it's inconsistent, that's a feature more than a bug because it means your GM is paying attention to pacing, which is one tool for a good game. Trust her to make things a little harder or a little easier in order to make the game better for everyone and don't sweat the finicky details. There are lots of great games that handle those physical things elegantly, but this one focuses on character and ethics instead.

depends on the Height of the roll.

Reason for Removal

Height 1-3: They decide this scene is too crazy and run or surrender.

Height 4-6: They're lightly hurt.

Height 7-8: They're badly hurt.

Height 9-10: They're dead.

When the mob gets hit, it loses a die from a set. When enough people have dropped, the mob disperses. (How many is 'enough'? Maybe a third or a quarter, decide beforehand. If they're real fanatics, half.)

Example: After the local cable news outlet reveals the warehouse hideout of Commander Whim, a crowd of angry locals shows up waving axes and shotguns. There are about 30 of them, and the GM decides beforehand that they split once

ten of them are felled. Their pool is 10d and stays that way throughout. They have weapon Advantage 3 because their leader is armed (+1), many of them are armed (+1) and they were pissed at Commander Whim before they knew where to find him (+1).

Commander Whim, on the other hand, has the powers Armor and Terror, the latter with a 7d pool. He hopes he can frighten them away without having to open fire with his shotgun, but he's not going to back down—his demon would never forgive him for showing weakness.

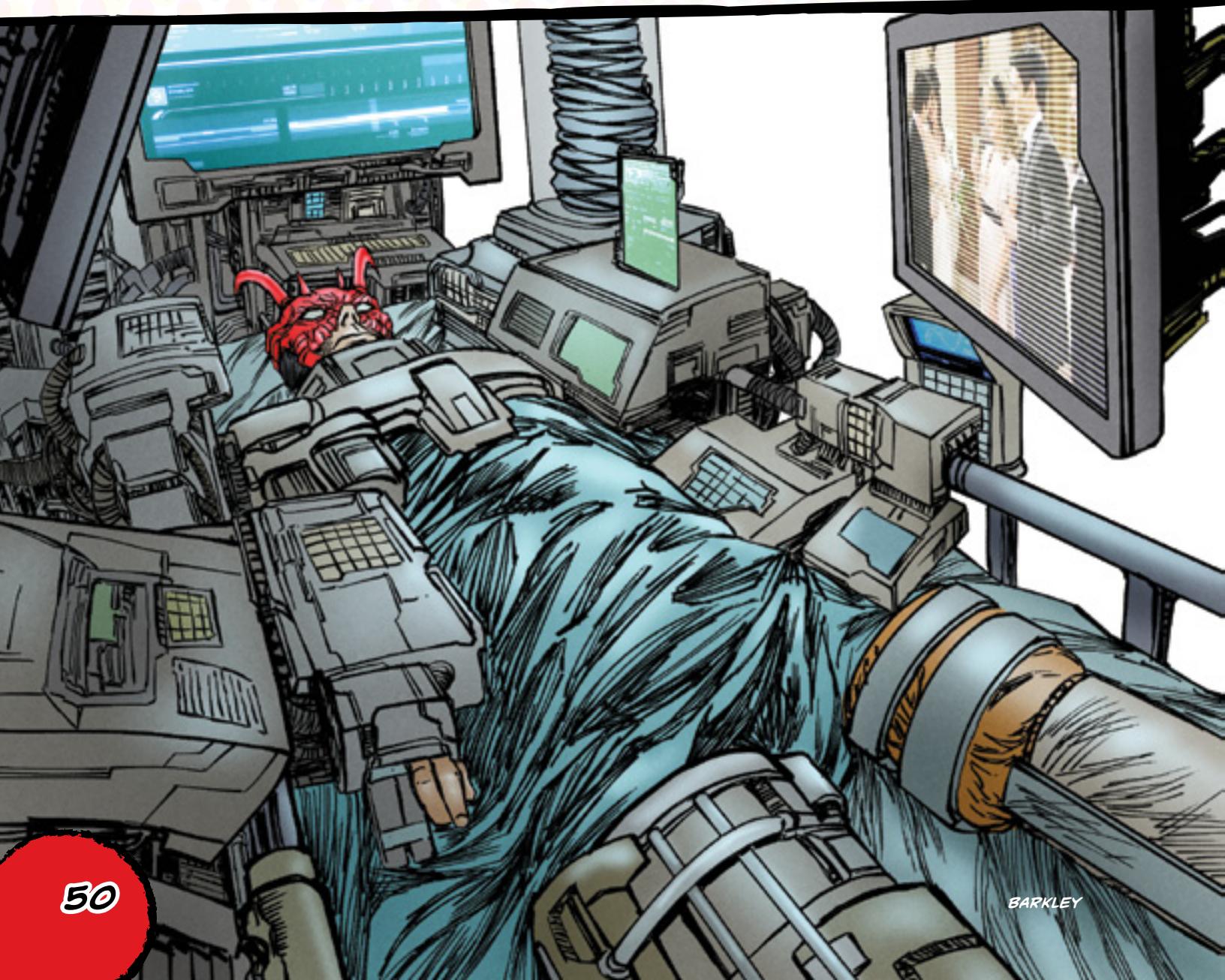
When the mob attacks, it rolls 3x5 and 3x7, while he gets 2x1. His armor prevents them from using any weapon Advantage and knocks those rolls down to 2x5 and 2x7, which strip out two points of Courage and lead him to make a called shot with his next attack. But that gives him no sets, while they get 3x2, 2x3 and 2x10. His protection leaves only the 3x2 as a

2x2 and he loses his last point of Courage.

On the next round, he rolls a 3x2 while they get a 3x7 and a 2x10. His defenses reduce the 2x10 to a pointless 1x10 and the 3x7 becomes a 2x7—timed after his 3x2, which ruins it while driving off three of the crowd. But there's still 27 of them left, and he decides next round to open fire. His Sly Cruelty has been plumped up with the three dice that came off Courage, and the weapon gives him +2 Advantage. He's rolling 7d before his Advantage, and he decides to put it all into Width.

This time he naturally rolls a 4x4, which becomes a 6x4, while the riotous gang gets 3x3, 2x4 and 2x10—after his protection thins it out, that's only a

2x3. His shotgun blasts injure six of the attackers, who drop in place or scatter, and take a die out of the 2x3, leaving him unscathed. Next round, he does it again, as do they. They get 3x1, 3x3 and 2x9. He gets 2x6 and 2x10, and chooses to apply his Advantage to the sixes—after all, his goal is not to have a stack of dead bodies. After the Armor effect, they have a 2x1 and a 2x3. His 4x6 goes off first, causing (directly or through panic) four more injuries and spoiling the 2x1 set. But that 2x3 gets through, and he loses his sole point of Open, sliding it over into Sly. If he was human, he'd be dying now, but as a demon he's just miserably sore. The mob, on the other hand, has lost 13 of its members to gunfire injuries, trips and falls, or bowel-shaking terror. They turn and flee.



INTELLECTUAL STRUGGLES

It works just like a fistfight, with only a few minor tweaks. First off, timing matters a lot less for intellectual defense, so now that 2x10 **Patient Knowledge** defense can ruin a 3x5 **Cunning Knowledge** argument.

Secondly, you can't take away someone's last point of **Open** simply through reasoned debate. That makes sense, right? But other than that, you can take a crack at just about any Tactic with the right evidence... as long as the target is willing and able to listen. Someone who's got a heavy emotional investment in denying (say) the theory of evolution may not respond to any sort of **Knowledge**-based approach until softened up with a social attack.

SOCIAL STRUGGLES

Same mechanic as intellectual struggles. You declare how you're trying to adjust someone's Tactics through wheedling or seduction or browbeating, you roll and you resolve it. Defense timing is just like intellectual conflict. Easy.

The big difference is that when you punch someone, you want to cause pain and injury. When you argue with someone, you want compliance and agreement. So make sure everyone knows what you're trying to accomplish with social pressure. If you get a set that causes a result, the target can avoid the change or damage—if he agrees to do what you want.

Example: *Acid Papa has managed to manipulate his demon into getting him to a violent bank robbery with promises of hijacking the heist. His real goal is to keep the hostages alive. He points a gun at a robber's head and says, "Let her go or I'ma ventilate your brain." This is a Devious Corruption roll targeting the other guy's Cruelty, which the robber would use to shoot an unarmed hostage. Acid Papa gets a massive 5x6 result, enough to simply shear off a point of the guy's Sly. If the robber lets the girl go, he doesn't have to suffer the Sly loss. But if he doesn't, he's now got one less Sly die to use in his pool to kill her.*

You can't make anyone do anything through social pressure, except lose traits. If you completely hollow out someone's **Deceit**, and then all the **Devious** above it, you haven't turned him into an honest guy. You've just spiritually bludgeoned him into being a lousy liar. To be fair, that can be a pretty decent outcome.

MISCELLANEOUS MISFORTUNES

Sometimes, a player whiffs a roll for something important, or encounters some kind of environmental hassle that impedes or humiliates or damages him. A character could get set on fire, dunked in acid, thrown on the third rail just as a train crashes down on him, or just get pantsed in front of a dozen teens with their cell phones filming. How do you handle stuff that isn't explicitly "getting hit by a superhero" or "getting talked down from the brink of misbehavior"—bad events that are simply the vicissitudes of fortune?

It's all on the GM.

If it's a simple day-to-day hassle, she slides a point off one Tactic and into another, explaining why the character has had his attitude forcibly adjusted. Fell off a wall? Slide **Endurance** to **Contempt** because the character is now hurting and being a little less disciplined. Made your neighbor suspicious when she caught you climbing in the window wearing a leotard? Slide **Greed** to **Generosity** because you now have to circumscribe your actions and act like a decent person, at least when you're around the house. Note that if the GM asks you to slide a point from something that's empty, you have to slide a dot off the Strategy above it instead. (You can't expect the GM to keep track of all your empty Tactics, and if you've let one get empty you're obviously vulnerable to worse outcomes.)

If it's a more significant setback, like having someone throw you into a bathtub full of gin and light it on fire, or getting run over by a motorcycle? The GM names a Tactic and you just erase a point, instead of sliding it. You're under police surveillance?

Chop a point off *Greed*. The lead news story was footage of you eating a live kitten? Lose a point of *Corruption*, since people aren't going to listen to your honeyed words when your breath still reeks of poor Missy Mittens. Someone gets access to your bank account? Lose a point of *Generosity*. Again, if the relevant Tactic is empty, it goes off the Strategy above it.

For serious, cataclysmic disasters like the aforementioned train-and-third-rail combo, lose a point straight off a relevant Strategy. (In that case, *Open*.) If the Strategy is already empty, lose a dot off its opposite. (So if you're out of *Open*, you lose the dot off *Sly*.) If the *Washington Post* puts together your supervillain identity *and* your ordinary life and your demonic-Aspected appearance, and it's front-page over the fold? Lose a point of *Cunning*. Get pinned down and subjected to lengthy torture involving waterboarding, non-therapeutic ECT, mock executions and terrifying doses of ketamine? Lose a point of *Devious* or *Insightful*, as your grasp on your self-image and trust of humanity erode.

GMs—understand that this is an authority to be wielded lightly. Characters can already lose a lot of Tactics and pay heavily to restore them, so having them slid around or excised capriciously is going to tip the balance into frustration and helplessness on their part. But when they get themselves in trouble (and they will), this is how you reflect the consequences.

OPTIONAL RULE: COLLATERAL DAMAGE

Here's something you may want to throw in to make the strained lives of your PCs even less tenable. It's a simple system for figuring out civilian casualties when superpowers are getting thrown around in populated areas.

Here's how it works: You assemble a pool and roll it at the end of every combat round where certain especially dangerous powers are in play. If you get a pair, someone's at risk. Width determines how badly hurt and Height determines how many.

Step by step, here's how that works.

ASSEMBLE THE COLLATERAL POOL

Add a die for each of the following factors:

- Each combatant who aggressively uses any of the following powers or Aspects: Telekinesis, Wither, Dominator Strike, Terror, That Hideous Strength, Horned, Giant, Flame Wreathed.
- A single person firing a gun.
- Multiple people firing guns.
- Each person who gets bloodily mangled.
- There are at least a dozen people present.
- There are fifty or more people present.

These factors all stack. So, for example, two demons are fighting, but they're not (initially) using any crazy powers. They're doing this in the middle of a baseball game, so the crowd is pretty big. On the first round, the collateral pool is two dice, because there are at least a dozen people present and because there are more than fifty people present. The GM rolls, no set, no problem. People are uneasy but still kind of confused.

Next round, one activates Giant and Flame-Wreathed, while the other opens fire with a handgun. Now the pool is 5d, one for each scary (or difficult-to-control) power, one for the sound of gunshots, and two for the people present.

ROLLING FOR THREAT

Here's the twist: Collateral Damage is rolled at the end of the round, after all the actions have been resolved, and it determines potential danger to onlookers and property. You explain to everyone involved who's in peril and from what, and leave it up to the players to mitigate, exacerbate, or ignore the danger.

Width determines the level of risk.

Collateral Damage Risk

Width 2-3: Minor injuries, scrapes, bruises, cuts and twisted ankles.

Width 4: Serious injuries: broken bones, severe burns, concussions.

Width 5+: Death.

Height determines how many people are at risk from the threat.

So in our example, the two battling villains have a 5d pool. The GM rolls and gets a 4x4. (It's unlikely, but I just threw my dice and that's what I got.) So four people (the Height) are at risk of serious injuries (as per Width 4). The GM tells the two villains that their thrashing and gunfire have prompted a mass flight, so only a dozen people will be left on the battlefield at the end of the round. That's the good news. The bad news: The bleachers are collapsing after the fiery giant fell into them, and some people who couldn't get off are now at risk of getting pinched and spindled by the crumpling aluminum. Can the giant help them? Probably not, unless he switches off his fire. Is the gunman willing to turn his back in order to drag people free? He might get one or even two, but not all four...

These rules simultaneously make it easier to rack up sins (as described on pages 89-92) while making characters far more guilty of destruction. Use with caution.





KOMODA

ME AND KARISH-NEPHET THE DEFILER

I take a deep breath as I walk into the bank. There is no reason this has to end badly. No reason at all. There are no visible guards. This isn't a main bank, just a little branch. They're relying on cameras for security. Unfortunately for them, cameras only deter people who aren't already in every police database in America and Europe (not to mention all those posters in African post offices).

Right. Deep breath. It's not like I'm an A-list criminal. Not yet. Wait, that doesn't matter. I just need a couple thousand bucks. Easy peasy. I could be another customer, another soccer mom or school teacher coming in to deposit a tax refund check.

I wait in line while a senior citizen hobbles up and monopolizes one teller while the other teller works the drive-in. After granny

starts making her way to the door, I get impatient. I let Karish-Nephet in.

Karish? Time for serpent form, buddy. Let's go.

Who dares invoke... the Defiler?!?

Come on, it's me. Margie. Who else calls on you these days?

Ah, Margaret. Once more you come crawling, debasing your self for the favors of thy infernal master.

At this point, I seriously consider walking out of the bank and giving it up. But once Radio Karish is on, it's a while before he gets bored and if I don't do something to entertain him, he's going to be a pain in the ass all afternoon and probably half the night.

Karish, if it's okay with you, I'd like to transform into the Serpent Princess and rob the bank. If you can fit that in your busy schedule.

Time is as nothing to the infinite Karish-Nephet! Let your puny form be garbed in my glory!

When the cops review the video footage, they're going to see plain old me on those CCTVs for the first few minutes, Margaret Silverberg in her mom-style jeans and cowl-neck sweater. And then BAM! The sudden appearance of a scaly, eight-foot-tall woman with a serpent head and tail, waving a scepter and dressed like an Egyptian princess as envisioned by Frederick's of Hollywood. Only, you know, with a slit in back for the tail.

I do not understand why the Serpent Princess has such a rack. Shouldn't boobs be reserved for mammals?

"Cower, mortals, lest thy days end in unimaginable suffering!"

Crap, Karish is talking out loud. That's never good. As one of the onlookers pulls out his cell phone, I feel my arm point at him. In the moment, I'm not really sure whether it's me or Karish directing it.

"No pictures, asswipe! I mean, um, submit and kneel before the Serpent Princess!"

He's not doing it. I really hate seeing those shots on the internet.

Let's kill him!

No! Um, just humiliate him! Do the zombie thing!

Yessss....

"Bow and cower!"

With that, camera-man drops his phone, kneels on it with his full weight and prostrates himself. "All... hail... Karish-Nephet..."

"On your feet, slaaaave!" Karish really digs it when I put extra vowels in. "Adorn thy princess with tribute!"

Karish, scan the bankers. They're all going to be cool, right?

Perhaps I do not care to.

What? This is no time to screw around! I don't want any surprises. You don't want to look bad, do you? My zombified guy is lurching towards the counter and climbing over it.

Reading such quotidian minds is beneath the glory of the Defiler.

Oh for the love of... hey, someone's making a run for it!

"Halt! Kowtow thyself!"

The bank patron crashes down halfway to the door, smacking his own head onto the floor.

That'll do. Let him go.

Who are you to direct Karish-Nephet?

I'm the only body you've got, crap-monkey! Now let him go or I swear my next stop is an exorcist!

As if some bourgeois Catholic theologian could contend with my greatness. He scoffs, but he does it. The compulsion he... okay, we... inflicted ends and the runner lies there, sobbing and exhausted.

Honestly, I don't know what difference it makes. I could have just let him get away. But Karish seems a bit thawed, he's rummaging through the local minds... three more employees in back on the phones, whatever... horrified onlookers, stark terror, good, none of them are going to make trouble... one of the tellers is sticking in a dye pack....

Karish...?

I attend.

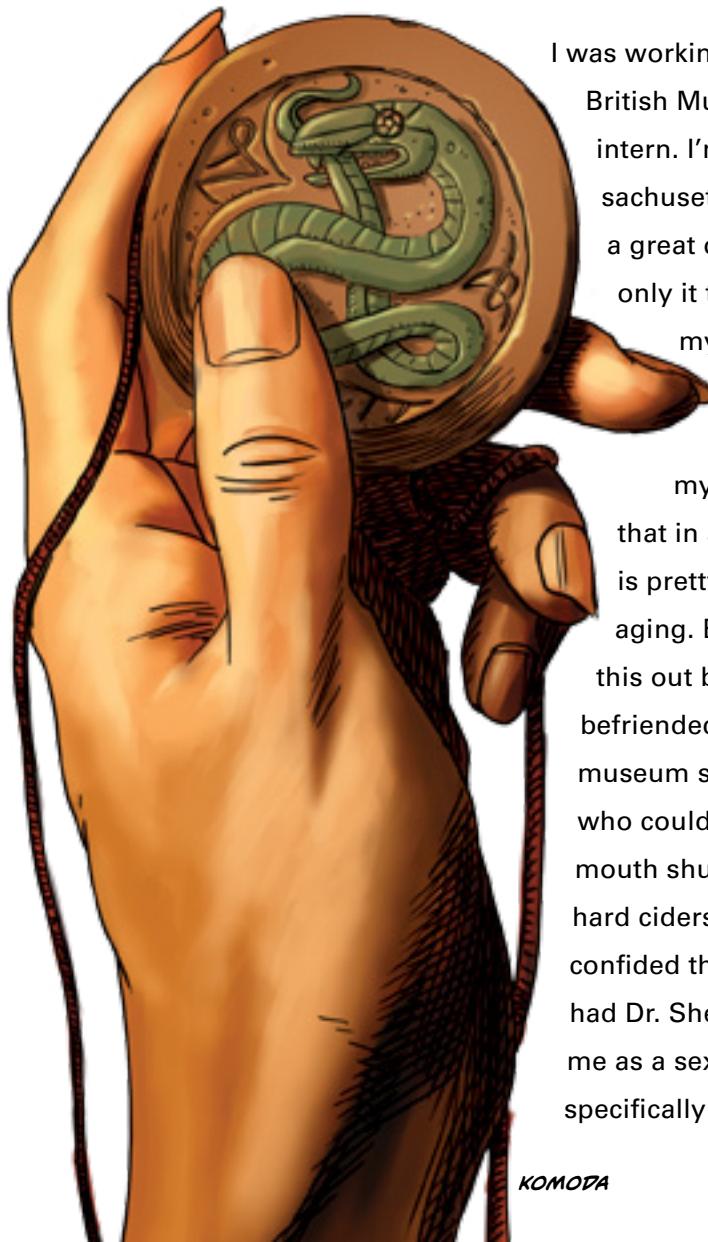
"Thou who wouldst besmirch my greatness, stain thyself instead!"

The teller who grew a pair jerks upright and his eyes glaze over. That really creeped me at first, that and the soulless voice, but I guess people can get used to anything. He marches to the corner by the drive through and releases the dye-pack on himself.

"Laugh! Behold the one who sought to outwit the Serpent Princess, and laugh! Karish-Nephet commands it!"

And everyone in the bank laughs in unison, mechanical and forced. But that doesn't bother me. I've got other problems.

First off, someone in the back on the 911 line got told that a superhero is on the way.



Worse, one of the tellers is wearing an engagement ring that she just got yesterday, and Karish wants it.

You may be wondering how a nice middle-class intellectual wound up playing "Are you there, abominable hell-god? It's me, Margaret" with an evil spirit that prefers to refer to himself in the third person. Well I'll tell you. It's a cautionary tale. It could happen to you.

I was working at the British Museum as an intern. I'm from Massachusetts, and it was a great opportunity, only it turned out my mentor was trying to get into my pants. Now, that in and of itself is pretty discouraging. But I found this out because I'd befriended one of the museum secretaries who couldn't keep her mouth shut after two hard ciders and she confided that not only had Dr. Shelleigh picked me as a sex object, he'd specifically thought I'd

be plain enough to appreciate his sagging fifty-year-old charms. I believe the exact phrase had something to do with "punching your weight."

Add to that a long-distance relationship that was already on the rocks, which foundered when I told him about the professor putting on the moves. Bradley (the boyfriend) asked how he was supposed to trust me. Hello? Maybe he could trust me because *I told him all about being hit on and how I said no?* I think he was looking for an excuse to end it, and him getting engaged just seven months later seems to support the thesis.

But hey, I got even. Me and Karish-Nephet.

So I was cataloguing minor Egyptian artifacts and feeling very, very sorry for myself when I found the ushabti. I had the card for "carved wooden box, serpent motif" and was typing it into a computer that was, itself, an antique. Seriously, it had a black box screen with green letters on it. Remember those? So I was using their painful command-line cataloguing software, but first I was to check every single item and make

sure it was still intact. Which, for the most part, I did.

But that carved wooden box, serpent motif, rattled. When I opened it, there was a tiny green serpent-headed statue, which I (incorrectly) assumed was Renenet. I stole it.

I checked with triple care that it wasn't missing or misfiled. I told myself that it was crudely made, possibly fake and certainly not worth more than \$880.00 US. (I'd shopped around.) I also struggled for some moral high ground by reminding myself that the British Museum had, themselves, stolen it from someone's tomb. (From the card, they think he was called 'Something-kopshef the Blackened and Accursed.' Should have been my first hint.) But really, I was pissed at the museum, at Bradley back home and Professor Shelleigh upstairs. So stealing the ushabti was my small, spiteful, cowardly revenge.

Of course that was the day they started searching museum employees. I found out later that someone had nicked the museum director's Nimba fertility mask as a joke and hidden it in the men's room. But I panicked and I

took that little jade figurine and I swallowed it.

I am quietly confident that it's still in me somewhere, probably near the base of my spine, because that's where I feel Karish-Nephett sleeping when he's dormant. I bet it'd show up on an X-ray.

That night, the Defiler awoke and I felt the fire climb my spine for the first time. I heard the voice in my mind speaking of glory and revenge, and Professor Shelleigh had done plenty to make that sound like a great idea. I had power, not just the brute zombie-brain clobber but subtle influence, and it all seemed too fun and too easy to get under a Welsh guy with great hair, great abs and an absolutely swoony accent. (Terrible bridgework though.) Then when I was back in the US, it was child's play to get back in touch with Bradley and tell him there were no hard feelings, and then when Shelleigh came to attend a conference I lured them to my apartment with promises of my famous brisket. Once they were there I called upon Karish-Nephett and...

And it all got out of hand. I was really angry. Hysterical. All their blustering apologies and

defensive posturing just made it worse and worse and I made them have sex with each other. A couple times.

I mean, Karish suggested it.

But no, I did it. I let it happen. It's on me.

Last I heard, Bradley had gone out to Alaska and was working on one of those canning ships. Professor Shelleigh killed himself in his hotel room, leaving a note with some pithy observations on how easy it was to get a gun in the USA.

Me? Well for me the honeymoon was over and I was, for better or worse, in a long term relationship with an immortal, mind-controlling sadist. One with a serpent motif.

I point at the bank teller and snap my fingers. "The ring."

Her eyes get wide. "What?"

Oh bitch, don't play dumb. Karish hates coy and I'm not crazy about it myself. Difference is, Karish will bleed it out of you.

"Your engagement ring. Put it in the sack."

She blinks.

Make her put it in.

Nay.

What, you're a horse now? You want the ring, take the ring, let's go.

I don't care about the ring. I care about her choosing to part with it. I care about her fear.

I suppose I should be grateful. There's a guy I worked with, has the same kind of thing. Only his evil spirit likes him to stack up dead kids like firewood and then leave cryptic hints to this one particular FBI agent. Still, this situation is not getting any better, so I grab the stupid tramp by her scarf and reel her in close.

"You think your man's going to stop loving you 'cause you lost the ring? If he's that much of a dick, I'm doing you a favor. Because if you make me kill you over this ring, it is not going to be all romantic like that stupid Fifties song—"

'Earth Angel,' I believe.

"This isn't 'Earth Angel,' it's just going to be your parents sobbing at your funeral about

why you were too stupid to hand over a lump of carbon!"

She starts tugging. It's stuck.

"Put your finger in your mouth," I tell her, and then the ceiling cracks open.

Let's talk about superheroes for a moment, 'kay? I'll start out by saying that, if you want to put your underwear on top and run into burning buildings, fine. Rescue people. I mean, maybe you'd do better if you hired on with the fire department and got training on how to pull a ceiling or do CPR. But whatever, follow your bliss. I don't know. Could be there's a psych screening for EMTs.

But most superheroes aren't prying people out of car wrecks and aiding faltering swimmers, now are they? Or at least if they are, those aren't the ones you see on Fox News and CNN. No, there it's all about *crime-fighters*.

Having forced my ex-boyfriend to sodomize my onetime sexual harasser, I do not have a lot of moral high ground to claim, but at least I never said I was a role model. I have never

pursued, nor would I accept, product endorsements—unlike that guy with the overgrown hatchet who shills for the body-spray people. I may rob and kidnap, but I'm honest.

Those self-righteous pricks with capes and masks? Frankly, they're careless. Grandstanding puerile jerks, and I know that sounds pretty ironic coming from someone who says "submit and kneel" far more often than is strictly necessary. But I'll tell you this for free: Anyone who dies in a fight with me? They died because *I wanted it*. I do not do collateral damage, not ever, none, zero, zilch. Can your goody-goody Tom Courage claim that? Nope. Destiny Crusader? Nuh uh.

And those are the guys who, at least, feel *bad* about leaving trails of bystander bodies in their wake. Sure, they like to put all the blame on the supervillains—but last time I was up against Destiny Crusader, I actually pulled a guy out of the way when ol' DC knocked a wall down. Did I rub his face in it? Oh sure, I made good and certain he knew that I was a bank-robbing, mind-controlling devil-bitch and *still* better at doing *his* job even when I didn't want to.

That's how I got away. It was a close thing, too. That crazy moron can kick through buildings and he blames *me* for people dying when he tries to take a lick at me? Puh-lease.

Don't even get me started on all the 'gritty' heroes who treat their sociopathy like a Two-For-One coitus coupon with the rescue groupie of the day. There's a guy in Arizona? His freakin' *nom de guerre* is 'Collateral.' He teamed up with Body Count last month and went after a supervillain who was just as bloody-minded. I think that between the three of them they killed five, injured at least a hundred, and demolished a police station, a parking garage and a Taco Bell.

I guess part of it is, you never know what you're going to get. Some hypertrophic Boy Scout with dilated pupils and a martyr complex? Or some weirdo with heat vision and a personality like 'Uday Hussein, LAPD'?

He's almost here, Karish says in my head, about two seconds before the bank ceiling crashes down and some guy who looks like he's barely post-pubescent strikes a pose

in the wreckage. I'm tempted to point out the cameras so he can aim his puffed chest more accurately, but the guy who ran for the door earlier just got his ankle smashed, looks like, and he screams pretty loud before passing out. Crap. I really should have just let him bolt.

"So. Princess Python. I should have known it was you!"

Oh goody, he's a talker.

"Why?" I ask, grabbing the loot bag. "Because the name popped up when the computer recognized Margaret Silverberg? And it's Serpent Princess anyhow, idiot."

"Sorry, but there are so many snake villains," he sneers.

"Sergeant Sidewinder, Burning Cobra, Snake Gandhi..."

"There is *not* a supervillain called 'Snake Gandhi'!"

"Yuh huh!"

Are we suddenly back in third grade?

"Next time," he says, "Pick something a little more original. You'll have plenty of time to think up something creative... in prison!"

Karish? Can you drop this weenie?

"Fly away, little fool!"

I try to help. I gesture, I even hiss, and the kid staggers back half a step before straightening.

"You'll have to do better than that," he says.

Left!

I lunge left and the hero misses me by inches. I swear, I feel the wind of his passage, right before his fist slams into the marble counter and shatters it. I get a nice southpaw rabbit punch to the back of his head and it's like socking a truck tire. I don't think he even notices.

Ooh, one of *those*.

Maybe talking wasn't so bad after all.

"And what's your brand identity, little boy? Captain Dress-Up?"

That got him. He turns red behind his blue domino and says, "I'm... SKY ARROW!"

Hit him with the brain-zap, do it!

"Sleeeeep!"

He stumbles again and palms his eyes as I throw a desk blotter at his face. Pathetic, I know, but Karish-Nephet's mind whammy is doing *something*. I'm going to have to stay out of Arrow's way if I don't want to end up a red smear on a car loan poster. "Your puny powers are no match for me!" I squeak and keep scuttling as he swings and connects. The Serpent Princess can take a hell of a punch, but that doesn't mean I like it. The next time he swings, I sidestep and sweep his ankles with my tail, leaving him to smash full force into a wall.

It's load bearing. I hear it start to groan and decide it's time to get moving.

Right. The front and back are lined with cop cars, and I don't really want to make some cops shoot other cops again. I think the way out might be up, since Mr. Arrow thoughtfully created a skylight. It's just going to be tough reaching it. I tell Karish what to do.

"Sky Arrow! Punch that teller!"

I figure he'll be stuck for a moment, fighting off the command. It never occurs to me that he might do it.

Sometimes I think my life is way too complicated.

There's a lot of noise going on: Various people pleading for mercy or screaming or praying, police bullhorns out front, the groan of steel and crack of drywall as they slowly start to crumble. On the plus side, it's making that roof-gap a lot closer. On the minus side, I'm soon going to be on top of a building as it falls in on itself.

I tip up the desk and push it under the hole as I realize Sky Arrow is actually *obeying*.

The teller, the one who just got engaged, she's screaming, the hero's pulling back one of those brick-smashing fists... I can only hope he stops for a *bon mot* before he destroys this girl.

Karish, knock him out!

No. He's about to kill her.

But he doesn't realize it!

"Sleeeep!"

He drops like a poleaxed steer. I'm about to climb to freedom when I see that the teller is holding out her ring.

The guy with the ankle's probably going to need pins in his leg, according to the evening news. One of the guys in the back room had a heart attack, but he's stable. No fatalities, though only me, the teller and Sky Arrow know how near a thing that was.

With the hero knocked out I went up the hole, took a couple gunshots from the cops in back before I could command them off on a wild goose chase, then crawled out onto the roof over the drive through and climbed down in the confusion. Back to human form, and I walked away with \$6,500 cash and a diamond ring I didn't even want. Oh, and Sky Arrow's oath to capture me. He swore it in front of the TV reporter.

"There's got to be an easier way," I mutter into my KFC eight-piece box, but no one answers. Karish is subdued again.



CHAPTER 6:
THE UPSIDE TO DAMNATION

BEING ONE OF THE HELLBOUND MEANS

frequent internal bickering, danger, heartbreak, the risk of assault by angels and superheroes—and also a very real chance of being bodily cast into eternal perdition. None of those sound like selling points, but there are upsides to the condition. Otherwise, nobody would do it.

DEMONIC PREROGATIVES

There are a number of things all demons can do, simply because they're demons. They can recognize one another, they can build internally cunning devices, and they can help their mortals achieve impossible results (if they really want to). These specific abilities are detailed below.

DEVILISH CREATIVITY

Those moon-splitting lasers, silent hovercars and insanity gas grenades don't just build themselves, you know. Any demon can, with time and effort, create scientific-seeming devices that are actually powered by hellfire and spite. Some just make their cursed amulets look like cursed amulets and have done with it, but many take the modern approach because (1) they're mortified of looking like they're behind the times and (2) it's hilarious to watch real scientists try to replicate impossible devices. (Until they succeed, like Alexander Graham Bell and his stupid telephone. Arish-Kanneret the Honeyed Voice of Betrayal is *still* pissed about that.)

Here's how you construct a monstrous device with which to inflict your will on whimpering, cowering citizens.

STEP ONE: DEFINE WHAT IT DOES

Be specific. Is it a flying carpet? A blinding fog? A wand that makes people age at a ghastly, accelerated rate? A fertilizer ray that makes plants grow huge and become viciously animated? Write that down, along with a brief description of the machine.

Now figure out which of the following best describes it. It may qualify for more than one, in which case you have to add its costs together.

Environment Change, Minor. This is something normal science could accomplish, though science usually demands larger devices and more noise. A ring that can knock over walls, uproot trees like a bulldozer and dig holes like a backhoe is making minor environment changes. Rule of thumb: If it isn't attacking and can be done with a machine the size of a two-car garage or smaller, it's a minor environmental change. **Cost: 1 Generosity**

Environment Change, Major. It does something that, with science, requires a much larger machine—or something science can't quite manage just yet. Here's where you put your silent airships that run on water, devices that turn lead into gold, and (as of this writing) invisibility cloaks.

In fact, any device that mimics a power or an Aspect is at this level as long as it doesn't attack. If the power is based on a Tactic, assume the device has that Tactic at 2. If the mimicked Aspect usually requires a pool roll to activate, give the device a pool of 4d. **Cost: 3 Generosity**

Environment Change, Cataclysmic. Anything that can mimic a nuke or a MOAB goes here. Anything that can drastically overturn political or economic assumptions overnight is in this category, as is anything that's substantially more badass and magic than any Aspect or power. **Cost: 5 Generosity**

Attacks a Tactic Automatically. You can point it at someone (at roughly rifle range), pull the trigger and make a **Sly Cruelty** attack against the Tactic defined when the device is designed. You want a confuse-o beam that fuddles **Knowledge**, or a poverty curse that kneecaps **Generosity**? This does that. You could also fix up a truth beam that clobbers **Deceit**, if you were feeling perverse.

Alternately, if you want the device to fight on its own, you can give it this ability and it does so with 4d, no Advantage. **Cost: 1 Knowledge**



STEP TWO: FLAWS

Attacks With Nastiness. When you make an attack on a particular Tactic, using a specific dice pool, you get a weapon Advantage. For every point of *Knowledge* the device costs, you get a point of Advantage, up to a maximum of +4. For example, you could make a magical silver tongue stud that gives you a +4 weapon bonus to *Devious Corruption* when you use it against someone's *Nurture*. That would cost four *Knowledge*. Or you could make a crazy bladed glaive-claw glove that adds +1 Advantage to every *Open Cruelty* attack on *Courage*. That costs one point of *Knowledge*.

Alternately, instead of connecting to all attacks from one pool you can attach this to a magical weapon or attack device, the kind you make with "attacks a Tactic automatically." **Cost:** 1 *Knowledge* per point of Weapon Bonus

If your device costs two points of Tactics or more, it needs at least one flaw. The more it costs, the more flaws it needs. For every point the device costs above the first, it needs one flaw off the list. Note that you can buy some flaws multiple times: These flaws are marked with an asterisk (*).

Blatant: There is no subtle way to operate the device. It might emit a blinding flash of light, a cloud of thick black exhaust or a very loud noise. As soon as this goes off, everyone within the radius of a few blocks is going to be craning their necks towards it unless you're really muffled.

Bulky*: It's large and awkward to carry. If you buy this flaw once, the device is at least seven feet long and requires both hands to direct properly. Buy it twice and it's the size of a stretch limousine, with the same speed and maneuverability. Buy it three times and the device is the size of a nice house in the suburbs and can't move anywhere.

(Note that in the case of vehicles where being bigger is an advantage, this is a great flaw to buy.)

Cooldown Rate*: You can't use it very often. If you buy this flaw once, the device can only be used every other round. Bought twice, it can be used once per scene. A third purchase means it can only be used once per day.

Easy Disarm: No matter how big and complicated the device is, control of it can be wrested from you fairly easily. Instead of being built into your armor, the controls are wired to, say, your iPad; as soon as someone pries that out of your hands, the machine becomes useless to you. If it's not immediately obvious how someone making a *Sly Endurance* roll can get control of the item, explain it so the GM (or other Hellbound) can plan appropriately.

Expensive Upkeep: The thing demands pricey fuels, constant repair or some other expensive factor to keep it running. If your *Generosity* stays below 3 for more than two scenes, you can no longer afford to keep it working.

Finicky: Sometimes, the damn thing just craps out on you. Every time you use it, the GM rolls 1d10. If it comes up 1, the machine is defunct for the rest of the scene.

Fragile: If anyone can hit it with a *Cruelty* or *Courage* attack that beats Difficulty 3, the device conks out until you sacrifice a point of *Generosity* to get it repaired and functional once more.

Fuel-Hungry: This is different from upkeep. The machine wants something you can't just go out and buy. To operate, it needs something mystical like the blood of an innocent, widow's tears, first-edition hardback copies of surprise bestsellers, or the grindings off a demon's horn. Getting the fuel is something you should have to play through, at least until it becomes boring. Once attained, the device gets enough juice for a few sessions of sporadic use or one session of heavy use.

Palpably Evil: The thing is just wrong. No one can look at it and not recognize its demonic nature. No matter its appearance, it makes decent folks' skin crawl, while filling the immoral (that is, any

mortal with a Sinister Tactic at 3+) with a seething lust to possess it. While you're carrying it openly, you get a -1d penalty on all **Devious** rolls. (That's especially inconvenient with the Bulky flaw.)

Rare Components*: Whether the component is scientific-ish (Wonderflonium! Unobtainium! Adamscoatlantium!) or arcane (The skull of an English queen! Hair shaved off an angel's scalp!), it's

WHY AREN'T WE ASS-DEEP IN DEMON MACHINES?

If demons can make magic items and all it costs is human distress, why aren't there thousands of them lying about? Good question, with several answers.

1) Demons can deactivate their devices at any time. The demon decides to shut it down and down it shuts, regardless of possession or distance. But once it's stopped, it's deactivated forever (or until it's rebuilt with more *Generosity* or *Knowledge*).

2) Anyone who gives a diabolical creation about three hard smacks can wreck it. In this case, a 'hard smack' means an **Open Courage** success. Doesn't matter how big the machine is, three hits leaves it non-functional. It can be repaired, but it's pretty much the same Tactic investment as building it from scratch. A kindly GM may opt to cut down the time required.

3) Any time a demon gets displaced from its host, the devices it built with that host conk out. That means if the human half of the hellbound exorcises his demon (as described on page 98) or if the demon drags the human to hell, the device stops working. Moreover, it's bricked if the Hellbinder dies, regardless of circumstances.

something unique and absolutely, positively not on the market. You're going to have to steal it. Meaning, you're going to have to go on an *adventure* before you can complete the device. If you buy this more than once, you're going on multiple missions.

STEP THREE: PAY YOUR SWEAT EQUITY

Now that you know how much the device is going to cost, you pay for it. Specifically, the *mortal half* of the hellbound pair has to agree to sacrifice his hard-earned *Knowledge* or *Generosity* putting this thing together. This can take as long as you like, especially if the device has a high cost. That is: If you have a device that costs 2 *Generosity* and 1 *Knowledge*, you can pay 1 *Generosity* today, wait a week until you build it up again, put in another point of *Generosity*, and wait as long as you like before offering up your *Knowledge*.

In addition, constructing a device takes time: one day for every point of *Knowledge* or *Generosity* spent. This time isn't reduced by flaws, but every other demon (or angel, in theory; it's never really come up) who contributes to the construction can reduce the build time by a day. This isn't a day of total sweatshopping, either. It assumes you spend around eight hours tinkering with the thing, but there's still time in there to rob a bank, sleep with the postman, or catch part of that *Babylon 5* marathon.

When the time's done, the Tactics are sacrificed and the flaws are paid off, the machine is ready.

STEP FOUR: ON MY COMMAND, UNLEASH HELL

Once its flaws are dealt with and the Tactics have been shaved, the device is in hand and ready to go. Typically it requires some sort of dice-pool roll to activate. (*Sly Cruelty* if it's a weapon, *Cunning Knowledge* for a machine, just about anything that seems sensible for mystic stuff—*Patient Greed* for a functioning alchemy lab, for example.) The roll may be mitigated by other rolls or Difficulties at the GM's discretion. But by and large it's been paid for and it works as advertised.

SURVIVING BEYOND HUMAN ENDURANCE

Demons protect their hosts from blows that would cripple or kill a mortal, even those demons who don't have specifically defensive powers. **The mortal host doesn't die until both Open and Sly hit zero.** (Normal people start dying when **Open** hits zero.) If your **Open** goes to zero and you continue taking hits, those hits go over into **Sly**. On the other hand, if **Sly** hits zero and continues getting targeted, *those* hits go over into **Open**. That's not a problem humans have, but there's the fine print on the hosting contract. (See "Taking One Hell of a Beating" on page 36 for the practical implications of this in play.)

APPRECIATING THE NUMINOUS

When you, the demon, are active or can perceive the world around you, you generally recognize anyone who's hosting an angel or demon - but only if that angel or demon is active.

When you're active, both you and your host can understand anything said by another angel or demon host in any language, and be understood as well.

But when demons are dormant, their humans get no insight about other numinous beings nearby.

The only exceptions are when the target is using supernatural powers to conceal or disguise himself. In that case, while you (the demon) can recognize *some* kind of spirit, you may misidentify or get only a vague impression.

For example, if someone decides to use Dead Ringer to impersonate an angel's host, or the host of a different demon, the observer is fooled by the spiritual impersonation as well as the physical one. Similarly, someone using Darkness-Shrouded scans as demonic (assuming the crawling tenebrous chill wasn't a sufficient hint) but the demon's identity can't be ascertained, nor is the sense specific enough to allow you to shoot in the darkness with any improved chance of hitting.

"I THINK, PERHAPS, I'LL BE A JERK"

The ability to activate Aspects blindly runs, head-first and hard, into issues of separating player knowledge from character knowledge.

If a demon's uninvoked and running on a Sinister Tactic deficit, he doesn't know what's happening with his mortal. You, the player controlling that demon, may know that the mortal is right in the middle of a tender reconciliation scene with his ex-wife. That would be the worst possible time for a demonic Aspect to kick in, wouldn't it?

And maybe that's great fun for all the group. Maybe your mortal's player loves the opportunity to chew scenery and emote and be livid at his demon. But what do you do if he's annoyed that you upstaged his scene and turned his high drama into low farce?

If you're a nice guy and you've got a friendly, cooperative group, call a time out and ask player-to-player. "I totally want the demon who's bored and cooped up to ruin the hell out of this. Please?"

If you're a more competitive group, just go for it. But understand that the price for putting things on an adversarial footing is that you wind up on an adversarial footing. It's perfectly in character for a mortal who's been demonically cock-blocked to decide that demonic help just isn't worth it. It could be your ticket to more time silenced, not less.

Then again, the conflict is the core of the game. Play it by ear and don't be a dick.

SPYING ON YOUR MORTAL

If your primary Sinister Strategy is greater than its opposite Virtuous Strategy, you can monitor his actions 24/7, even if he's being a dick and not talking to you. On the other hand, if his Strategy is equal to or greater than your primary Strategy, you're cut off until called like a bowing, scraping manservant. You just sit there, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, twiddling your thumbs in sensory deprivation until your no-good do-gooding host sees fit to permit you access again.

Whatever the balance, **don't feel like you need to grant any request for aid just because he asks**. Enjoy the opportunity to open negotiations that the request provides. Especially if he's been keeping you in the dark.

On the other hand, understand that the ability to spy is not the ability to crack wise. No matter how much your primary Strategy exceeds his, **you cannot initiate communication**. Even if you activate an Aspect without his permission. Even if you start the process of harrowing his body down to the Abyss! You are silent until one of two things happens, and those two things are **(1) he uses a power or (2) he gives you permission to speak**.

It's tremendously tempting to use your Screw to comment on everything, but remember that you can't observe unless you have the strong primary Strategy, and you can't speak to him in character unless he speaks to you. If you mess up, that's fine, but don't take it personally if your mortal (or your GM) reminds you that you were talking out of turn.

HELL-DRAGGING

If your primary Strategy hits 5, it is *on*. You then have the opportunity to rip open a portal to hell itself and drag your mewling mortal down into eternal service, bound with chains of fire where the worm rests not. In theory, this is your *entire purpose* in accessing the mortal plane, though some demons develop a taste for the earthly world and delay their ultimate prize-claiming for some time. That's fine. Demons are immortal, so why rush through the feast?

The specifics of this jaunt are described on page 101.

IMPROVING A SINISTER TACTIC

At the end of a scene in which a Hellbound mortal does something bad, the demon can improve one Sinister Tactic by one point. Maybe even two points. If he was acting like a real monster, the Sinister Strategy governing the Tactic might improve. But only if the sin was bad enough. This is described at length starting on page 89.

Note that you can only improve Tactics when you know what's going on. If your mortal locks you out by having a Virtuous Strategy equal to or greater than your primary Sinister Strategy, you can't raise a Tactic, no matter how much of a slimy weasel your mortal host is.



ACTIVATING ASPECTS

Aspects are described on pages 82-87. They're remnants of your diabolical heritage, writ large in the body of your host. They're powerful. They can also be costly.

There are two ways an Aspect gets activated, and both are in the hands of the demon half. The easy way is, the mortal requests it, you acquiesce, and the mortal slides **one point off a Virtuous Strategy** in payment. Naturally, demons want this to happen as much as inhumanly possible.

The other way is less cooperative. The demon simply decides to *make it happen* and rolls the Aspect's governing Strategy, without adding a Tactic to the pool. **If the demon gets a set on this roll, the Aspect goes on** for the rest of

the scene. If it fails, the Aspect still goes on, but now the governing Strategy weakens, sliding a point into the opposite Virtuous Strategy. You don't have to be actively invoked to do this! You can be in the dark, seething and angry while he's being all tranquil Bruce Banner and then—WHAM!—suddenly he's wreathed in hellfire, or is intangible in the middle of an erotic interlude, or has goat legs at the beach! Good dirty fun for the whole damn family.

Of course, **if you've let a Strategy get completely empty, you can't activate the associated Aspect.** Watch for that.

BARRY

SINFUL PERFECTION

You can transform one of the dice in your human host's pool into a Master Die, but you probably won't want to. Here's why. When you do it, the Sinister Tactic on the action's line gets hit, sliding over into its opposite. (If that Sinister Tactic is already empty, you can't invoke Sinful Perfection.) If, for example, you give him a Master Die in *Courage*, it costs you a dot of *Cruelty*, just giving it over to his *Courage*. Even if you give him a Master Die in something bad like *Corruption* or *Greed*, the evil wears out and turns to virtue, sliding over into *Nurture* or *Generosity* (respectively).

Why is this?

Because demons used to be angels. To do anything perfect, a demon has to let its angelic nature show, just for a bit. Humans can feel that in the long run, even when that holiness has been corroded and yoked into the service of wickedness.

The demon remembers too. That's why the wickedness weakens. It becomes shameful to use.

ANOTHER DEMONIC POWER: "SECRETS OF THE AGES"

If your players need an occasional hint, clue or insight (especially into matters otherworldly), the most obvious pipe through which to feed them is their Screwtape.

Let's start with the good news: Screwtapes can roll Patient Knowledge (based on their host's Patient Knowledge—at last, a use for all that goodness-and-light crap!) to see what they remember about secret history, infernal gossip, grudges and trysts from the War On Heaven, occult weirdness and similar diabolical topics. They can do this all on their own or at the behest of their host.

The bad news is that the GM sets Difficulties as she sees fit and doesn't need to tell the demon what it is. Screwtapes who beat the Difficulty get a straight answer. Screwtapes who roll a pair but don't beat the Difficulty get any plausible-sounding BS the GM wants to lay on them. A Screwtape who fails the roll doesn't know—but his host remains ignorant of his ignorance, meaning the Screwtape can tell the mortal whatever lie sounds plausible.

The catch for the Hellbinder host is that he has to invoke his demon if he wants to ask advice. The catch for the demon is that if he tells lies to influence the mortal, he could wind up getting caught in the lie and being invoked less—even if he honestly passed on manipulative misunderstandings from the GM.

Obviously, the potential for hurt feelings and misunderstandings abound, as does the possibility of getting too-easy insight into the workings of other demons. Hence, this rule is entirely optional. Use it, or not, to fit your group's needs.

THE DOMAIN OF THE HUMAN

Just like the demon half of a Hellbinder, the human has some things that are restricted to him only. Not as many, though.

EXORCISM

Your pesky devil sidekick has a primary Sinister Strategy, and opposite it is one of your Virtuous Strategies. **If that particular Strategy hits five, you can attempt to throw off your demon**, break the hell-forged chains of perversion and evil, and consign it back to the fiery pit. This is a *big deal*, a true game-changer, not in the buzzword sense thrown about on CNN, but in the literal sense of fundamentally ‘changing’ the ‘game’ you’re playing. It’s described in detail starting on page 98.

JUSTIFICATION

At the end of every scene, after the demon has a chance to pump up your Sinister Tactics by highlighting any evils you (plural) accomplished, the mortal can **slide a point from one Sinister Tactic to its opposite** by explaining any good that you (singular, most likely) achieved. This is described on page 93.

LONG-TERM PERSONAL GROWTH

Demons have been around for millennia and, for good or ill (hint: not for good), their personalities are set. People, on the other hand, can change and grow and improve (or change and wither and become sour old husks). Here’s how that works.

At the end of every session, you can **slide one point between two opposite Strategies**. You could move a point from **Devious** to **Insightful**, or you could slide a point from **Open** to **Sly**. To accomplish this, you need to explain what’s changing in your character’s personality and approach to life. *Why* is he now listening instead of chattering? (“Because listening worked that one time” and “because he realiz-

es he hasn’t tried listening and wants to be more receptive”) are both perfectly legitimate.)

Moreover, he can now **improve one Strategy by sacrificing a point off of one Sinister Tactic and one Virtuous Tactic underneath it**. For example, you could become more **Patient** by sacrificing a point of **Greed** and a point of **Generosity**. Or you could raise **Sly** by giving up a point of **Contempt** and a point of **Courage**. Again, this needs to be explained and, again, there are *no firm guidelines* about what those explanations need. Think about why you (the player) want to improve a particular Strategy. Now tie that to something that’s going on in the heart of your character and explain it.

ACTIVATING POWERS

Only the human can invoke the diabolical abilities listed as ‘powers’ below. (Aspects, on the other hand, can only be switched on by your demon.) You don’t have to give up traits or anything to do this. They’re just there. But **as soon as you use any power, your demon becomes active** for the remainder of the scene.

OPTIONAL RULE: BIG DEMON

Hey, how’d you like to have an extra demonic power? Instead of two, you’d get three. How badass would THAT be?

If your GM decides to use this optional rule, you can choose to host a stronger demon, one who already accomplished something awful and majestic (probably involving the consumption of a Hellbinder) and who thereby has a closer tie to infernal power. But by the same token, that tie is also *stronger*.

If you go this route, **you get three demonic powers, but the Screwtape gets to decide when to activate them**, not you.

I CAN'T EXPLAIN

There are no rules or guidelines for what makes an explanation for sliding points good or even acceptable. That's because there aren't right and wrong answers. The explanations are primarily there to help you, the player.

But they aren't just an arbitrary imposition from a game designer who's a little too artsy-literary for his own good. Honest. The explanation for why your character changes is helpful for everyone.

*It helps your GM because it shows your view of the game and what you think is coming. If you keep amping up **Devious**, the GM knows you think that's getting hammered, or that it's particularly useful to you. Knowing that helps her craft a good game for you.*

It helps your fellow players as well, for much the same reason. You know how you think your character appears to them, but you don't know how your character actually seems—that's limited to your acting ability and I, for one, am no Dame Helen Mirren. The interior glimpse at the end of the session gives them cues on how to back your plays when you try to present your character as sullen, or charming, or serenely wise. (When the character for whom you're Screwtape starts shifting and converting, listen up. That's how your demon knows what to offer.)

All this is on top of the help it gives you in playing your character. People play RPGs for all kinds of reasons—because they love the interplay of fictional personalities, they like the tactical rule challenges, or they need an excuse to get together with their buddies. The explanations for changing your characters' stats are an obvious payoff to one type of player but may seem like a pain to other types. If you're one of those other types, give it a chance. There may be fun at work there that you aren't expecting.

DEMONIC POWERS

Each Sinister Tactic has three associated powers, as listed below in tidy alphabetical order. Descriptions follow. Unless it states otherwise, any power that attacks physically can be dodged or blocked like any other physical attack.

Corruption

Impossible Beauty	Hanging Curse
Teleport Self	<i>Babel Babble</i>
Wither	

Deceit

Body Control	False Memories
Dead Ringer	
Telekinesis	

Contempt

Armor	Regeneration
Arrogance	
Banish	

Espionage

Animal Form	Retrocognition
Clairvoyance	Ineffable Defense
<i>no e e</i>	<i>Dark Ritual, Oracle</i>

Greed

Alchemy	Crime-Time
Psychic Object	Summon
<i>ene o t</i>	<i>Soulless Materialism</i>

Cruelty

Dominator Strike	The Evil Eye
Terror	That Hideous Strength

ALCHEMY (GREED)

For the avaricious, there's the beauty of changing flowers, lead or hero sandwiches into expensive statuary. For the just plain vicious, you can do the same to a hero's girlfriend.

The "Midas Touch" gimmick of turning someone completely into an inert statue is indisputably classic and classy, but it has some restrictions. You can't do it on someone who's running, kicking you, or otherwise being anything other than helpless. In

short, if you could simply shove a pillow over someone's face and kill him without a roll, then you can turn him into a statue *with* a roll. (Pillow to the face, c'mon, where's the fun in that?) He's okay once the power wears off, unless you melt him down. In which case, ooh, ick.

For people who are running and kicking and otherwise resisting your decorative ambitions, attacks with this take the form of randomly making chunks of them golden. This wears off after a while (like adolescence) but is painful and confusing while it lasts (also like adolescence). If nothing else, there are plenty of sneering musical puns to be made after transforming someone's anatomy, ranging from Shirley Bassey ("Golllllldfingah!") through Neil Young ("...keep me searchin' for a heart of go-oh-ohld...") and Jurassic 5 ("...holdin' on to what's golden..."). Enjoy the laughs while

you can, because anything you turn into 24 karats changes back after 24 hours.

When it's used for attack, you can roll *Cunning Greed* as an attack pool. You can't improve this with a weapon, but it has a range about equal to a pistol.

Any time you use *Generosity* to buy someone off or bribe him, you can use one die in the pool as a Master Die, as long as your *Greed* is equal to or greater than your *Generosity*.

ANIMAL FORM (ESPIONAGE)

You can turn into a wolf, or a raven, or a giant snake. (The snake thing is perennially popular.) You can become any natural animal you're aware of—fish, fowl or monotreme. It's typically a somewhat sinister specimen of the relevant species, unless it's something that just doesn't come in "creepy"—like a bunny or a kitty. But if you turn into a wolf, it's a black wolf with red eyes unless you specify otherwise.

Weirdly, extinct species are off limits. ("Until you get serious about saving the habitat of the Sumatran tiger, I will kill one hostage a day!") You also can't use this to change into a human being—or, perhaps, if you do, you're stuck changing into the human you are.

If your *Espionage* is low, you're only going to take its appearance; but the more *Espionage* you have, the more of an animal's special qualities you can mimic. *Espionage* also limits how much you can change your mass. The chart below offers some guidelines but is hardly comprehensive.

Animal Abilities

Espionage 1: If it's human-sized, you look like it; but you have no other special capabilities.

Espionage 2: You can shrink to the size of a very large bird (vulture, condor) and fly like one.

Espionage 2: You can grow to the size of a horse and gain +1d Advantage to all **Open** rolls while changed.

Espionage 2: You can take the form of an aquatic animal like a shark or porpoise and gain its ability to breathe water or hold your breath, but you can't swim any faster than you run and your basic attacks are unchanged.

Espionage 3: You can shrink as small as a rattlesnake or cobra. If you hit anyone with a bite, your poison offers a +2 weapon Advantage.

Espionage 3: You can shrink as small as a pigeon or sparrow and fly like one. Tracking you by ordinary means is effectively impossible.

Espionage 4: You can grow to the size of a rhino or elephant and, while transformed, gain +2 Advantage to all **Open** rolls.

Espionage 4: You can shrink as small as a mouse, thereby gaining a Master Die in situations where you're trying to hide by being mouse-sized.

Espionage 5: You can shrink to the size of a bee or mosquito, flying like one and gaining that hiding task Master Die.

Espionage 5: You can grow as large as a whale and hold your breath appropriately. (Or, if you prefer, breathe water as a giant squid). You get +3 Advantage to all **Open** rolls in this shape.

To change, you always have to roll a set using Cunning Espionage. The change lasts until you quit it, or until the end of the scene.

ARMOR (CONTEMPT)

Demonic armor is not pretty. At least, not the kind PCs get. It tends towards knobby plates of discolored chitin that would make a deformed lobster start cracking wise, or glowing eldritch runes that moan and spark with baleful luster, or matted stinking clots of hair and filth.

To activate Armor, roll Open Contempt. If you get a set, your armor appears and remains visible for the rest of the scene. Any physical damage has its Width reduced by one point. Moreover, weapons can no longer give Width bonuses when used to injure you. Weapon bonuses to non-physical attacks, still factor in, be they from powers like Terror or from someone using a knife to threaten your mom.

Unfairly (as is so often the way when dealing with things infernal), deluded 'heroes' as described on page 125 usually wind up with either glitter-sparkly energy fields or simple toughness that can't be perceived at all, until you hit them with a truck or something. It helps maintain the illusion that they're something other than hell's pawns, while PCs get no such comfort.

ARROGANCE (CONTEMPT)

Most demons have a certain degree of smug superiority. There's a minority of cringing sniveler scuttling around and mumbling "gollum," but most stand tall, dress gaudy, and speak of themselves in the third person. It's more fun even though, just like your grade-school teachers uselessly told you, bullies are only lashing out to cover up their insecurity.

But not all demons can make arrogance into a form of supernatural defense. You, however, can do just that. Your self-regard covers a fundamental unwillingness to examine your own motivations. Like an impenetrable shield, that stubbornness protects you from doubt, persuasion, and plain-spoken good advice.

Whenever anyone attempts to persuade you using *Nurture, Honesty, Deceit* or

Corruption, the Height of their set is reduced by your **Contempt** rating. If this reduces their set's Height to zero, it's ruined.

As soon as a relevant persuasion attempt is made, it's up to the mortal to decide, during the declare phase, whether he's using Arrogance to defend. If he does, his demon goes active. Note that there's no roll required for Arrogance, so he can switch it on and still take other actions.

BANISH (CONTEMPT)

Teleporting a chunk of organ from the middle of a struggling target is trickier than you might think (so don't get distracted), but the look of surprise someone gets when their gall bladder suddenly appears in front of their face really is priceless. Other than the unpleasantness of the non-physical teleport attack (and, of course, it's just as easy to drop someone from a high place if that seems more fitting), Banish is terribly handy for getting out of handcuffs, dropping rocks on people's heads, or getting undressed in a hurry.

That said, this form of teleportation has some quirky limits. First off, you have to start out touching the object or person you want to send. (To call things to you, you need Summon.) You can only teleport the object (or fraction thereof) to somewhere within thirty feet, and you must see the destination with your naked eye. It has to have enough open space to accommodate the incoming object. But teleporting only part of something is perfectly kosher, and quite dramatic when the cops find half their paddy wagon door stuck in a treetop. You can teleport up to a hundred pounds for every point of **Contempt**.

To attack with Banish, roll a set with **Sly Contempt**. The first time it's used to attack someone in a scene, it gives +3 surprise Advantage; after that, it's good for +1 surprise Advantage. It does normal damage to **Courage**, like most physical attacks.

For each point of **Contempt** you have, you can 'dedicate' one item that belongs to you and which you've handled a lot. (For our purposes, a set of clothing counts as an "item" as do all the keys on your ring, or the sniper

rifle and its case and bullets, or whatever.) When sending a dedicated item to any location you're intimately familiar with (somewhere you currently live or work, say), the range is increased to thirty miles and you no longer have to see the destination. The destination still has to have enough open area to contain the item.

BODY CONTROL (DECEIT)

With this power, people do as they are told. It doesn't change people's emotions or opinions or decisions, but it does very effectively hijack control of their bodies. You can force them into any perverse or dangerous actions that you desire. The power doesn't make people forget or misperceive or misremember things, though. It's only for concrete movements.

To use Body Control, you need to make eye contact and issue a command. (It's especially fun if you preface this, or follow it with either "My will is stronger than yours! You must obey!" or just "Sleeeep!") The target doesn't have to understand the order, but he does have to hear it, so you can use any language you want. You can only target one person at a time.

Roll **Devious Deceit**. Your Height determines how many words long your command can be. The GM should interpret it in the most straightforward and obvious way. Characters can choose to defy a command, doing nothing instead. Doing so costs a point of **Nurture**. The **Nurture** point vanishes, it does not slide. The point comes from **Insightful** if **Nurture** is at zero. Characters who have run out of both **Nurture** and **Insightful** can still disobey, but doing so leaves them unable to act for the remainder of the scene. Commands that would take more than one scene to complete are begun but are abandoned when the scene ends.

A variation on this is **animal control**, which works on any animal but not on people and involves more dramatic gestures. (You still have to issue verbal commands. You needn't preface them with "Children of the night, attend!" but I personally feel you should.) To have power over both people and animals, buy the power twice.

CLAIRVOYANCE (ESPIONAGE)

Clairvoyance or “remote viewing” or “scrying” is the psychic answer to pointing a telescope at your neighbor who never draws the curtains. When you clairvoy (is that a verb?) it’s like you’re right there. You hear nothing, but you can see anything that’s lit up and not blocked by walls, clothes, lampshades or the like. Since you can move your point of view with but a thought, even those walls and lampshades are unlikely to deter you for long. You need to be fairly relaxed and have your eyes closed to use Clairvoyance.

Activating clairvoyance requires a Patient Espionage roll. You can scan one mile outwards for every point of Espionage you have. It does not search out persons, but if you know a location you can send your vision straight there, provided it's within range.

DEAD RINGER (DECEIT)

When the Prince of Lies equips his underlings to sow dissent and mistrust among mortals, he doesn’t do a half-assed job. When a demon uses Dead Ringer to impersonate someone, it’s not just the look. It’s the facial expressions and postures and nervous gestures. It’s the voice tone and timbre, and enough speech habits and superficial memories to carry off the charade to perfection. You must, however, have spent at least a few minutes in the presence of the person you’re going to copy. You don’t have to talk to him or touch him or anything; peeing in the next stall is close enough. This power duplicates garments, documents or badges. It also equips you to remember things like security passwords as long as the target had them down cold. If he’d have to think hard to dredge up the launch codes, you’re out of luck.

To activate Dead Ringer, roll Insightful Deceit. With a set, you change to look like the targeted person for the remainder of the scene, or until you halt the effect, or until you use Dead Ringer to change into someone else. While you’re changed, it’s a Difficulty 5 Cunning Espionage roll for anyone else to spot the charade simply

from casually suspicious intuition. If you speak with someone who knows the victim well, he gets an **Insightful Honesty** roll to see through the disguise if he has any reason to be alert. The Difficulty of the **Honesty** roll is equal to your **Deceit** score.

DOMINATOR STRIKE (CRUELTY)

This is your personalized weapon of choice. Bolts of hellfire? The icy touch of the grave? Your face bursts open and your skull flies out to bite people? They all work the same way. Dominator Strike has about the range of a typical firearm and gives a +1 Weapon bonus.

When you pick the power, give it one extra off the list below.

Persistent: After the first impact, it continues to slide away a point of **Courage** every round until the victim takes a moment to stop the effect. (If it’s hellfire, she stops, drops and rolls. If it’s acidic slime, he pulls off his shirt and wipes himself clean. If it’s a swarm of satanic bees, she shoos them away with her cape.)

Fearsome: The first time you use it in a scene, everyone who isn’t demon-infused slides a point of **Courage** over to **Cruelty**.

Enervating: The first time you use this on a person in a scene, instead of doing normal damage it slides a point of **Open** over to **Sly**.

Hot: It sets things on fire. This works like the ‘Persistent’ perk on living people, but just burns and burns for curtains, carpet, piles of dry leaves and other flammable inanimates.

Stunning: The first time you use this on someone in a scene, instead of normal damage it removes a point of **Knowledge**.

Nasty: Instead of a +1 Weapon bonus, it has a +2 Weapon bonus.

Use Sly Cruelty to make a Dominator Strike attack, as if it was any other



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weapon. Moreover, you can always use *Cruelty* to attack with Dominator Strike, even if for some reason you'd normally have to use *Courage* instead.

IMPOSSIBLE BEAUTY (CORRUPTION)

Most typically, this means you are impossibly beautiful, like a late 1990s Taye Diggs made entirely of late 1980s Winona Ryders. But it works just as well for entrancing music or awe-striking sculptures or brain-stunning fashion design.

To activate Impossible Beauty, roll *Devious Corruption*. For the remainder of the scene, you get Advantage to *Corruption* or *Deceit* rolls made to influence people, but not to activate demonic powers. The Advantage is equal to the Width of your Impossible Beauty roll.

Note that because Impossible Beauty gives you Advantage, it doesn't matter how many people you enthrall. There's no multiple action penalty for using it. Also, it's a 'generic Advantage' like aiming: The stuff that counteracts surprise and secrecy doesn't do any good against loveliness.

INEFFABLE DEFENSE (ESPIONAGE)

This power's description is deliberately vague: The demon has an unwholesome ability to stall, impede and avoid the actions of others. This could be described as warning precognition, nasty telepathic insight, simply being smarter and 'knowing they were going to do that' or some kind of instant hypnosis that makes people unable to complete their actions. But while the rationale for the effect is vague so that you can tailor it to your preferences, the effect of Ineffable Defense is always the same.

Any rolls that use surprise or secrets for bonuses against you have their bonus reduced by an amount equal to your *Espionage*. If you have *Espionage* 3, no one can get the drop on you.

This isn't always on, but when something happens that might surprise or startle the character, the mortal player decides whether to invoke Ineffable Defense during the declare phase of the conflict. Once declared, it goes into effect with no roll and lasts the rest of the scene, complete with demonic commentary. If he opts to leave it off, he can still turn it on later.

PSYCHIC OBJECTS (GREED)



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You can produce objects from nowhere and, when you no longer need them, banish them back to nowhere. This could simply be a case of legerdemain ("...of course I have my passport right here!") or you can present it as a full-on Green Lantern power ring.

The greedier you are, the larger and more complicated the object you can create from nothing. The object has to appear in contact with your body. If it's too heavy for you to hold up, it has to appear resting on the ground. (This just means you can't drop a two-ton weight on somebody by conjuring it from nowhere.)

Psychic Object Limits

Greed 1: A commonplace object you could effortlessly hold in one hand (without any kind of augmented strength). No electronics. A gun works normally, but if you make something that looks like an iPhone or a universal remote, it's just a prop. Credit cards have no functioning magnetic strip.

Greed 2-3: Any object you could, conceivably, lift to waist height with unaugmented strength. You can now create any electronic object you understand.

Greed 4-5: Anything that you could buy made by humans, up to the size and weight of a Bugatti Veyron. (That's a sports car.)

To create a psychic object, roll **Cunning Greed**. Any set is sufficient to create the object. Psychic objects last until the end of the scene. You can produce a number of objects equal to your **Greed** rating in any single scene.

SUMMON (GREED)

Summon is the polar opposite of Banish, in terms of limited teleportation. You see an object in the distance, gesture dramatically and—bamf!—it appears in your hand. Obviously this doesn't have the same broad-scale possibilities for mayhem (unless you're standing at the edge of a building or something), but man is it sweet for shoplifting. Or disarming your enemies.

You can only teleport the object (or fraction thereof) from somewhere within thirty feet, and you must see the target with your naked eye. (Sorry, you can't just teleport someone's heart into your hand—unless it was already visible, in which case, what's the point?) You can teleport up to a hundred pounds for every point of **Greed**. As with Banish, you can rip stuff apart with Summoning, though it's less precise because you don't start out at point blank range to your target.

To attack with Summon, roll a set with **Cunning Greed**. The first time it's used to attack someone in a scene, it gets a +1 surprise bonus and a +1 weapon bonus. After that, it's just the +1 weapon bonus. If you're not attacking, any set is sufficient to bring over any suitable object.

As with Banish, you can dedicate an item for each point of **Greed**. To qualify for dedication, it has to belong to you without contest and be within your

lift limit. As long as that object is somewhere you know intimately (like a current workplace or home, or lair), you can bring it to you from a range of thirty miles, and you don't have to be looking at it. For our purposes, a supervillain costume counts as an "item," but not the stuff on the utility belt (a separate item) or a weapon (another item). But you can teleport the clothes onto you for a sweet quick-change.

TELEKINESIS (DECEIT)

Some demons prefer to use it subtly, to slam doors, rattle windows, steal quietly and kidney-punch people with invisible, long-distance fists. But others are perfectly fine with stopping bullets in midair and hanging people upside down to emphasize a point.

You can lift a hundred pounds for every point of **Deceit** you have. You have to be able to see your target, and it has to be within ten feet for every point of **Deceit**. You can move it at about the pace of a brisk walk. Fine control is problematical. If you're at the full extent of your weight, your margin of accuracy is going to be within 18 inches, give or take. If you're moving something the size of a pencil, you can scrawl with it but not write gracefully. Tapping keyboards works fine though, if a bit slowly.

Human bodies are considered one "thing" and, being pretty large, it's hard to just poke an eye or close off a carotid artery. However, if you're in a situation where you could simply smother someone with a pillow, you can also use TK to dispose of him dramatically. You can use it for a *coup de grace*, but not as an instant, sure-fire kill.

Any time you use TK as an attack on someone, roll **Insightful Deceit**. The first time you use it against someone who hasn't seen or heard about the power, it has +2 surprise Advantage and +1 weapon Advantage. Every time after that, the inherent surprise bonus drops to +1. If you're not attacking, any roll is sufficient to lift an object that's in range and light enough.

TELEPORT SELF (CORRUPTION)

To vanish in a puff of smoke or a concealing shadow, or to step through a mirror and taunt your enemy as you fade—it's a classic villain move. It's also useful for setting up nasty sneak attacks, or getting away from dangerous areas, or getting into areas that are meant to be secure. But you can only move yourself, your clothes and your personal effects, and you can only move everything all at once, accompanying yourself. (Teleporting out of handcuffs or other constraint is a Difficulty 3 trick, as is vanishing and leaving your clothes behind.)

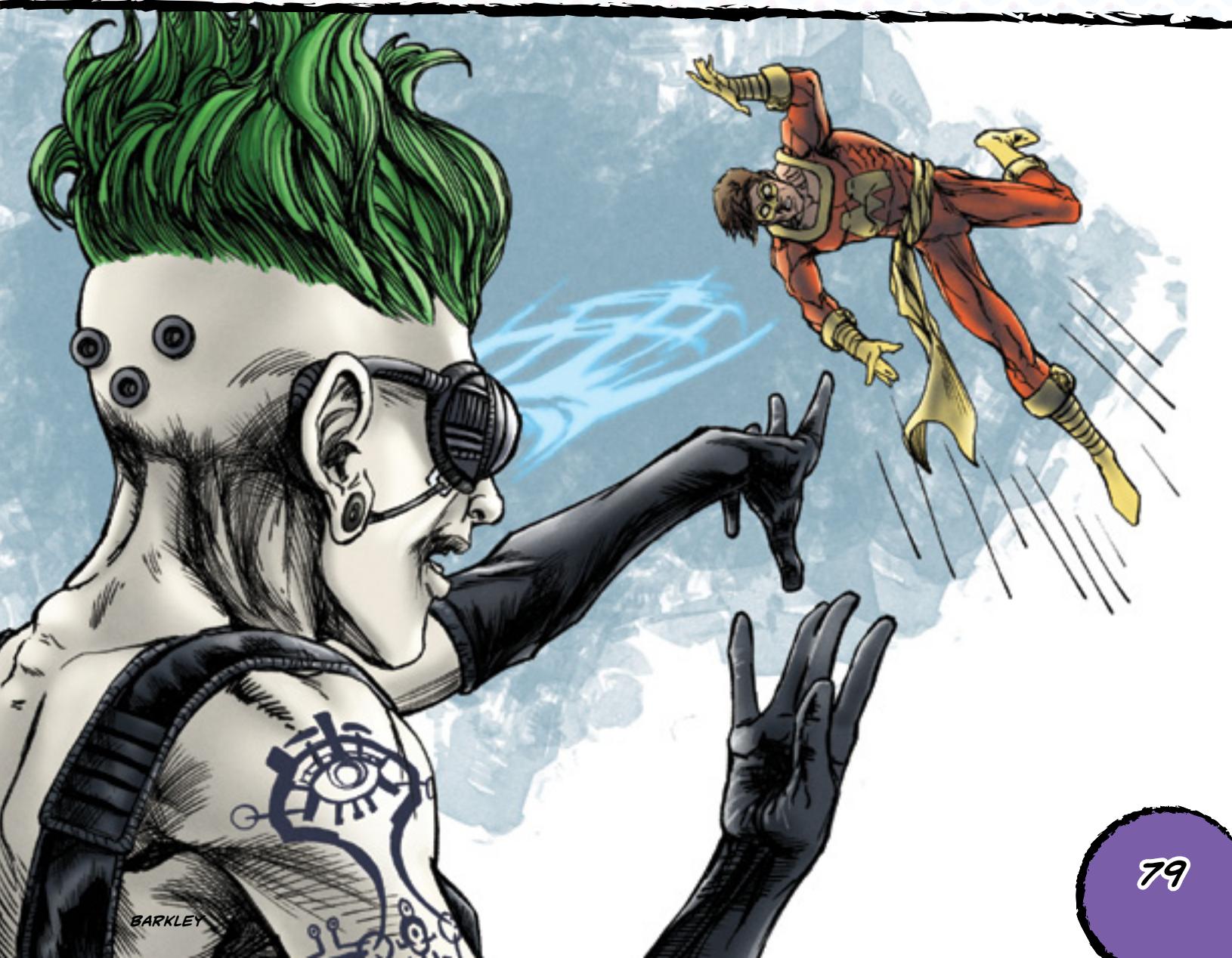
Your power has the range of one mile for every point of *Corruption* you have, but you can only teleport into certain places. The destination

has to have enough open space to contain your body. (Don't worry, you won't leave pieces behind or wind up stuck halfway through a wall.) It also has to be somewhere you're seeing, or someplace you've physically seen recently, or a place you know intimately.

To teleport, roll a set with *Insightful Corruption*. When your action goes off, you vanish. If you use this to get an advantage over someone in combat, it gives you +1 Advantage from surprise.

TERROR (CRUELTY)

You say 'boo' and, instead of saying 'eek,' people scream, claw their own faces bloody, and develop post-traumatic stress disorders. This is not invoked through their physical senses (or, at least, it doesn't have to be—turning into a flame-



cloaked giant certainly might increase the effect with a weapon bonus). Even if you look like a mild-mannered bookworm, you can strike people with mortal terror. There's no need to gesture or say anything or even look (though, let's be frank, uncorking lines like "Tremble before me, puny mortals!" is pretty typical). You just pick someone nearby and decide you want him freaking out.

To invoke Terror, roll **Devious Cruelty**. It has the range of a handgun. If your set pierces their defenses (and the only thing normal people can use to defend is **Insightful Nurture**), it strips away one point of **Courage**. (It's not slid into **Cruelty**, it just goes away.) However, once **Courage** hits zero, Terror has no further effect. Additional hits do not affect **Open**.

THAT HIDEOUS STRENGTH (CRUELTY)

Super-strength is simple to understand. You can lift, crush and uproot this, that and the other thing. But in an RPG, it can be hard to implement, especially if you want to be accurate about your physics. Can someone pick up a semi-trailer by the back axle without it snapping in half? If someone holds a main battle tank over his head, shouldn't his feet get poked into the ground like fence posts?

Better Angels is not focused on Newtonian physics. Rules are provided for bludgeoning people with your bone-breaking thews. Any other feat of strength—pulling up trees, flipping over cars, throwing garbage dumpsters through cathedrals, punching out skyscrapers—is pitched to the GM's judgment, within some simple guidelines.



Cruelty 1:

Combat Rules: +1 weapon bonus

Without a Roll, You Can: break handcuffs, tear phone books, bend steel bars.

With a Rolled Set, You Can: lift a car over your head, kick through a steel door.

Cruelty 2-3:

Combat Rules: +2 weapon bonus

Without a Roll, You Can: tear a half-inch steel plate, uproot a parking meter.

With a Rolled Set, You Can: jump through a brick wall, break a foot-thick living tree in half.

CUSTOM POWERS

The little stories throughout this book contain supervillains who are using all kinds of crazy powers that aren't on this list. You can too. If you're one of those who wants a demon whose power is *Raise An Army From The Very Stones* or *Alluring Succubus Disguise That Only Affects Men*, or something a little more standard like *Telepathy*, here's how it works.

Go to "Devilish Creativity" on page 63. Build something that costs three points. That's your power. If it costs four points, take one flaw. If it costs six points, take three flaws. Your GM picks a Strategy/Tactic pair for its pool and, if necessary, what gets rolled to gobble it up. There it is. So... Telepathy? Does something science can't quite manage; major environmental change; three points. If I were your GM, I'd make it either **Cunning Espionage** or **Insightful Corruption**, and if the latter you'd only be able to detect the yucky stuff. (If the former, only very practical things, not secret hopes or hidden emotions.) People can roll **Insightful Nurture** to resist the **Corruption** version, or **Cunning Knowledge** to misdirect the **Cunning Espionage** version.

Want to call up a batch of demonic minions? That's going to cost you. First, it's a major environment change, bringing a load of entities into existence where there were previously none. So that's a +3 effect. That may be okay if you don't want them to be able to attack, but if they can't attack they aren't very good minions, are they? Tack on the ability to automatically attack for +1 and give it a point of Advantage to keep them from being total suck. Now you have to buy this off with two flaws. How about... blatant and palpably evil? Hell, if you're calling up minor imps to wreak mayhem, those barely sound like drawbacks. Once per round you can barf out a servitor. Let's base this on **Cunning Generosity** (because you're gaining an object or advantage, but not in any kind of decent or virtuous way). Roll a set, generate a minion. You can have a total number of minions equal to your **Cunning** pool. They either attack with 4d and get Width+1, or they attack with 5d.

WITHER (CORRUPTION)

Cruelty 4-5:

Combat Rules: +3 weapon bonus

Without a Roll, You Can: tip a locomotive engine onto its side, throw a car engine a city block.

With a Rolled Set, You Can: collapse one corner of a skyscraper with your bare hands.

Those weapon bonuses come into play whenever you punch someone or throw something at him. If you're hitting someone with an object that would normally give a +1 weapon bonus or more, your weapon bonus rises by a single point until it maxes out at +3. Note that it doesn't matter whether you're throwing a full beer keg at someone or a single peach pit. We just assume the beer keg is slower and easier to dodge, while that peach pit can do some hellish damage at high speed.

You grab someone (or something), shout "Feel your flesh writhe in the grip of malice!" and your victim's arm or leg or face turns leprosy and dry and shrivelly. Or grab a car and make it rust out, turn a thriving tree to a blasted deadfall, or corrode a painting into a cracked, faded mess. Wither is pretty good against inanimate objects and better at injuring humans. But since it leaves **Courage** alone, it's less effective against supernatural enemies.

Make a **Devious Corruption** roll. This is a physical attack that only works on grappled victims. It cannot be improved with secret or weapon Advantages, though surprise works normally. When it hits, it moves a point of the victim's **Open** into **Sly**, no matter the Width of the roll. Against an inanimate object, Wither does about as much damage as having a drunk driver smash an SUV into it at 35 mph. It can be dodged and blocked normally.

HANGING CURSE (CORRUPTION)

While the curse of being hung by the neck until dead would be useful for agents of demonic malice, that's not exactly versatile. No, the 'hanging curse' takes its name from the way it hangs, like the legendary Sword of Damocles, until one day it drops.

It works like this: The demonic supervillain gestures dramatically and declares, "My ire shall fall upon thee should you ever talk to Janice again!" or some other similar trigger condition. "...should you ever raise violent hand against me" is a pragmatic alternative, while "...the next time thou hast the temerity to micturate standing up" is a dramatic combo of cruelty and weird specificity. The trigger action can vary widely.

The effect of the curse varies, but as long as you rolled a Patient Corruption set while placing it, it goes into effect the instant the target performs the forbidden action. Specifically, the curse immediately removes one point from a designated Virtuous Strategy. The point does not slide; it's just gone. It comes back only in the usual difficult ways you gain points in a Virtuous Strategy.

You can curse someone as many times as you want, but the most recent success is the only one that's supernaturally enforced. (You may not want to let people know that—if you fool them, they might avoid five or six behaviors, not just the last one forbidden. On the other hand, if they notice that one curse didn't take effect, they may assume all of them are bluff. Take your chances. If they do know the curse works, it's really fun to call out two or three fakes with each real one.)

The overarching effect of the Hanging Curse is to give your enemies an unpalatable choice. They can avoid the action you forbade (thereby letting you control them) or they can suck it up and take the hit on Patient, Open or Insightful. Once the curse discharges, it's done until another is placed.

While the Hanging Curse is powerful, it does have limits. First off, it only works if the victim can hear and comprehend the forbiddance. (If she doesn't know what to avoid, she doesn't squirm, and what's the fun for your demon in that?) Secondly, it's one to a customer. You can actually remove someone's Hanging Curse by replacing it with something like

"Yeah yeah, feel my wrath if you ever, um, jump to the sun" The quality of the roll doesn't matter, remember—just how recent it is.

As for the form the curse takes, that's up to you. If you target Patience, he could become subtly scatterbrained or plagued by terrifying hallucinatory clowns. A decrease in Insightful could inflict Tourette's-like impulsive cursing, or it could just be a shady cast to his features that make every statement and question seem vaguely sleazy. Open could be anything from weeping sores to sourceless lethargy.

REGENERATION (CONTEMPT)

The power of healing really, really quickly is coveted by anyone who's ever had to deal with the persistent itch and horrible aroma of a broken leg in a cast. It's also, naturally, a powerful weapon for a contemptuous demon to sneer in the face of death itself.

In many games, Regeneration is easy to implement because characters have Hit Points, but *Better Angels* has a different focus. It tracks how able you are to fight back (or do other actions) and doesn't explicitly address how bloodily you're injured. The rules don't say when you've got a broken arm or are bleeding out — exactly what "I lost 2 points of Open" means is up to you and the GM — so Regeneration can't say when your arm is fixed or when you're back to normal.

At the same time, Endurance and Cruelty and similar physical traits are so much more than just how battered you are at a particular moment. If, in the course of a fight, someone held you down and slowly sliced your eyeball until the fluid inside had completely drained, that would be a significant reduction in Courage (and probably Open). Having your eye grow back ten minutes later is a powerful consolation (as long as she doesn't immediately cut it out again) — but does it fully restore your will to fight, or is an entirely natural reluctance likely to remain?

These are issues of characterization, so Regeneration deals with them by re-balancing Courage and Cruelty, or Endurance and Contempt, over the course of scenes to reflect attitude changes going along with physical healing. This power maintains a gross balance between Open and Sly. It works quite simply.

Put a line between the dots on the Open-Sly continuum so that you know what your levels are at the start of a scene or a game session. If they shift around during the scene, don't erase the lines. Once per scene, you can make an Open Contempt roll to restore your lost or shifted dots to Open and Sly. Any success is sufficient to restore the previous levels. (Though it's possible that you may wish to remain at your altered levels, if you've shifted and not lost stuff. If you decide to stay shifted, you can change the lines at the end of

the scene and Regenerate to them in future scenes.) If the scene ends without you succeeding at the roll, you can automatically reset the traits before your next scene begins.

Note that you can only Regenerate in scenes where you lost or shifted those traits due to *injury*. If you find something else that burns your **Open** or **Sly**, you can't Regenerate it away. This is trebly true for anything that gives you a benefit for sacrificing one of those traits: You can't sacrifice, Regenerate, sacrifice and Regenerate ad infinitum. Use scratch paper to keep track of losses that can be restored with Regeneration.

FALSE MEMORIES (DECEIT)

The ability to falsify recollection is scary on a level different from building-blasting ice-rays or hemorrhage-causing eye-beams. We rely on our memories to be solid and trust-worthy because if they aren't (and, as an aside, science assures us that they are in fact incredibly plastic), we have no basis for deciding about *anything*. Our ideas of judgment are irreparably compromised. Even *knowing* that our memories have been damaged or tampered with (or, again, just understanding the science that they were *never factual to begin with*), we have to treat them as if they can be trusted because the alternative is a morass of indecision and paranoia.

With this power, you can consign people who irritate you to the depths of that morass.

To work it, you touch someone and think about the lie you want them to believe. Roll **Patient Deceit**. If it succeeds with sufficient Width and Height, your lie is true to the victim without even being told.

Width determines how firm the charade is, while Height determines how long it lasts.

Width 2: Memory is vague and foggy, on the level of "Yeah, I think I've met this guy," "Oh yeah, I saw some kind of altercation at some bar last week," or "I took some karate classes, um... sometime..."

Width 3-4: Memory is sturdy and has some emotional content, unless actual events and recollections contradict it. "I remember you! Jedda Jankes from that crazy summer working at the Pizza Shack!" "I was coming out of the Pink Pinto Wednesday night and I saw some guy in a red and blue superhero getup pounding the *crap* out of this fat guy in a green shirt. It was heinous, man!" "Oh yeah, I got my brown belt ages and ages ago, but I'm totally out of training..."

Width 5+: Memory is vivid, detailed, and is given assumed to be factual unless and until it is contradicted by overwhelming evidence or a powerful series of other memories. "What do you mean 'who's this?' It's my wife, Jedda! The love of my life!" "Clear as day your honor. It was Captain Daylight... er, the defendant... and he kept kicking and kicking Mr. Jericho there even though he was begging him to stop!" "You messed with the wrong guy, punk. KI-YAAH!"

Note that false memories don't provide real skills, though with a 5+ result the GM may shift a Tactic one point left or right to represent motivation. For instance, that guy who truly believes he's a 9th Dan could shift a point from *Cruelty* to *Courage* from pure misplaced confidence.

Height 1-2:	I day
Height 3-4:	I week
Height 5-6:	I month
Height 7-9:	I year
Height 10:	Permanent

Memories implanted need to be something that can be written out in fifty words or less, but people tend to imagine reasonable details for them. That's not even part of the power: Confabulation is a function of normal cognition. I've read that in like, three different books.

RETROCOGNITION (ESPIONAGE)

You know the scenes in all those serial killer books, shows and movies where the brilliant detective recreates the crime scene just by looking at it and being spooky? The mystic answer to this is retrocognition, which does for “times gone by” what clairvoyance does for “places far away.” You can apply it to an object, a location or even a person and get visions of their history.

These ‘visions’ aren’t like actual psychedelic out-of-body experiences. They’re more like memories of things you never saw. So if I use Retrocognition to look at 8:30 to 12:45 the previous night in room 221 of the Bide-A-Wee Motel, I don’t have to sit through the whole thing like it’s the movie Gettysburg. I know what happened as if I’d been there paying attention the whole time, but accessing the information doesn’t take a ton of time.

You can absorb one hour of experience for every point of Height in your **Patient Espionage** roll.

What you get to see depends on how far back you can look, and that, in turn, depends your **Espionage** rating.

Espionage 1: 24 hours

Espionage 2: 1 month

Espionage 3: 1 year

Espionage 4: 10 years

Espionage 5: 100 years

Once you’re navigating through multiple years, there are a couple ways to do it. The simplest is to say, “show me what happened here on May 6, 1983, at 10:45 P.M.” That sort of specificity doesn’t require any particular success on your roll. Any pair or better calls it up.

The trickier bit is to hold a hatchet and tell your power “show me what happened when this got covered with blood and hair.” To see with that degree of precision, not knowing exactly when it happened, requires a success of Width 3 or greater.

CRIME-TIME (GREED)

This isn’t quite super-speed and it’s not quite time-control. It’s more of a pause that refreshes. Essentially, when you activate Crime-Time, everything stops for about sixty seconds. Everything, that is, except you.

If it were more comprehensive, this power could be used for every kind of evil, from sneaking lewd glances at people who wouldn’t give you the time of day to dabbing sarin paste up the noses of passersby.

The good news for humanity is that Hellbinders with this power cannot affect frozen matter. Anything that’s touching them and becomes “unstuck in time” with them remains touching them and stays unstuck. Flaming objects instantly go out. Those sarin dabs remain stuck on one’s finger. Punching someone who’s frozen is like punching a brick wall.

With all these limits and restrictions in place, Crime-Time might seem less useful, but consider the advantages of compressing sixty of your seconds into an eyeblink for everyone else. Any physical attack that’s timed later than you in a fight misses you, because you can simply get out of the way. You can (apparently) vanish from plain sight. You can hide behind the door while they search the basement and then, just as they’re about to look where you are, you can freeze time, hide in the basement and continue to spy on them. You can’t slit an unsuspecting time-frozen cop’s throat, but you can run around behind him, point your gun and wait out the freeze. Or you can just climb on top of him and, when time comes back on, have him collapse under the sudden, unbalancing weight.

Being a product of demonic magic instead of stodgy ol’ science, there’s no air displacement shredding the scenery and seeing light seems to work normally without any blue- or redshift.

Make a **Cunning Greed** roll. When it goes off (assuming you’re in a time-sensitive situation), you can describe about sixty seconds’ worth of action that you can take without moving anything (not even opening doors!) or leaving anything behind. When the time ends, you get +1 to +3 Advantage from surprise, depending on what exactly you set up. You cannot activate Crime-Time again the same round its effect occurs. (That is, your GM can stop you if you’re trying to just roll one pause into another without letting anyone else ever act.)

THE EVIL EYE (CRUELTY)

Sometimes, you just want to put a hex on somebody, preferably from a distance and undetectably. That's a job for the Evil Eye. It has roughly the range of a pistol and when you glare at your foe and mutter something glottal under your breath... nothing happens.

That's the beauty of the Evil Eye. *Nothing happens.*

If that beauty is a little subtle for your tastes, consider that the Evil Eye hangs around. Your accursed victim tries to charm the pants off the UPS guy and nothing happens. She bucks for that promotion at work and nothing happens. She tries to get a search warrant for your lair, to no avail, and then she tries to shoot you and just *misses*.

The Evil Eye is not infallible, it can't stop everyone from doing everything, but it can slow down just about anybody. Here's how it works.

Make your **Cunning Cruelty** roll and, if you get a set, the target labors under the shackles of misfortune. Specifically, he takes a -1d penalty on every dice pool and, worse, if he has access to a Master Die somehow, *that's the die that gets removed*.

The curse lasts for a number of scenes equal the Width+Height of your roll. You can curse someone more than once, but it doesn't deepen the penalty, it just resets the duration. If you rolled really well with the first curse (say, Width 2 and Height 10 for 12 scenes of impediment), a second curse might actually *shorten* the duration (if it was Width 2 and Height 3, say).

GMs, be sure to have lots of pesky unrolled hassles fall upon the cursed also. Stuff like bank errors, car trouble, an embarrassing case of ringworm... GMCs who get the curse should suffer these quotidian dismays as well as more serious setbacks for which you didn't necessarily roll. Anything you can do to make sure the villainous PC knows the curse seems to be working is good too.

DEMONIC ASPECTS

Every one of the Hellbound has the potential to physically reveal his demonic nature, though this is not always a wise or subtle course. If you want people to help you out willingly, sprouting horns and flames may not be the best way. But if you want people to help you out *fast*, it can work wonders. Your mileage may vary.

Only the demon half of the Hellbinder pair can activate the Aspect, and then only at a dreadful (to the demon) cost, as described back on page 68. Short version: If everyone plays nice, the human slides a point off a Virtuous Strategy. If the demon does it without permission, like for a special birthday surprise, the demon rolls the relevant Strategy with no Tactic. No set? Slide a point off the Strategy, but the power activates. Got a set? Yay, it activates for free.

Something important to know about Aspects is that they come on fast. When a Screwtape announces that he's putting on an Aspect during the declare phase, it comes on during the roll phase, **before any other actions get resolved**. This can be especially important for defensive powers like Ghost Form or Carapace.

The Aspects for each Sinister Strategy are as follows.

Cunning

Cloven Hooves	An Utmost Foulness
Ghost Form	<i>Legion</i>
Wings	

Sly

Carapace	Aqua-Form
Giant	<i>Hell's Engine</i>
Horned	

Devious

Darkness-Shrouded	Glory
Flame-Wreathed	<i>Non-Euclidean</i>
Invisible	

CARAPACE (SLY)

This looks like Armor (see page 73 for its howling faces and swirling negative energy voids) but functions differently. The two powers are quite complementary, so if you want to really, *really* soak up punishment like nobody's business, Armor + Carapace is the way to go. Just stay clear on which hideous disfigurement comes from the power (suppurating pustules? gnarled scales?) and which comes from the Aspect (parasitic demon fetuses that jump out of enlarged pores to martyr themselves on incoming bullets? blizzard of wind and hail obscuring you and forcing back attackers?).

When your Carapace is active, every physical attack against you has its Height reduced by a number equal to your Sly. If Height is reduced to zero or less, the attack misses.

CLOVEN HOOVES (CUNNING)

You may have read the entry label and scratched your head. "Hm," you may have thought, "Baddass wings or goat feet? To soar above the rabble, or have limbs that look like they belong in some hideous soul-food stew? Kind of an easy pick..." *Maybe* you're not even reading this! Maybe you just skipped right to the wings! Well if you can't be bothered to read this, *screw you!*

Cloven Hooves don't mean you can walk on uneven surfaces with great confidence. They mean you're empowered to make *Faustian pacts*. If you're not familiar with the myth of Doctor Faustus, he's the guy who sold his soul for magic power. In this case, you're the buyer. Cloven Hooves means you can eat people's souls.

Who's eviler now, wing-man?

Here's how this works. You don't get to immediately take the whole thing, but you can offer humans a chance to succeed, guaranteed, at an action of their choosing. After that, you get a little something for you. It's the free market at its finest. ("Don't think of it as cloven hooves, but rather as the Invisible Hand.")

The market isn't open to everyone: People who are already Hellbinders are bad credit risks, since some other demon already has made its territorial pissings all over *their* souls. Similarly, you can't make a pact with the mortal who's your other half. You're already helping that ingrate, so he doesn't need or merit added help. Anyone with an angel in him is protected too.

You can have one pact active at a time for every point you have in **Cunning**. If your **Cunning** drops, one of your pacts immediately breaks, so it's advisable to limit them so that they end after a week or a month or by the next full moon. You have to manifest the hooves to complete the pact, though it's often a good idea to keep them hidden while negotiating—I recommend cowboy boots. Or just conducting all your bargains over the phone or through eBay. Needless to say, you need to get the mortal to agree voluntarily, but how hard is that? I mean, seriously. Half of them don't even believe they have souls.

When the circumstances agreed upon occur, the mortal gains a Master Die to one Strategy, which remains for the rest of the scene. At the end of that scene, the mortal who made the pact loses a point off one Strategy of the demon's choice, and the demon gains a point in one Sinister Tactic of the demon's choice. The demon does not need to be present for this.

Bonus? If the mortal dies while using that Master Die, his soul becomes your plaything in the afterlife and you get a free point in your **Cunning**.

Wings. Feh.

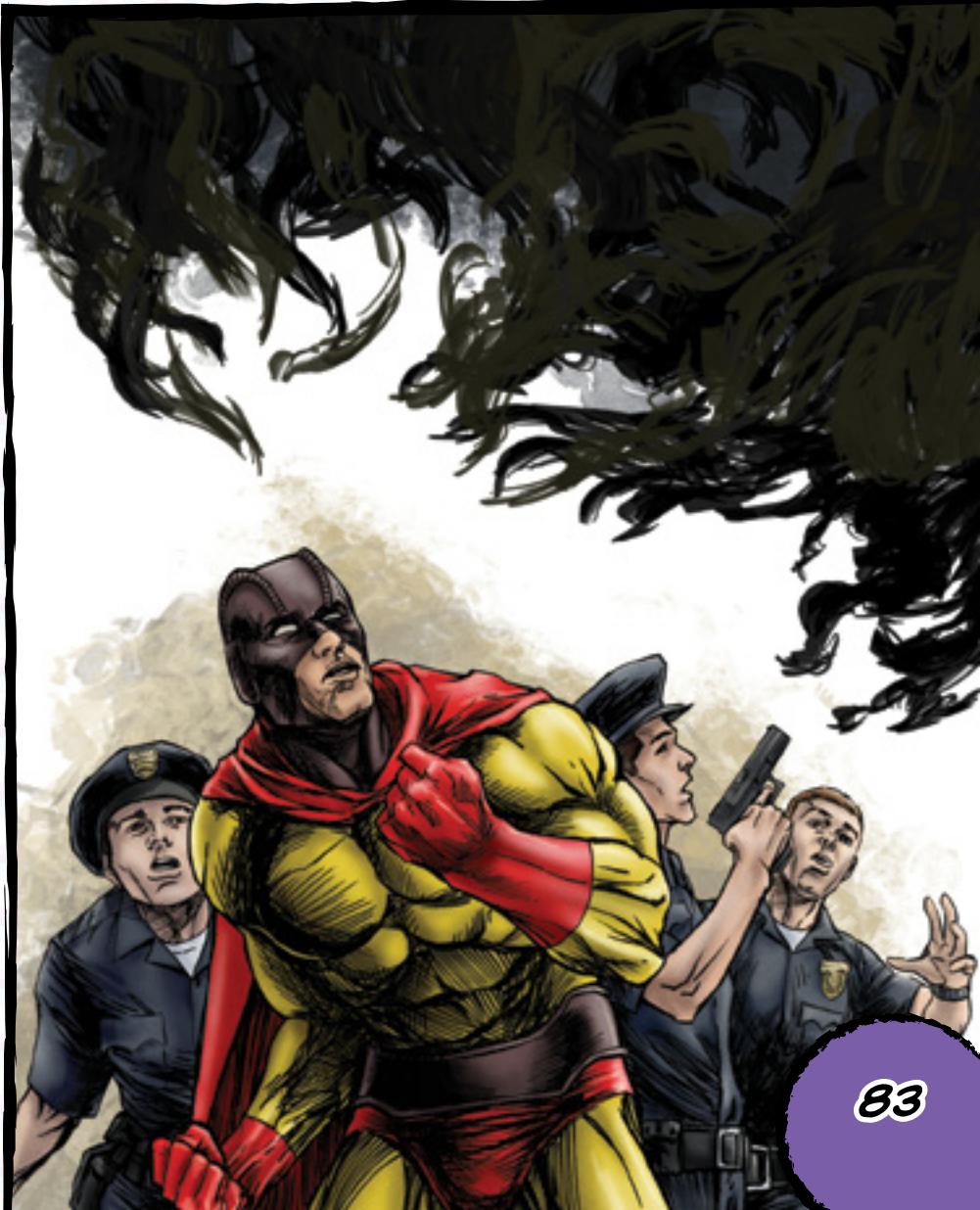
BARKLEY

DARKNESS-SHROUDED (DEVIOUS)

You can summon a field of supernatural darkness, an inky cloud that descends like clinical depression and envelops you, your minions and any allies you graciously permit to shelter beneath it. It's selective. To you and a few people you approve, things just look a little darker, like wearing sunglasses. To everyone else, it's like midnight under a cloudy sky.

The cloud is about ten feet tall and radiates out ten feet from you for every point of **Devious** you have. If you get to **Devious** 4, you can stretch the shadows to cover a 40-foot radius, with you in the middle.

For every point of Devious, you can permit another person to see through the darkness. (If you



have **Devious** 3, you and three others can navigate the shroud unimpeded.) You and your allies get +1 surprise Advantage on any physical actions taken against enemies who are also within the shroud. No one can get a surprise bonus on an attack against you, or your protected allies, if they strike from outside the cloud. If they have no means of seeing through the darkness, their attack is against Difficulty equal to your **Devious**.

FLAME-WREADED (DEVIOUS)

When you turn this on, you're covered in fire. That's simple enough, isn't it? You can describe the flames as you wish—guttering orange flickers, bright green jets, surging tendrils of gusting red—it all works the same way. Anything you hit gets hurt, and anyone dumb enough to hit you

gets hurt. The only exception is other people who are Flame-Wreathed, or people who have some kind of fire immunity, but how often are you going to brawl someone like that?

Any time anyone hits you with a close attack, he slides a point of *Courage* away, except as described above. When you make hand-to-hand attacks, you can add your **Devious** to your **Open Cruelty** pool. If this produces a pool of more than ten dice, you are objectively awesome. Roll the engorged pool and enjoy your guaranteed success.

Note that the pool increase from being Flame-Wreathed is not a surprise bonus, a weapon bonus or any other kind of bonus. Effects that remove those sorts of bonuses do nothing against Flame-Wreathed.

HOST FORM (CUNNING)

You get a tiny bit transparent and a whole lot ectoplasmic. You can walk through walls or people, cross traffic without looking, and avoid all manner of physical hassles. It makes you immaterial.

The question of “wouldn’t I get pulled to the center of the earth?” is handled with a bit of selective finesse on your part. If you choose to allow an object to resist you a little, it resists you a little. So you can walk on floors and the ground. It even works on liquids, so you can walk on water. Gasses are out though, so this doesn’t let you fly. (That takes wings, described below.) Moreover, you can’t let an object resist and then pick it up. Anything stronger or heavier than a soap bubble or cloud of steam is going to fall through you. You can lean against that wall, but if you push it you’re



going through. You can grip that doorknob, but as soon as you try and turn it, your fingers poke through.

This brings up the drawback of Ghost Form. It's great for watching people and delivering spooooooky messages, it works a treat for getting out of prisons, but when you're in Ghost Form, you have no physical effect on the world. Often, you're immaterial in the figurative sense as well. That is, unless you switch off Ghost Form and punch someone when he isn't expecting it. Or unless you have a power like Telekinesis.

You can switch Ghost Form off and reactivate it once per scene for every point you have in Devious. It takes an action to solidify or to pass out of phase, though you don't need to roll anything. At the end of the scene, Ghost Form wears off even if you didn't use up all your changes.

Thus, if you have **Devious** 1, you can activate Ghost Form and walk between the bars of your cell and head into the evidence room, turn it off and get dressed in your costume, then turn it on and walk through the walls (and probably, the night-sticks and taser-lines of your pathetic captors) and away. But if you deactivate it to take a swing at one of those cops, you don't get it back. If you had **Devious** 4, you could go get your costume and a bloodstained bayonet from a murder case, turn immaterial, walk out, let the cops tire themselves swinging at you, turn physical, stab one, turn ghostly and repeat that twice more.

When you phase out, you can carry about ten pounds of clothing and gear with you, but nothing living. You can't use this to shred items by turning part of (say) that motorcycle helmet intangible and leaving part solid, either.

If you activate any other physical power that depends on making contact with a solid object (Summon, Banish, the Flame-Wreathed Aspect, That Hideous Strength), it doesn't work while you're ghosted. But if you come back into phase, it works normally.

Giant (Sly)

You get big. Really big. How big? For every point in **Sly**, you gain five feet of height, with proportionate weight and reach. You get the effects of That Hideous Strength, but it's based on **Sly** instead of **Cruelty**. (If you already have that power, base its effect on the larger of **Sly** or **Cruelty**.)

When you're Giant, if you take damage that would affect Open or Sly, you can choose which one it affects.

Horned (Sly)

Okay, so let's just take the "he's one horny devil" jokes as read and move on. With this Aspect, you can grow some sort of pointy natural weaponry, horns or tusks or fangs or a rack of antlers. ("Check out the rack on that one!" Sorry. Couldn't resist.)

What the horns (or claws or acid-dripping tentacles or whatever) do is make your hand-to-hand attacks that much nastier. If you have That Hideous Strength or some other power that gives you a weapon bonus on hand to hand attacks, that works just fine and combines smoothly with the horns. If you try to spear someone with a pitchfork or katana or boulder, you get the appropriate weapon bonus, but not the advantage of horns because (presumably) you're not holding the weapon with your gnarled antlers.

The Height of every attack you make using your horns is increased by an amount equal to your Sly. If this raises your Height above 10, the attack becomes immune to gobble dice.

INVISIBLE (DEVIOUS)

Moving about unobserved has a definite appeal, and I'm sure you don't need me to tell you about all the opportunities this provides. So let's talk limitations for a moment. Even when you're unseen, it doesn't mean you're inaudible, or that you won't displace smoke or leave footprints or exhale steam in the winter. It's a hell of an edge, but it won't stop people from shooting or swinging blindly, and it can be a surprising pain in the ass to get out of people's way when they don't know you're there.

On the plus side, anything you're wearing or carrying also becomes invisible.

When you turn invisible, you get +3 surprise Advantage on all actions where remaining undetected is a big plus—until people realize you're there. (Like, if you punch someone or fart loudly.) Then the bonus drops to +1. In addition, when attempting to hide or move unseen, you can add your Devious stat to your Cunning Greed pool. This is not a surprise bonus (which you also get), but a pool enhancement. If your pool is over ten, you still get to roll all the dice to which you're entitled.

WINGS (CUNNING)

Ah, flight, the dream of mortals and the majestic transport method of devil and superhero alike. Whether you want to dodge the slings and arrows of outrageous costumed angel-handlers, or to swoop down and bash the crap out of people, Wings can let it happen.

Given the loose and narrative nature of how events happen in *Better Angels*, there's no reason to get all hard and fast and miles-per-hour about how fast you can fly. While most Aspects are available for one scene only, Wings get a bit of a pass if you're trying to cover great distances in order to make the plot more convenient. Think of Wings as a narrative excuse to arrive where the action is and gloss over such annoying details as whether you took the bus or where you parked the Supervillainmobile.

Cunning 1: You can fly at the pace of a brisk jog, circling to raise yourself ten feet per action. You take no damage from falling if you have your wings out.

Cunning 2: You can fly at a sprinter's pace and gain fifteen feet per action in height, more or less.

Cunning 3: You can shoot straight up, thirty feet just like *that*, and cruise at about the speed of a car in light city traffic. You can hover in place, where demons with lesser Wings are stuck wheel-ing and circling like some manky bat.

Cunning 4: You can reach fifty feet in just moments and swoop down with enough force and precision to enhance hand-to-hand attacks. If you'd normally have no weapon bonus, the dive-bomb attack gives you +1 weapon Advantage. If you'd normally get a +1 or +2 bonus, it rises by a single point. If you'd have a +3 weapon bonus, it stays maxed out. That's just the way it is.

Cunning 5: You can zip up to the top of a ten-story building in a single bound, fly as fast as a speed-ing locomotive, and get all the advantages of the previous levels as you wish.

Whatever your **Cunning**, if you're flying and someone else is walking, he can't punch you. You're effectively immune to hand-to-hand attacks from earthbound people unless you make a close-up attack on them. They can still pepper you with gunfire, of course. Also, at the GM's discretion, someone with the Giant Aspect active might reach you, using increased reach and speed.

Once per scene, if your wings are out, you can arbitrarily declare that a physical attack hit your wings instead of your body. This breaks a wing and prevents you from flying for the rest of the scene, but you don't take damage, meaning you don't have to shift around any stats or erase them.

The next time you summon your wings, they're perfectly fine. You could even shut them off for the scene and re-summon them unharmed, if you feel like gambling and/or burning Strategy points.

AN UTMOST FOULNESS (CUNNING)

While many demons' heritage is reflected with traditional looks like horns and fanged maws and leathery bat wings, some are ugly even by Hell's standards. Those are the ones who can take Utmost Foulness as an Aspect. When relaxed, those with this Aspect look like the aftermath of a fire in a wax museum — melted forms with too many eyes, limbs and mouths, gooified and slagged together wrong. Except it's all moving, reforming, like a snail's eye times a thousand with half-recognized human organs and animal features, rising and falling, much of it stuff on the outside that should be hidden within. Never still, it's a stretchy, polyadaptive, gooey mess.

The advantage of being a plastoid mass of ever-changing limbs is that it makes you very versatile.

With Utmost Foulness in play, a character gets points of weapon/tool Advantage for any physical task, simply by making his body into what he needs. He can exude spikes for striking, make his body a slingshot to hurl a rock at someone, ooze away from injury or whip up a quick plastron to shed unwanted blows. The amount of Advantage is half his current **Cunning** score.

It's up to the GM to offer Advantage (or Difficulty) to social or mental tasks that might be helped or hindered by repulsive, seething mutation. Spotting that ambush might be easier if you can make your eye telescopic or turn a foot-square surface of your body into an exterior eardrum. On the other hand, seducing someone while looking like an animate offal pile may be impossible, no matter your Corruption score. Scaring the crap out of people is definitely easier, though.

AQUA-FORM (SLY)

You become a blue-green figure of water and ice, sliding and sloshing around the landscape.

Being made of living water has several advantages.

- Impact weapons like swords, guns, fists and SUVs no longer give any weapon Advantage against you.
- When underwater you can move at your running speed without effort, you don't need to breathe, and you get the advantages of the Invisibility power.
- You cannot be pushed or pulled.
- If you can make contact with a wall while falling, you take no damage from hitting the ground.
- You can pass through a hole the size of a soup bowl in one round. A hole the size of a dime? You can squeeze through that in about sixty seconds. Seeping through something like a door crack could take as long as five minutes, but if water can go through it, so can you...eventually.

That said, there are a few drawbacks.

- Weapons that explode use their full Advantage and, moreover, have the Height of their attack raised by one when unleashed against those in Aqua-Form.
- Aqua-Form is vulnerable to extremes of temperature. Attacks based on fire or cold also use their full Advantage and have the Height of the attack roll raised by one point.

GLORY (DEVIOUS)

This is not to be confused with Impossible Beauty (though they work really, really well together). When you transform into a form of Glory, you may look beautiful or terrible or, more likely, both. You become impossibly imposing, like a thunderstorm or an eclipse — something above human scale, beyond typical lusts. You become a figure that obliterates reason and self-respect, too vast and real, too much to be dealt with.

At least, that's the highest form of it. Demons shy of **Devious** may just be a bit more dapper.

When Glory is active, every social action you take has its Height increased by an amount equal to your **Devious** score. If the Height exceeds 10, the action becomes immune to Gobble Dice. (This is basically 'Horned' for persuasion.)

CHAPTER 7:
SIN! (AND VIRTUE)

PUTTING SOME KIND OF OBJECTIVE MORALITY INTO A ROLEPLAYING GAME

is always a fraught endeavor. There's a risk of creating paradoxes, Catch-22 ethical conundrums and flat-out special cases where, yeah, maybe Gandhi *would* punch a pregnant nun in the stomach. But in *Better Angels*, that's all part of the fun. (Ethical conundrums, not nun-punching.)

The puzzles play out through the rules. The PCs are walking a thin line, trying to please their demons and keep them strong with acts that satisfy their vile natures, while simultaneously trying to contain their demons and create good outcomes from evil acts. Is it possible to destroy the devil's house with the devil's tools? Or are the supervillains just fooling themselves and traipsing in complicity down the path of good intentions?

That's the game.

THE IMBALANCE

The human has all those Virtuous traits, measuring his aspiration to do (and be) good. The demon has Sinister stats, indicating its desire to rip it up with a realness. The combinations of these factors produce the power pools rolled to do the horrendous anti-miracles for which the hellbound are infamous. So far so good.

But the halves are almost always in conflict, and even in the short terms there has to be a winner and a loser. When a demon's primary Sinister Strategy and its opposite Strategy aren't equal, there's a fight to see just who wears the pants in the relationship. Or, as the case may be, who wears the bloodstained leotard.

SINNING

Increasing a Sinister Tactic isn't hard. Sinning has famously been likened to a slippery slope. The details are down to which sin is getting attention in any particular scene. At the end of any scene where one of the Hellbound was taking part in the action, the Screwtape player can argue for a Tactic increase, if he saw his host being appropriately naughty. The exact form the moral breach takes determines which Tactic can increase.

But type is not the only factor to consider. There's also magnitude. If he broke the rules a little, you can raise the Tactic by a point at the end of the scene. If he commit a great crime, you may raise that Tactic two points. For something truly heinous? You can directly raise a Strategy.

Here, then, are the exact fuels each sin needs to burn bright, with various magnitudes.

CRUELTY

Bloodlust is pretty straightforward. Death = joy. More death = more joy. Not pleasant, then, but straightforward.

Raise and Deed

1 *Cruelty: Killing*. This isn't anything elaborate and premeditated, and it doesn't even need to be unwarranted. But any time your actions leave a body in their wake, you're entitled to raise *Cruelty*. It can be an accident, a him-or-me self-defense scenario, or an entirely justified murder. Doesn't matter. Thou shalt not kill. It's in the book. In fact, you can qualify just by leaving someone to die. If you hit and run someone who later gets saved by a Good Samaritan, you still sin up.

2 *Cruelty: Kill in cold blood*. Sure, it was unfortunate when that late-night office worker ran around the corner and you shot him without thinking. But when someone's restrained and helpless and you kill him anyway, that's another thing entirely. At this point, you could show mercy. You have to go out of your way to kill. And you do.

1 *Sly: Kill a hundred people at once*. At this point, it becomes largely a matter of numbers. It doesn't really matter whether the bus you firebombed was on a Seniors Vegas Tour or was carrying recent convicts to Supermax prison. Quantity counts.

CONTEMPT

Though hardly incompatible with wrath, contempt is different. The most contemptuous don't see themselves as petty or idly scornful. They're making a statement, showing defiance against the rules, morals, and expectations of 'decent folk.' These being demons, it's expressed through misery, because *humans don't deserve happiness*. Contempt isn't interested in fair fights: It just has to demonstrate everyone else's inferiority. *Has to*.

It's possible to do this without any bloodletting whatsoever, and many supervillains like it for just that reason. Just be careful that the excuse, "I never *killed* anyone" doesn't lull you into a false sense of righteousness as you irreparably scar a child's psyche in front of his helpless parents.

Raise and Deed

1 *Contempt*: **Humiliate someone.** If you deliberately make someone feel total embarrassment, that's pretty sweet to a demon of contempt. Pantsing a kid in the lunchroom or giving him a lingering unkind nickname is all it takes. Who knew so many junior high kids were diabolical? (On closer consideration, I did.)

2 *Contempt*: **Inflict degradation or misery on someone at your mercy.**

1 **Sly**: **Prolonged torture by your own hand.** Most people call this crossing a line. Lots of folks have taunted and humiliated and often feel bad about it after. Deliberately causing intolerable pain or fear? That's big league. That's your first step into a darker world. This often involves some planning and preparation: "Not only am I better enough to beat you, I'm better enough to beat you with one hand tied behind my back. Now get in the man-sized pinball!"

ESPIONAGE

Espionage heartily endorses the "knowledge is power" concept, and to prove it demonstrates superiority by making others feel small. The whole point of voyeurism is to see people doing shameful or private things.

It's hardly worth it if you catch them being good. So to make your peeking and prying okay, you have to show people they're just as warped, or weak, or ethically incontinent as you, if not more so. Derision is the main course for *Espionage*. It goes down well with avarice and a nice hearty merlot.

Raise and Deed

1 *Espionage*: **Victory gloat.** If you overcome someone who isn't cataclysmically feeble and inferior, you can grind out an *Espionage* perk by hectoring them about their weakness, stupidity, how they could have triumphed if they hadn't been so foolishly noble (or idiotically predictable, or so overconfident). This works fine on cops, FBI agents, other Hellbound and, of course, anyone who calls himself a 'superhero.' Ordinary people at the wrong end of your home invasion? Not challenging enough, even if you refer to yourself in the third person.

2 *Espionage*: **Ruining a hero.** Most superheroes have a secret identity. Learn it. Put it on the web and basic cable news. Eat popcorn. Laugh. Or impersonate him, kick a few orphans and puppy dogs and then watch people cringe when the real guy shows up to save them. Removing a hero's powers? Tall order, but also *super hilarious*.

1 **Cunning**: **Steal that which your rival loves most, just to show you can.** Yeah, there was sometimes a triangle between Lex, Clark and Lois, wasn't there? If your death ray or moon-missile can't bring your hero enemy low, a dozen roses to steal the love of his life might. Of course, the perfect act of villainy is to then discard said lover as callously and viciously as you can manage.

GREED

Envy can lead to greed, but just as often greed exists separate and apart from any odious comparisons. *Greed* can just be a burning need for *stuff*. A need that can seem fairly harmless to indulge, compared to the urges of treachery and wrath.

Raise and Deed

1 *Greed*: **Steal something you don't need.** If you



KOMODA

take bread for your starving children, you're just unfortunate. If you shoplift perfume you could easily buy, now you're being greedy. Taking candy from a baby fits here. Not really that harmful, it's mostly about shock value.

2 *Greed*: **III-gotten gains.** In a dollar amount, let's call it a minimum of ten million bucks. Like a theft to get you on the national evening news. A famous art object or a prototype of a new device probably meets the 'significance' criteria as well. It doesn't have to be stealing, either. You get paid your ten mil to destabilize a government or suppress a clean-burning engine that runs on water, that's certainly an act of greed.

1 **Cunning:** Steal something unique, priceless, of no use to you personally and which you don't even like. Mona Lisa, Liberty Bell, a superhero's sidekick... something irreplaceable but impractical.

DECEIT

The devils of *Deceit* play elaborate political games of manipulation and subterfuge, not just for gain, not just because they like it, but because that provides the most opportunities for opportunistic—even whimsical!—backstabbing. If you're playing both sides against the middle, you've doubled your odds of being on the winning team, right?

Raise and Deed

1 *Deceit*: **Openly betray and mock someone who trusted you.** This has to be over something significant. If you swore on your *life* to make it to Timmy's tap dance recital and you don't make it because someone broke your leg, that's no sin. To get your raise, you have to laugh at him as he cries later. "You expected me to go see you dance? You really are stupid! No wonder your mom abandoned you," and so on.

2 *Deceit*: **Actively backstab a friend.** The pure form is to literally take an actual *knife* and stick it in his genuine *back* but if you edge him out of a billion-dollar business deal, that's sufficient. To double-dip your deceit, you have to initiate the betrayal and he has to know about it. Just tapping his confession privately and handing it anonymously to the FBI? Sinful, but is it *sinful enough*? No. Getting money

from the FBI and then torturing a confession out of him after asking him to a birthday party at your penthouse? Now you're talking.

1 **Devious:** **Kill an unsuspecting ally.** It has to be someone to whom you've made a gesture of aid or friendship, and he has to have reciprocated in kind by helping you out or demonstrating trust. You have to strike the blow yourself and make sure he's stone cold dead, too.

CORRUPTION

The most common sin for supervillains isn't about the killing and the stealing. Oh sure, murder and theft are usually *involved*, but it's really about... greatness. Grandeur. It's about putting a face to the fears of the masses—*your* face. It's about creating a legend, a narrative of horror and envy and adoration and terror that lasts for decades and splices up history books. The money, the groupies, the hilarity of watching someone's lip tremble as he realizes you played him for a straight-up sucka? All fine, but for the real connoisseur of bad, it's about lookin' good.

Raise and Deed

1 *Corruption*: **Make someone your minion.** There are two ways to do this. First is by making someone do something in spite of reluctance or moral qualms. (The classic is "open the safe or I blow your brains out.") The second is to have someone verbally affirm that you are their master and your will takes precedence over other loyalties. The Cloven Hooves power is perfect for this, as is a typical S&M dungeon.

2 *Corruption*: **Become an institution.** If you acquire a private island base or take over a small country, you've reached the big leagues of bad. About damn time. You only get this once, when you seize the whatever-it-is.

1 **Devious:** **Idolatry.** Any time a thousand people (or more) gather in order to openly worship you as their personal god, you gain a point of **Devious**. Also, you probably get crazy amounts of religious groupie action.

REPENTING

To improve a Sinister Tactic, all a demon has to do is check off one of the easily managed (or, at least, clearly understood) situations described above. How does a man increase his virtues? Internally. Where raising a sin is all about the damage you inflict on the world around you, raising a Virtuous Tactic works by showing that you're having a positive effect, and it's handled with a looser hand.

At the end of every scene, after the demon raises a Sinister Tactic, the mortal's player can **slide one dot from any Sinister Tactic to its opposite**. He can transform *Greed* into *Generosity* or *Corruption* into *Nurture*... **if he can justify it.**

Here are the six loose, vague examples of the spiritual alchemy by which the wrong is righted.

To turn *Greed* into *Generosity*, the player has to explain how his actions in the scene helped someone to whom he owed nothing, and from whom he had no good reason to expect repayment in kind.

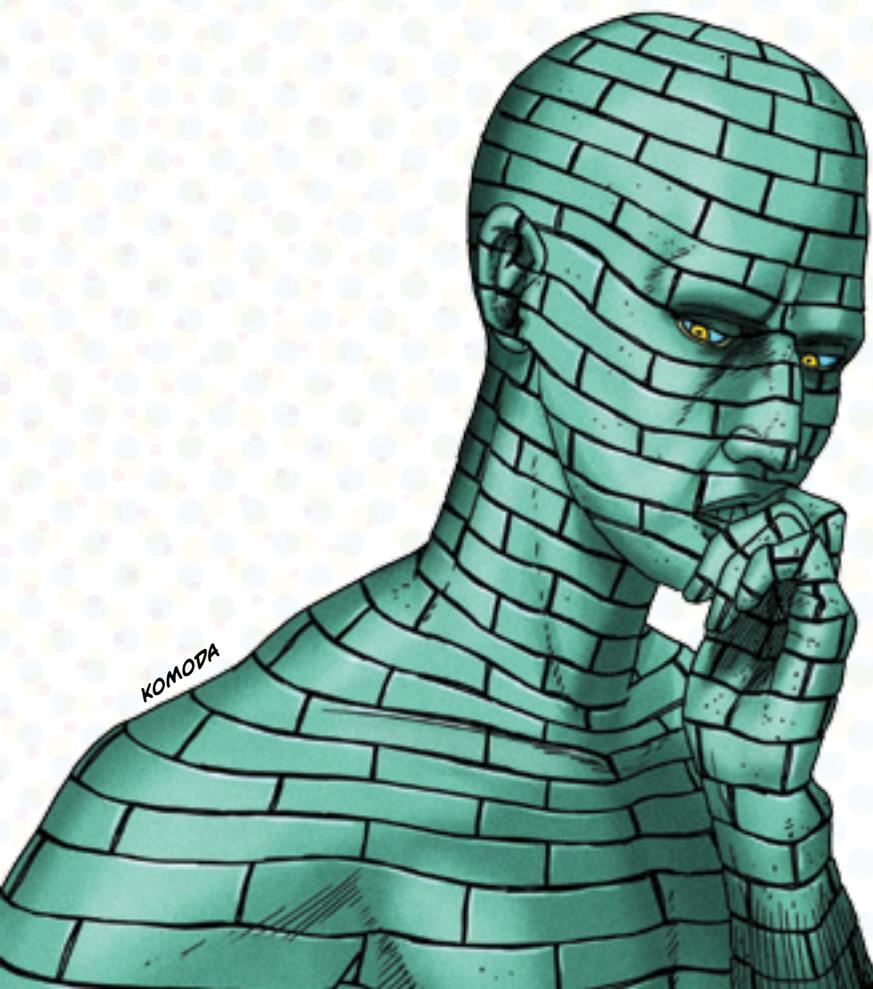
To change *Espionage* into *Knowledge*, the player has to explain how he has come to understand or know something new and relatively important.

To change *Cruelty* into *Courage*, the player has to explain how he demonstrated mercy to someone or how he exerted himself to protect someone else. (This does not have to be physical. He could show emotional mercy with a white lie or protect someone from intellectual entrapment.)

To change *Contempt* into *Endurance*, the player has to lose a conflict, and it has to cost him something. He either has to verbally surrender or be put in a position where he can no longer fight back.

To change *Corruption* into *Nurture*, the player has to show that he admitted to wrongdoing and tried to make up for what he did.

To change *Deceit* into *Honesty*, the player has to show how he told the truth and it was injurious to him or his interests.



CHAPTER 8:
GOOD VS. EVIL (TEMERITY VS.
IRRITABLE MONSTROUSNESS)



THE CONFLICT WITHIN A HUMAN

who wants to do good but is lured into evil is thrown into great relief when that ‘evil’ has a name, a voice, and a fist full of temptation made manifest through showy superpowers. If our humans are protagonists, certainly some of their antagonists are going to be smug superheroes; and the chilling monsters who result when demons find accepting hosts (one could call them “super-duper-villains” but that would sound far too precious); and angels trapped by wicked men; and some plain ol’ normal people. But for a lot of groups, those are just ancillary. They’re the warm-up. The real workout is the conflict inside, between demon and host.

The game presents this as player vs. player.

If you’re an experienced gamer, lots of red flags just shot up. Pitting players against one another, especially when their characters are (at least nominally) supposed to be helping each other, often turns into a tense, tight knot of ill will and resentment. But the question is, who else can do it?

Would you trust a player to run both his own character and a demon meant to torment that character? Sure, there are some drama-prodigy players who *can*, but more likely it’s going to break down into a non-conflict where the demon does whatever the character wants (or vice versa), or the player is going to get too exhausted fighting *himself* to enjoy the game. Asking someone to undermine everything he pursues isn’t the best idea, even if you say please.

Or you could hand the GM the reins of the demons. Certainly that’s the more traditional approach. But the GM is already handling all those cops, supporting characters, angels, serial killers and shoeshine boys. That’s a lot of work, and giving her half of the players’ stuff to do just makes the job more burdensome. That’s without considering the almost irresistible temptation to use the demons’ control over powers as a pacing tool. Hell, I know I would. But Aspects and Master Dice are personal. Giving half their access to the GM on top of all her other authority leaves her running all the game and playing a third of it too. Too much.

So your demon is controlled by one of your fellow players. The technical term for the guy playing the role of your demon is **Screwtape**, after a main character in C.S. Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters*. In *Better Angels* this is, on occasion, shortened to plain ol’ **Screw**.

ALL HAIL OBLIVION

A lot of this idea for players being Screwtapes to each other comes from the old World of Darkness game Wraith: The Oblivion. Ken Hite once described it as ‘the setting so bleak your GM has to deputize the other players to torment you.’ But the goal of the Shadowguide in Wraith (which was their name for the guy who offered you dice if you’d do lousy things) was to bring your character into unimpeachable contact with his own worse nature. The Shadow was an embodiment of everything rejected and despised about the self, but it was inescapable because it was (after all) you.

Wraith was complicated. It was an attempt to map internal conflicts onto an external setting. Better Angels doesn’t have those ambitions. Your Screwtape may be cozy with you, but it’s not your character. It’s an alien spiritual parasite, and it wants to relate to you the same way you relate to the car in your garage. You want your car to take you where you’re going without breaking down or going out of control, and to achieve that you’re willing to gas it up and perform basic maintenance. Maybe you have a sentimental attachment to your car, but no sane person is going to surrender his life that his car might remain unharmed.

Similarly, the demon sees you as a vehicle. You may be a pimped ride in which it takes pride or you may be the Hyundai with the dying transmission, but ultimately, it just wants to get behind the wheel, go places, and not worry about backfires.

ENTER SCREWTAPE

When generating characters, each player decides his demon's primary Sinister Strategy, along with a power and an Aspect. The player immediately to his left becomes that player's Screwtape, spends points on the character and picks an Aspect and a power.

Easy so far, right? You're Screw for the player to the right, and the player to your left Screws you. The abilities of the demon are described in some detail starting on page 63. They mostly consist of (1) activating Aspects, (2) offering Master Dice and (3) sticking in an oar about what's going on *when invited*. If your primary Sinister Strategy exceeds your host's opposite Virtuous Strategy, you can be constantly aware of events, but you can't speak to him until he asks your advice or activates a power.

DEALING WITH YOUR PLAYER AS A SCREW

If you've run a game as GM, you may already be ready to Screwtape and just not know it. (Or maybe you do know it.) The function of the GM is to provide opposition that's appropriate to the characters. If the characters are all investigators, they're not going to like a scenario that can only be solved by mindlessly cracking heads. They're unlikely to enjoy a no-win situation, unless they explicitly signed up for a horror game, and maybe not even then. But games with no challenge, no threat? Those get dull fast.

This is probably old hat to you. If it is, then unpack all those ideas from your mental "GM" drawer and put them in your "Screwtape" drawer. Playing this game, you sign up to wrestle with the devil, and there's no point if the devil just lies there belly-up. On the other hand, it's not much of a wrestling match if the devil brings a chainsaw. Strike the balance. Tempt, don't bully. Give him meaningful choices, but accept his decisions without trying to force his hand.

Also, give the player space if he seems to want it. The big temptation with the role of "devil on his shoulder" is to relentlessly hector the poor bastard with offered bargains and taunting, but that's not only kind of a pain, it's counterproductive. If he *asks* for advice, it means he's ready to listen. Demons may be short-sighted and self-centered and cruel, but they're clever about manipulating mortals. They know that if you never give the guy a rest, you're training him to ignore you. If you lead him into disaster right away, you put him on guard for the rest of your pairing. So as I mention elsewhere, if the player says, "Hey, I didn't invoke you!" take the hint, apologize and wait for the time to ripen. Moreover, remember that you can't talk to him unless expressly invited or unless he uses a power, no matter how high your primary Sinister Strategy gets. If it's high enough you can watch, but only in silence.

The real key to Screwtaping is the great unspoken law of successful gaming: **Don't be a jerk**. You do not *win* by making his character miserable, and you're actively a loser if you deliberately set out to make the *player* miserable. You *win* by helping him make an awesome story about someone walking a moral tightrope, trying to do good from a position waist-deep in evil.

So help him when he asks for help. Make suggestions you think he's actually going to *accept* or, alternately, give advice so diabolically over the top that you know he's going to say no and you can both enjoy the exchange. *The Odd Couple* dialectic is one of *Better Angels'* charms. There's characterization gold in the back and forth exchanges of weak human and needy demon. But a good magician always leaves the audience wanting more. If you think it *might* be time to end the in-character argument, it's time.

When you're in character as a demon, keep in mind that while you're ancient and evil, you're not necessarily contemporary or all that sophisticated. You're all id, no internal censor, relentless desire with no moral center. Understand that the player is going to manipulate the demon through its simple nature, and enjoy that. When he comes up with a clever supervillain trope that wallows in flamboyant, puerile and self-gratifying comic book evil instead of the hopeless, efficient ba-

nality of real life evil, that's gold. That's exactly where the game is meant to take you. But you're not going to get there unless you work together at providing a strong conflict.

There's a real risk of getting bogged down when you have to play two characters at once. The best way to handle that is... **don't play two characters at once**. In many games, the mantra is "never split up the party." Here, you don't have to abide by that. When one player goes off on his own, he's not showboating or hogging the spotlight if he invokes his devil. You're never alone with demonic possession.

But what if your character is in a scene *and* the character for whom you Screw is too? Concentrate on your character. You can throw in a comment here and there, but a good rule is to keep your mouth shut unless (1) his actions touch on one of your favorite sins, (2) he's chasing down some virtue and it doesn't fit your designs or (3) you're being helpful. This game's a little like the Internet. Just because you can comment on everything doesn't mean it's a good idea. Only contribute when your contribution is wanted (or when it makes things more interesting for everyone).

DEALING WITH YOUR SCREWTAPE AS A PLAYER

You're at the game to have fun. Your fellow player, the guy grinning and bargaining with those seductive Master Dice, is there to have fun. The essence to having a good experience with Screwtaping is to respect one another, be a good sport and keep in mind that sadism is the only game where one person's fun always has to be extracted from another's.

Better Angels is meant to be "sadism light," if it's going to be sadistic at all. There's an undeniable pleasure to needling, teasing, causing a little discomfort. It's what makes us want to tell the best ghost story at the campfire, or tell the joke that flirts with offense.

Being on the receiving end can also be fun, as long as it doesn't go too far and as long as it doesn't seem unfair. But "unfair" in this context is so vague and subjective that it's not all that helpful. So let's be more particular.

Screwtape is fair as long as it's a demon toying with a character. It is not fair when it's a player toying with a fellow player.

It's an odd balance to strike and accusations of taking it personal can be impossible to prove. But let's try a little thought-exercise. Imagine you're in a play. You're in *Romeo and Juliet* and you've been cast as Tybalt. Tybalt hates Romeo. When you're onstage, you want to project loathing towards Romeo with every word, every gesture, every eyebrow twitch. But you don't hate the actor *playing* Romeo (I hope—though he did get the lead role), you don't feed him miscues and try to trip him and replace his Aqua Net with spray paint. That would just be crazy.

In *Better Angels*, your Screwtape is Tybalt. You've got Romeo, the guy with the good lines and all the time onstage. But without antagonism, you're going to be a very boring Romeo. So when Screwtape plays tricks and tempts your character, that's all right. He's doing his job. If he succeeds in destroying the character, you still get the dramatic death scene. If he fails, your character just looks better for having overcome steep odds.

Communication within the game is essential to keeping the balance right. If the antagonism is too sharp, don't invoke the demon. Don't use powers, find other ways to achieve your goals. Starve him of Sinister Tactics and crank up your Virtuous stuff. *Make him desperate*. Moreover, keep in mind that your Screwtape is also running a fellow PC. If you aren't going to help him with his bank heist or revenge-murder because your demon has just been too fierce lately, it's likely that he gets the message and backs off. Just make sure you frame it as the character's sensible decision. Otherwise, you're the one taking it personally and making things player vs. player instead of character vs. demon.

On the other hand, maybe the other guy takes it too easy on you. If you want to subtly encourage him to throw a little more opposition in your face, that's easy too. Taunt the demon. Talk some smack. Just make sure it's character-to-demon smack and not player on player. If you detach, he should back off. If you intensify, he's likely to respond in kind.

If your Screwtape is harassing you, don't be afraid to pipe up with, "I ain't invoked you yet!" That's perfectly appropriate. In the advice on playing *as* Screwtape, I made sure to mention how okay that is.

WHAT IF A SCREWTAPE SICKS OUT?

We're all busy people and sometimes we just can't make it to Friday night's game. In every RPG it's a hassle when a player can't make it (especially if his character vanishes in the middle of a cliff-hanger) but *Better Angels* is doubly susceptible to absence, since every player is doing double duty. But every one of us has to miss a session now and again. How to handle it?

The simplest way is to close ranks. The GM can take over both the character and the Screw for the missing player, effectively turning her into a GMC. The Screwtape player for the missing dude now fills in for the missing guy, trying hard to play the Screwtape consistently.

Alternately, one can play both missing characters by group consensus. The longer the group's been at *Better Angels*, the more established the characters are and the easier this should be. While the temptation to have the devil and mortal behave in ways that simply benefit your character, it really is better for the game (and the friendships of the players) to try to stick with the original player's vision. There's enough backstabbing and self-interest in this game without adding more.

FINAL CONFLICTS

The balance between a mere mortal and a raving hell-beast is a delicate one and, while some couples rattle along together, regardless of difficulties (like, say, Bill and Hillary Clinton) others reach a breaking point and explode in a public orgy of humiliation and pain (like Jon and Kate Gosselin). Maybe you're happy playing Hillary to your demon's Bill, but the more common outcome is the fight. The nasty, nasty fight.

When the demon half of the equation maxes out his primary Sinister Strategy, it gets ugly. Same thing if the human hits 5 in the opposite Virtuous Strategy. As soon as there's no further to go (or descend) something has to break, and that something is the partnership.

Keep in mind that these confrontations are a *big deal*. Make it a group effort as much as possible. It could occupy a whole session if it goes all the way. GMs, be ready for it to be the centerpiece of an afternoon's play. Of course, have something on the back burner in case the character dies or the process gets derailed early on. Players, it's fine to spring this on your fellow players (as much as you're able when your Strategy is getting that high) but try not to surprise the GM. Trust me, it's a lot smoother if she's ready to back the move.

GET THEE BEHIND ME, BITCH-FACE

A human whose Strategy hits 5 in the face of demonic opposition doesn't have to immediately throw down with his spirit, but if he doesn't confront it within the next five days, that Strategy automatically drops a point. Tolerance is generally a good thing, but tolerating your position as "engine by which a diabolical entity wreaks havoc" is a stretch. Use it or lose it.

"Use it," in this case, means "attempt to banish the demon to Hell." The human issues an ultimatum and conflict immediately begins. Once it starts, it goes through three phases.

STEP ONE: BEAT THE DEVIL

This is not a metaphorical beating. It's entirely physical. The human invokes the demon and then attempts to do as much grievous harm to it—meaning, *himself*—as he can. He can jump off a building, set himself on fire, or have a friend standing by to strafe him with a machine gun. The demon, one presumes, uses whatever wiles and power it has to resist this. All this is done in an attempt to reduce the demon's *Cruelty*, so there has to be some kind of verbal attack as well. (An exorcist mortal with a buff *Devious Nurture* pool is a godsend.) But at least some of the damage has to be physical.

Beating the Devil lasts for three combat rounds. There are several outcomes that can arise.

If **Open** hits zero and no one stabilizes him, the human host perishes and the demon is free to find a new host. This is, clearly, sub-optimal.

If *Cruelty* hits zero, the demon's hold on the body is weakened and he's forced to retreat to within the human's mind. The struggle continues on the inside while the body returns to its mortal appearance (if any Aspects were invoked) and flops, unconscious, to the ground.

If, after three rounds, *Cruelty* is still a positive number, the human loses a point of *Courage* and the challenge ends. The demon is, one presumes, really pissed.

KOMODA

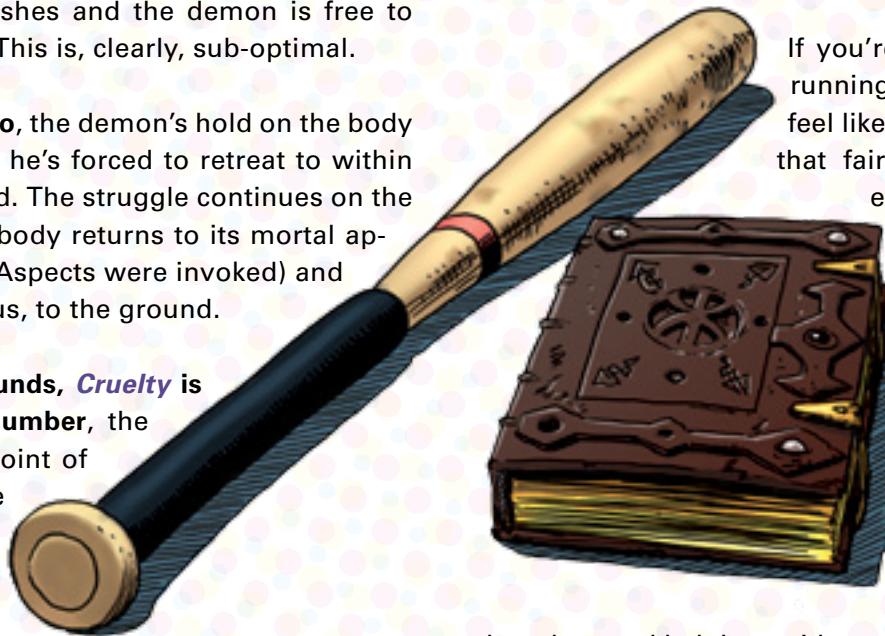
STEP TWO: GOING INSIDE

The crude 19th century exorcism was "beat the devil out of 'im, guv'nor" but for a supervillain there are additional steps. Physical brutality can get you part way there, but the demon can then offer its mortal host temptations, in hope that he weakens and continues to let the demon ride him.

This tempting takes place in the memories of the human. The demon forces him to recollect some traumatic event (ideally one from earlier in the game) and shows how much worse it could have been without the demon's help. Or maybe the

character has to relive a past failure that had dire consequences because he refused to take a Master Die from the demon (or refused to activate his powers at all).

Here's how that runs mechanically. When the mortal frame collapses, the human's player gets sent out of the room. The demon player then assigns roles to the other players, which can be their usual characters or entirely different roles based on who was present in the memory. The demon player explains (roughly) how she wants things to go. Then the mortal player returns. The demon player is GM for the single scene of memory. The regular GM decides when it has reached a climax and had enough falling-off time to let the mortal player make his decision. Then (one way or another) the supervillain awakens and everyone proceeds with their normal roles.



If you're a demon player running this scene, don't feel like you have to be all that fair. The other players and the GM are there representing the mortal's memories or his vision of events. You want to skew everything to show the demon as helpful and essential, and the human as hopeless and helpless without it.

After the memory replay, the human player has an opportunity to voluntarily drop his Virtuous Strategy back down to 4. If he does, the conflict ends and the demon/human hybrid continues in supervillainy as before. But if the human sees the worst outcomes that could have happened without diabolical aid and still tells the demon to get outta town, the conflict escalates to its third stage.

If the human agrees to ramp back his Strategy, both demon and mortal returns to consciousness. They're still

DEMONS AND AMULETS

Demons are tied to the physical world through their hosts, but between hosts they need to fall back on devices that are less likely to get old, die, go insane or come to Jesus. They need amulets.

Typically these are little paintings or carvings or pendants, often illustrating some element of the devil's appearance or personality. When the spirit has a human host, the amulet is nothing but a very old gewgaw.

If the demon's host dies, the creature reverts to the amulet. It can exert a subtle influence on the nearest person to the object (whether that person's touching it or a hundred miles away). This influence typically helps the amulet get found or dug up if it's lost. Once found, the devil tries to get the holder to invoke it, either directly or subconsciously. (Ironically, once the demon has a formal agreement with the mortal, it can only address the host once the host asks for it.)

Amulets aren't indestructible by any means. If one gets dissolved, smashed or melted down, it ceases to function. A demon without a host is up a creek without a paddle if its amulet is ruined. If it does have a host, it can make a new amulet, but there's a catch. The demon has to give up a point of its primary Strategy, and the human has to sacrifice a dot off that Strategy's opposite. Getting a feisty human to agree to that can leave a demon making all sorts of concessions.

sharing and the demon may be feeling a little chastened and compliant after such a close call. But it's back to the status quo.

On the other hand, if the human still wants to evict, it's time for the third and hardest step.

STEP THREE: THE BLUDGEONING

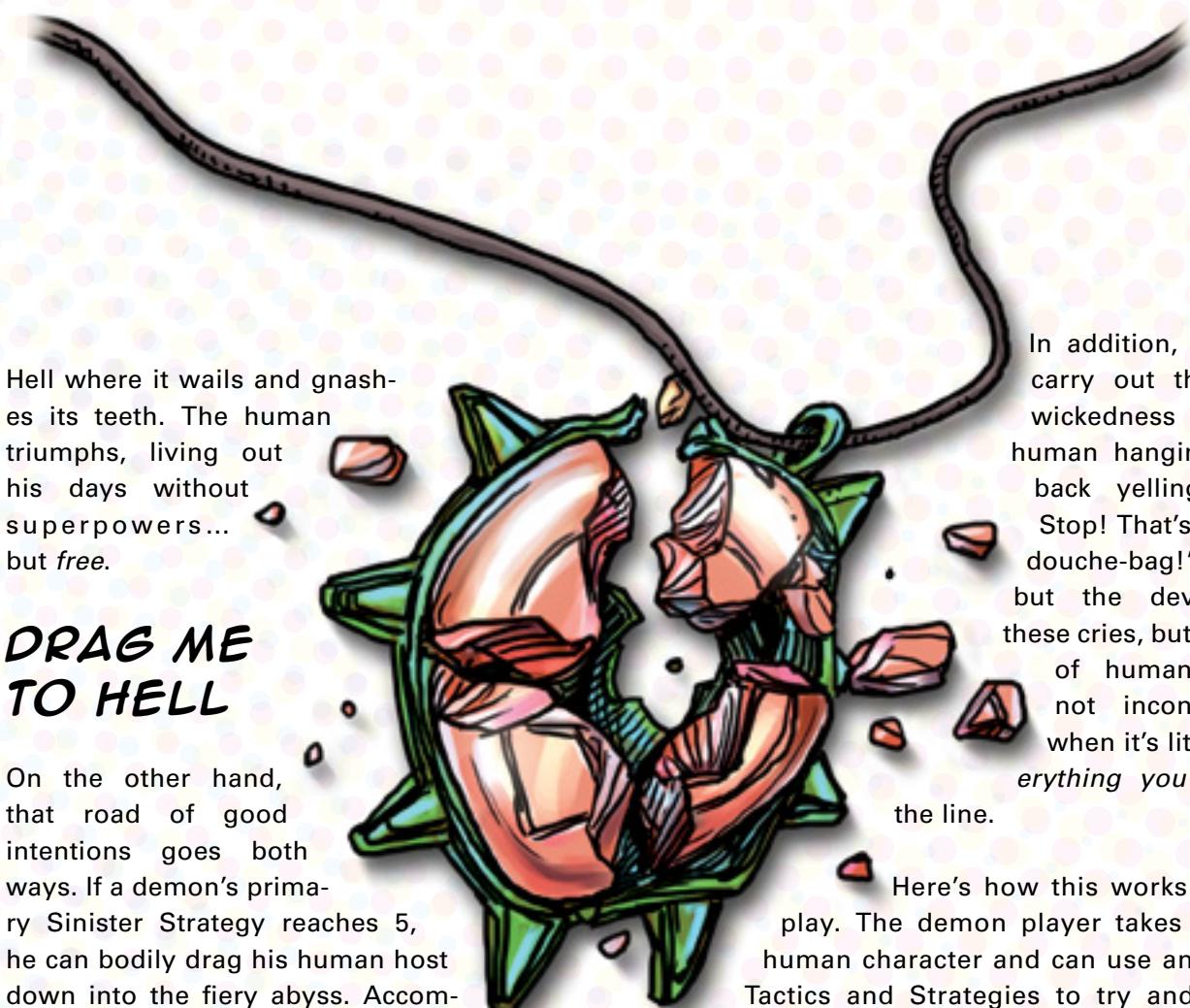
At this point, the demon physically separates from the human, usually through an orifice of the demon's choice. This is universally nonfatal (worse luck) and does no real damage. Then the demon and the human fight.

The demon in this state is both majestic and fragile. It can reallocate dots from any Sinister Tactic into *Cruelty*, and both its Aspects are automatically activated for free. It can use its powers at will. However, it cannot use any Virtuous stats. If it has a power based on *Sly Cruelty*, it can rock that hard. If it has one based on *Insightful Corruption*, its pool for that is *Corruption* only. The demon dies if its *Sly*

gets zilched out. All physical damage is taken on *Cruelty*.

The mortal, on the other hand, is now just a normal human being. Maybe a human being with a rocket launcher or a bunch of friends standing by ready to swing crowbars when the thing shows its face, but in the final analysis, frail flesh. However, he can use Tactics from both sides of the character sheet if he wants, at the levels they'd reached before the demon was expelled. (This does mean he has zero *Cruelty* to use.)

The hell-creature has to fight to the death—either its old host's or its own. If the host dies first, the demon can find a new host, just as if the mortal died without challenge. But if the demon dies first, it's exiled from the mortal realm. If it has an amulet somewhere (see "Demons and Amulets"), it's stuck in that until someone deliberately tries to coax it out with lots of mischief and mojo. If the amulet has been destroyed, or is on the mortal host's person, or gets destroyed while the demon's trapped, then the demon is flung back to



Hell where it wails and gnashes its teeth. The human triumphs, living out his days without superpowers... but free.

DRAG ME TO HELL

On the other hand, that road of good intentions goes both ways. If a demon's primary Sinister Strategy reaches 5, he can bodily drag his human host down into the fiery abyss. Accomplishing this is the demonic equivalent of winning the Super Bowl and marrying a movie star.

As with a human expulsion, a demon's conquest occurs in three parts, but unlike the human, the demon has no choice but to immediately begin when his favorite Strategy hits 5.

CUTTING TIES

In the first stage, the demon takes over the mortal's body and tries to kill everyone (or destroy everything) his human partner cares about. This is tricky, however, since by usurping the human's role the demon cuts itself off from its demonic heritage. It can run around in man shape, tell horrid lies and act out, commit various matricides, infanticides, sorocides and so forth, but it has to do it all without the aid of hellfire, instant hypnosis, or that hideous strength. No powers, no Aspects, no Master Dice.

In addition, it has to carry out this gross wickedness with the human hanging on its back yelling, "Hey! Stop! That's my wife, douche-bag!" No one but the devil hears these cries, but the force of human will is not inconsiderable when it's literally *everything you love* on the line.

Here's how this works in game play. The demon player takes over the human character and can use any and all Tactics and Strategies to try and trounce everything the human loves. However, any time the demon rolls a success, the human can slide a point off a Virtuous Tactic to reduce the set's Width by one. Any pair can be ruined with a single slide. If a Virtuous Tactic is empty, the mortal can slide a point off the Strategy above it, though this gets *really* dangerous (especially with **Open**).

It's possible that the man-shaped demon gets killed during this time, especially if one of the "things the mortal loves" is a partner in crime with a demon of its own. If the hellbound dies at this point, it's the mortal that goes on to the afterlife. The demon just finds a new earthly host, gravitating towards its amulet (page 100).

If it doesn't die, the possession lasts exactly 24 hours. The demon has to work fast. Whether it (1) makes a clean sweep of all that's pure and pleasant or (2) makes a hash of its monstrous design, the next stage inexorably follows.

HELL ON EARTH

After twenty-four hours as a man, **the creature is forced into its true form**, which it cannot hide. Its Aspects turn on and won't turn off. It takes control of its infernal powers, which it can roll at full strength, even if it needs to borrow a Strategy for the activation roll. The mortal is still stuck in the passenger seat, but can still sacrifice Tactics to pull dice out of sets, as described above. Though it's likely that by now, his store of Virtuous Tactics is pretty depleted. (This is a fine time for the mortal's player to put a little extra effort into his Screwtaping, as described on page 96.)

The demon, unveiled and in charge, has one hour—just sixty thin minutes—to round up five innocent victims, murder them, and arrange their entrails in a pentagram. For the purposes of this gruesome rite, “innocent” means someone the demon hasn’t met before, doesn’t know, but who still isn’t a horrible hell-bent soul. If he grabs five people at random and one just happens to be a child molester, murderer, renegade bank executive or war criminal, the ritual fails.

This may not sound all that difficult for a beast of infernal might, but keep in mind it just spent the last twenty-four hours in egregious destruction, *and* it is now clearly, visibly and obviously a Thing That Should Not Be. Most people’s response is to run, call the cops, pray, or cry out loud for superhero intervention.

Maybe the demon dies at this stage. If it does, the mortal body can emerge, relatively unscathed, from the wreckage of the diabolical form. (If the human was hurt beforehand—if, say, his dad hit him in the brisket with a pipe wrench during the first stage patricide—those injuries remain.) The mortal has had the demon forcibly flung off it and is now just an ordinary guy. (Well, probably an

ordinary guy in a notorious supervillain’s getup.) The demon finds a new host and the mortal deals with the fallout of the previous 24 hours’ devil dickery.

Maybe the demon fails to get its guts strung before the clock ticks down. If that’s the outcome, its primary Strategy drops to 4 and it goes back to being a passive passenger on the mortal, who regains control of the body just in time for the wracking pains and grossness of its transformation back to human shape. The devil and mortal are back in traces, working together in the same unlikely buddy-movie pairing they had before the demon hit Strategy 5 and started getting ideas.

But maybe the demon succeeds. Maybe the demon gets its five-man quota and says a brief chant and the intestinal pentacle bursts into flame.

Maybe the demon opens a portal to Hell.

ABYSSAL CAGE MATCH

“Home! I’m goin’ home! ON MY TERMS, BITCHES!”

That’s pretty much the spirit of the situation. The demon hops through the hole into Hell (which the GM gets to decorate as she sees fit) bars out his mortal (with neither man nor monster taking damage from the process) and laughs and laughs and laughs.

Dragging a human being physically to Hell results in a demon becoming more powerful, more prestigious in what passes for decent society among the damned, and he gets sent back to Earth with another amulet (page 100) to do it again. The human? Well, I’ll just say it goes poorly for him and let your imagination fill in the rest. No, filthier than that. More painful. More humiliating. There.

Although... the devil's triumph and the mortal's despair only occur if the man can't escape. Odds are, he can't. He's in human form with no powers or Aspects, he's beat up, and all he has is any equipment he put on the super-suit. The portal could be right next to him but more likely it's way up in the roof of an echoing, sulfurous cavern with his old pal the demon standing between him and it.

The demon? He's in his native form once more with fun new superpowers. If he did not already have the Wings Aspect, he gains it. If he did not already have Carapace, he gets it. If he was not already Flame-Wreathed, he now is. Fun!

The mortal? If the demon kills him, he re-forms unhurt in two rounds with **Open** 1, **Endurance** 1 and **Courage** 1. But he only has ten rounds to get out the hole before it closes, locking him into the underworld forever and making his rival's gains permanent.

The smart money is clearly on the devil in this situation, if it stays mano-a-demono. About the only hope the mortal has is if someone on the sunlit, God-watched world of Earth jumps through the hole to try and reel him out. Even then, the odds aren't great unless it's someone with powers of their own fit to beard the devil in his own den. (Everyone knows the devil has a beard. It's that black, pointy, pie-stabbing number.) So if the mortal's fellow supervillains decide to take the plunge, they might *literally* yank his 'nads out of the fire. Of course, if they're on the hot 'n' fiery side when the gate closes, they count as additional trophies for the demon's den wall, while their demons get stuck in Hell occupying subservient roles to the demon who opened the gate.

You know what? I think the smart money's on the demon, no matter what.



**CHAPTER 9:
BIG FAT EXAMPLES**



REMEMBER TOBEY, FRANK AND KATIE, our intrepid players from back in Chapter 2? It's time for their first session. Their GM, Sarah, has imposed a narrative contrivance on them. To wit, their demons are all pals from back during the War On Heaven and, while it's excessive to suggest that they trust or like one another, they hate and fear each other less than they might other people.

Both Wanda (the blues musician with, so far, no last name) and Luther Christian have Virtuous Strategies that are lower than their Screwtapes' primary Strategies, so their demons (run by Tobey and Frank, respectively) can constantly spy on their mortals but not say anything. This means that both those demons have seen images of a display of ancient Incan statuary coming to the local museum, and they're aware that a fourth member of their little band has that statue as his amulet. But until called, they can't do anything. Sarah mentioned the statue to all three disparate hellbound, but only Felix Barbarossa has taken the bait. Therefore, he's on hand to see the museum director (with a somewhat dazed expression) making his way through the moderate crowd, two guards at his side, setting up velvet ropes to keep people ten feet back from the idol. Then the director gestures to a petite woman who has a strange effect on Dr. Barbarossa.

SARAH: As soon as you look at her, you rationally know that she's okay-looking, but nothing spectacular. Yet at the same time your emotions go crazy, spewing yearning-to-protect and affection verging on adoration all over your mental landscape.

FRANK (FELIX): ...huh. Okay, something weird's going on here, but I'm just going to play it cool for a bit.

SARAH: You're not the only one affected. An awed hush falls over the crowd as she nears the case, and then people start babbling things at her—"I love you!" "Please help me!" "Tell me what you want!" and so forth—just as the museum director unlocks the case.

FRANK (FELIX): "Hey, what's going on?"

SARAH: No one's paying attention. The museum director is grunting as he tries to pull out the statue.

FRANK (FELIX): I'm going to regret this but... "Kazoth? You there?"

KATIE (KAZOTH): Oh, that's me, right? Ahem. "Tremble, puny mortal, as dread Kazoth attends thy sniveling invocation!"

FRANK (FELIX): ...yeah. So any idea what's going on there?

SARAH: Now that you're active, Kazoth, you can tell that the woman reaching for your demonic friend's amulet is hosting a no-kidding *angel*. If you talk with her, you might be able to identify which one.

KATIE (KAZOTH): How tough are angels?

SARAH: They beat down your sorry asses in the war. What's that tell you?

FRANK (FELIX): Do angels automatically recognize demons?

SARAH: Nope. You can get the drop on her, maybe.

FRANK (FELIX): Nah, I'm going to shout out at her, "Hey, that's stealing! You're stealing that! *Thou shalt not steal!*"

SARAH: Okay, what are you trying to do here?

FRANK (FELIX): A **Devious Nurture** attack, attempting to wear down her... um, let's go straight after her *Nurture*.

KATIE (KAZOTH): Ooh, can I give him an MD to help with that?

SARAH: It'll cost you a point of *Corruption*.

KATIE (KAZOTH): ...which is zero. Okay, I guess I'm restricted to cheerleading. "Your temerity pleases Kazoth, mortal! Perhaps you shall prove a worthy host of my..."

FRANK (FELIX): Yeah, yeah, did she hear me?

SARAH: She's trying to defend herself with **Insightful Nurture**.

FRANK (FELIX): So what bonuses do I get?

SARAH: None.

FRANK (FELIX): What? I'm taking her by surprise and I'm telling the *truth* about her stealing! That's gotta be worth some Advantage!

SARAH: Normally, yes. But it doesn't work against her. Making an angel doubt itself is an uphill task at the best of times, and she's got a trick protecting her.

FRANK (FELIX): ...oh. I'm rolling 6d and I get... ooh, a pair of nines!

SARAH: Holy snap, Frank! Even with a Master Die she can't avoid the guilt trip from your pair of sixes.

FRANK (FELIX): They're nines.

SARAH: They're sixes now. She falters for a second, then says, "I realize this is irregular, but this statue is very dangerous. I have to dispose of it safely." The museum director is looking a little puzzled, too.

FRANK (FELIX): I'm going to look at him and yell, "Are you just going to let her steal and destroy it? Who is she anyway?"

SARAH (AS THE MUSEUM DIRECTOR): "Um, that's a good point... er, Miss, I don't think I caught your name... could you, maybe, go into a little more detail about what you're planning to do?"

FRANK (FELIX): Okay, I'm going to try and slip into the crowd so I'm blended.

SARAH: You're in the crowd already.

FRANK (FELIX): Yeah, but I don't want her, or anyone else, to realize that the same guy says the next thing.

SARAH: Roll **Sly Contempt** to sneak around and skulk. Any set will do it. You were towards the front so getting to the back is easy. Everyone's trying to get closer to the adorable woman.

FRANK (FELIX): Kazoth, you want to help me skulk?

KATIE (KAZOTH): ...no.

FRANK (FELIX): ...and I roll a pair of tens.

SARAH: You've skulked. What now?

FRANK (FELIX): "He's trying to stop her! He must be evil! He's protecting the evil statue! Get him before he hurts her!"

SARAH: What are you trying to accomplish with this?

FRANK (FELIX): I want the crowd to get riled up and mob the guards and director, or at least get mad at them so she has to deal with it.

SARAH: Okay, roll **Devious Deceit** to create a misunderstanding.

KATIE (KAZOTH): Have a Master Die. I can add one to this and oh, do I ever want to!

FRANK (FELIX): Let's make that a pair of tens, shall we?

SARAH: The crowd starts shoving and shouting, and now the guards are bellying up to the velvet ropes and scowling, and suddenly instead of being a little woman with a beaded handbag and recycled flip-flops, she's a ten foot tall blazing statue made of diamonds with wings and a halo. People are openly falling down in worship. Kazoth, you do realize that if you don't do anything, your good friend's amulet is likely to get destroyed, confining her to the fiery furnace for the foreseeable future?

KATIE (KAZOTH): All we need to do is get close enough and we can start teleporting the thing away from her. She's dealing with the crowd, right?

SARAH: Felix would have to make an **Open Contempt** roll to get through the people, who are now really clumping up around her. Difficulty 3. Frank, you going to try it?

FRANK (FELIX): She hasn't really identified me, right?

SARAH: There's a lot going on. How would you tell?

FRANK (FELIX): All right, I'll push to the *front* of the crowd again. Six dice... and look at that pair of tens and pair of eights! Haw!

SARAH: You're right by the demon statue, but there's a guard in front of you.

FRANK (FELIX): The crowd's surging around, right? Can I make a Banish attack when I brush against him, without him noticing?

SARAH: Um... you can try, but that's a multiple action between **Devious Deceit** and whatever you use to activate Banish.

FRANK (FELIX): Ooh. That would be four dice, trying to get two sets. Okay, I'm just going to knock down one of the rope stanchions, flop forward and land on the doodad.

SARAH: That would be either **Open** or **Sly Contempt**

FRANK (FELIX): I'm stronger, that's six dice... pair of sixes.

SARAH: She's looking at you.

FRANK (FELIX): Is anyone else from the crowd rushing forward to touch and adore her?

SARAH: No, she's got them pretty well settled.

FRANK (FELIX): Can I grab it, use Ghost Form, and phase through the floor with it?

SARAH: If Kazoth opted to activate that Aspect, the statue would still be too heavy to take with you. But you can see a stairwell in the distance, going down. You could Banish it there.

FRANK (FELIX): All right, I'm shoving my face down to hide it and sending the thing.

SARAH: She's trying to grab you and yank you off it before you can do anything.

FRANK (FELIX): I get... no sets.

SARAH: And she gets a pair of tens to haul you off it. You're now dangling from her hand and she's staring at you balefully.

FRANK (FELIX): "Kazoth, can we *please* phase out of this?"

KATIE (KAZOTH): "And now the mortal pleads for his mistress' favor. Very well, squealing one. But thou owest me greatly!"

SARAH: Next round, you're trying to use Ghost Form and she's trying to stop you from using Ghost Form. Both happen simultaneously, so... call the roll odds or evens?

FRANK (FELIX): Odds!



KATIE (KAZOTH): Evens!

SARAH: Okay, Katie calls it... and it's odd. You slide your point of **Devious** and start to go through her fingers when she cries "Demon!" and suddenly you're solid again. But hey, you might as well bring out the wings, since your gig is already up.

KATIE (KAZOTH): She can just switch my powers off?!?

SARAH: That one, apparently.

FRANK (FELIX): Right, I'ma Banish her hand.

SARAH: Hm... normally you'd get a fat surprise bonus, but she's immune to bonuses...

FRANK (FELIX): What, like, all of them?

SARAH: She's going to punch you real hard. How's your **Courage**? She's trying to take you straight out of the fight.

FRANK (FELIX): **Courage** two. Maybe I'll just try to eel out of her grip before she hits me.

KATIE (KAZOTH): I'll give up a point of **Contempt** for that!

SARAH: Hm. You trying to avoid the blow or get away or make a multiple action for both?

FRANK (FELIX): Gah! I guess I have to avoid the punch...

SARAH: Katie, are his wings out?

KATIE (KAZOTH): Not yet. Hell, if he's going to get beat to death, he might as well die looking human.

SARAH: Roll 'em.

FRANK (FELIX): Triple sevens, with that Master Die!

SARAH: Enough to beat her triple fives. You squirm out of the way and hear someone behind her shout, "Hey, face your real nemesis, you slutty slutface!"

KATIE: 'Slutty slutface?'

SARAH: That's what he says. Over her shoulder you see a guy dressed all in black, except for a narrow red triangle on his forehead and a thin red diamond in the center of his chest. Black cape, black boots, one black glove and one red, black mask.

FRANK (FELIX): Gimp or domino?

SARAH: Gimp. The mouth's unzipped. He makes a gesture, and suddenly there's a burning axe in his red right hand. "Prepare to face... THE AXE-HOLE!" He's taking a swing at the diamond woman. She's going to fly up in the air with you to avoid him.

FRANK (FELIX): I'm going to try to get away from her.

SARAH: Roll your **Sly Contempt**.

FRANK (FELIX): What about **Open Contempt**? It's higher.

SARAH: Fine. She swoops up just as he swings, and...?

FRANK (FELIX): Pair of sixes.

SARAH: You slide out of her grip and sprawl on the floor. The crowd's fleeing, except for the guards, who are pulling out their nightsticks.

FRANK (FELIX): Grab the statue and send it to the stairwell.

SARAH: You sure? You're actually the most **Cunning** person here, so you can wait and see what the Shining Diamond and Axe-Hole do first.

FRANK (FELIX): Oh. I'll do that, then.

SARAH: Axe-Hole points at a guard and says, "You know what I like to do in a museum? *Deface things*." Shining Diamond swoops down at him.

FRANK (FELIX): ...yeah, still thinking I'll send the statue to the steps. Two sevens,

two fours! On four dice! Thank you very much!

KATIE: Your dice are hot today.

SARAH: A red scrap of flesh appears in Axe-Hole's hand while a guard screams and clutches his now-bleeding head. Then the Diamond crashes into him and he gets flung back a good ten feet. You teleport the statue away just like you wanted while the crowd stampedes, the museum director flees, and one guard tries to help the other. Next round, Axe is going to start swinging wildly at the crowd, Diamond shouts "I forbid you to harm these people!" and Katie? You get the feeling that Ghost Form might just work now.

KATIE (KAZOTH): Really? Oh, let's do that!

FRANK (FELIX): Can I get through the floor?

SARAH: Yep. Although... are you willing to let the crowd get mangled by that dude with the fire-axe?

FRANK (FELIX): When the elephants struggle, it's the grass that gets trampled.

SARAH: Wow. Classy. If you just want to sneak away, you can easily do that with wings and... what, two more Ghost Form switches? If you just bugger off, that closes the scene. If you go after the statue, things continue.

FRANK (FELIX): Either one of those guys could pulverize me with a single hit, right?

SARAH: It'll take at least two. Or one from each, I suppose.

FRANK (FELIX): Buggering off, ma'am.

KATIE (KAZOTH): "What? Dost abandon my comrade in craven fear? Truly, thou art as weak in thy loyalty to me as thou art to thine Physician's Oath."

FRANK (FELIX): "Put a sock in it, Kazoth."

SARAH: All right, is there a Tactic you can raise, Katie?

KATIE (KAZOTH): Oh yeah! Let's see what Felix did... *Contempt*? Humiliate someone. Humiliating yourself presumably doesn't count. So using *Contempt* for what it says on the tin doesn't improve it? *Greed*... steal something useless, would the statue count? No? Crud... For *Cruelty* I need to kill someone. Didn't do that. *Espionage*? Need a victory gloat, which implies victory. Drat. Well, *Corruption* needs minions in service and I sure as hell don't have the open betrayal and mockery I need for *Deceit*.

SARAH: Sounds like a whole lotta nothing. Frank? Got anything to turn Sinister Tactics Virtuous?

FRANK (FELIX): I can't turn virtue back into sin?

SARAH: Nope. This is repentance we're talking about.



Switching to the other players, Sarah asks them where their characters are. Luther Christian is looking for a job, while Wanda is busking in the local train station. Both of them have the opportunity to see, on a nearby TV, breaking news of the super-throwdown at the museum and, when each calls up a demon for information, they find out about the Inca statue. Since both are interested in getting the player group together, they decide to investigate. Wanda goes all out, changing into her supervillainess costume (she calls herself "Killin' Floor Blue") while Tobey just goes in his normal clothes, but with his demon active.

SARAH: There's a crowd gathering at the well-lit front of the museum, where ambulances and police cars and fire trucks are keeping people back and bringing out gurneys. The back has people at its fence, but it's got trees and thickets on the other side, so there's not as much to see.

KATIE (WANDA): Is there a way to approach unseen?

SARAH: Um... well, you've got a grappling hook, right? There's a shabby building across from the back fence, but there's a street lamp right at the corner.

KATIE (WANDA): Right... "Terbat, should we go invisible?"

TOBEY (TERBAT): "Screw you."

KATIE (WANDA): "What? Screw... screw me? I thought we were coming here to rescue the amulet for your old buddy, but if that's going to be your attitude..."

TOBEY (TERBAT): "I don't wanna! C'mon Wanda, going invisible is *hard*. Why don't we just use TK to mess up the light, then climb the outside of that building, then throw the hook into one of those trees and get across that way?"

KATIE (WANDA): Fine, we'll try that.

SARAH: Roll **Insightful Deceit** to undo the lightbulb.

KATIE (WANDA): Triple fives!

SARAH: Some people in the crowd glance over when the light unexpectedly fails. Roll **Cunning Espionage** to avoid their gazes, but since you squelched the light I'll give you a +2 Weapon bonus.

KATIE (WANDA): I'm for sure adding that to my pool... but no. Nothing.

SARAH: You're in full supervillain gear? Why not describe that to us?

KATIE (WANDA): Blue bodysuit, black cowboy boots, black utility belt... you got the list of stuff that's in there, right?

SARAH: Yeah.

KATIE (WANDA): Black cape attached with velcro, black lacquer acoustic guitar slung on my back and a black harlequin mask with a blue crystal tear hanging from one corner.

FRANK: Are you going to commit crimes or go to Mardi Gras?

KATIE (WANDA): I forgot to mention, a big black musical note in the center of my chest.

SARAH: Yeah, people are pointing at that.

KATIE (WANDA): Right. Plan B. I stride forward and look for the two biggest guys in the crowd. "You! You in the Tap-Out shirt and over there, the guy in the Coors cap! I need you to lift me over the fence."

TOBEY (TERBAT): "You know, Invisibility is starting to sound good right about now..."

SARAH: One of the onlookers is kind of sidling away, towards the front where the cops are...

KATIE (WANDA): I'm going to pick the sidler up with Telekinesis.

SARAH: If you're not hurting her, that's any **Insightful Deceit** roll, complete with the surprise and weapon bonuses.

KATIE (WANDA): Nine dice and... no set?!?

FRANK: Wow, your dice are cold tonight.

SARAH: People are starting to laugh and she runs off. Tobey, you're in the front as a girl runs up and starts yelling about there being a supervillain in the back.

TOBEY (LUTHER): Oh, I'm for sure heading that way.

SARAH: ...and our runner got a pair of tens in her attempt to get police attention, so two cops are going with her.

KATIE (WANDA): I just wanted to get over the stupid fence. I'm going up to it and throwing my grappling hook. I can't TK myself over?

SARAH: Nope. *Open Contempt* to get over the top.

KATIE (WANDA): Oh crud. (*Rolls.*) Not a sausage.

SARAH: Tobey, as Luther rounds the corner, he sees her trying to climb the fence and not having a very good time of it. The cops are closing in. Frank, you're Tobey's Screwtape, right?

FRANK (MUREKABAÄL): Murekabaäl, reporting for duty.

SARAH: That incompetent-seeming woman is hosting Terbat the Splendid who soloed against four seraphim to give you time to drag a wounded Kazoth to safety. Now two donut-fed po-pos are trying to cuff and stuff her.

FRANK (MUREKABAÄL): "Luther! You must help her! Murekabaäl commands it!"

TOBEY (LUTHER): "I think I'm just going to hang back and see how this plays out."

KATIE (WANDA): I'm unslinging the guitar and starting in on a soulful blues song about how badly I'ma reprise on anyone who touches me.

TOBEY (LUTHER): Doesn't 'reprise' mean repeating a musical theme?

KATIE (WANDA): I figured it was the basis of "reprise."

SARAH: Roll for Impossible Beauty. I assume that's what you're doing?

KATIE (WANDA): Yeah. What's the advantage of having a guitar?

SARAH: Plus one, unless it's like a super-awesome Stradivarius guitar. Yours isn't.

KATIE (WANDA): Any surprise bonus?

SARAH: The cops are surprised that you're singing at them, but it's not really that helpful.

KATIE (WANDA): Right. No sets.

SARAH: They're grabbing you.

KATIE (WANDA): I'm going to levitate one cop into the other.

FRANK (MUREKABAÄL): I'm going to activate the Giant and Darkness-Shrouded Aspects.

TOBEY (LUTHER): What?! No, don't!

FRANK (MUREKABAÄL): I can't just let Terbat get thrown in the slam.

SARAH: You can't stop an active demon from switching on your Aspects. Roll your Strategy...

FRANK (MUREKABAÄL): Two threes.

KATIE (WANDA): On two dice? That's it, I'm changing dice.

SARAH: Your Aspects have been thrust upon you, Tobey. What are you going to do with them?

TOBEY (LUTHER): Um, I guess I'll exclude her from the darkness shroud and yell at them to let her go.

SARAH: Right. The cops are trying to grab her when all this stuff goes down, they are totally not expecting crazy demon powers from behind.

KATIE (WANDA): I got two fives, two sevens to levitate the cop.

SARAH: Why does Luther want to yell at the cops?

TOBEY (LUTHER): Um... he doesn't want them to hurt her, or for her to hurt them.

SARAH: Good enough, roll **Devious Nurture** with a +2 weapon bonus.

TOBEY (LUTHER): I'm taking that on my result. Three sixes, two fours. I'll add the +2 so that becomes five sixes, right?

KATIE: How'd you get that giant pool?

TOBEY (LUTHER): I'm a very nurturing person.

SARAH: Right. One cop hesitates as the giant yells at him, and the other gets knocked over with TK but doesn't quite hit his partner. People are now yelling and running. So you know, Katie, you've slid one cop's *Courage* and Luther, you've decreased the other cop's **Open**. Next round? Wanda, your **Cunning** is crap, right?



KATIE (WANDA): If by 'crap' you mean zero...

SARAH: What're you doing?

KATIE (WANDA): I'm yelling "Hey, lift me over the fence!"

TOBEY (LUTHER): Subtle. I'm just ripping the fence open. I'm crazy strong when I'm huge, right?

SARAH: Yeah. You're also an easy target, or would be if you weren't all Darkness-Shrouded. The cops are shooting at you.

KATIE (WANDA): Can I TK a cop?

SARAH: Sure. Same one or the other one?

KATIE (WANDA): The one who lost **Open** last time. And I'm putting all my Advantage into extra Width.

SARAH: Noted. Tobey, to get that fence uprooted you're going to need to roll any set with **Open Courage**. (*Rolls.*) The cop you're aiming at, Katie, gets a pair of sevens, good enough to penetrate the darkness.

KATIE (WANDA): I got nothing. Shoulda saved some Advantage to beef my pool.

TOBEY (LUTHER): Shoulda, woulda, coulda. Pair of sevens uproots the fence.

SARAH: ...just as the bullet slams home. Slide a point off *Courage* to *Cruelty*.

TOBEY (LUTHER): Okay.

SARAH: Next round?

TOBEY (LUTHER): I'm going to clobber that cop.

KATIE (WANDA): I'm going to clobber the other cop, I guess. I'll use... one point of Advantage to boost the pool, one point to raise the result?

TOBEY (LUTHER): Remember, you get another point of Advantage because you can see in the darkness.

KATIE (WANDA): Oh yeah! I'll add that in to Width.

SARAH: You sure? They're both shooting at Tobey again.

TOBEY (LUTHER): I'm punching the guy who shot me. Or can I swing the fence at him?

SARAH: Yeah, you've got a piece of fence debris. Give yourself a +2 weapon bonus.

TOBEY (LUTHER): I'm putting everything into boosting the pool. Normally, my pool for **Open Cruelty** is... um... two... No wait, it just got angried up to three! So +2 from the weapon... up to +3 from being Giant... along with +1 surprise from the cloud... seven dice?

SARAH: That guy got a pair of eights, so do better.

TOBEY (LUTHER): I got... a pair of twos. That's not better.

KATIE (WANDA): Let's see if my six dice do better. Oh! Trip sevens! So that becomes a 5x7 hit?

SARAH: What were you trying to do to him? Break an arm, wring him like a washcloth, compress his chest?

KATIE (WANDA): I just smash him into the ground.

SARAH: He ruptures on impact. His buddy can't see that he's dying, but thanks to the clarity of your vision through the cloud, you totally can.

TOBEY (TERBAT): Terbat says "Congratulations! You forthrightly slew that foeman! That was wonderful!"

SARAH: The other cop is calling for backup. You guys going into the museum or what?

KATIE (WANDA): Do I recognize Murekabaäl?

SARAH: Yeah, you think Terbat fought beside this guy...

KATIE (WANDA): "Look, I'll take care of getting the statue! You lead the police

away and get to safety!" Now can we please get invisible?

TOBEY (TERBAT): Do we haveta?

KATIE (WANDA): C'mon, I just killed a guy!

TOBEY (TERBAT): All right, pay me my Insight. Yeeeaaahh...

SARAH: You're invisible and going through the fence? That'll take you out of the scene.

KATIE (WANDA): I'm fine with that. I get a point of **Cruelty** for killing that cop, right?

SARAH: If Tobey wants to take it.

TOBEY (TERBAT): And why wouldn't I?

SARAH: Sure. Any kind of repentance going on to slide stuff around?



KATIE (WANDA): Um... well, I've learned a valuable lesson that people are really freakin' fragile when it comes to TK and I'm going to be more careful in the future. Can I slide a point from *Espionage* to *Knowledge*?

SARAH: If you wish.

KATIE (WANDA): Doing it.

TOBEY (TERBAT): "C'mon, don't tell me there wasn't part of you that didn't enjoy smacking that piggy up. You know for sure they're going to give you some room and respect now, right?"

KATIE (WANDA): "I know they're going to be chasing like hell to get the supervillainess who killed a cop."

TOBEY (TERBAT): "All the more reason to keep alert." Not to mention that it might be a bad idea to take offensive powers off the table when 5-0's going on the warpath.

KATIE (WANDA): Okay, I'll leave it on *Espionage*.

TOBEY (LUTHER): Before Luther leaves, he has to gloat over the fallen cops. Does it count if I let Murekabaäl do it?

SARAH: If you stand around declaiming about how great thou art, more cops are going to surround you, increasing your risk, no matter who says the words. You're trying for a Tactic increase, right? Yeah, you can let your demon spout off and get the raise.

FRANK (MUREKABAÄL): "All your vaunted 'civil order' is as naught to me, foolish mortals! Cower before the might of... IMMENSE-O!"

TOBEY (LUTHER): That's going to be our supervillain name? You'd better be generous with switching on the Giant form, then.

FRANK (MUREKABAÄL): No, it's brilliant, no one will connect the crimes of a stubby little punk like Luther with the murderous excesses of cop-killin' Immense-O.

KATIE (WANDA): Look on the bright side. He could have called you 'The Big O.'

FRANK (MUREKABAÄL): Oh, is it too late to change?

SARAH: You said what you said. You're now surrounded by cops. What, exactly, are you planning to do?

TOBEY (LUTHER): I'm fifteen feet tall and super-strong, right? And covered in inky darkness? I'm running straight at the cops who are coming around the corner, then jumping over them.

SARAH: Is that the *full* plan?

TOBEY (LUTHER): I want to jump over them, run into the crowd of civilians, drop the Giant form, run along with all the other fleeing people, and then drop the darkness to escape.

FRANK (MUREKABAÄL): That's pretty clever.

SARAH: Okay. There are about five cops shooting at you. You're going to need to make an **Open Contempt** roll to vault over them without tripping over one.

TOBEY (LUTHER): Does the surprise bonus help?

SARAH: No, c'mon. They can't see you coming, how are they going to get out of your way?

TOBEY (LUTHER): Pair of sevens.

SARAH: Cop one... pair of eights. Cop two... miss. Cop three... pair of nines.

TOBEY (LUTHER): Crud.

SARAH: Cop four... pair of sixes. Cop five... pair of sevens. So that's four hits? Slide four points of *Courage* into *Cruelty*. But I'm giving you a fifty-fifty chance of landing on an officer and... you do! He slides a point of *Courage* off. You're sprawled there in your cloud of darkness and they're yelling at one another to try and figure out what's going on.

TOBEY (LUTHER): Five cops? All right, I'm going to Summon one of their handguns. Actually, let's try two. What sort of Advantage do I have here?

SARAH: It's the first time you've used Summon, so you get +1 surprise, +1 weapon. And you still have +1 surprise from the darkness. So +3 altogether.

TOBEY (LUTHER): Hell, I'm grabbing three guns and putting all three points of Advantage into my pool. It starts at seven, goes up to ten, loses two for two extra targets...

SARAH: Yeah, they're shooting you some more.

TOBEY (LUTHER): Pair of nines, pair of threes. Hm...

SARAH: Cop one... misses. Cop two... misses. Cop three... misses. Cop four... misses. And cop five... gets a pair of threes, which miss because you're cloaked in the inky night.

FRANK (FELIX): I guess that's why you're supposed to hit the ground when guns go off.

SARAH: They think they have to aim ten feet up to get center mass. You're now holding two guns.

TOBEY (LUTHER): Well shoot, that worked great. Let's do it again. I'll just go after two this time, since the surprise from Summoning wears off. That's eight dice, looking for two sets... pair of nines, pair of fives.

SARAH: The three cops who still have guns... one's trying to get out of the dark and the other two are shooting. One misses, the other gets a pair of sevens.

TOBEY (LUTHER): Did I disarm him before he could shoot?

SARAH: Let's see, you aimed at two of the three cops... two of them shot at you and you got two guns... call it a forty percent chance of getting the right guy? Roll and if you get a 1 through 4, you disarm him before he shoots you.

TOBEY (LUTHER): Nope.

SARAH: Lose another point of *Courage* into *Cruelty* as he shoots you.

TOBEY (LUTHER): I'm all *Couraged*-out. So now I have a seven-die **Sly Cruelty** pool, which is what I'd use to shoot these guys, along with a handful of guns and the darkness advantage. Right?

SARAH: Yes. Only one of them is still armed, but he's out of the cloud.

TOBEY (LUTHER): Hm... is there a storm sewer grate around, or a manhole cover?

SARAH: Yeah, they're all over the place.

TOBEY (LUTHER): I'm heading over to it and wrenching it out.

SARAH: If that's all you want to do, you can get it without a roll.

TOBEY (LUTHER): Grand.

SARAH: The last cop takes a shot at you while you're doing that. Holy cow, he hits!

TOBEY (LUTHER): He's after my *Courage*, which is empty?

SARAH: Yep, so it goes into **Open**.

TOBEY (LUTHER): Ah, but being Giant lets me decide whether it impacts **Open** or **Sly** and I'm knocking down **Sly** to slide into **Open**.

FRANK (FELIX): You realize that's going to shrink you? You're just weakening your own giantism.

TOBEY (LUTHER): I'd like to deactivate Giant and get down the manhole.

FRANK (MUREKABAÄL): "Oh very well. I suppose we have created enough of a distraction for our erstwhile ally Terbat."

TOBEY (LUTHER): Not to mention that we stole guns we don't really want or need *and* probably humiliated those cops.

SARAH: You're down in the storm sewer. Give me a success with **Open Contempt** and you can put the cover back. Eh, let's make that Difficulty 3, since you're under it and it's heavy.

TOBEY (LUTHER): Pair of fives. Luther is buff.

SARAH: Right. If you switch off the darkness, you can get away clean and they think you just vanished. That ends the scene.

FRANK (MUREKABAÄL): Okay, well let's see what tactic we can crank. Did we humiliate someone? That could raise *Contempt*, which is already nice and high... we stole those guns, which we didn't need, that could raise *Greed*...

SARAH: That's kind of a stretch.

FRANK (MUREKABAÄL): Well the victory gloat for *Espionage* is a lock, right? And our *Espionage* is empty, so I'll raise that.

TOBEY (LUTHER): Can I move a point from *Cruelty* back to *Courage*?

SARAH: Why?

FRANK (MUREKABAÄL): Yeah, why? It'll just make you less awesome.

TOBEY (LUTHER): Because Luther could have started shooting those unarmed cops dead, and with *Cruelty* all maxed out he must have wanted to, but he showed forbearance.

SARAH: Okay, that's reasonable. Luther really didn't want to hurt those cops.

FRANK (MUREKABAÄL): Running away, in this case, increases your *Courage* stat? How do you figure?

TOBEY (LUTHER): Because I stood up to Murekabaäl, which is a lot harder than facing down some policemen.



*Sarah then switches the action back to Wanda as she sneaks through the museum to search for the statue, which she eventually finds and retrieves (though not before she swipes a couple of nice folk-art necklaces from the gift shop and a few netsuke that catch her eye in the Japanese exhibit). Some debate ensues about whether this is a new scene (giving her the opportunity to raise another sin) or whether it's a continuation of the old scene (which would let her stay Invisible without having to reactivate the Aspect). They compromise by letting her get inside unseen before the invisibility wears off (complete with Terbat groaning, "It's haaaard...") and requiring her to make some *Espionage* rolls to remain unspotted, but the clever use of a few telekinetic distractions gives her the bonuses she needs to escape with the statue... just in time to run into Luther and Felix, who've rejoined the crowd of gawkers, demons active so that they easily recognize her.*

Retiring to Felix's office, they narrate their back-stories and then discuss what they want to do with the Inca statue containing their old comrade Nuzathon the Diacritically Intolerant. (It's a very rough translation from the old Abyssal, hard to explain in English.) It emerges that while Kazoth is a huge fan of Nuzathon (to the point of hoping to get the spirit in a female form so that Dr. Barbarossa can continue the on-again, off-again love affair kindled during the war), Murekabaäl has zero interest in helping someone who's diacritically intolerant (the umlaut in his name indicates a form of demonic... well, that's too much to go into here, just suffice to say they didn't see eye to eye on some critical political questions during the rebellion against the Lord God Almighty). Add in Terbat's filthy lust for Nuzathon (complete with hopes to get it in a male host more susceptible to Wanda's particular set of charms) and the conversation gets quite heated. With demons active, all three start bickering over the ultimate fate of the Incan statue.

SARAH: All right, each of you has made some arguments, but no one's really whipped out the stats and started trying to re-arrange someone else's character sheet. I'm willing to close this scene and call it inconclusive unless you're willing to start with the cutting remarks that can't be unsaid.

FRANK (FELIX): I'll go first. "I risked my life to secure the amulet of my comrade, and I categorically will not let her be destroyed over some ancient grudge. If I was willing to let that happen, I could have just let that Shining Diamond creature do it!"

SARAH: Okay. Who are you glaring at while you say that, and what's it meant to accomplish?

FRANK (FELIX): Um, Luther's the one who wants to smash it, so I'm pointing that at him and trying to kinda scare him into backing down, and kinda impress him with my loyalty. Or, I guess, Kazoth's loyalty.

SARAH: Sounds like *Devious Corruption*, aimed at... *Courage? Nurture?*

FRANK (FELIX): Let's make it *Courage*.

TOBEY (LUTHER): You just want my *Cruelty* all plumped up!

SARAH: Luther? What're you doing in response?

TOBEY (LUTHER): "Look, are you sure that letting out another demon is such a great idea? I mean, sure, getting even with an unfair system sounded great in the abstract, but there's a dead cop in the street thanks to... us." I'm going with *Insightful Nurture* to keep my *Courage* intact. I didn't fold to Murekabaäl, I'm not folding to some satanic doctor with delusions of grandeur.

KATIE (WANDA): "Hey, I had those cops totally under control until you had to giant out and make them panic!"

TOBEY (LUTHER): "What, with a power ballad?"

SARAH: You guys just bickering, or are you really trying to make some shifts? Tobey, it's going to be a multiple action if you're sniping at Wanda.

TOBEY (LUTHER): I'm just blocking Felix.

KATIE (WANDA): And I'm just lashing out because I feel guilty and think he was slyly making a dig at me.

SARAH: Roll 'em.

FRANK (FELIX): Trip threes?

TOBEY (LUTHER): Pair of tens.

KATIE (WANDA): I'm going to start idly strumming my guitar.

SARAH: 'Idly'?

KATIE (WANDA): Just warming up. I can take my time with this, right?

SARAH: Sure.

FRANK (FELIX): Felix makes the point that if we work together, we're a lot more protected. "I, for one, am in no hurry to face that horrible angel again by myself. If we team up, we can watch each other's backs."

TOBEY (LUTHER): "You've got a funny way of arguing for cooperation. You start with inflexible demands that we take dangerous actions, then fall back on insisting we protect one another!"

SARAH: What're you guys up to? Luther, you declare first.

TOBEY (LUTHER): I'm going after his *Corruption* by making him realize how unreasonable he's being, and what a terrible risk he's taking.

SARAH: That doesn't sound like what you said.

TOBEY (LUTHER): All right, then I'll fall back into a defensive *Insightful Nurture* crouch. I don't want another demon rampaging around. That's bedrock.

FRANK (FELIX): Can I add a die to my pool next round if I don't roll this round? Just set up arguments, like aiming in combat?

SARAH: Sure, but you have to explain what you're setting up.

FRANK (FELIX): Crap, my *Corruption* is lousy... I've only got good stuff to persuade with. So I guess I have to go with the "I'm so lonely and

afraid" and then break down crying. *Devious Nurture*, I guess.

SARAH: Wow. Right, he's unexpectedly sniffing and weeping and Luther's defending when no one's attacking. Katie, you've strummed and hummed and are as in tune as you're getting.

KATIE (WANDA): I'm unleashing Impossible Beauty. That's +1 Advantage from the guitar and +2 for taking two rounds to 'aim,' right? Okay, hm... I'm adding one die to the pool and two to the Width. Do I have to make a multiple action to whammy both these guys?

SARAH: Nope. The power targets you, making you persuasive, so it's not multiple. What're you guys doing while she's bursting into song? Luther, you declare next.

TOBEY (LUTHER): "I think we're all pretty stressed out and distraught. We don't have to decide this tonight, after all. Why don't we kick back and make decisions tomorrow when our minds are clear?" So that's *Devious Nurture*, attacking his *Corruption*. He either agrees to put off the decision or takes the hit, right?

SARAH: Right. Frank?

FRANK (FELIX): I guess I'll defend with *Insightful Nurture*? No, I can't do that, can I? I'll have to counterattack. Hm. Okay. Here we go. Felix looks up, eyes wet and says, "You don't know how deep Kazoth's feelings for Nuzathon are! I really think... he loves her. I think that's the best part of him, something that didn't get soiled and corrupted, something that kept him going through his imprisonment! Without her... I don't know, he could go completely crazy!" So either he agrees to let Nuzathon out, or he loses a point of *Nurture*!

SARAH: If you get the sets. Roll, suckas.

TOBEY (LUTHER): Two fives.

FRANK (FELIX): Nothing. Nuts.

KATIE (WANDA): Pair of tens, pair of fours. With the Width boost, I get +4

Advantage to all *Corruption* and *Deceit* for the rest of the scene. Hey guys, let's chat!

TOBEY (LUTHER): Do you feel boned? I feel kinda boned.

FRANK (FELIX): Distinctly boned, yes.

SARAH: Be that as it may, the music seeps into your minds and coils there like a moist, smothering layer of poisoned perfume. Wanda? You've got the whammy on 'em, what're you doing with it?

KATIE (WANDA): I'll start with Luther. I'm going to point out that I was the one who shed blood for this thing, I'm the one who took the risk of sneaking in and hauling it out and, in passing,

isn't it a little hypocritical for the guy hosting a demon through a gunfight with the cops to suddenly have all the scruples about unleashing demons? That's **Devious Corruption** targeting his *Nurture*. I want to lance that big boil of decency on him!

TOBEY (LUTHER): ...ohhhkay. I'll point out that, one, I'm the fellow who got shot a lot, and that, two, as a demon host, I'm front and center for their viciousness and incidental murders. I'm doing **Devious Nurture** against her *Corruption* to remind her how guilty she felt about rupturing that dude.

FRANK (FELIX): As long as she's not aiming at me, I'm boo-hooing about my fears and trying to get her to commit to some kind of mutual protection deal. Would that be **Devious Nurture**?



SARAH: You're trying to play on her sympathies while she's distracted to get her to protect your mewling little self? Not exactly pure. **Devious Corruption**, hombre.

FRANK (FELIX): I got nothing.

TOBEY (LUTHER): Two fives, two fours.

KATIE (WANDA): Two pair, tens over fives.

SARAH: Okay, so... Luther loses a point of *Nurture*, sliding it into *Corruption*. That wrecks one of Tobey's sets, but he has two, so Wanda loses a point of *Corruption*, sliding it into *Nurture*.

FRANK (FELIX): We're approaching a steady state.

KATIE (WANDA): Wanda doesn't have any *Corruption*.

SARAH: Lose your **Devious**, then.

KATIE (WANDA): Slide?

SARAH: Yeah.

KATIE (WANDA): Oh, you're paying for that one. I was going to wrap the good doctor around my finger, but instead... right. I stop playing, cold and say, "Okay Luther, you're right. We'll sleep on it and make our decisions when we're not so... wound up. Hey doc, can you recommend a place to stay? And where do you think we should store the thing? Will it be safe in your clinic?"

SARAH: What're you doing here, Katie? Come over here and tell me in the other room.

KATIE (AS WANDA; IN PRIVATE): I'm lying to Luther. I want to get him off my back and then find a good host for Nuz, or at least hide the statue so he doesn't break it.

SARAH (IN PRIVATE): Roll your *Deceit*, and beat his **Insightful**. You've got +4 Advantage, how do you want to divvy that up?

KATIE (AS WANDA, IN PRIVATE): Width doesn't matter? I'll put it all into a pool boost and drop a die to make a called shot, setting one remaining

die to 10... and I roll 3x9, which should do it.

SARAH (BACK WITH THE OTHERS): Right, she's falling back to, "Let's deal with it in the morning."

TOBEY (LUTHER): I'm okay with that.

SARAH: You... okay, Frank, what about you?

FRANK (FELIX): One more plea that we agree to help one another out. I'll suggest that it be on a trial basis, for like two weeks? **Devious Corruption** against Wanda, she gets hit unless she commits to the team.

KATIE (WANDA): Oh, you... I'm going to...

FRANK: No results. I need more *Corruption*.

KATIE (WANDA): Wanda takes Felix's hand in hers, stares in his eyes and says, "Yeah. I'm in it. No more lone wolf Wanda. Now we're like a pack. Like a *family*." Tearing up, super-intense, total climax of the Oprah network movie emotional intensity.

SARAH: Which means?

KATIE (WANDA): **Devious Corruption** to get him to feel obligated to protect and assist Wanda the way he wants her to help him.

SARAH: You think that's corrupt? Getting him to put himself at risk and deal squarely? Sounds like a job for *Nurture*.

KATIE (WANDA): Ugh, fine. I got... a pair of twos.

SARAH: That'll do. What're you aimed at? Ooh, looking at his sheet, it doesn't matter. If he doesn't cave, it's coming straight off **Devious**.

FRANK (FELIX): I need some *Deceit* and *Corruption*... Right. Bursting into tears, Felix throws his arms around her and says, "Until the wheels come off, Wanda!"

SARAH: He means it? He's really dedicated to this teamwork?

FRANK (FELIX): He is at this second.

KATIE (WANDA): How else could he get that coveted point of *Deceit* later?

FRANK (FELIX): Now you're getting how the game's played.

SARAH: Okay, let's go through the six sins and see if anyone can rise up in some evil. No victory gloat... no stealing... no one's betrayed, yet... no minions, no killing... Hm, would you guys say Felix got humiliated?

FRANK (FELIX): No.

TOBEY (LUTHER): Yes.

KATIE (WANDA): Yes.

SARAH: Hm. I'd let both Wanda and Luther take a point of *Contempt*.

KATIE (WANDA): Sweet! I'll totally take that.

TOBEY (LUTHER): I'm not leaving it on the table, that's for sure.

FRANK (FELIX): I just have to get some more points... can I slide a point of *Honesty* to *Deceit*?

SARAH: You can only slide off Sinister Tactics, onto Virtuous ones.

FRANK (FELIX): Except for *Contempt*, Felix is *totally out of sins*.

SARAH: Shouldn't that be a good thing?

FRANK (FELIX): Um... okay. I guess I'll move a point to *Endurance*. Y'know, since you all seem so pleased that I've been humiliated.

KATIE (WANDA): I think I'm leaving my Sinister Tactics untouched. Wanda's... in an okay place with herself.

TOBEY (LUTHER): I'm moving a point of *Greed* over to *Generosity*. Seeing Felix crack up like that really bothered Luther, especially since he wasn't trying to provoke a crying jag.

SARAH: Hm. *Generosity* represents

your ability to pay for stuff... it was zero... well, I guess you're getting called back for a job! All right, I think this is a good place to end the session. You can slide a point between Strategies, and you can increase a Strategy by sacrificing one bad Tactic and one good Tactic under it. But doing this requires an '80s-sitcom-style 'lesson learned' thing at the end.

TOBEY (LUTHER): Hm... I'm going to move a point from *Open* to *Sly*. I know, it's kind of self-defeating, but giantism needs *Sly*. Besides, getting shot all the time makes losing *Open* seem reasonable, and since sneaking away worked so well, he's probably going to fall back on tricks again. I'm not going to make any other changes.

KATIE (WANDA): I'm taking a point off *Cruelty* and off *Courage* and putting them into *Open*. Wanda's really freaked out over that cop and wants to avoid fights in the future. I think I'll leave everything else untouched. I could move a piece of *Devious*, but I think I'll leave it there in case I need it for Aspects.

FRANK (FELIX): Losing a point of *Courage* and a point of *Contempt* to raise *Sly*. It sucks to lose *Contempt*, but I need something to keep me from just dying after one punch... and it's hard to explain how Felix's *Sly* increases after all this beating and weeping, but here goes. He's now really embarrassed and feels the need to overcompensate. He's rededicating himself to not getting messed around again. But at the same time, I'm moving a point of *Devious* to *Insightful*. His unexpected weakness and emotional fragility has given him greater compassion and insight, or something.

KATIE (WANDA): Plus you want to have *Insightful* to defend against Wanda.

FRANK (FELIX): Well...

KATIE (WANDA): You're learning how this game's played, too.



BARKLEY

CHAPTER 10: MY ENEMIES LIST



EVERYONE HAS PEOPLE WITH WHOM THEY STRUGGLE AND CONTEND. The difference is, a normal person's enemy is the guy in the office who hogs funding and trashes her work behind her back, or maybe a mother-in-law who always thinks her son could do better. A supervillain's enemy can change the course of mighty rivers, make the night his servant and command the very elements themselves (not to mention news anchors).

Opposition is the core of conflict, and conflict is the key to story. This chapter shines a light on sources for opposition.

ANGEL-INFUSED DO-GOODERS

You know how *you* got stuck with a sarcastic psychopath whose idea of a real fun night is goading you into backhanding a hostage right through a steam radiator? Not every host to otherworldly beings has that problem. Some people get *angels*. Presumably their paranormal voices do stuff like remind them to get flowers on their wife's birthday and tip them wise when an orphan is about to stumble in front of a dump truck.

These folks are the superheroes that everybody loves. When someone's in mortal peril, of course, he's going to accept help anybody with a fire extinguisher—but the first rescuer he *thinks of* is one of these ne'er-do-wrongs.

Any self-declared hero in tights could get a creepy stalker who stages a fake emergency for attention, but these ones get the high-grade nuts setting up real danger. Then the heroes stage an intervention and it *works*. They look great.

Ugh.

Life must be so *easy* for these people.

BASIC ANGELS

When you get a human and an angel working in harmony, it's a powerful combination. The host can add a Master Die to every mundane action when the angel is manifest, right up to the point the action stops conforming to the angelic Code of Conduct (described below). Also, angels are freakin' gorgeous: That works like a +3 weapon

bonus to **Devious** rolls, whether the angel is manifest or not. They're built as normal people with between 40 and 60 points to buy stats. Naturally, they're really heavily invested on the right side of the character sheet.

On top of that, they get angelic powers and Aspects. Because angels are GMCs, these powers are fairly simplified. That doesn't mean they're not *buff*. As a rule of thumb, one starting angel can face off with two or three starting hellbound.

ANGEL POWERS

Every angel-hero gets between one and three of these, depending on whether they're minor cherubs or mighty archangels.

CIRCLE OF ABJURATION (HONESTY)

In the angel's light of truth, no unclean or dishonest thing can abide. To activate this power, the hero bows her head and chooses one Sinister Tactic (of the six on the character sheet). Then she rolls **Insightful Honesty**.

If she gets a set, the power switches on. It lasts a number of rounds equal to the roll's Height, and affects every target within its radius. That radius extends out ten feet for every point of *Honesty*. Anyone within that radius either (1) automatically slides a point off the designated Tactic into its opposite Virtuous Tactic or (2) must flee outside the radius. If there's no place for the people to flee to, the loss cannot be avoided. However, if a Tactic gets zeroed, the power has no additional effect (that is, it does not start eroding Strategies).

EXAMPLE: Metatron has Circle of Abjuration, **In-sightful** 4 and **Honesty** 4. He sets the ward to expel **Greed** and rolls 8d. Rolling an excellent 3x9, the field goes up. Everyone within 40 feet has to either get back or lose a point of **Greed**, for the next nine rounds.

Only one Tactic can be abjured by a single hero at any time, but if you get two with this power working together, it gets scary quick.

FORESIGHT (KNOWLEDGE)

The angels in these hosts are old, smart, and they've seen all your jive-turkey tricks before. No matter what you try, what you do, what you make, it's old hat to them. Life is one big rerun channel or oldies station to them, only it's your sinister plan's punchline they're stepping on and your master strategy's refrain they're singing by heart.

Any roll intended to decrease a Virtuous Tactic, directed against someone with Foresight, has its Height decreased by the target's **Knowledge** score. If Height drops to zero or below, the set is discarded. Foresight is always on.

MEEK ENDURANCE (ENDURANCE)

This may be a bit of a misnomer, since when you see an angelic figure streaking into battle with piercing light streaming off its halo, the last thing you're likely to think is, "Wow, that's some meek endurance he's got working there." But what're you going to do? They're angels. They can call their powers whatever the heaven they want.

Any time anyone targets the angel-hero's Virtuous Tactics with a roll intended to decrease them, that roll's pool suffers a penalty equal to the angel's **Endurance**.

EXAMPLE: Angela St. Claire has **Endurance** 3 and **Meek Endurance**. Felix Barbarossa's **Devious Corruption** pool is 7 and he applies it to buying her a super-sized strawberry margarita and flirting. But he only rolls 4d because the alcohol doesn't seem to affect her, and neither do his aftershave and casual stories of his med school days.

RIGHTEOUS ARM (COURAGE)

You know what angels like to do with demons? Hit them. They hit them *so hard*. None of them hit harder than those with a Righteous Arm.

Whenever the righteously armed hero physically attacks someone, he gets a weapon bonus equal to his enemy's **Cruelty** or **Sly**, whichever is higher. If he attacks with a weapon, his bonus is equal to the foe's **Sly**, **Cruelty**, or the weapon's bonus, whichever is highest.

UNSTAINED (NURTURE)

You ask him when he's going to divorce his wife and he says, "It's complicated." You ask why the army can't send troops to stop the genocide and the politician says, "The regional politics are really complex." You ask the banker where the money went and he says, "These financial instruments are really sophisticated."

For some people in some situations, though, things aren't complicated at all. They're just right or they're wrong. For those Unstained, things are right. These people possess a simple goodness that cuts to the core of a situation and divides good from bad like sides of the Red Sea. Things that would sound corny, or naïve, or childish from most people sound irrefutable from the Unstained.

No dice pool directed against the Unstained is improved by Advantage from surprises, secrets or weapons. This power is always active.

ANGELIC ASPECTS

Angels have Aspects, just like demons do, only they're based on the virtuous side of the character sheet and, oh yeah, they don't have to sacrifice anything to switch them on. They just happen, when they need a little extra whatever to get the job done. Angels may have one Aspect, two, or even all four. They all have Wings at the very least (as explained in the sidebar).

CHORUS (PATIENT)

Angels are attuned to the music of the spheres, the implicit order that undergirds all the laws of science in a symphonic whole. So when they cooperate, it's not just the hesitant and half-baked teamwork that mortals struggle for, with last-minute cell-phone calls and resentments over forgotten maps and snacks. It's a perfect alignment of immortal intelligences, acting like separate fingers on a single hand, and that hand is the smiting fist of a righteous God.

An angel with the Chorus Aspect sings in action and, as if that wasn't annoying enough, for every other unfallen angel present he gets a +1 weapon bonus on every Virtuous Tactic roll, to a maximum of +3. Fortunately (for evildoers) there seem to be a lot fewer angels around than demons, not every angel is in the chorus and they're spread pretty thin. Still, when you see a barbershop quartet headed your way, glowing blades of sunlight unsheathed as they partake in four-part harmony, just get the hell outta there.

HALO (OPEN)

You know that golden pearlescent ring of light around the heads of angels and saints in old-timey pictures? Well, it represents more than just the light they emit (though, that said, they do illuminate a night most prettily). No, that halo represents the perfection of the Lord flowing through them, their incorruptible nature blazing through the fallen world like a blowtorch through tissue paper. When the broken realm of physical matter comes into conflict with incandescent holy perfection, can you guess which one gives way? I bet you can.

OTHER POWERS

Just about any demonic power can be kluged onto an angel with appropriate adjustments. Base it off a relevant Tactic and Strategy and keep the rules the same. Keep it fair to your players and you can have a fine time throwing them curveballs.

WORD OF BLESSING (GENEROSITY)

The power of the right word at the right time shouldn't be underestimated. Someone who looks at you before you step onstage and says, "Break a leg," or who says, "I believe in you" before you make that speech, or says, "Come home safe" before your shift at the fire station can give you the courage to endure or the faith to see through your anxieties. And those are just *mortals*. When someone speaks with the words of a heavenly messenger, it's like getting clobbered by a sledgehammer of trust and encouragement.

Someone with the Word of Blessing power activates it by making a *Patient Knowledge* roll. (Because the user must be *Patient*, this power can only be used on someone that the hero knows a bit—a half hour of interaction is sufficient. After that, the roll can be made at any time.) If the roll gets a set, the angel can take one point off any one of its Virtuous Tactics and put it on any other Virtuous Tactic. The Tactic that grows can be the angel's or someone else's. It can, for example, take a point of its own *Courage* and transfer it to someone else's *Nurture*. Or it can take its own *Knowledge* and move it into its *Honesty*. (When used on the angel itself, the power requires a half hour of prayer and contemplation.)

With the Halo Aspect active, an angelic hero regenerates one lost point of Virtuous Tactic every round. This won't improve a Tactic that hasn't been harmed, and it won't raise one above the point it started, and it does nothing for Strategies. But it doesn't have to be rolled and, as a side effect, it emits about as much candlepower as one of those big cone lights the stadium uses for night games. (They can dim it down as necessary, of course.)

Understand that if a Virtuous Tactic gets shifted by a 2-3 Width hit, this power shifts it back. It doesn't regenerate the Virtuous side while letting the Sinful side remain engorged.

RADIANCE (INSIGHTFUL)

A less searing, more penetrating and warming sort of light comes from the emotional foundation of the **Insightful**, instead of the brute strength of Halo. This radiance represents what should be, where the halo is the brute infliction of what is. While gentler, Radiance is no less powerful.

An angel with Radiance can pick one demonic power or Aspect. No one he can see can apply that Aspect or power. There's no roll for this, but it only affects one power or Aspect at a time. If directed against the Darkness-Shrouded Aspect, the Radiance suppresses the darkness. However, if another Aspect or power is targeted, it can still be used if the user is protected by being Darkness-Shrouded.

Additionally, if an angel attempts to block a demon's Aspect with Radiance, and they both activate the Aspects at the same time (as in the example on page 127) the GM can just roll a die to see which happens first.

ANGEL WINGS (OPEN)

All angels can manifest wings or, at the very least, can fly. This works just like demonic Wings from page 86, only it's based on **Open**.

THE ANGELIC CODE OF CONDUCT

Those angel powers sound pretty nifty, don't they? Huge social bonuses, nigh-invulnerability and so on, but remember: They're all premised on keeping the Code of Conduct, and that's tricky. Let's take a look at the Code.

Thou Shalt Be Honest. Angels can't lie and don't like it when their mortals lie. Their beauty bonus and Master Dice don't apply to rolls for dishonest dealing, and it's not just literal lies. Someone asks you a question and you say a *non sequitur* that sounds like it should be the answer? Breaks this commandment. Telling the truth in a way calculated to mislead? No good. Telling the truth but leaving out a critically important piece of context? Not honest. The closest most angel-folk can come to deception is looking you forthrightly in the eye and saying, "I'm not going to answer that."

Aid Ye the Needful. If someone's in danger, you go to help them. Doesn't matter if you've only got a one-in-a-thousand chance of saving his life without getting your own legs fatally burned in the process. You go help him. Doesn't matter if it's your worst enemy. You help.

Harm Not the Harmless. Angels are only permitted to use violence against two categories of people. One is people who started it, and in that instance the angel can only match their level of escalation. If a guy spits in an angel host's face, the angel can chastise him verbally but is forbidden to deck him. If the bad guy shoots at an angel and knows for a damn fact (well... I guess it would be a blessed fact) that the angel's bulletproof, it's not permitted to throw a truck through the shooter. The angel can only engage him with violence that would hurt him as much, or as *little*, as he could hurt it. So angels can really only take off the gloves and start dealing Old Testament smitings against people who are trying to kill them and have a chance of getting it done.

And demons.

Angels are permitted to do anything they want to demons, up to and including shooting them in their sleep with rocket launchers. But demons in conflict with their hosts are something of a gray area, so most angels attempt to engage them honorably.

Accept Surrender. Oh, this one's fun to play with. Once you wave that white flag, angel-heroes have to stop hitting you unless you're obviously a manifested demon. If they try to keep attacking after you surrender, their powers weaken. It's a laugh riot.

Once an angel has transgressed these commandments, even by accident, his powers degrade and you get a more... nuanced situation. It's described under "Cherubs in Abusive Relationships" (page 139). Note that the angel has to be active and aware during the transgression. But that does put people in the position of either having super angel powers or having license to treat people shabbily.

One other difference between angels and demons (if the harps and songs and halos didn't tip you off) is that angels don't eavesdrop. They *only* monitor the actions of their human host when invited, unlike demons, who spy lasciviously any time their primary Strategy is greater than their host's contrasting Strategy. Angels, by contrast, meditate on the sublime or something.

USE

Angel-bearers in harmony are a flavor to use sparingly in a *Better Angels* campaign, for a couple reasons. One is, if you push their point totals and have them teaming up, they may be an unfair challenge unless the PCs start playing against the Code of Conduct, and that's only interesting and fun the first few times. Those initial encounters can be quite a trial to PCs, too, as their choices are either to (1) passively accept defeat at the hands of some serene pretty-boy who doesn't get the blues like they do or (2) actively transgress an agent of supernatural kindness and decency. Pick your poison.

A good time to throw a character like this at the PCs is when the human side is doing exceptionally well and the devil side is rather weak. PCs who meekly surrender are probably on the fast track to a five in a Virtuous Strategy, and can be signaling that they're ready for their redemption plotline, please. On the other hand, if anything's going to drive someone back into the arms of evil, it's a cloying assault by the unstained supernal.

The other time to use an angel is when the human side's on the ropes and the devil may drag him under. Then it serves as a big red warning flag: The PC as supervillain has gotten bad enough that real agents of Good want a piece of him. If they don't answer that wake-up call, then it may be time for a final harrowing.

Overall, angels are there to provide a challenge on both the moral and physical fields of battle. Physically, well, they're tough. Morally, they offer a sort of ethical simplicity that someone in a complicated relationship with a demon probably won't allow himself to believe. They look naïve, even though they're the fullest expression of Good in the world. What does that make the PCs?

THE SHINING DIAMOND

Sometimes she's an improbably imposing woman nine feet tall, sometimes a moving diamond statue (still tall) and always a thundering juggernaut of justice. The Shining Diamond prowls the East Coast sticking her elegantly chiseled nose into hijackings, hate crimes, kidnappings and (of course) attempts to seize penitentiaries or hold court houses for ransom.

No one would suspect the woman behind the crashing fists is a five-foot-two folk singer named Chartreuse Milante. Having sung protest songs in coffee houses about environmental destruction, the withering of personal privacy and the injustice of war, she nevertheless dated Mark Golard, a right-wing libertarian. It was a classic case of opposites attracting, but she was sure she could change him. (Or, as she thought of it, 'redeem him.') Then came the day he proposed. He slipped a gorgeous ring on her finger and she just knew that if she asked "Is this a conflict diamond?" it would ruin her relationship. But she also knew that if she didn't ask, the relationship would ruin her. So she said no, broke it off, and he let her keep the ring.

Neither of them dreamed that the ring was a beacon to a spirit of righteousness, which found in Chartreuse a good-hearted person for whom the spirit had always been willing but the flesh, alas, weak. With her new spiritual partner, the weak flesh has become diamond solid.

STATS

Cunning 1 (+MD*), **Patient** 3 (+MD*)

Greed 1, **Generosity** 2

Espionage 2, **Knowledge** 3

Sly 2 (+MD*), **Open** 3 (+MD*)

Cruelty 0, **Courage** 2

Contempt 2, **Endurance** 2

Devious 2 (+3 weapon bonus**), (+MD*),

Insightful 2 (+MD*)

Corruption 1, **Nurture** 3

Deceit 2, **Honesty** 3

Powers: Unstained, Foresight

Aspects: Radiance, Wings

*These bonus Master Dice come into play only for mundane tasks in keeping with the angelic Code of Conduct, when the angel has been invoked.

**This bonus applies at all times, but can become degraded if the Code of Conduct gets violated while the angel is perceptive.

BARKLEY



THE DOORMAN

Any time, any place, anywhere there's a door, the Doorman can show up. It's never when anyone's looking, but when the bank robber blinks, the Doorman arrives, just between frames of the security footage.

Most commonly he looks like... well, a small-d doorman, the kind you get at a nice hotel or apartment building. You know the guy, long red coat with bright brass buttons, sturdy shoes, a cap? Add a black domino mask and you've got our hero.

When not fighting crime, the Doorman is actually a doorman named Devon Devlin. When a police officer, in uniform, started slapping his girlfriend around in the lobby, Devon stepped in and got arrested. His steadfast insistence that he'd done the right thing hit the Thin Blue Line really hard, and while the cop was suspended indefinitely (with pay) Devon lost his job and has been harassed with parking violations, speed traps and vague police insinuations ever since. But he also received a strange statuette in the mail, no return address, depicting an angel atop a gateway. With that tucked under his arm, he opened the door to his apartment and stepped, instead, into the middle of a mugging.

Surprisingly, the Doorman can't fly. He seems almost unique in that regard among angel-infused heroes. Is there some mystery there to investigate?

STATS

KOMODA

Cunning 0 (+MD*), **Patient** 2 (+MD*)

Greed 1, *Generosity* 3

Espionage 2, *Knowledge* 2

Sly 0 (+MD*), **Open** 2 (+MD*)

Cruelty 2, *Courage* 4

Contempt 2, *Endurance* 2

Devious 1 (+3 weapon bonus**) (+MD*), **Insightful** 4 (+MD*)

Corruption 1, *Nurture* 3

Deceit 0, *Honesty* 3

Powers: Righteous Arm, Teleport Self***

Aspects: Halo

*These bonus Master Dice come into play only for mundane tasks in keeping with the angelic Code of Conduct, when the angel has been invoked.

**This bonus applies at all times, but can become degraded if the Code of Conduct gets violated while the angel is perceptive.

***Works exactly like the demonic power, except that it's based on Insightful Nurture.



LUMOS PANTERA

Some superheroes (and villains) have recurring problems with phonies. I don't mean insincere people, I mean folks who study the costume, sew (or build) their own version, then go out in public pretending to be the hero. The motivations for this range from insanity and misplaced affection through to the most callow of self-indulgences: Robbing a gas station dressed as the Mood Killer because no one dares resist, or trying to pick up chicks disguised as Big Daddy Issues.

But when you're a giant panther made out of glowing daylight, that's not a problem. Neither is gravity. Neither are most bad guys, because there's only thing on earth fitting that description and it's Lumos Pantera.

Lumos Pantera never speaks (though it roars once in a while) and it seldom concerns itself with picayune stuff like muggings and stickups. It's more likely to streak down from the sky like a comet when there's a sinking ship, a terrorist standoff, a tsunami, an unprovoked invasion or some other serious disaster, set things right, then fly off without even leaving a single silver cat turd or accepting a tin of Fancy Feast.

Unlike most super-folk, Lumos Pantera doesn't have a secret identity. Its human has so humbly submitted to the angel's will that it just flies around the world, glowing panther style, *all the time*. Some satellites say it has a lair in the middle of the Gobi Desert, but it only stops back there every few days.

No one ever calls it just plain "Lumos." No one ever calls it plain ol' "Pantera."

STATS

Cunning 1 (+MD*), **Patient** 3 (+MD*)

Greed 1, *Generosity* 2

Espionage 1, *Knowledge* 4

Sly 1 (+MD*), **Open** 5 (+MD*)

Cruelty 2, *Courage* 4

Contempt 2, *Endurance* 5

Devious 1 (+3 weapon bonus***) (+MD*), **Insight**

ful 4 (+MD*)

Corruption 0, *Nurture* 5

Deceit 0, *Honesty* 4

Powers: Animal Form***, Meek Endurance, Word of Blessing****

Aspects: Blaze of Righteousness*****, Chorus*****, Radiance, Wings

*These bonus Master Dice come into play only for mundane tasks in keeping with the angelic Code of Conduct, when the angel has been invoked.

**This bonus applies at all times, but can become degraded if the Code of Conduct gets violated while the angel is perceptive.

***The same as the demonic power Animal Form, except it's based off Patient Knowledge.

****Lumos Pantera uses this power on itself unless, through some strange chance, it has a half-hour to nuzzle a target protectively.

*****This works like the demonic Aspect Flame-Wreathed, only (1) its targets slide a point off Cruelty instead of Courage and (2) Lumos Pantera adds Insightful to Open Courage, instead of adding Devious to Open Cruelty.

*****With Chorus, Lumos Pantera doesn't need to sing. It roars. Inspiringly.



KOMODA

HELLBINDERS

Sometimes through trickery or incompetence, demons wind up hosted in people who are rather nicer than average. Hey, that's you! Just don't assume everyone else in the same situation is your friend.

MISLED "HEROES," OFTEN "GRITTY"

The difference between a Hellbinding villain and a "superhero" who just kills people all the time may largely come down to spelling and self-awareness. A Hellbinder's demon is obviously demonic. There are no illusions about what it wants or why it's around. What you see is what you get.

Some spirits are craftier. They say the devil's greatest trick was convincing people he didn't exist, but I'd submit that 'they' never thought Ol' Scratch might be able to talk people into doing the devil's work from the side of the angels.

In other words, these are guys who think they're heroes, who try to act like heroes, and who may have lots of other folks believing they're heroes. But they're really clueless chumps getting played like Guitar Hero by deceptive entities who (most often) want bodies piled high and deep and aren't too particular about whether the dead and damaged are mostly damned.

RULES

These folks are built on the same rules as the PCs. Usually it's a strong demon and a weak human,

but not always. They immediately recognize other demon-bound humans (just as PCs can always know that these folks *really* have a demon and not an angel in 'em, if they squint a little) and their attitude varies greatly depending on how the demons got along in the past. Not all infernal entities play nice. In fact, backstabbing and ruthless careerism at another's expense is the rule in Hell, more than the exception.

USE

These are good and versatile peers for PCs, so use them liberally. Their power levels are comparable for the ol' fighty-smash, and if you need to adjust them, it's easy to rationalize. The PCs' Tactic ratings are popping up and down like the line on a heart monitor, so they should readily understand how someone else in their situation can face irregularities.

On the other hand, these folks are tools. They're dumb bunnies who've let themselves be persuaded into evil acts through appeals to vanity and prejudice, and often the media loves them. This makes them a great foil for PCs, because the similarities play up the contrasts. On one hand, both groups are in the same situation, hosts to malevolent entities who encourage them to do things they otherwise wouldn't. But the PCs are facing an ugly reality, and are despised for the charade they put on to contain (and entertain) their monsters. Gritty heroes are denying reality and are admired for being the dupes who put on a great show while achieving (directly or obliquely) the *aims* of their monsters.

THE PAVIOR

Hank Marceau doesn't think logically about the big stuff. He thinks symbolically. He follows his intuitions. He goes with his gut.

Hank's gut likes machines and order and things in their proper place. He didn't have the grades for engineering (or college, really) but he got a job driving an asphalt paver and internalized the idea that good roads make for good neighbors. When he hears the phrase "street crime" he bristles because, hey, it's not the street holding up stores and mugging people.

He was picking up some weekend hours working a construction job way out in the boonies when his bulldozer uncovered a weird wooden statue. As he picked it up he could tell it looked old and native, but at the same time it had exquisitely carved wooden gears and articulated arms. When you raised one arm, the other drew back, and when you moved *that* arm the head turned and tilted. It was awesome!

More awesome were the dreams that came. Dreams of progress and devices and cities to the horizon. People protected by walls and four-lane highways that no marauding bear or vicious serpent could ever cross. People going to work on time without traffic jams. Everything predictable and controlled and *nice*.

The very next day he called in sick and went to work creating his sterile, treeless, constricted utopia. He would pave the world to save the world. He was the Pavior.

STATS

Cunning 1, **Patient** 2

Greed 3, *Generosity* 1

Espionage 1, *Knowledge* 3

Sly 3, **Open** 2

Cruelty 3, *Courage* 2

Contempt 2, *Endurance* 0

Devious 1, **Insightful** 1

Corruption 2, *Nurture* 1

Deceit 1, *Honesty* 1

Powers: Summon, Armor

Aspects: Giant, Ghost Form

...HAD SO MANY DEVICES...

Pavior, as printed, is just starting out with his dewy-eyed plan to create a grass-free Utopia, but if you want to present your PCs with a more challenging, more experienced Hank Marceau, (especially if they have a nature-themed supervillain identity—he hates snakes) you can simply assume he's flushed gobs of *Knowledge* and *Generosity* down the toilet of diabolical creativity. Here's what he's likely packing.

The Flattener. It resembles a tracked tank, only without the tank part. It's all track, a triangular rolling mass of steel twenty feet long that, with Hank's directions, rumbles over an area and reduces everything in its path to rubble. Anything you could do in a long day with a big bulldozer, you can do in a few minutes with the Flattener. It counts as a minor environmental change. Pavior can roll his *Sly Cruelty* pool to send this rumbling after someone, attacking their *Contempt* Tactic with +1 Advantage.

The Road Monster. It's a monster truck, massive and loud and clouded in blue-black exhaust. In addition to the minor environmental change of being a huge powerful machine that can race down the road and knock over flimsy suburban homes, it mimics the Carapace Aspect. It balances these advantages with a double-dip of the bulky flaw, as well as being blatant.



KOMODA

SEA CHANGE

Keesha Acevedo got out of the Navy and went straight to work for the Coast Guard in a drug interdiction task force. She met a great guy on her crew and they were engaged when they plotted an intercept course with a speed boat off the coast of Florida.

Smugglers rarely fire on Coast Guard vessels, not if they know what's good for them. So Keesha wasn't expecting anything beyond frantic cargo dumping and stammered excuses. She certainly wasn't expecting a supervillain.

What followed is what professional soldiers affectionately call a "donkey rodeo." The traffickers were hugely outgunned, but before the supervillain died from an excess of bullets he tore apart the two Coast Guard cutters and summoned two dozen starving sharks to prey on survivors in the water. Keesha was just grabbing for something to float on when she threw her arms around the sea-serpent corpse of the super-smuggler. She saw its necklace, a pendant in the form of a green-eyed snake, and she knew.

When the rescue chopper arrived, only a few Coast Guard personnel had survived. None of them could explain why the sharks ignored them (even two who were bleeding) and viciously attacked an unhurt drug smuggler. None but Keesha, and she chose not to.

Since that time, Sea Change prowls the Florida waters, roams the Everglades and even takes to the sewers of Miami in search of drugs and crime. Her body count has gotten quite high, but it doesn't bother her one bit. The part that would care drowned with her fiancé.

Keesha's demon dabbles in envy but mostly focuses on cruelty, which means that Sea Change has been known to spend hours waterboarding a suspect for information that she might have found after thirty minutes with library microfiche. She feels better killing people when they beg for it, and heartily encourages them to do so. Once she's finished toying with them, of course.

STATS

Cunning 2, **Patient** 1

*In her case, it's the animal control variant described on page 74.

Greed 2, **Generosity** 1

**In this instance, huge venom-dripping fangs. Still works just like being horned though.

Espionage 3, **Knowledge** 1

Sly 3, **Open** 2

Cruelty 1, **Courage** 1

Contempt 3, **Endurance** 1

Devious 1, **Insightful** 2

Corruption 2, **Nurture** 1

Deceit 1, **Honesty** 1

Powers: Animal Form, Body Control*

Aspects: Giant, Horned**



KOMODA

LIFESHOOTER

Take a guy who's aggressive by nature—honestly, just *pushy*, got too much testosterone in the womb or something—and put him in a household with strict pacifist parents. What happens? In Tyson Franks' case, immense cognitive dissonance, a nasty split between parents and child, and massive rechanneling for his baser energies. Tyson played football and rugby right up to the point that he went to med school. He might have neurotically directed his pent-up wrath against illnesses but when he was trying to save the life of a drug dealer who got all shot up by the cops, he stumbled across a strange piece of metal lodged between folds of the fellow's intestines. Washing it off later, he saw it was a grinning little possum demon statue, and at that moment he realized that he could resolve his feelings, his training and his ethics in one fell swoop. All he had to do was dress up in lab whites and apply his anatomical knowledge to taking crooks apart instead of putting them back together. It was all so simple! Tyson can't understand why *every* doctor doesn't go vigilante on days off. Insufficient devotion, he guesses.

Tyson's ridden by a non-verbalizing devil of bloodlust and treachery, which found the unstoppable force of Tyson's natural inclination towards carnage almost as delicious as the irony it created when plastered against the immovable object of his Quaker roots. Dr. Franks' eager ash-canning of the Hippocratic Oath was pretty great too.

Dr. Franks was so desperate for a way out of his psychological bind, he's actually convinced himself his powers are all natural—that he can dodge eight gang-bangers, and throw scalpels with unerring accuracy, and smell a sweaty fat guy sneaking up on him in a garbage dump because he's really smart and because Med School taught him how to focus his attention, or something.

STATS

Cunning 2, **Patient** 1

Greed 3, **Generosity** 2

Espionage 3, **Knowledge** 2

Sly 4, **Open** 1

Cruelty 3, **Courage** 1

Contempt 2, **Endurance** 0

Devious 1, **Insightful** 1

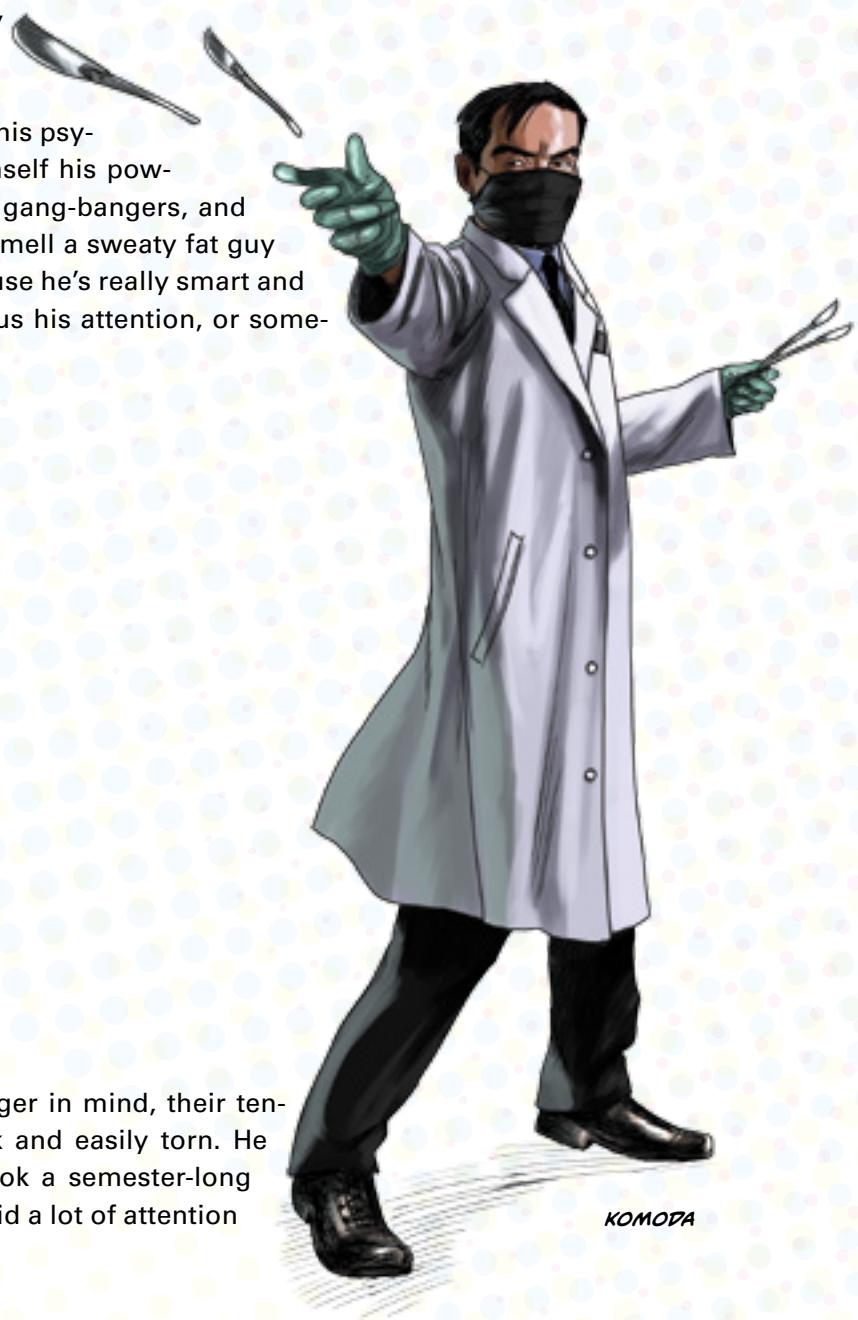
Corruption 1, **Nurture** 1

Deceit 1, **Honesty** 1

Powers: Arrogance, Ineffable Defense

Aspects: Darkness-Shrouded, Horns*

*When he lays hands upon anyone with anger in mind, their tendons, muscles and ligaments become weak and easily torn. He thinks he can do this because he took a semester-long Aikido class as an undergrad and paid a lot of attention to connective tissue anatomy.



KOMODA

CHERUBS IN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

So what happens (you're wondering) when one of those namby-pamby Servants of the Light misjudges a host and winds up tied to some thuggish dickhead? Do angels in bad partnerships have options other than patient forbearance? Besides a slightly-higher likelihood of humming "Is She Really Going Out With Him?" under his breath, how does the host handle diabetes-and-sunburn-inducing levels of sweetness and light rumbling through his brain *all the time*? Can he exploit his angel? Can the angel achieve what millions (yes, literally millions) of mortal women have attempted and failed, to wit, making someone really *change*?

As often as not, the answer is a resounding "maybe, sometimes."

RULES

Back on page 125 it describes how angels with copacetic partnerships get good looks and Master Dice a-flyin' on top of all their unique powers. But that stuff's fragile, as fragile as a human's ability to sustain purity.

The first time the human breaks the Code of Conduct while the angel is active in him, the Master Dice go away. (As with demons, angels have to be summoned and invited to act before they can start tricking out their host's lives with success and danger.) Those don't come back.

Moreover, every time he breaks the Code with the angel active, his gorgeousness bonus to **Devious** drops by a point. This is cumulative. It stops when the bonus hits zero, at which point **the angel dies**. I mean, presumably it goes to heaven, but still. If you killed an angel, how would you feel? Pretty bad I bet, if you were a normal-to-decent human being. (If you're a demon, of course, you feel terrific. If you're a supervillain, it's probably a complicated blend of horror and guilty thrill.)

It's possible to repair that bonus and keep the angel on life support. The bonus can be restored by any action that would improve a Virtuous Strategy. Instead of the Strategy improvement, the bonus jumps back up a point. Any Strategy works, too. Angels aren't finicky, which explains how they come to be in these pairings in the first place.

USE

This is another category of spirit/human hybrid that works well as a frequent supporting player. They make good 'frenemies.' While their angels are probably kicking up all sorts of alarms about demon hosts, the fact is both groups are walking similar moral tightropes, trying to balance the good outcomes for *this* world with the extravagant, often theatrical notions radioed in from another realm.

Both sides are (openly or secretly) concerned with minimizing damage, with doing good without upsetting a delicate balance, and with keeping the upper hand in an adversarial relationship with a hosted spirit. With the angels and demons struggling to tear into one another, it's a perfect opportunity for the humans to find common ground.

On the other hand, pounding on one of these jamokes is often a good quick way to put a smile on your demon's jagged maw, and it can be both easier and more justifiable than putting the smack on someone who's unalloyed virtue and charity. By the same token, a cynical angel host looking for a fast way back into his passenger's favor could do a lot worse than finding a demon down on its luck and issuing a fatuous and high-minded challenge.

GORILLAWRENCH

Sylvia Hogarth was down in the rain forest doing anthropology research when her particular rainforest tribe told her they had this stuff that would put her in touch with the divine if she packed it into her nasal sinus. She figured it was plain ol' yoppo, the Amazon hallucinogen noted for producing spectacular headaches, copious vomiting, and a sensation that you're at the center of the cosmos with everything else everywhere gently twirling around you.

Well, it wasn't yoppo. Near as she can tell, her angelic self-mate used to be a tree and the natives had been grinding it up for years as a nasal ingestible. (It smelled *wonderful*.) But unfortunately for Sylvia, she took her ceremonial huff just as a rival native group attacked, toting brand-new shotguns they'd been given by narcotraffickers hoping to chop down the trees and make a secret road through the jungle. (Their American engineer dubbed it "Eight Miles Highway.")

Her hosts were slaughtered without mercy, but Sylvia transformed into an incandescently beautiful woman and was doing swimmingly against the bad guys until they started surrendering and her angel insisted that she honor it.

Sylvia, as an anthropologist, knew for a fact that this particular tribe firmly believed no real oath could be made with outsiders (who were, they felt, not even actually real). She knew they'd go back on it the minute it became convenient. Knew it.

So she broke the truce first. When she was marching them back towards a civilized prison, she waited until her angel was quiescent and her captives were lining up to cross a stream on a fallen tree. Then she opened fire with one of their own shotguns. She brought down two before the others swarmed and she had to invoke the angel again, but by that point her enemies had decided that this 'surrender' thing wasn't even worth faking, and fought to the death.

As her angel wept within her, Sylvia was already plotting how she could befoul the drug runners' plans as a mortal and bring her angel in only for ethically pure stuff. That was in three years ago and since then she's been the holy terror of the whole river valley. Ironically, she wears a gorilla costume when she does most of her crime-busting because a glowing figure of resplendent glory draws too much attention. Yes, she knows gorillas aren't native to the Amazon.

Sylvia competed at bodybuilding and triathlons before she went to South America, and she lived in the jungle for two years before the tribe accepted her enough to blast angel dust up her nose. So she can hold her own with just a big heavy pipe-wrench and determination. But she's becoming increasingly frayed as she tries to balance pragmatism (but no powers) with power (but back-breaking idealism). So far she's kept most of her misbehavior hidden from her angel, but the strict rules she plays by when glowing have made her feel increasingly entitled to sucker-punches, arson and intimidation when she's working without celestial backup. She's also broadened her "enforcement purview" from murderers and drug runners to lumber barons, polluters and corrupt government officials.

STATS

Cunning 2, **Patient** 1

Greed 2, **Generosity** 1

Espionage 2, **Knowledge** 3

Sly 1, **Open** 3

Cruelty 2, **Courage** 3

Contempt 3, **Endurance** 1

Devious 1 (+2 Weapon Bonus*), **Insightful** 1

Corruption 1, **Nurture** 1

Deceit 1, **Honesty** 2

Powers: Body Control**, Righteous Arm

Aspects: Wings, Halo, Radiance

*This bonus applies at all times, but can become degraded if the Code of Conduct gets violated while the angel is perceptive.

**It's the 'animal control' variant described on page 74. This is a fun power in the Amazon, a region known for alligators, boas and big cats. Fortunately, the legendary dangers of piranhas and candiru fish are greatly exaggerated. Unfortunately, the bird-eating 12-inch spiders are totally real.



EVERLOVE

Tina Trimble is a hard-case romantic. Love at first sight? She believes it happens all the time. She finds nothing wrong with silly Love songs (and when Tina's considering it, Love is always capitalized). She thinks there is one soul mate for everyone on the planet and that it's destiny for everyone to have the chance of true Love and total happiness and contentment, if they just have the courage to go out there and look for it.

But sometimes people need a little help.

Tina found an angel embedded in a bit of geode quartz crystal that was incorporated in a piece of kitschy elf art (no, not "Legolas" elves; more like "got lost in Germany on a trip from Santa's workshop to that Keebler tree" elves). The angel is so ancient that it doesn't really communicate in words, just urges and impulses. It's pretty alien to humankind, so it may not grasp exactly everything Tina's doing with its power.

What she's doing is matchmaking. She sees two people she thinks belong together? She befriends them both (not at all hard with a Master Die in *Devious*) and sets them up on blind dates. If they don't hit it off? Then she gives them a li'l pep talk!

It gets a bit uglier when she sees people who don't belong together. Sure, she's gotten some people (both genders) out of abusive relationships, but as her confidence has grown she's started to take a broader view. "They're both so *poor*, they'd be happier with people who could support them and buy them things!" "Oh, they're so *lazy* together, I'm going to fix her up with a physical trainer and him with that adorable breakdancing girl!" "But what if they had kids and the kids got his giant German potato nose? They'd be hideous!"

She means well, which may be scant consolation when she's chiseling apart you and your lover because one of you only bought daisies on Valentines' Day. ("Daisies? Who *does* that?!?") She's constantly manipulating people, either to shove them towards relationships they otherwise wouldn't pursue (no matter how much they "should") or to break apart couples who, in her view, just aren't happy enough.

Her non-Christian, vaguely New Age semi-animist view of the spiritual world means that Tina won't necessarily reject someone out of hand just because he's hosting a 'demon.' Indeed, she believes that the almighty power of Love can redeem any spirit.

She's fascinated by superheroes and supervillains and thinks they need her amorous assistance more than *anyone*. That's warning flag number one. Flags two through fifty? She has not, herself, found her soul mate, but she's certain he'll be a brooding, troubled supervillain that she can redeem.

STATS

Cunning 2 (+MD*), **Patient** 1 (+MD*)

Greed 0, *Generosity* 2

Espionage 0, *Knowledge* 1

Sly 2 (+MD*), **Open** 1 (+MD*)

Cruelty 0, *Courage* 2

Contempt 3, *Endurance* 1

Devious 3 (+3 bonus**) (+MD*), **Insightful** 2

(+MD*)

Corruption 3, *Nurture* 3

Deceit 3, *Honesty* 3

Powers: Circle of Abjuration, Righteous Arm, Word of Blessing

Aspects: Halo, Wings

*These bonus Master Dice come into play only for mundane tasks in keeping with the angelic Code of Conduct, when the angel has been invoked.

**This bonus applies at all times, but can become degraded if the Code of Conduct is broken.



MR. DIGNITY

Dignity's a good thing, right? People respecting one another and behaving with comportment, such that they'd be pleased to be watched? Dominic Brown takes it all too far. Always a stickler for grammar and manners, it was his considered opinion that the world's problems often arose from a failure of basic civility. Hey, maybe he has a point: Police have found that if you crack down on little stuff like loitering, fare hopping and public drinking, you get a drop in felonies too.

Which is why when someone in the apartment building plays his stereo too loud, Dominic and his angel (whom he picked up from an odd statuette that caught his eye in a junk shop—he likes bargain antiques almost as much as he hates it when people misuse apostrophes) may pay a visit. He may sternly (but courteously) explain your thoughtlessness to you, perhaps with reference to Judith Martin. When someone with an angel as a **Devious** weapon explains manners to you, *they stay explained*. Similarly, grammar errors on signs get you a lecture from *The Elements of Style* that you'll remember on your deathbed after Alzheimer's has claimed your mother's face and your first lover's name.

Is this a terrible abuse of power? A bit. But far more, it's a terrible *waste* of power. Mr. Dignity does not respond to hostage crises, drug-riven neighborhoods under the boot heel of vicious gangs or even supervillains with the means and motive to poison every living thing in Lake Manitoba. Unless, maybe, someone's ransom note or manifesto has colons misapplied.

On the other hand, considering the havoc a well-meaning and *ambitious* idiot could do with that much mind control, maybe it's just as well.

STATS

Cunning 2 (+MD*), **Patient** 1 (+MD*)

Greed 1, *Generosity* 2

Espionage 0, *Knowledge* 2

Sly 2 (+MD*), **Open** 1 (+MD*)

Cruelty 1, *Courage* 1

Contempt 2, *Endurance* 1

Devious 4 (+3 bonus**) (+MD*), **Insightful** 1 (+MD*)

Corruption 2, *Nurture* 3

Deceit 1, *Honesty* 2

Powers: Foresight, Word of Blessing

Aspects: Chorus, Radiance, Wings

*These bonus Master Dice come into play only for mundane tasks in keeping with the angelic Code of Conduct, when the angel has been invoked.

**This bonus applies at all times, but can become degraded if the Code of Conduct gets violated while the angel is perceptive.



MATCHES MADE IN HELL

So far we've examined good people with bad spirits, good spirits with good people, and bad people with good spirits. That just leaves the nadir, the *ne plus ultra*, the abyssal depths of depravity: The indefatigable viciousness and power of a spirit coupled to the free will and savvy of a modern mortal.

These are not people who fight their demons, or trick them, negotiate or buy them off or keep them on a starvation diet of sinfulness. These are folks who got with the program.

RULES

They're identical to the rules for PCs. They just have a degenerate synergy at work.

With their cozy "I wuv you more, Adolf," "No, I wuv you more, Mael-sephal the Maledictous!" relationship, they readily shuttle Tactics back and forth to stick Wiggle Dice on mundane actions, so they often don't even need to use diabolical powers to achieve diabolical ends.

In this, they're the very opposite of flashy and flamboyant Hellbinders like the PCs. They have a good thing going and they don't want anyone coming in to spoil it. And by 'good thing' they of course mean 'very bad thing indeed.'

Also, because they're not in conflict, they tend to be built with 45-60 character points instead of the more typical 40.

USE

Here you have your climactic villain and diabolical tempter. You don't need a lot of these around, they should be the frustrating, slippery, pure evil bastards that always manage to wiggle their way out, probably by tricking gritty heroes into covering for them half the time. If approached peacefully, they're all reasonable arguments for setting aside the cape and the wrestling boots and settling into a harmonious life with a spirit guide. Their message is, "It's so nice to stop fighting it. Give in! You'll succeed at everything!"

Ideally the PCs resist their tawdry appeals, and then the chase is on. Don't make it easy. These guys have little percentage in standing and fighting, they want to be left alone to wreak their atrocities. Running one to ground and destroying it can be the capstone of the campaign.

If you want to make things a little simpler on the PCs, suggest to one or more Scrtapes that they have a real infernal history with this spirit. If it did them a serious dirty back in the ages before Christ, it's a strong motivation to get payback now, and vengeance is a motivation that humans and demons can both enjoy.

STEVE STILES

Why is Steve Stiles alive? He's alive because it's the 21st century, when a rare cancer that would have been untreatable even ten years ago is now held in abeyance by an implanted node of radioactive material. He's alive because he's got a demon tossing him Wiggle Dice on his *Endurance* rolls to not perish, himself, from radiation poisoning. And he's alive because all the women and men and children he's sexually abused have been so befuddled by his mind-twisting looks or his impenetrable disguises that they can't bring themselves to tell anybody or to stop him themselves.

Any scumbag can ruin a year (if not much more) with a savage rape or confusing molestation. It takes a demonic scumbag to make the violation a central part of your identity afterwards. And it takes an *atomic* demonic scumbag to infect a good 37% of his victims with radiation sickness.

Incidentally, in addition to being a monster of absolute evil, Steve works as an economic development consultant. Takes him all over the world, most often to the poor parts.

STATS

Cunning 4, **Patient** 2

Greed 4, **Generosity** 2

Espionage 3, Knowledge 2

Sly 3, **Open** 1

Cruelty 2, **Courage** 1

Contempt 4, **Endurance** 2

Devious 4, **Insightful** 2

Corruption 4, **Nurture** 0

Deceit 4, **Honesty** 0

Powers: Dead Ringer, Impossible Beauty

Aspects: Invisibility, Ghost Form



KOMODA

THE HONORABLE JANE ATTENBOROUGH

People think a demon's going to go straight into politics. Probably a relic of *The Omen* and *The Dead Zone*. But while the executive and legislative branches have splayed out their tawdry charms to the diabolically inclined, the judiciary seems to get short shrift. Maybe it's just because there are bibles around for swearing-in all the time.

Judge Jane Attenborough gets right around that by using a specially printed fake bible. Every book has been altered, and not always subtly, either. Most of the Ten Commandments in her swearing-book (as she charmingly calls it) simply have "not" tidily removed from behind various "shalts" and reinserted in others. "Thou shalt commit adultery," "Thou shalt not honor thy father and thy mother," and so on. Similar vandalism has been wreaked on the Beatitudes, producing verses like "Stupid are the meek, for they shall be called big yellow pussies."

That wasn't Jane's idea. A detail-oriented demon put that volume together as a hobby, and Jane stole it from him after throwing him in the path of a monk from the Holy See who'd been rescued from an illegal pit-fighting ring as a child and who now battles crime as Brother Vengeance. (He's a gritty hero.)

No, Jane just sits in court and listens to cases and excludes evidence and runs things by the book as much as possible, only stooping to commit procedural errors when necessary. Various scumbags in her area (Horry County, South Carolina—it's a real county, look it up!) have been promised either a mistrial or a not-guilty verdict in return for "favors to be named later" by a sweaty Greek guy known as Priapus Ambrosia. Priapus is a colorful character, renowned in the South Carolina underworld not only for his body odor, colorblind taste in suits and outrageous name, but also for making people sign agreements in blood. Oh, and for getting people off the hook. He's known for that, too.

Priapus is, of course, just Jane in disguise. While many of her agreements with crooks and skels end with sold souls, she also has them do all kinds of gun running, race baiting, hate crimes and general larceny. She makes sure they leave Horry County to do it, though. She's busy enough as it is.

STATS

Cunning 3, **Patient** 3

Greed 3, **Generosity** 3

Espionage 3, **Knowledge** 2

Sly 2, **Open** 3

Cruelty 2, **Courage** 0

Contempt 4, **Endurance** 2

Devious 4, **Insightful** 2

Corruption 4, **Nurture** 0

Deceit 3, **Honesty** 0

Powers: Dead Ringer, Body Control

Aspects: Cloven Hooves, Darkness-Shrouded



CHAE JIN SOOK

Obviously, the next time Jesus Christ came to Earth he would come in a female body, right? 'Cause of gender parity. Fairness and being evenhanded, that's what God the Father is all about!

(This all makes much more sense when Jin Sook perkily explains it.)

Chae Jin Sook is only seventeen years old and exactly 958 people have accepted her as their personal savior. She preaches universal happiness through love, and all religions are really one, and if everyone just held a flower and opened their hearts all the wars and cruelty would cease. Also, she would like you to sign over a large percentage of your salary, pre-tax please.

An ugly corollary to her beliefs is that people who suffer misfortune do so because God is either testing them or punishing them, and either way helping them with anything other than positive energy and public cheering is an affront to the divine plan. But at least Jin Sook can tell you which ones are God's *real* enemies and which are just going through the ol' refiner's fire!

From the Temple of Herself (occupying some prime Hawaiian beach front) she records her sermons and web-casts and performs expertly-staged healing miracles. There are about five thousand people worldwide (mostly in South America, Hawaii and California) who ascribe to her religion financially, another five thousand who read the occasional ghostwritten book, go to a concert-like "awakening session" (with really good pop music) or watch one of her late-night infomercials. But to get to the rank of "Apostle" you have to sign on the dotted line, and the durable power of attorney is entirely secondary to the blood-oath of soul bondage. Of course, to get to that point you have to prove your loyalty by cutting all ties to your family, going through some sophisticated brainwashing programs and, oh yeah, getting your personality melon-balled by Jin Sook's demonic splendor.

958 people have signed up for that, and they're the ones running drugs from South America, making threats to keep prominent cultists out of jail and hiring lawyers to harass anyone who speaks badly of Herself. They're also the ones who compete for her favor because the highest honor she can bestow (and this is known only to the 958 Apostles, of course) is to personally release you from life as a human sacrifice to her greater glory, casting off the shell of self to reach Nirvana/Heaven/Satori or some other promised Graceland in the sky. The sacrifices are carefully selected, of course, to be those who (1) won't be missed and (2) will be most surprised to find their souls damned to eternal torment.

STATS

Cunning 3, **Patient** 2

Greed 3, *Generosity* 3

Espionage 4, *Knowledge* 1

Sly 3, **Open** 2

Cruelty 3, *Courage* 0

Contempt 3, *Endurance* 0

Devious 4, **Insightful** 2

Corruption 4, *Nurture* 0

Deceit 4, *Honesty* 1

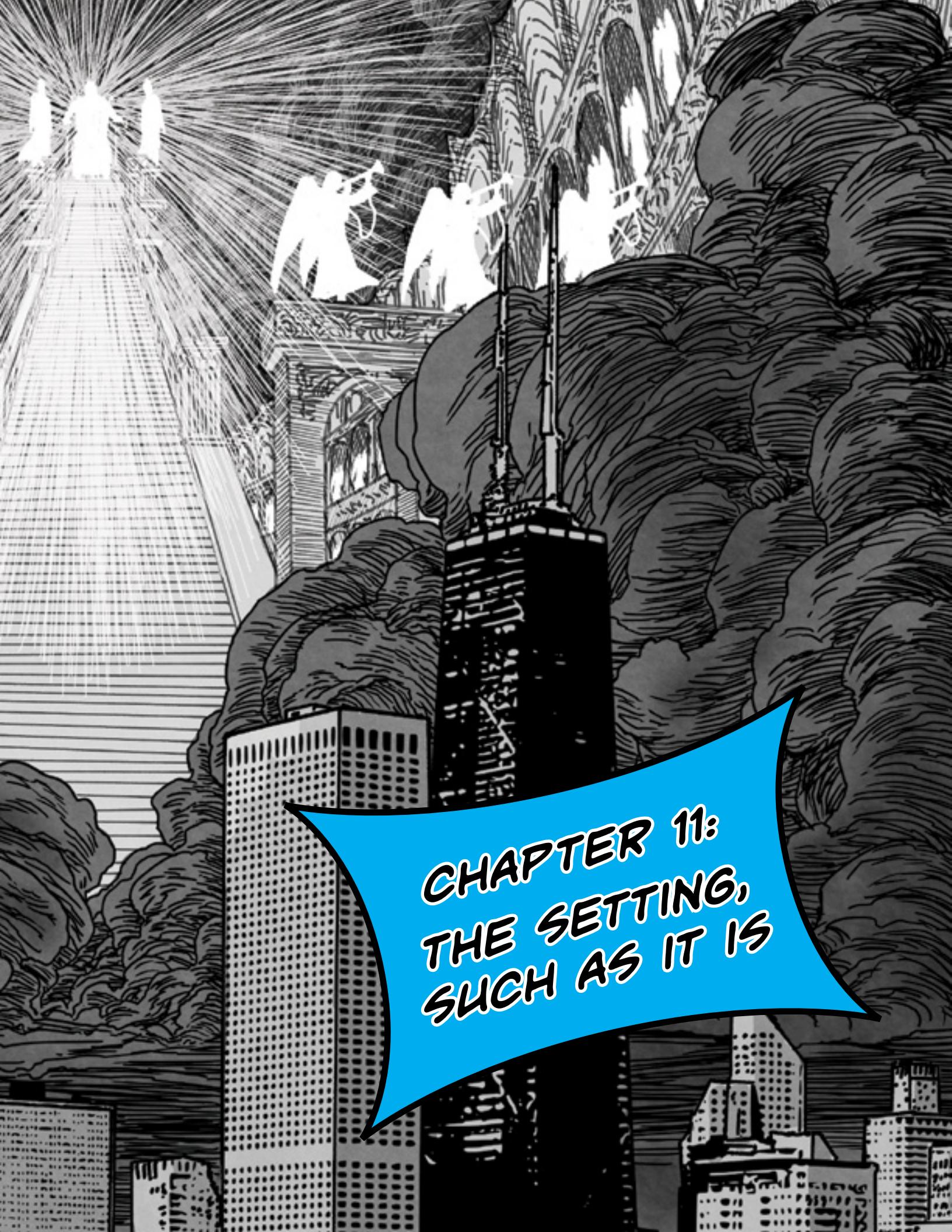
Powers: Impossible Beauty, Ineffable Defense

Aspects: Cloven Hooves, Invisibility





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CHAPTER 11: THE SETTING, SUCH AS IT IS

LET ME LEVEL WITH YOU: I don't have a rock-solid idea for the setting and never did. This whole book started out as a thread on the RPG.NET forums, and from then to now, the driving idea has been the central conflict of good human vs. evil spirit in the context of supervillain capes and masks. I did not have a firm idea of what the 'demons' actually were, whence they came, what they were really after (other than assorted mayhem) or of the history preceding the arrival of the PCs.

I think that's okay. The setting is not the focus of *Better Angels*, the characters and their harassing demons are. Rather than throw together something lackluster for an audience well known for reworking settings in any circumstances, I decided to leave the book shorter and cheaper and give you the tools to build your own setting around your preferences and interests. If you want to tack it onto a more developed setting, you could easily bolt this onto *Grim War* and probably *This Favored Land*, two setting books for *Wild Talents*.

That said, I'm unwilling to slam the back cover in your face so abruptly, so I'm going to suggest this is brainstorming across time and space. I'm throwing out ideas on January 19, 2010 in Illinois. You can catch and juggle them where you are when you're reading this.

THE NATURE OF DEMONS

Characters may want firm, settled notions of just what these obnoxious tenants in their minds are, and tough noogies for them if they do. It can be an unanswered mystery that nags from the sidelines of the action like Hell's cheerleading squad. But maybe the *players* want to know, and are going to have less fun if there's no answer available. Maybe as GM you can use the search for the spirits' true nature as a metaphor for man's existential questions and dicey relations with the ideas of a higher power. Or maybe you can use it to string together lots of way-cool fight scenes. If you want that to be an element and it's going to contribute, you have some decisions to make. Here's a palette of choices.

ANGELS WITH BROKEN HALOS

Maybe demons are straight-up *demons*. They are exactly as they present themselves: foul fiends exiled from the presence of God for prideful transgression, eternally cast out of divine grace and unquenchably envious of mankind.

Their sole motivation is to bring mankind into damnation with them, not because misery loves company, not because they know it'll make them feel better, but out of the thin possibility that it might help them suffer *less*.

The biggest strength of the traditional diabolical setup is familiarity. Everyone's on the same page—harps on this side, pitchforks on the other. It's clear and uncluttered and provides a stable platform from which to leap into the personal conflict. This is a good option for a group that's not particularly interested in doing deep background discovery and just wants to emote over their struggles and then tie up a superhero.

The drawback is, with this option, your rocket's too small to frag God. It drags traditional Christianity front and center, which may not be a comfortable place in your group. If you're all good Lutherans and have a tacit agreement of How Things Go, fine. If you're all ardent atheists and have a different opinion (possibly much campier), there's probably no conflict. But in mixed groups you're going to bash into this head-on. Maybe that's good. Maybe it's the kind of juicy, meaty philosophical exploration that some people demand of their spandex-bedecked heroes. But know what you're getting into beforehand and wear a helmet and/or a bib.

GONZOITY

Maybe thematic unity appeals less to you than getting a double serving of crazy. If that's the case, the kitchen's open. You don't have to choose between grays, demons and psychic projections. You can have one of each and with three you get an eggroll. This is the high gonzo option, of course, and it means that PCs are either going to punt the idea of getting one right answer, or it's going to be the center of the whole campaign.

The idea of making a big *Enchilada Supremo* by combining all the ingredients creates some complications (multiple agendas, multiple vulnerabilities, multiple Final Showdowns) but it can, actually, explain why everyone defaults to heroes and villains. What other idea could possibly stretch to cover them all? The reason that evil spirits, evil aliens and evil thought-forms projected from beyond the wall of time-space all act like supervillains is because that's the convention. That's the only shorthand that makes sense to the humans they so desperately need (to use).

Think of it like Conquistadors in South America. These weird foreigners have uncanny powers and inscrutable agendas, but they are hugely outnumbered. To get anything done, they have to express requests in ways the natives can understand. The Spaniards' command of the Incan language was probably pretty sketchy at first, and ditto the Incan command of Spanish. They communicated in broad strokes, big gestures, simple concepts. Similarly, the aliens of Better Angels express their urges in terms of costumes, capes and crime waves.

SPACE ALIEN MOFOS

Rather than go two falls out of three with Gnosticism, you can yank off the devil mask and find a pair of unblinking eyes in a stubby gray face. Maybe the demons and angels are monsters from outer space and they're using human cat's-paws as their agents on Earth. Sufficiently advanced science is indistinguishable from religion, right?

As with Christianity, the question of extraterrestrial intelligence is one everyone has an opinion about and no proof, but for most people (*most*) it's less controversial. But there are still issues to contend with: What do tech-savvy ETs want with Earth? Is the whole conflict one big anthropological experiment for them? Is Earth unique and exceptional in some fashion, such that they have to act carefully instead of just dropping from the sky with an "Under New Management"

sign? Are the angels and demons locked in Total War, wasting each other with blasters in the asteroid belt while they scheme and contend behind the scenes on the third world from the sun? Perhaps they're so advanced that they're settling a bigger conflict by betting on a race of hairless apes. Perhaps the angels have no real moral superiority and are just showing humankind what it's prepared to accept, and so are the demons. Maybe rejecting both is the only safe course. Or maybe they're only a *little* more advanced and in different directions: They're screwing with us because they don't have the secrets of the atom and want them. Or maybe electronics don't make sense to their brains, even though interstellar travel and mind-melding do.

If you're Screwtape in a group like this, emphasize callousness, disconnection and a real difficulty understanding positive human emotion. Don't use metaphors or similes—misuse them. Make confusing and nonsensical statements or exclude pronouns. Manipulate people for inscrutable reasons or couch your urging in the language of blunt, individual self-interest. Perhaps demons of cruelty are studying the only emotions intense enough for them to track. Perhaps the vain ones are simply exploring drives that seem so fundamental to humans.

GMs can have fun with this, altering the usual Faustian tropes by sliding wildly along the continuum from fire and brimstone at one side, to saucers and abductions on the other. Similarly, the end-game conflicts when Strategies hit five can have a change of backdrop without substantially altering the mechanics. Instead of typical amulets, perhaps the invaders' identities are channeled through psionic broadcast crystals, or maybe they're tied to containers that have their original physical templates and master gene lines encoded within. Combining these ideas with traditional trappings can be a treat when players crack open that 4,000-year-old statue and find a shriveled, inhuman mummy inside, or examine the Devil's Ruby under a scanning-tunneling electron microscope to uncover the impossibly small circuits laced throughout it.

When the human attempts to cast off his rider, the first step can take the form of some kind of scientific assault on implanted alien tissue. The second stage is when the demon attempts to retain its psychic connection after its physical infestation has been weakened. The final phase is when the creature shows its true nature, stripped of disguise and vulnerable, though fearsome for all that. Should the man kill it, it just freaking dies instead of being sent to 'Hell.'

The demon's victory can go through the same filter. The alien's triumph is that it has finally understood something deep and profound about humankind: our evil. The first part of the process weakens the human's will to resist by isolating him from the herd, and also makes the personality more digestible because it

can now be considered in isolation, apart from all the influences that impact so firmly on social creatures. The next bit is data checking: The demon has to dissect five people as a control group, confirming its observations about its host's neurological structures. If it does its murders, it can call for an extraction and (since its scientific mission is complete) its distant masters agree and open the portal. Now instead of skulls and lava and stalagmites, the final fight takes place on an orbiting cruiser where the truth of the charade is finally stripped aside. If you want to go a little cheesy on it, maybe this is the PCs' chance to upload a virus from their laptop (or, more plausibly, slaughter a battleship full of aliens single-handedly) and end the whole damn situation.

UGLY TOURISTS FROM BEYOND THE FIFTH DIMENSION

If the previous option owes a debt to *Forbidden Planet* and *This Island Earth*, here we harken back to a long-faced gent from Providence who may be gaming's most checked name: H.P. Lovecraft. Instead of physical aliens who somehow sprayed their spores into the drinking water, now they're immaterial aliens who've transfixed human consciousness with their own and are slowly extruding their polydimensional selves into our tidy 3-D world. (If you think our world isn't tidy, you haven't looked under the sofa of a nine-dimensional intelligence organized through iterative chaos math.)

Some of Lovecraft's entities had the kind of involved personal malevolence you expect on grade-school playgrounds and at the DMV, but the most famous are inscrutably Other. If you want what most people think evil looks like, go with the Christian model. For a manipulative and devious evil, go with the Grays. But for an eerie, nihilistic void of confusion, check in with Lovecraft.

Screwtape has to change a lot in this model. Instead of jokes and sadism, go for callousness, curiosity and the bizarre. The demon wants things, and those things include worship or mur-



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der or craven self-protection, but it approaches them from a different angle. Perhaps it's cruel like a Gray, trying to chart human limits. Maybe murders shift human souls into a phase-space where the spirit (or its waiting colleagues) can more readily capture and dissect them. Or perhaps the emotions most reliably provoked by a particular sin have no greater meaning to it than the sound of whistling across an empty bottle, and it's just provoking those feelings because it likes the noise.

Just as devils take on a different complexion through a Lovecraftian lens, so do angels. Instead of benevolent (if impossibly strict) guides, they're the angels who have to preface everything with "Be Not Afraid!" They give no more explanation than a volcano or a whirlwind, and while they

treasure honesty and human life, they're not exactly tame. They are defending mankind but they aren't saying why. The folks who bear them are either as freaked and paranoid as the PCs, or they're starting to see from that distant moral plateau, and it gives them a fanatic's million-mile stare.

Final conflicts (see page 98) here take on the complexion of trying to jam a psychic signal from beyond, or disentangle folded space that's weirdly intersected with one's own body. The final aspects of the human's triumph over the demon should, in this case, imply that excessive humanity is not good for these things and that they are trying to remake humanity in their own image. By maintaining human values in the face of cosmic absurdity, PCs force their captors into mental spaces that confine them too tightly, making them abandon their man-suits lest they lose their ability to think in higher planes. Once they're forced into our three dimensions, they're fighting on our turf. (Incidentally, I'd steer clear of tentacles when describing them, just because it's been done so much—often well, but sometimes not so wisely. Go for unnamable angles, causeless sensations impinging directly on the brain and description through metaphor.)

The triumph of the outsider is less an imprisonment than an apotheosis. The initial familial butchering is just natural to the demon: The only reason it didn't do it earlier is that it didn't have enough synchrony with its host to tell the difference between beloved targets and strangers. Once the specimen is isolated, the five murders aren't to open a physical bridge. They're to gather enough biomass and redundant genetic code to re-create the human as a multidimensional being capable of departing from man's world of mundane angles. In this instance, the human's last desperate chance to escape is not

from a physical place, but from a psycho-biological gestalt. As he is becoming his own prison, he (and his friends) have to break free from the interface between three- and nine-dimensional space before it collapses. Good luck with that.

CREEPS FROM THE COLLECTIVE ID

These demons act like demons because they believe they're demons, but it's an illusion. They're really manifestations from humanity's collective unconscious.

If you're not hip to Jung, here's the quick version, adjusted for RPGs: Your conscious, individual self is the one of which you are most aware. But you have an unconscious mind, gnawing at suppressed fears and desires, irrational and only truly free in dreams. That's Freud territory, but Jung goes him one better. Freud's unconscious was still individual, with each man an island.

Jung's collective unconscious is the ocean in which those islands sit—a stew of common beliefs, archetypal social roles, urban legends and sourceless factoids that "everyone knows."

In this model of devility, that ocean is storm tossed and flinging things, formerly submerged, onto the beaches of individual experience. Demons aren't that way because they've chosen to be, but because they've been cast in a role, the role of "how people think evil works."

The big question here is, where do the funky powers come from and what does that mean for the setting? The answer is, everybody's a little psychic. Most of the time it's such a tee-

ny-tiny degree of ESP or telekinesis or what have you that it's utterly imperceptible. If you're face to face with a liar, your ESP may tell you he's full of crap—but it's going to be only a tiny part of your suspicion, weighted far less than your unconscious judgment of his facial expression and posture and word choice. But it's in there. You read his mind, albeit in a faint and meaningless way.

Think of your favorite fictional psychic—Jean Grey, The Amazing Turtle, David Blaine, whoever. Now assume that 99% of the population has only one *millionth* of a part of that person's psychic juice.

In a world of seven billion people, that means the collective unconscious could potentially access seven thousand times the power of your favorite psychic. Your favorite psychic sucks! The power undergirding the demons and angels is like two thousand Jean Greys, two thousand Amazing Tur-



tles and two thousand David Blaines combined, with a thousand Uri Gellers added for good measure. Plenty of energy for teleportation and body reshaping, along with the more traditional psychic stuff like mind control and TK.

Screwtaping in this setup doesn't have to change a bit, since demons conform to people's ideas of demons by definition. Same with the Hell of high Sinister Strategy. If your soul gets dragged off and enslaved by your resident devil, you can console yourself with the thought that you haven't *really* been sentenced to eternal damnation. You've just had your identity scanned into a psychic gestalt where it will be punished until humankind's aggregate personality changes enough that "demon" has no ideological weight. (Honestly, for the purposes of a jaw-socking supervillain game, there's not much difference.)

What can happen with this setup (though it doesn't necessarily have to) is that the PCs find out what's really going on and start trying to harness the power of the collective unconscious without going through the silly mediation of demon projections and angel imagoes. If they can sink a pipeline down to that power and direct it consciously, without the interpretation of a self-interested psychic sock-puppet, they could become greater than any angel or demon.

Do you suppose the angels and demons will like that? Hell, even if the PCs can't drill their power well, how are angels and demons going to take being told that they aren't even real? "Sorry there, Ashmodaedel the Infinite Destroyer, you're only a pack of cards!" That'll go over real well.

HUMAN-ON-DEMON VIOLENCE

Just as 'the horrible truth about demonkind' can vary from game table to game table, so can the history of it. But while there are loads of ways you can go with the real nature of demon possession and superpowers, there are really only three broad categories of historic possibility.

'TWAS EVER THUS

If you take the tack that demons have been around ever since the Fall of Man, it makes for some work, but at the same time it saves you some explanations.

The good news is, you don't have to deal with questions about the logic of putting on a cape and kicking Virtue in the shins. If demons have been riding mankind's ass since time immemorial, people are surely used to folks in masks and flamboyant outfits screaming "Kneel before me, puny mortals! Kneel before... MONSTER MASTER!"

Well, as used to that as one can get.

The point is, the idea of the supervillain makes lots more sense if great power has long been yoked to moral extremes. If that's "just the way it's always been," then you can hit the ground running. Characters can quite reasonably throw together a colorful persona because that's what people who get powers do.

The work comes with deciding about your alternate history. Can all the great evils of history be tracked back to demons? Was Vlad the Impaler an early supervillain? Was Hitler carrying a demon that hit the jackpot of cooperative hosts?

If you want a world where history changes very little, are you comfortable with the great evils of true history—the Trail of Tears, the depredations of the Golden Horde, Stalinism, Nanking in 1937—being blamed on demons? Similarly, you have to decide if it cheapens history's true

heroes by asserting that they had supernatural Good propping them up the whole time.

An interesting variant is to suggest that, in the great sweep of history, superheroes and villains count for very little. Angels and demons don't just cancel one another out, they're less likely to triumph for their sides than collections of normal people led by extraordinary leaders. The strictest good and evil are, in this setting, just not *practical*.

On the other hand, if you decide to make it heavily alternate-history, what then? You have quite a bit of work to do explaining what changed, how and why.

This is also an approach that causes difficulty with one of the nontraditional explanations for demons. If demons are actually Gray aliens, surely they'd have figured humanity out after five thousand years of experiments. (Unless they're just doing it for fun.) But Lovecraftian aliens have opaque motives, so that's okay, and the sub-sub-conscious rationale just means humanity is getting the world it richly deserves.

NEW! IMPROVED! EVIL!

On the other end of the spectrum, you can have this whole ongoing "angel demon superpower" cosmic fiasco as a unique event in the history of mankind. They weren't here before, but they sure as hell are here now.

As the negative image of the "Oh yeah, the Crimson Marauder's been jacking diamonds all over town for months now, just ignore him" approach, this has the opposite problems. History can stay firm and familiar, no problemo. But you run into a very good question. "You can violate the laws of physics in ways that no one can even understand, you have impossible powers, and your best idea is 'theme-party museum heist'?"

This is the core question of *Better Angels*, and having supervillains (and heroes too, fine) pop in from nowhere makes it even starker. If you follow this path, comic books existed long before real costumed adventurers, and that can be your explanation right there. People,

especially good people with evil ideas impacting their minds, desperately seized any framework they could find for dealing with their situation. They became supervillains because it seemed like the best way to calm down their riders without giving in to them entirely.

But if the previous option meant you had a lot of work to do on the past, this one means you face a job with the present and the future. What would world leaders do with superheroes (and supervillains!) on the government payroll? If they're cropping up evenly all over Earth, that's probably a big jab in the crotch for the USA, the EU and even China. If the powers are in the hands of the major developed nations (who can at least pay for them) how does that change the power dynamic? More terrorism? A new Cold War? World War III? If you're going down any of those routes, I recommend making it a very gradual build up, one the PCs get to fully participate in and experience. In fact, you could probably structure a pretty fine campaign where it's the PCs' actions that determine which of those three options you get.

Or maybe humankind, if the PCs are good enough at being bad, lucks into a fourth option that doesn't *totally suck*. Maybe supervillains can provide such a spectacular distraction and such an impressive threat that Iran isn't willing to turn its back on Doctor Mayhem (and his sidekick Mayhemite) to make good on its threats against Israel. And vice versa, of course.

This idea is a good fit for a space alien explanation. They weren't here before; now they are. It works just as well extradimensionally. (Really, one of the charms about an opponent with no true grasp on 'sanity' or 'humanity' is that anything it chooses to do is automatically in character.) If you have the standard Christian demons, you may want an answer for "Why now?!" You could brush up on Revelations and have this be the straight-up End Times, thereby enjoying the charms of pre-post-apocalyptic gaming. Alternately, if you go with the collective unconscious as your source, you can hand-wave it with anything from delayed millennium fever, to a critical mass of population, to the universalizing culture represented by McDonalds and Wal-Mart

bringing the collective lexicon of experience into enough sympathy to really synch up, to psychic experiments from behind the Iron Curtain finally trickling through into private companies, other governments, and well-heeled terror cells.

IT COMES AND GOES, LIKE A RAINBOW

What if the ability of angels and demons to pester and eviscerate mankind fluctuates over the ages? Maybe the angels can only come out and play once the demons have already taken the field. Or maybe diabolical possession is like war: It sounds great until you're in it, then it sucks, so nobody wants to do it for a while, until everyone's forgotten how cruddy it is, and then it's GOTO 10.

This can give you the best of both worlds. If you want consistent history, it just hasn't been demon days since the Dark Ages. Hm, maybe all those crazy old manuscripts were inspired by something more than ergot poisoning! This gives you license to play with the set-dressing of forbidden idols, ancient texts, hidden chambers in old cathedrals, and all kinds of anachronistic devices. You ever hear of the Baghdad battery, or the Antikythera Mechanism? All that stuff could have fallen off the super-suits of a B.C. version of the Abysmal Anarchist. ("Look out, Xeno! That clock he's carrying is accurate to within *five minutes!*")

If you want your demons in Lovecraft form, it's all down to "the stars are right." That works fairly well for alien re-invasions, too. Maybe the ETs are like periodic cicadas and only wake up every hundred years, or four hundred, or when the Mayan calendar says so. Or maybe they were driven off in the past and have now come back for round two. Maybe the orbits of our two star systems only line up with a hyperspace wormhole periodically. The only option that requires exceptional hand-waving is the collective unconscious source, but who's to say that the psychic vibes of an entire race don't move in waves? Maybe they only switched on recently because it's the Age of Aquarius.

21 SHORT IDEAS CONCERNING SUPERVILLAINY

I hope these help inspire your game.

#1: RAINING ON THE PARADE

You can set this one up ahead of time rather tidily, if you want. Right after a superheroine hands a particularly public beating to a PC, the mayor declares that he's going to put up a statue of her in the city's main plaza. This begins rapidly, thanks to the funding of an anonymous admirer. (Opportunity A for PCs to be bastards: They fund the statue in order to put a bomb in it, or have it be the antenna for a mind-control ray, or have it actually be a killer robot, or simply to have a statue of the PC hidden inside it so that after the first rainy day, the exterior melts away and the supervillain image remains.) The cops aren't all that crazy about this. They love *her* (or, if she's gritty, maybe they don't) but they're worried about validating amateur policing by crazies in capes. (Opportunity B for PCs is to exacerbate this. Letters to the editors with the phrase "The cops are just jealous because she does their job better and isn't wreathed in a layer of donut fat" are highly recommended.) Whether the PCs take these opportunities or not, on the scheduled day of the unveiling, the mayor sets up a big and expensive ticker tape parade for her even though the police union's in heavy negotiations. ("What, they can't afford our health plan but the *bulletproof* chick gets a parade?") Neither mayor nor police chief is willing to blink, so the parade starts side-by-side with a police picket line. They're not fully on strike, but there's a department-wide sick-out. Short version? The cops are disorganized and in short supply just as the PCs know exactly when their rival is going to be headed towards her statue. Lots of onlookers, and she can't run off without looking yellow.

#2: WHERE'S MY HANDOUT?

A horrible tragedy has befallen some distant, foreign city. As soon as the heart-wrenching images of suffering and loss hit the 24-hour news cycle, it prompts an out-



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pouring of generosity from the people local to the PCs' city. (If the disaster coincides with some outrageous act of PC villainy, thereby deposing it from the headlines, all the better.) The city has gathered food supplies, medicines and money to send overseas to the needy. All that stuff, along with a bunch of firefighters and doctors, is being loaded onto a generously donated freighter. It's having a big public sendoff from the city docks.

Sinking that boat would crush the hopes of millions, if you're cruel. On the other hand, holding it for ransom could be very profitable... and indisputably newsworthy.

#3: BILLIONGIN'S ISLAND

Billionaire distiller Jim "Gin Daddy" Daedolopulous has been increasingly erratic in recent years, though his business sense is as sharp as ever. Cynical and cryptic,

his business deals always seem to leverage the worst aspects of human nature for deep profit. Lots to admire there.

Now he's built a private island in the middle of the Pacific, shaped like his (self-made) family crest, with a hundred-room mansion on top of it. Carefully designed as a self-sustaining ecosystem (as long as you're willing to go vegetarian which, like Hitler, "Gin Daddy" is) the island is cutting all ties with the outside world. Isolated with his wife and a bevy of "secretaries" along with a couple physicians, chefs, craftsmen, masseurs and a world-class beautician, Daedolopulous is ready to wait for death in style, flipping a double bird at the rest of humankind as he does.

Clearly, the place is just itching to be seized, since no nation's navy is responsible for protecting it. Of course, Daedolopulous is no fool,

so who knows what defenses he's built in there? In fact, aren't his actions perfectly in character for... a supervillain?

But the fact remains. It's a swell hideout. Sure would be a shame to leave it unoccupied (by which I mean, "occupied by anyone other than the PCs").

#4: IN THE AUTUMN, IT'S A RIOT OF COLOR

People are used to supervillains perpetrating outré and grotesque acts of mayhem, but it's a different matter when it's a cop. In this case, a police officer who just happened to be white gunned down a fifteen-year-old who just happened to be Latino. Now the city's sizable Latino community has just happened to erupt into an orgy of violence, looting, protests and arson.

That's all without the PCs getting involved. Can they somehow take the credit for this spasm of civil unrest? Exploit it? Or is there some way to use their eeeevil reputations to subtly defuse the situation, right behind their demons' backs?

#5: STICKS AND STONES

Gordy Warville wants to run the city one day. He successfully switched from crusading district attorney to city council member, and now he's challenging the mayor. But he needs media attention. He decides to seek it by going on the radio or on TV and mocking one of the PCs' costumes. At length. Like, a total "Worst Dressed List" treatment. You just gonna roll over and display your tummy for that?

#6: WHATEVER HAPPENED TO PROFESSIONAL COURTESY?

The PCs may have made it perfectly clear that they're in charge of their little square of turf, but apparently one guy didn't get the message. The Human Volcano has caused magma eruptions, blocking the major highways into and out of their metropolis, and he's threatening to do the same to the railroads and airport unless his demands are met. (His demands? The usual. Public obeisance and surrender from the police chief, a superhero to be publicly unmasked, a golden throne to be constructed by melting down treasures from the history museum, and the hand of the TV weather girl in marriage.) Do the PCs join his fiendish plot

and accept roles as his sidekicks? Do they break the cordon and risk looking like heroes? Is there a third option that makes them look bad while still saving the city?

#7: POACHED!

Right after a PC has pulled off some magnificent caper, another guy in cheap spandex, calling himself "Lord Nadir," claims all the credit! Who is this joker? What does he want? Is there any way to steal back the blame, or will 'Nadir' just mock them for an act of plagiarism that, in reality, he performed?

#8: POACHING?

It's a beautiful crime. No one knew Dennis Warchovski was the sole witness to a heist, except for two detectives, their chief, one ADA and the five patrolmen put on his protective detail. Dennis didn't even know where he'd been taken, just that it was the windowless part of a hotel suite, with police officers in the next room checking every carryout pizza that came through.

No one knew how valuable Mr. Warchovski was except the detectives, the chief and the lawyer. But someone entered that room unseen and *skinned him alive* without the cops outside noticing until the blood started to soak through the carpet. They had to break the door down—it was locked from the inside and there was no one there but the very dead Dennis Warchovski with his socks stuffed in his mouth and a look of horror locked on the drying muscles of his face.

No one is claiming credit for this beautiful, beautiful crime. The media has a whiff of it; they know he was in protective custody, but not why.

Do your PCs dare take credit for this? I mean blame. Will they take the blame?

#9: PRETTY PLEASE?

GMs, you have to tailor this specifically to one of their PCs. Set up a problem that only one character's superpowers can solve, something the local hero can't otherwise get a grip on. Now have the hero come and ask the PC for help. When that doesn't work, he can beg. Make it a heart-wrencher if you want, something that's going to force the hero to really grovel.



WARVILLE: VILLAIN COSTUME "STUPIDEST THING I'VE EVER SEEN."

Will the PC agree? On what condition? Just how do the other characters feel about this? (It works well if the hero is a particular thorn to a *different* character.)

#10: TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE! (THAT'S A LIE)

What is the *perfect crime* for one of your PCs (or for the whole villain clique)? Bring near some rare, valuable item that's ideal for their personal villain identity; a golden Pharaoh mask for someone with an Egyptian persona; moon rocks for a lunar baddie; an endangered animal visiting a zoo to mate-in-captivity for someone with an extinction theme. For those with cruelty or bloodlust as their drug of choice, make it a political summit that, if disrupted, could cost thousands of lives. Whatever it is, it

should fit your characters' sins like it was sewn on. It should seem too good to be true.

Because, natch, it isn't true. It's a trap, and if they investigate just a little, they can spot hints of that. Do the humans let themselves get captured to mitigate their demons' evil? Do they reverse the trap on their stalkers, and the hunters become the hunted? Is there some way they can actually get the mask/moon rock/amorous marsupial and escape?

#11: I KNOW WHAT YOU DID LAST THURSDAY

If a PC is keeping an identity secret, have someone realize it. Not someone with powers, just some everyday schmoe who sees this as a way to cash in. With paranoid precautions, he keeps himself hidden while hitting up the supervillain

for cash and favors. Can the PC find him and deal with the arrogant upstart, or will the blackmailer out him to the media (or a superhero) out of fear?

#12: CHEAP IMITATIONS

The whole point of a distinctive costume is to ensure that people know it's *you*, but only the 'you' you've chosen to be. Murdervixen, scourge of East St. Louis, wants to be instantly recognizable as such, but doesn't want her private life as Madge Vačlavel exposed. (Otherwise she'd never get a moment's rest, what with the arrest warrants and job offers from skin magazines.) So what happens when someone else dresses up in Murdervixen's signature corset, fishnets and fox mask?

You don't have to leave that as a rhetorical question. Just swap out "Murdervixen" for a PC in your party, ideally one who's got a bit of vanity and a really distinctive look. Someone else makes a knockoff costume and starts a petty, unworthy crime wave by cashing in on the PCs' hard-earned street cred. What to do? Let the cops or some schmuck-ass hero catch the phony? Tempting (and maybe worth it if the villain is also lazy) but it's probably more interesting if the villain tracks down the impostor himself. If nothing else, it ensures that the frame sticks, once it goes on.

On the other hand, what if the villain lets it slide and the forces of good and justice can't quite reach the goal line? Soon, there could be dozens of Murdervixens spreading throughout the Midwest, performing unacceptably stupid crimes, gaining weight and giving inarticulate interviews on the radio.

#13: I FEEL WE SHOULD BE INTERACTING

Who is the mysterious White Phantom? A pale and ethereal figure, he stalks the city by night, now seen outlined against the illuminated face of a clock in a tower, later witnessed striding grimly through the most pestilent slums. A thousand rumors swirl in his wake but no one knows who he is, where he came from, if he's a force for good... or evil?

Well, honestly, it's neither. He's just some guy who likes to dress up and who has aspirations for neither the commission nor the obstruction of

crime. Hell, he could be a performance artist.

This is a good one to foreshadow a bit, only to have it be a red herring. While the PCs are scratching their heads over what to do with the wannabe ("We could put him in the Maze of Doom I suppose... I dunno... just doesn't seem worth it...") you can surprise them from another angle. Or with another angel.

#14: SHOULD'A DONE MORE PUSHUPS

Right in the middle of a super-fight, with Buicks being heaved like snowballs and eyebeams going off left and right, the PCs' powers conk out. Full stop. No reply from the demons. But fortunately for them (?) the same thing has happened with whomever they're fighting. Suddenly the hero's wings and halo have deserted him. Now what? Keep fighting with fists and cinder blocks? Run away? Chase him if *he* runs away?

The question is, of course, what happened to their powers, and you have to answer that. No, I'm not going to, *you* do it. The question of "Do they really want those powers back?" is left for your players.



#15: "RAT FINK" IS SUCH AN UGLY PHRASE

Someone privately approaches one of the PCs with an offer. If he's willing to sell out one of his buddies (meaning, a different PC), the guy making the offer is willing to let him (the first PC) skate. Who's making the offer? Could be a crime lord, a police chief, or a gritty hero. If the PC accepts, does he keep his word? Does his partner in treachery? If he refuses, what then? Is there a way to turn the whole situation into a trap? Or maybe to have it both ways, depending on who wins in the end?

#16: KISS THE RING

Christophe Maureaux came to the U.S. from the poverty of the Caribbean, looking for opportunity. He found it in crime, and now he runs a famously violent and psychotic drug gang. But he wants more. He wants one of the PCs.

Something about this particular supervillain appeals to Christophe and he won't take no for an answer. He initially offers all kinds of concessions—cash money, protection, mook backup and value deals at his brothels. If the other PCs want to come along, he considers it a gift-with-purchase. But he doesn't really care about the other PCs and works subtly to isolate 'his' villain from them. It's not all that long before he's got his pet supervillain running petty bullshit errands for him: shaking down debtors, threatening witnesses, scouting out drops to make sure they aren't setups... the crime equivalent of fetching a no-foam soy cappuccino. Soon he wants public displays of loyalty, as if the PC is a yappy dog peeking out of Christophe's purse.

That's the downside of 'yes.' If the PC refuses, he gets a whole crime cartel trying to persuade him, possibly by removing other PCs who are in the way. Or if word gets around that the PC defied him, Christophe may need to pull out all the stops to get the supervillain *dead*. Otherwise, he looks foolish.

#17: THE FOCUS GROUPS HATED IT

Hollywood's making a movie about a PC! Well, okay, technically it's about some

jerk hero the PC fought with a lot, but the PC is going to be a major, major character in it. This is great news... until the script leaks on the Internet and it's *all wrong*. They're making him look like a fool, only a step above comic relief. And the actor playing him? *Hayden Christensen*.

Oh, this is intolerable. But what's the PC going to do about it? Write a nasty letter? Go on a murder spree? Something middle-of-the-road?

#18: THE MALEBOLGEAN CANDIDATE

For readers not conversant with Dante's *Inferno*, Malebolge is the Eighth Circle of Hell, reserved for frauds. It is not a misspelling of "male bulge." Thank you.

Kristin Klewes has been a stay-at-home-mom, a successful entrepreneur and a pillar of local charities. Now she's running for the Senate and with her commonsense speeches, inoffensive good looks and wholesome background, she's got a real chance!

Of course, the PCs' Screwtapes recognize that she's got a rider, a demon of treachery they recognize from the Roman job years back. The demons would love to see their old colleague fail, and the humans can probably recognize that having Satan's sock-puppet in Congress is a bad idea.

(Funny how there's that cancer cluster around her district. And they never caught the Interior Decorator Killer, who was so active in her home town. In fact, her political career started with accusing the local authorities of not doing enough, and after she organized a string of neighborhood watches the IDK stopped, just like she predicted. Also, though most citizens have no idea, her home town is now recognized as a national hotbed of wife-swapping. At least, national wife-swappers recognize it as such.)

But what can the PCs do? If they try to assassinate her and fail, that's probably as good as handing her the election. Can they join up and then betray her from within, or will she betray them first?

#19: WANNABES

Brand identity is important for superhero and villain alike. The Joker's purple and green and ghastly grin, Magneto's helmet, Kraven the Hunter's lion-face vest... they're unforgettable. Surely your PCs want to be just as memorable.

One is. He succeeds at his image-building so well, in fact, that a whole group of rambunctious youths starts mimicking his look and speech patterns. The entire idiom, really. They're stirring up trouble.

If the PC presents himself, the gang is awestruck. They want nothing more than to be his minions. They're itching for his commands.

The problem is, under the costumes they're spoiled middle-class brats with bad grades, too much allowance and insufficient parental supervision. They're vicious when they're bullying a meek 7-11 clerk, but against any real opposition? Soft. No work ethic either. Lazy and forgetful. Will the PC whip them into shape? Or just whip them?

#20: I WANT ONE!

Science magazine has quite a scoop. An isolated lake valley in the Congo has been found to be home to no-fooling *dinosaur survivors*. Living relics of the saurian age! No T-Rexes (dammit) but the big slope-backed herbivores and, more importantly, something between a velociraptor and a *Carnotaurus*, about the size of a pony.

Yeah, a tricked out motorcycle is fine if you can't get anything better, but imagine riding up to the bank on the back of a Jurassic predator.

The article has the exact location, and just how many supervillains and heroes are going to try and get their hands on these critters? How many have lizard or snake themes? A lot, that's how many.

Can the PCs get to Africa? Can they make their way through the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which has spent much of the last several decades as one of the most unpleasant war zones on the planet? Can they out-compete the other heroes and villains to capture the lizards, and if they do, can they train them?

#21: THE FIXER-UPPER

An amusement park is going bankrupt and closing. It hasn't been profitable for years and the roller coaster and mystery rides are already starting to look worn out and dangerous. Could a villain want a better setting for villainy?

Of course, getting control of the land means out-bidding an aggressive real-estate investment group ready to bulldoze the place for a mall. Leaving it undeveloped isn't going to make anyone on the city council happy, and just how do the PCs propose to raise the money to buy the land? For that matter, how are they going to cloak their paper trail? Those developers have plenty of clout, so any opposing bid is going under a microscope for irregularities.

Finally, there's the question of why the park failed in the first place. Rumor is, it's haunted by the teens who were sacrificed by a satanic coven, but that can't be true... can it?



KID HELL AND VICICLE

The hero faded from sight.

He'd never let on that he could turn invisible. People knew he could fly and they knew beams of force from his eyes could punch through cinder blocks, but the invisibility... he kept that one up his sleeve. In fact, he'd designed his entire... well, he guessed the guys teaching "Heroic Semiotics" at the university would call it his "persona"... around gaining attention. The costume was a garish red and yellow number with fractal-inspired flame patterns on the forearms, ankles and waist. He was hard to miss, but when he knew he was soon going to tangle with the vicious Vicicle, he preferred to remain unseen. He wasn't the only one whose powers could punch through cinder blocks, and the

last time he'd fought the self-styled "Cold Pimp Supreme" a flying icicle had hit his armored crotch hard enough to leave him walking funny for two days.

He took a deep breath to try and calm himself, but the moments before the fight were like a drug. Later on at home, when he was swallowing ibuprofen and trying to stretch the soreness out of his limbs, he'd see everything he did as an exercise in self-sacrifice, as a martyrdom for justice, as self-less and high-minded heroism. But at moments like this, right before gittin' it *on*, he had to admit it was fun. It was black-diamond skiing and high-stakes poker and after-hours dance clubbing all rolled into one magnificent, brightly colored

thing. If he had to take a couple of shots to the 'nads now and then, it was worth it for the rush.

(He always thought of his super-clashes as "gittin' it *on*" and had considered trying to make "Let's git it *on!*" his tag-line. But he couldn't; the guy with the flame-colored cape was too self-conscious to do it. He knew with a bleak certainty that snarky sexual banter would inevitably follow, not just from the villainous, but from those goddamn teens on the Internet. Villains demeaned everything. It was one more thing to hold against them.)

A couple of inches off the floor of the New City History Museum, he drifted forward, unseen, no footsteps

to hear, inching closer to the center of the crime, feeling the temperature drop from summery to cool to cold. When he started to see snow on the floor, he smiled. No footprints from him.

His breath was visible as he came around the corner into the museum's great central chamber. It didn't occur to him that might give him away until he heard Vicicle's odd mix of lordly formality and coarse gutter patois.

"Kid Hell," he drawled. "Thou art prompt wid' a realness."

But the hero didn't hear the villain say "Slumber gently, y'all," because a bolt of frosty force had already smashed his face and left him dazed on the floor.

When he awoke, Kid Hell's teeth were chattering viciously, and he could feel cold leaking into his feet and arms. Spread-eagled in midair, his limbs were frozen into a massive snowball behind him, pushing his back into an uncomfortable arc.

"Behold the great icy fool," intoned Vicicle. Kid Hell could hear him, but not see him. He craned his neck down and just barely caught sight of his foe sitting on a looted Theban judge's chair. A woman was sitting on his lap, absent-mindedly stroking his hair.

"Y'all might take yo' shot, bitch-ass," the villain continued, "if thou trusteth thy aim to smite me an' miss my new friend, Museum Director Bates."

"I loooove you," the mesmerized woman crooned.

"Shut up, baby, I know it."

Kid Hell desperately tried to find an option. Blast the ice away from his hands and feet? No, he'd break his own bones. The ball was too heavy to fly off the floor. Desperately, he turned himself invisible, hoping that Vicicle might think he'd teleported....

No luck. Instead of a startled mistake, Vicicle responded to Kid Hell's gambit with a deep laugh and a snowball to the chest.

"He still there, see," he said, "And his puny games best stop immediately, lest my wrath fall upon him through a groin pummeling of awe-striking proportions, yuh huh."

"What is it you want, you frozen deviant?"

"Want? I wanna make money and bend bitches, yo, but first I got bidness. Don't you worry 'bout what I want. Concern thyself with what I command!"

"Oh, so you need my help?" Kid Hell asked.

"Word unto thy sagging-teated materfamilias, I *need* nothing. But you need to get yo' head straight and bend knee to thy lord and master, rightly won through battle's trial!"

"Sure, just let me down..."

"Soon enough. We ain't got much time. The Reaver, the Roamer and the Robot Messiah are on they way here and anon, we must attend to their deprivations an' whatnot."

"The Three-R All-Stars? Oh, they'll settle your hash soon enough, Vicicle! My embarrassment is a small price to pay..."

"Those dumb fools think they heroes, just like you. Ignorant, they think they're coming for me, but they bein' led by the nose. 'S all about Cambodia, boy!"

Kid Hell blinked. "I knew there was an exhibition opening here, stuff from that temple on the Cambodian flag..."

"I'm confident that yo' deep and inky ignorance makes no exception for Indochinese cultural history," the villain spat, adding "Bee-yotch" as an afterthought. "The great city temple of Angkor was left untouched by Cambodia's civil war, with even the Khmer Rouge respecting its integrity..."

"Keep talking," Kid Hell said as he struggled to see if he could free a hand by stripping it out of its frozen glove. "This is fascinating."

"Aight then, let's try another way. Where'd superheroes come from?"

"Uh... various places. Genetic engineering, um, a tech accident for Robot Messiah... implants... nanotechnology... um..."

"An' all that nano jive did *nut-hin'* before 1991, an' it *all* came together that one year?"

"Hey, I read all about it in that one *Wired* article, it was... was... emergent complexity! Chaos math, that explained it! Chaos math... and stuff," he mumbled.

"Thou hast dined upon this fatuous claim of 'emergent complexity' as if 'twere the finest Chateaubriand steak, when verily 'tis naught but a stank-ass pile of doo-doo butter."

Kid Hell blinked. "What?"

"1991! The end of the Cambodian civil war, the beginning of the looting of Angkor Wat! Five hun'red an' forty guardian statues displaced, stolen, chopped up an' sent abroad after centuries undisturbed! Including the one you frozen against right now!"

"What the hell does that have to do with anything?"

"When'd you start hearin' the voice?"

Kid Hell felt a chill that had nothing to do with the giant ice ball at his back. "I don't hear voices."

"Nah, but you hear *a voice*, don'tcha? Or is it just a feelin'? An inchoate and partially-formed sensation, emotions alien to yo' former life but seeming more natural and native daily? Something in you, put into words or merely a tugging of spirit, crying for destruction, excitement, release?"

"No..."

"Oh aie, don't try an' fool a pimp, boy." Vicicle was on his feet now, staring arrogantly up at his prisoner. His embroidered blue coat brushed the snow with its white trim, gold sparkling from his teeth, the peacock feather in his wide-brimmed hat bobbing gently as he spoke.

"You think a brother in the 'hood with a few tricks is gonna essperiment with 'nanites' or have a 'radiation accident'? I'm possessed, an' so are you, and so are those three wroth knaves heading here right now to destroy that statue once an' for all. Oh, my ungentle spirit was well fuddled from its age-long confinement in darkness vile, and seeing my raiment took me for a king. How it raged to learn it had gifted icy glory upon a common bawd! But so long as

the statue remains, it is trapped within me, bound in part to my will. Let your fellow ‘heroes,’ your All-Stars, let them have a piece a’ me an’ I promise that guardian’s gonna get blowed up inna battle. They fierce. You help me, we might just fight ‘em off, keep the statue whole, keep a lid on this bubblin’ kettle of devil poo.”

“You’re insane.”

“On my honor I speak truth.” Vicicle shrugged. “You can kill me. You can eyebeam the livin’ crap outta me right now, f’real. I’m playin’ dou-

ble or nothin’.” Outside the hall, Kid Hell could hear the thundering footsteps of the Robot Messiah. “Or you can let yourself believe what you know, deep down. Somethin’ in you ain’t good, it’s evil. You can accept truth and just maybe fight the beast. Or you can deny it, remain no more than an idiot with a flame-print jockstrap, and do far more evil in virtue’s name than ever I have in the cause of vice.”

Mind spinning, Kid Hell felt the ice around him withdraw and he dropped to the floor

with the first thunderous blow against the chamber’s sealed door.

“Hide yo’self,” Vicicle said gruffly as he moved into position. “If them three don’t mop me up right away, they might just let something slip.”

Kid Hell floated to the ceiling, unseen like heat haze on a summer day, as the door sundered.

“Vicicle, you cold-hearted fiend!” cried the Reaver. “Hand over the statue and no one gets hurt!”

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