

CHAPTER 6

CYPHERS

Benoît was leaning over the bar, listening to a young man who, I believe, was ordering for quite a large group. As this customer listed off his drinks, Benoît's hand rested lightly upon the countertop, and I found, for no reason I could readily provide, my gaze was resting upon the fingers of his hand.

Without any warning, or reaction from Benoît himself, there seemed to be movement from the ring finger of his right hand. A slight shudder, a shifting of the skin beneath his fingernail. A small patch of darkness seemed to grow just below it, expanding until it resolved itself into the shape of an insect. It pushed itself smoothly and quickly out from below his fingernail and dropped down onto the bar, scuttling away and out of sight so quickly I lost it almost immediately. It had all happened in a matter of moments, and there was no blood, no reaction from Benoît, no evidence that it had truly happened at all, apart from my shaking legs and the feeling I was going to collapse.

—MAG 102: “Nesting Instinct”

In addition to the resources available to a character based on their type or their focus—abilities that are always available and expected—PCs have access to a small number of abilities that are ephemeral and transitory. Called cyphers, these abilities represent luck, momentary inspiration, desperation, machinations of The Web, or, more broadly, the ineffable influence of all the dread powers at work. They can grant a PC a useful power that can restore them, inspire a new plan or direction, ease tasks, and more.

Because cyphers are driven by happenstance and the heat of the moment, characters don't choose them. The GM—representing fate, in this process—assigns them to the PCs. But as this happens between moments of action or drama, when the PCs are resting, the players also have a hand in directing the narrative that cyphers affect. This is because the player chooses when to use a cypher, and which one they use. Characters have a cypher limit that increases as they advance, representing the maximum number of cyphers at their disposal.

Regardless of what they do, cyphers are single-use effects and are always lost when used. Unless a cypher's description says otherwise, it works only for the character who activates it. Cyphers represent a character's personal luck or inspiration.

Cyphers are a game mechanic designed for frequent use and replenishment. PCs can have only a small number of cyphers at any given

Cyphers lead to fun game moments where a player can say “Well, I’ve got an X that might help in this situation,” and X is always different. Cyphers keep the game fresh and interesting.

time, and since it's easy to get more, they're encouraged to use them at a steady pace.

In theory, the cyphers gained by the PCs are determined randomly. However, the GM can also choose them deliberately.

GAINING AND REPLENISHING CYPHERS

Characters start with a full complement of cyphers, up to their limit. Once a cypher "slot" is freed up because a cypher is used, the character can gain a new one by resting. The rest must be at least ten minutes, but it can be the same rest used to recover points in a Pool or to reduce Stress. Normally this can only be done once a day (once between their ten-hour rests), so players might choose to wait until they have more than one slot free for new cyphers for maximum benefit.

Instead, the GM could choose significant points in the story when new cyphers might simply come unbidden to the PCs. Everyone could get a new cypher in the wake of a major discovery or success, or to help compensate them after a harrowing ordeal.

Cyphers don't have to be used to make room for new ones. A character can use an action to flush a cypher, freeing up space to acquire one later. Once a cypher is discarded, it is gone and can't be immediately regained.

USING CYPHERS

Most cyphers take one action to activate, just like any other ability. However, some cyphers are marked "instant" and can be used as part of another action or even when the PC is reacting to another character's action, such as when the PC is attacked.

Cyphers can be used automatically; they don't require a roll for the PC to gain their benefit because most cyphers only affect the PC. However, if a cypher does affect a target, the action to use it is Intellect based unless described otherwise. For example, using the breathing room cypher could be Speed based if the PC describes their action as quickly knocking whatever the target is holding from their hands.

Once a cypher is activated, if it has an ongoing effect, that effect applies only to the character who activated the cypher.

CYPHERS LEVELS AND EFFECTS

All cyphers have a level and an effect. The level sometimes determines an aspect of the cypher's power (how long it lasts, for example), but otherwise it only determines the general efficacy, the way level works with anything else. The Level entry for a cypher is usually a die roll, sometimes with a modifier, such as 1d6 or 1d6 + 4. The GM can roll to determine the cypher's level or can allow the player to roll when they receive the cypher.



CYPHER TABLE

d00	Cypher	34–35	Help from a stranger	72–73	Smell of blood (instant)
01–02	Another twist (instant)	36–37	Implore The Flesh	74	Spiral's luck (instant)
03–04	Big picture	38–39	Jigsaw solver	75–76	Squirm (instant)
05–06	Binary (instant)	40–41	Last words	77–78	Stare into The Vast
07	Body builder	42–43	Learn from The Web	79–80	Strange music
08–09	Breathing room (instant)	44–45	Lesson of The Boneturner	81–82	Taking stock
10–11	Burning desire (instant)	46–47	Librarian's pupil	83–84	Thought for the day
12–13	Cheating death (instant)	48–49	Like an Avatar (instant)	85–86	Thrill of the chase
14–15	Curiosity	50–51	Meat	87–88	Tightrope
16–17	Dance through the maze	52–53	Nemesis	89–90	Uncanny valley (instant)
18–19	Deathly silent and still (instant)	54–55	Nightfall	91–92	Watcher's know-how
20–21	Desperate effort (instant)	56–57	Observer effect	93	Weaver's encouragement
22–23	Eye contact (instant)	58–59	Of The Beholding	94–95	Well-being
24–25	Flee The Hunt! (Instant)	60–61	Of The Flesh	96–97	What we all ignore
26–27	Gift of The Piper (Instant)	62–63	Panopticon (instant)	98–99	What we lose (instant)
28–29	Guess you had to be there	64–65	Personal space	00	Words of the puppeteer (instant)
30–31	Gut feeling	66–67	Risen wind		
32–33	Hard shoulder (instant)	68–69	Sculptor's tool (instant)		
		70–71	Show must go on		

CYPHER LIST**ANOTHER TWIST (INSTANT)****Level:** 1d6

Important problems require elevated focus.

One die roll of your choosing gets rerolled.

BIG PICTURE**Level:** 1d6 + 2

Everything seems more vivid. For one hour per cypher level, you know when any movement occurs within short range and when large creatures or objects move within long range. You also know the number and size of the creatures or objects in motion.

BINARY (INSTANT)**Level:** 1d6 + 2

You correctly guess the PIN code allowing access to a phone, door lock, debit card, and so on, or you guess the alphanumeric passcode for a laptop, website, or similar situation, as long as the level of the object or program is equal to or less than this cypher's level.

BODY BUILDER**Level:** 1d6 + 2

Drawing on your inner reserves, you add 1 to your Might Edge for one hour (or 2 if the cypher is level 5 or higher).

BREATHING ROOM (INSTANT)**Level:** 1d6 + 1

As part of a physical action on your part (an attack, an “accidental” bump, a startling shout, pushing by on the way to somewhere else, etc.), you force an NPC within immediate range whose level is lower than this cypher's level to drop whatever they are holding.

BURNING DESIRE (INSTANT)**Level:** 1d6

This particular predicament allows you to **use 1 level of Stress** as an asset on your action without incurring a GM intrusion, as normally happens.

Using Stress, page 129

Damage track, page 132

CHEATING DEATH (INSTANT)

Level: 10

The circumstances were horrific but not fatal.

If you reach the last step on the [damage track](#), you go into a near-death coma for a week rather than dying. You have a serious scar even after you recover.

CURIOSITY

Level: 1d6 + 2

You reflect on excellence, adding 1 to your Intellect Edge for one hour (or 2 if this cypher's level is 5 or higher).

DANCE THROUGH THE MAZE

Level: 1d6

If you can imagine it, you can become it. All your tasks involving manual dexterity—such as pickpocketing, lockpicking, juggling, operating on a patient, defusing a bomb, and so on—are eased by one step for one hour, or two steps for one hour if this cypher's level is 5 or higher.

DEATHLY SILENT AND STILL (INSTANT)

Level: 1d6

You hide so well (assuming there is some way to conceal yourself) that absolutely no one is aware of you for one round.

DESPERATE EFFORT (INSTANT)

Level: 1d6

You're in the flow, gaining one free level of Effort to one task without spending points from a Pool. The level of Effort provided by this cypher does not count toward the maximum amount of Effort you can normally apply to one task.

EYE CONTACT (INSTANT)

Level: 1d6 + 4

You convey simple information to a known ally who can see you using only expression, gestures, or references (such as a line from a movie). Only you and your ally understand what is being communicated—or really, that anything is being communicated at all. The limit of the “message” is about one word per level of the cypher.

FLEE THE HUNT! (INSTANT)

Level: 1d6

If you're being chased, you get away. The pursuer eventually gives up (based on the circumstances). However, if the pursuer is given the opportunity—such as you returning—they may give chase again, and this time it is resolved normally.

GIFT OF THE PIPER (INSTANT)

Level: 1d6

Seeing your chance, you take an immediate additional action on your turn.

GUESS YOU HAD TO BE THERE

Level: 1d6

You recall any one experience you've ever had. The experience can be no longer than one minute per cypher level, but the recall is perfect, so (for example) if you saw someone dial a phone, you remember the number.

GUT FEELING

Level: 1d6 + 4

When faced with a choice between two known options, you pick the most correct one based on the circumstances. If you're following someone who gives you the slip, you get a gut feeling (provided by the GM) if they turned left or right. If you have to cut the red wire or the green wire to defuse a bomb, you choose the right one. If you're trying to solve a murder and you've narrowed the suspect list down to two, you identify the killer. The gut feeling doesn't work if neither of the two choices is the correct one.

HARD SHOULDER (INSTANT)

Level: 1d6 + 4

Skill or blind luck allows you to avoid a single attack from your attacker if their level is lower than the cypher's level. You suffer no damage or effect.

HELP FROM A STRANGER

Level: 1d6

You suddenly remember that you brought—or were given—a necessary item not recorded on your character sheet. Alternatively, you know how to cobble together a makeshift replacement for the needed item in a minute's time, using materials at hand. (Choose whichever fits the situation better.)

IMPOLE THE FLESH

Level: 1d6 + 2

Rolling your shoulders and centering your breath, you regain a number of points equal to this cypher's level to your Speed Pool.

JIGSAW SOLVER

Level: 1d6

Hardly anything gets past you. All your tasks involving intelligent deduction—such as playing chess, inferring a connection between clues, solving a mathematical problem, finding a bug in computer code, and so on—are eased by two steps for one hour.

LAST WORDS

Level: 1d6

If you spend a minute or so speaking to nearby allies, talking about the importance of what you're about to attempt, how strength comes from unity, how everyone working together creates something greater than its parts, and similar themes, you and your allies lose Stress in an amount equal to the cypher level.

LEARN FROM THE WEB

Level: 1d6

Sometimes all it takes is focus. For the next day, you are effectively trained in a predetermined skill (or two skills if this cypher's level is 5 or higher). The skill could be anything (including something specific to the operation of a particular device), or roll a d00 to choose a common skill.

d00 Result

01–10	Melee attacks
11–20	Ranged attacks
21–40	One type of academic or esoteric lore (biology, history, occultism, and so on)
41–50	Researching
51–60	Forensics
61–70	Persuasion
71–75	Mechanics
76–80	Speed defense
81–85	Intellect defense
86–90	Swimming
91–95	Psychology
96–00	Stealth

LESSON OF THE BONETURNER

Level: 10

If you reach the second-to-last step on the damage track (debilitated) and survive the experience, you find renewed purpose during your recovery. When you're hale again, you gain a [character advancement](#) step—skill training, +4 points to add to your Pools, +1 to Effort, or +1 to Edge—without having to spend 4 XP.

*Character advancement,
page 140*

LIBRARIAN'S PUPIL**Level:** 1d6

You are dramatically but temporarily inspired, allowing you to ease one specific kind of physical action by three steps. Once activated, this boost can be used a number of times equal to the cypher level, but only within a twenty-four-hour period. The boost takes effect each time the action is performed. For example, a level 3 cypher boosts the first three times that action is attempted. Roll a d00 to determine the action.

d00 Result

01–15	Melee attack
16–30	Ranged attack
31–40	Speed defense
41–50	Might defense
51–60	Intellect defense
61–68	Gymnastics
69–76	Endurance
77–84	Driving
85–92	Equipment operation
93–94	Stealth
95–96	Initiative
97–98	Perception
99	Performance
00	Tracking

LIKE AN AVATAR (INSTANT)**Level:** 1d6 + 2

Sometimes everything falls perfectly into place. Treat your action as if you had rolled a natural 20.

MEAT**Level:** 1d6

You psych yourself up, reducing the Stress you suffer from physical injury by 1 for one hour per cypher level. You still suffer Stress from mental shock or despair normally.

NEMESIS**Level:** 1d6 + 1

Your actions and/or words are especially startling. One NPC within immediate range whose level is lower than the cypher level decides to leave, using their next five rounds to move away quickly.

NIGHTFALL**Level:** 1d6

Determined to keep going, you use senses other than sight to get by for one hour per cypher level. You aren't hindered on tasks to perceive or attack in dark conditions.

OBSERVER EFFECT**Level:** 1d6

When you look around an immediate area, if there are any hidden clues significant to the current investigation, you notice them.

OF THE BEHOLDING**Level:** 1d6

Feeling especially alert, you have an asset to perception tasks for one hour per cypher level.

OF THE FLESH**Level:** 1d6

Your body embraces fight instead of flight.

All your noncombat tasks involving raw strength—such as breaking down a door, lifting a heavy boulder, forcing open elevator doors, competing in a weightlifting competition, and so on—are eased by two steps for one hour.

PANOPTICON (INSTANT)**Level:** 1d6

Fear is a great motivator. You memorize everything you see for thirty seconds per cypher level and store what you see permanently in your long-term memory. This cypher is useful for watching someone pick a specific lock, enter a complex code, or do something else that happens quickly.



PERSONAL SPACE

Level: 1d6 + 4

Flinching isn't always bad. For the next day, you have an asset to Speed defense rolls.

RISEN WIND

Level: 1d6 + 2

You catch your second wind, regaining a number of points equal to this cypher's level to your Might Pool.

SCULPTOR'S TOOL (INSTANT)

Level: 1d6

The tool feels so comfortable in your hand that you have an additional asset for any one task using it, even if that means exceeding the normal limit of two assets.

SHOW MUST GO ON

Level: 1d6

You spot an untended ladder, hard hat, clipboard and pen, cleaning cart and apron, or whatever is appropriate to the circumstances that, once obtained, allow you and up to two allies to slip into a building without drawing attention. If your entrance is challenged by guards or others monitoring the area, you and your allies' disguise and/or associated deception tasks are eased by two steps. The benefits of this cypher usually last for several hours.

SMELL OF BLOOD (INSTANT)

Level: 1d6

Outraged, inspired, or fueled by desperate need, your attack deals extra damage equal to this cypher's level.

SPIRAL'S LUCK (INSTANT)

Level: 1d6

Luck sometimes swings your way, and an attack that would normally inflict a serious injury on you gives 2 points of Stress instead.

SQUIRM (INSTANT)

Level: 1d6

An adrenaline jolt eases the action you are taking by three steps.

STARE INTO THE VAST

Level: 1d6 + 2

Stilling your racing thoughts, you regain a number of points equal to this cypher's level to your Intellect Pool.

STRANGE MUSIC

Level: 1d6

You take a moment to center yourself, and you lose an amount of Stress equal to this cypher's level.

TAKING STOCK

Level: 1d6 + 2

Putting together subtle clues and things you've seen and learned, you can ask the GM one question and get a general answer. The GM assigns a level to the question, so the more obscure the answer, the more difficult the task. Generally, knowledge that you could find by looking somewhere other than your current location is level 1, and obscure knowledge of the past is level 7.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Level: 1d6

You remember a pertinent detail regarding the current situation. The detail must be something that can be learned by normal research.

THRILL OF THE CHASE

Level: 1d6

The situation demands haste. For one minute, you can move a long distance instead of a short distance as an action.

TIGHTROPE

Level: 1d6 + 2

Galvanized by your plight, you add 1 to your Speed Edge for one hour (or 2 if the cypher is level 5 or higher).

UNCANNY VALLEY (INSTANT)

Level: 1d6 + 3

After talking with someone for at least a couple of rounds, you have a better understanding of what they would need to hear to find your deception or persuasion more believable and/or credible, easing a deception or persuasion task by three steps.

WATCHER'S KNOW-HOW

Level: 1d6

You know where to look or who to ask to find a significant piece of information. The GM might provide multiple options. This can be used when you start research or while you're searching for clues. For example, if you want to know if anyone's been in an apartment in the past 24 hours, the GM might say that you can look at the carpet to see if it's trodden upon, or that you can speak to the building manager to view the footage from the security cameras in the hallway.

WEAVER'S ENCOURAGEMENT

Level: 1d6

Your encouraging words and presence motivate someone next to you, granting them an asset on their next task. You encourage up to three characters at once if this cypher's level is 5 or higher.

WELL-BEING

Level: 1d6

You're jacked up on a cocktail of fear and adrenaline. For one round per cypher level, you can act as if one step higher on the damage track than you actually are, as long as you are not dead.

WHAT WE ALL IGNORE

Level: 1d6

Determined not to let things get to you, for one hour per cypher level, you reduce the Stress you suffer from mental shock or despair by 1 each time it occurs. You still suffer Stress from physical injury normally.

WHAT WE LOSE (INSTANT)

Level: 1d6 + 3

You brush past someone, coming away with something from their pocket, bag, or other container, assuming they're carrying anything. This cypher eases a pickpocketing task by two steps, or four steps if the cypher is level 7 or higher.

WORDS OF THE PUPPETEER (INSTANT)

Level: 1d6

Determined not to fail, you gain an additional asset for any one task involving verbal interaction, even if that means exceeding the normal limit of two assets.



It was dark inside, lit only by what spilled in through the open doorway. I could hear a sound like the turning of an old film reel, but I couldn't say where from. I stood there, unable to step inside, not because of fear, but because the space inside was threaded all over with film strips. Up and down, one side to the other, wrapping around and through each other. I gingerly reached out and touched one and, as I did, Dexter seemed to emerge from the darkness. At first, I thought he was taller than usual, but then I realized that he was suspended, ever so slightly, by the strips of film, his feet a good couple of inches off the floor. He was very calm as he asked what I wanted, and when I stutteringly explained the situation, he just nodded and said we should feel free to rearrange however we liked. Then he closed the door and I left, trying very hard to convince myself that he had only had two arms.

—MAG 110: "Creature Feature"

