

# HOUSE OF CARDS

*A Modern Fantasy Story Game*





A decorative horizontal border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns, rendered in a light gray color. The text 'HOUSE OF CARDS' is centered within this border.

# HOUSE OF CARDS

*A Modern Fantasy Story Game by Neal Stidham*

Parenthesis Press

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## Preface and Acknowledgements

This game started as a submission to a design challenge at RPG.net in 2008, and had it not finished strongly in the eyes of the judges, it might not have continued to develop into what you now hold. It's commonly held that creating role-playing games is a labor of love by necessity, and I suppose that's true in this case; I don't expect this little offering to be of interest to any but a small handful of dreamers, but if this inspires or just pleases you, whether as something you play or just something you read, thank you.

The visual aesthetic of this book is heavily influenced by the story-books of the late Victorian era, particularly in terms of the layout and the minimal use of illustration. Some contemporary elements were incorporated, such as the style of some of the illustrations and insights into composition, but the feel should still strongly evince the old volumes of, say, the Grimm Brothers that you might still have tucked away on a shelf somewhere.

My gratitude to those who provided input during the game's evolution: John Adamus, Erin Ayers, Joy Carter, James DeBruicker, Bradley Eggleston, Sarah Fitch, Sara Grove, Kenneth Hite, Mike Holmes, Matthew Karabache, Joshua Kronengeld, Li Marcus, Tore Nielsen, Lisa Padol, Geoffrey Schaller, Travis Stout, and Jennifer Wong.

It's impossible to give enough space to list all of the influences on this game, but the most significant are as follows:

Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. The influences couldn't be more obvious. The Queens' personalities are perfect for Comtes, the mirror-ways are right there, and Alice would be a perfect Fool-Bearer.

Susannah Clarke, *Johnathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*. A latter-day example of the sort of peculiarly, anachronistically modern whimsy one can bring to the game. The thistle-haired man is a wonderful template for a Comte.

Neil Gaiman, *Neverwhere* (among others). Of course, the collected *Sandman* remains vital reading as well, but to understand the tenor of a normal person's experience being thrust suddenly into a parallel world,

read the novelization of Gaiman's BBC series *Neverwhere*.

Thomas Ligotti, short stories. Make no mistake: dreams can be horrific. While *House of Cards* is not overtly a game of horror, the dark and the weird lurk around every corner. Ligotti's fiction captures feverish nightmare visions that aim to unsettle rather than shock. Of particular interest, "Vastarien" from the collection *Songs of a Dead Dreamer* is as perfect a sketch of a dreamer descending into the Megrin and glimpsing Beyond as any extant.

Winsor McCay, *Little Nemo in Slumberland*. The innocent wonder of Nemo's adventures are always tinged with a precipitous feel, as though the narrative is about to take a sharp turn at any moment, the way a dream should. The surreal imagery blending the ordinary world with Nemo's reveries informs the way a *House of Cards* scenario looks to us.

Jenna Moran, *Nobilis*. I'll admit it freely: *House of Cards* would not exist without *Nobilis*, particularly the second edition. Since that game's tone has evolved with the release of its third edition, this game is content to occupy a niche left. Much inspiration for *House of Cards* may also be had from the fiction at Dr. Moran's blog, *Hitherby Dragons* (<http://hitherby.com>).

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*Look around you. Every mirror leads to ten thousand worlds.*

That woman down the street who always gives you the funny look when you walk past her house? The one with the sprinklers, and the yappy little dog? You always think you know her from somewhere, even though you've never spoken.

*Tonight, when you dream, she will be a queen with skin like beaten gold. She will invite you to her palace behind the mirror in your room, plying your heart with wine-sweet words. Can you trust her?*

A different postman comes to your house every day, yet he greets you exactly the same way. At first, you thought you'd ask about that, but it just kept slipping your mind, and now you think nothing of it.

*As you slumber, he emerges with inky eyes from your shadows, bearing nine swords. He steals your dreams, delivering them like so many letters to others who would use them against you. Can you defeat him?*

Symbols are not merely abstract concepts: they exist to hold together the fabric of the world. The scaffolding of the material world is held together by cotter-pins of analogies. But something has gone terribly wrong, there Beyond the looking-glass.

*You stand in the breach between Here and Beyond to renew the World.*

## GLOSSARY

- **Alchemy:** *Sorcery that alters the properties of material things; the Path of Swords.*
- **Archetype:** *the powerful quasi-beings who exist both Here and Beyond, responsible for directing the proper flow of the universe's energies.*
- **Bearer:** *the mortal who has become host to an Archetype.*
- **Beyond:** *the counterpart to our physical reality, the mirror universe home to the Comtes and many of their subordinates.*
- **Castellan:** *potent denizens of Beyond, underlings only to the Comtes and Comtesses.*
- **Chimera:** *a general term for beasts of Beyond, with fantastic abilities and an evil cunning.*
- **Clubs:** *the French suit keyed to creativity, will, the peasantry and the element of fire; equivalent to the Tarot suit of Wands.*
- **Commoner:** *either natives of Beyond who have crossed into Here, or mortals from our reality subjugated to do the bidding of those Beyond by the Megrin.*
- **Comte/Comtesse:** *the supposed lords of Beyond, unique and dangerous; the energies stolen by the Megrin ultimately flow to them.*
- **Correspondence:** *an abstract idea connected to an Archetype symbolically.*
- **Court:** *an informal name for the Regalia.*
- **Cups:** *the Tarot suit keyed to emotions and empathy, the clergy and the element of water; equivalent to the French suit of Hearts.*
- **Diamonds:** *the French suit keyed to the body, physical or material things, commerce and the merchant class, and the element of earth; equivalent to the Tarot suit of Pentacles.*
- **Divination:** *the form of High Magic that taps into the cosmic consciousness to provide information.*

- *Dramatic Time: the convention of breaking time into rounds to determine the effects of contested actions and combat; contrast with Narrative Time.*
- *Eir: raw dream material.*
- *Enchantment: Sorcery that wraps items in magic to give them improved abilities; the Path of Wands.*
- *Haint: a location saturated with eir over a long period of time, usually through the presence of an unbound glass, and thus prone to supernatural events as well as highly attractive to those from Beyond.*
- *Hand: the cards held by a player, representing the character's health and stores of energy.*
- *Hearts: the French suit keyed to emotions and empathy, the clergy and the element of water; equivalent to the Tarot suit of Cups.*
- *Here: our physical reality, as opposed to Beyond.*
- *High Magic: magic which is more potent and complex than Powers; consists of Ways of Divination or Paths of Sorcery.*
- *Hybrid: the variety of Chimera composed of parts from two or more disparate animals in amalgamation.*
- *Imago: the most powerful of Chimerae; dream manifestations of legendary monsters.*
- *Investiture: the moment of becoming a Bearer, when an Archetype's power suffuses one's existence.*
- *Lore: the Way of Divination which seeks out obscure knowledge.*
- *Major Arcana: the Archetypes as codified by the Tarot; energy coalesced and at rest, as opposed to flowing freely (not to be confused with the society of Archetypes called the Regalia).*
- *Megrim: the infectious madness resulting from the consumption of a mortal's dreams by one from Beyond (typically a Chimera or Com-moner).*
- *Minor Arcana: the Tarot cards corresponding to the flows of energy and chance in the universe.*

- *Mirror-way: a road between the worlds which has become stable through frequent use.*
- *Motivations: the four central principles a character holds dear.*
- *Narrative Time: the convention of allowing time in-game to pass at varying speeds as dictated by story concerns rather than breaking time into regular intervals; contrast with Dramatic Time.*
- *Pentacles: sometimes called Coins, the Tarot suit keyed to the body, physical or material things, commerce and the merchant class, and the element of earth; equivalent to the French suit of Diamonds.*
- *Power: an innate magical ability, divided into Lesser and Greater forms.*
- *Principality: a small social group of Bearers within the Regalia.*
- *Renew: discarding one's hand and drawing back to maximum.*
- *Reflection: the variety of Chimera based on a mundane creature from Here but sporting grotesque exaggerations.*
- *Refresh: selectively discarding cards from one's hand and drawing back to maximum.*
- *Regalia: the social body comprised of all Archetypes; this is the term preferred by contemporary Bearers to the older term Triumph.*
- *Relic: a dream-realm that has become self-sustained rather than relying on mortal dreamers to persist.*
- *Replenish: to draw new cards back up to current hand maximum without discarding.*
- *Reversal: the state of an Archetype that has inverted its basic nature to escape disruption, rather than seek a new host. The experience is traumatic for the Bearer.*
- *Round: the interval of Dramatic Time in which a player can draw a card from their hand and describe an action or effect in one simple sentence.*
- *Secrets: the Way of Divination which uncovers hidden truths.*

- *Shuffle: a dramatic interlude, occurring when the last card is drawn from the deck, and signaling a narrative climax for one or more characters.*
- *Sorcery: the form of High Magic that works major changes on the world; divided into the Paths of Alchemy, Enchantment, Summoning, and Warding.*
- *Spades: the French suit keyed to physical force, reason, the military and aristocracy, and the element of air; equivalent to the Tarot suit of Swords.*
- *Summoning: Sorcery that constructs items from dream-stuff; the Path of Cups.*
- *Swords: the Tarot suit keyed to physical force, reason, the military and aristocracy, and the element of air; equivalent to the French suit of Spades.*
- *Target: the difficulty of a contested action, as determined by the referee. Higher targets represent more difficult actions.*
- *Triumph: an antiquated term for the society of Archetypes, now relegated to use by older Bearers and supplanted by the more contemporary Regalia.*
- *Visions: the Way of Divination which peers into the future.*
- *Wands: sometimes called Staves, the Tarot suit keyed to creativity, will, the peasantry and the element of fire; equivalent to the French suit of Clubs.*
- *Warding: Sorcery concerned with canceling or unmaking other magic; the Path of Pentacles.*
- *Way: a particular form of Divination.*
- *Weird: a magically-enforced destiny which confers power to its holder.*
- *Wonderment: a naturally-occurring magical phenomenon not part of the purview of an Archetype.*
- *World, The: the referee of the game; also, the 21st Major Arcanum of the Tarot — the Archetype and its Bearer vanished over 100 years ago.*

WORLDS



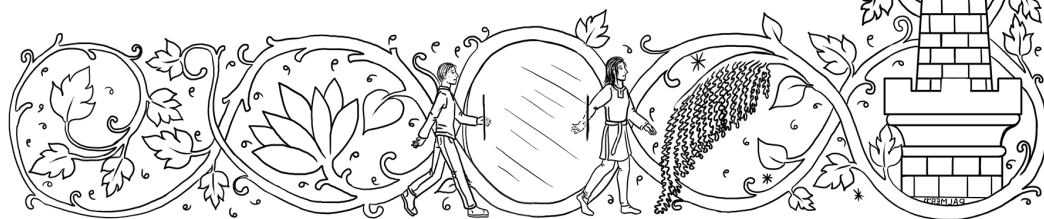


Eir cannot help but take on properties based on the presence of thought: we cast these shadows in dream simply by existing. It is possible for these bubbles of dreams to be drawn together by like-minded dreamers; two dreamers having similar dreams will find their dream-realms pulled together as if they were magnets, and the bubbles merge into one larger dream. This does not give them especially more durability – the constituent dreams still mostly collapse when their resident dreamers depart – but the sages note that once a dream-world achieves a certain amount of ubiquity, there remains at least one dreamer in it at all times to maintain its integrity, and thus the realm begins to take on a tenuous permanence. This may be how the *relics* (see below) came into existence, and seems also to be an explanation for the perseverance of other known dream-realms.

## The Unbound Glass

Any reflective surface may potentially serve as a portal between the two realms, but there are several factors to consider. Larger and flatter glass can transmit flows of dream more clearly; one must be able to actually pass bodily through the glass's dimensions just as one would a mundane door. The clarity of the reflection similarly affects its conductivity. Also, older mirrors open more easily because, like an old study acquires the indelible scent of its owner's pipe tobacco with the years, aged mirrors suffuse with eir.

The monk Téodor of Putna noted that a glass with an unfinished edge, lacking a border or frame, may naturally serve as a door to or from Beyond. Such a glass is considered ill-fated, for eir collects and passes through them like smoke through pinpricks in silk, and they draw the dream-





like barometers.

Sages note that natural openings between the two worlds attract creeping vines — even if none would normally be present. For instance, over nearly forty years, a sea of vines three flights deep accreted in the basement of a warehouse in Brooklyn, over an unused pane of opalescent glass left over from the destruction of Louis Comfort Tiffany’s factory. The vines were easily dealt with once discovered. (The serpent ouroboros woven throughout the foliage, however, was not.)

Left long enough, sorcerers remark, the vines sprout blossoms uncharacteristic of their species. On our side of the mirror, the flowers explode with riotous, incandescent rainbow color: the *lotus* blossom of myth, otherwise long since diluted by admixture with lesser strains. Its pollen is condensed eir, and its petals entice any creature that can taste or smell. The flowers of Beyond, in contrast, are milky pearl tipped with gold, delicate to the point of translucency. The legendary *amaranth*, which last grew in our world overhanging the now-lost Fountain of Youth, heals all wounds. Thus, the wise counsel, there are many reasons to be alert for strange blooms.

## The Lore of Reality

As the sage Makamoto Hideo discerned, “All things exist, whether they can or not.” Reality exists as the tangible craft around agglomerations of eir, and conversely, all things dreamed have a reality to them. Some things lack the internal cohesive force of many dreamers supporting them, and they melt into their constituent dream-stuff again as rapidly as fluorine reacts with its surrounding elements

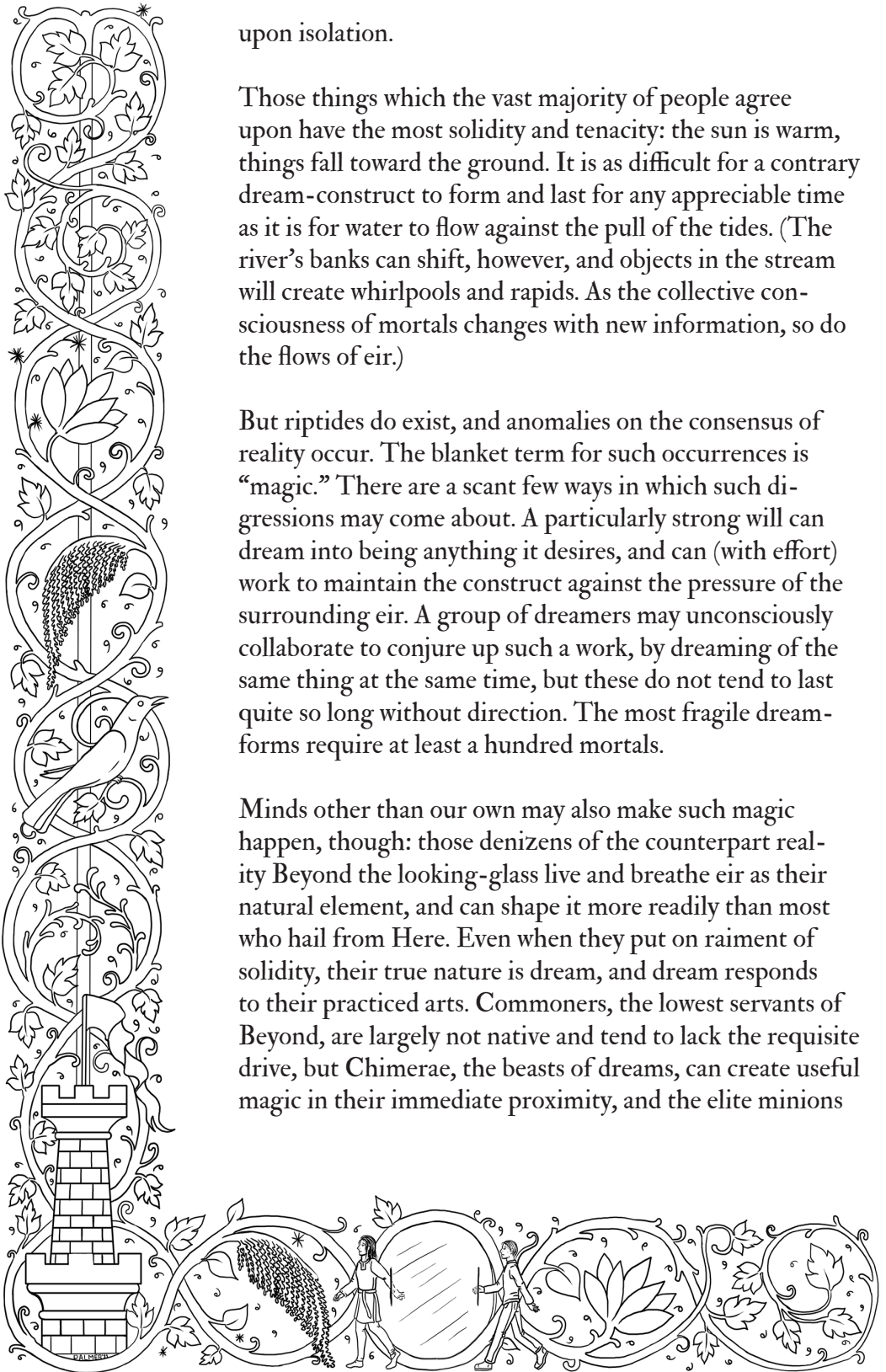


upon isolation.

Those things which the vast majority of people agree upon have the most solidity and tenacity: the sun is warm, things fall toward the ground. It is as difficult for a contrary dream-construct to form and last for any appreciable time as it is for water to flow against the pull of the tides. (The river's banks can shift, however, and objects in the stream will create whirlpools and rapids. As the collective consciousness of mortals changes with new information, so do the flows of eir.)

But riptides do exist, and anomalies on the consensus of reality occur. The blanket term for such occurrences is "magic." There are a scant few ways in which such digressions may come about. A particularly strong will can dream into being anything it desires, and can (with effort) work to maintain the construct against the pressure of the surrounding eir. A group of dreamers may unconsciously collaborate to conjure up such a work, by dreaming of the same thing at the same time, but these do not tend to last quite so long without direction. The most fragile dream-forms require at least a hundred mortals.

Minds other than our own may also make such magic happen, though: those denizens of the counterpart reality Beyond the looking-glass live and breathe eir as their natural element, and can shape it more readily than most who hail from Here. Even when they put on raiment of solidity, their true nature is dream, and dream responds to their practiced arts. Commoners, the lowest servants of Beyond, are largely not native and tend to lack the requisite drive, but Chimerae, the beasts of dreams, can create useful magic in their immediate proximity, and the elite minions



of Beyond known as Castellans can reach out to affect the entire scene.

## The Realm Beyond

Mirrors serve as gateways between the two halves of the universe, linking the shadow and the light, the sane with the incomprehensible. Lewis Carroll may or not have been a Bearer, but many agree that he had a relatively accurate (if incomplete) view of Beyond. Those traveling from Here are warned that the best case scenario is that the laws of nature are simply inverted, such that water flows upward, fire burns cold, and so forth: in other cases, particularly in the mad courts of the Comtes and Comtesses, the local laws are whatever those alien beings see fit at the moment. In the court of the Masked Prince of Luthiers, for instance, a dismal place shrouded in gloom, a laugh causes rubies to rain from the sky — which is punishable by death.

Bearers can use any mirror to travel from one realm to the other, with the expenditure of any card (which returns at the end of the scene — wise travelers may want to step through cautiously, as danger may be waiting across the threshold). If the character wishes to simply peer through the mirror into the other side without crossing, this costs a card as well, but the card replenishes immediately.

Whereas Here the eir is intangible and flows behind the curtains of physical matter, Beyond is dream-stuff made manifest. As such, it is readily malleable to Archetypes (and to the inhabitants there, if they possess the energy). Landscapes can consist of impossible features which shift seamlessly as the story dictates: a Bearer wandering through a forest of clockwork trees expends the three of Cups to



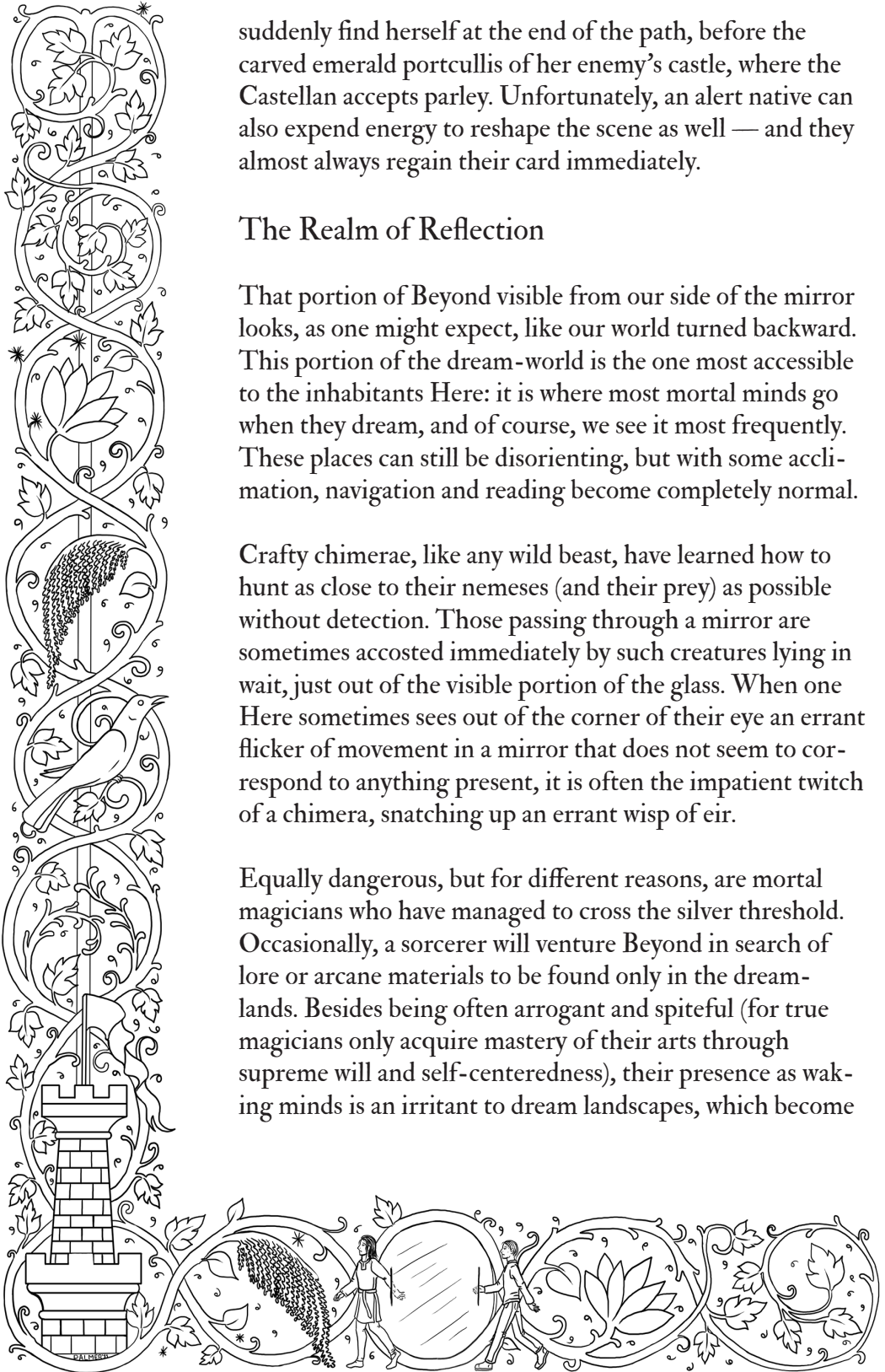
suddenly find herself at the end of the path, before the carved emerald portcullis of her enemy's castle, where the Castellan accepts parley. Unfortunately, an alert native can also expend energy to reshape the scene as well — and they almost always regain their card immediately.

## The Realm of Reflection

That portion of Beyond visible from our side of the mirror looks, as one might expect, like our world turned backward. This portion of the dream-world is the one most accessible to the inhabitants Here: it is where most mortal minds go when they dream, and of course, we see it most frequently. These places can still be disorienting, but with some acclimation, navigation and reading become completely normal.

Crafty chimerae, like any wild beast, have learned how to hunt as close to their nemeses (and their prey) as possible without detection. Those passing through a mirror are sometimes accosted immediately by such creatures lying in wait, just out of the visible portion of the glass. When one Here sometimes sees out of the corner of their eye an errant flicker of movement in a mirror that does not seem to correspond to anything present, it is often the impatient twitch of a chimera, snatching up an errant wisp of eir.

Equally dangerous, but for different reasons, are mortal magicians who have managed to cross the silver threshold. Occasionally, a sorcerer will venture Beyond in search of lore or arcane materials to be found only in the dream-lands. Besides being often arrogant and spiteful (for true magicians only acquire mastery of their arts through supreme will and self-centeredness), their presence as waking minds is an irritant to dream landscapes, which become



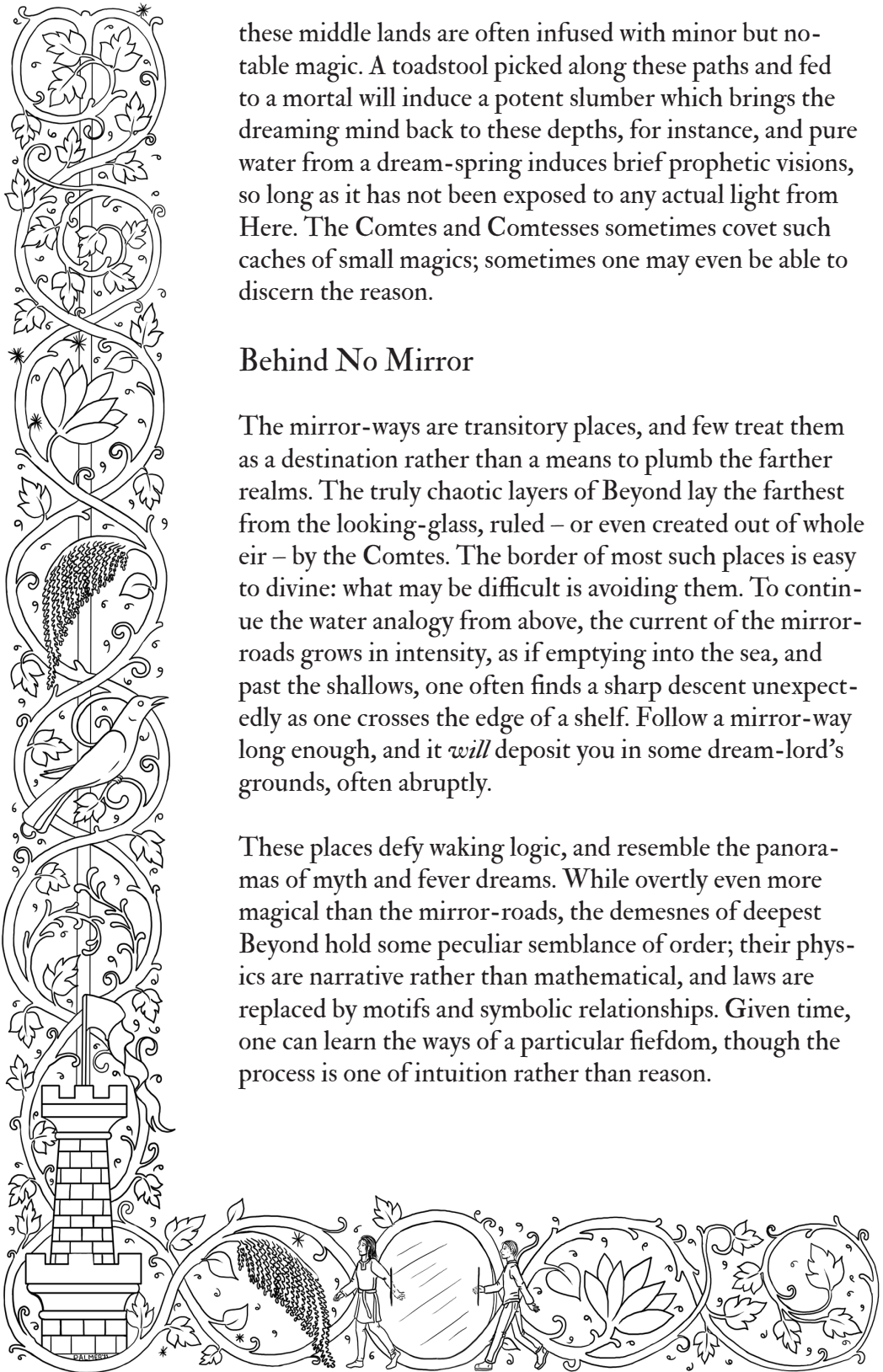


these middle lands are often infused with minor but notable magic. A toadstool picked along these paths and fed to a mortal will induce a potent slumber which brings the dreaming mind back to these depths, for instance, and pure water from a dream-spring induces brief prophetic visions, so long as it has not been exposed to any actual light from Here. The Comtes and Comtesses sometimes covet such caches of small magics; sometimes one may even be able to discern the reason.

## Behind No Mirror

The mirror-ways are transitory places, and few treat them as a destination rather than a means to plumb the farther realms. The truly chaotic layers of Beyond lay the farthest from the looking-glass, ruled – or even created out of whole eir – by the Comtes. The border of most such places is easy to divine: what may be difficult is avoiding them. To continue the water analogy from above, the current of the mirror-roads grows in intensity, as if emptying into the sea, and past the shallows, one often finds a sharp descent unexpectedly as one crosses the edge of a shelf. Follow a mirror-way long enough, and it *will* deposit you in some dream-lord's grounds, often abruptly.

These places defy waking logic, and resemble the panoramas of myth and fever dreams. While overtly even more magical than the mirror-roads, the demesnes of deepest Beyond hold some peculiar semblance of order; their physics are narrative rather than mathematical, and laws are replaced by motifs and symbolic relationships. Given time, one can learn the ways of a particular fiefdom, though the process is one of intuition rather than reason.

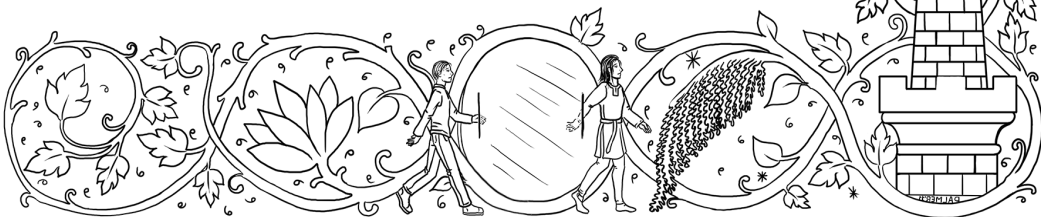


What wise Bearers and dream-explorers have learned is that, in general, the realms of the Comtes conform to a few central laws: each has a Restriction, a Compulsion, and a Signature; each of these traits has a Consequence that arises when it is transgressed. Learning these strictures always proves useful to interlopers, as even the Comtesses seem unable to violate them without a major expenditure of magic and will to change the laws throughout their holdings.

Intrepid mortal sleepers sometimes find their way to these courts, and if any memory of such encounters remains, it is always striking, whether a blissful masked rendezvous or a nightmare drenched in cold sweat. Commoners are sometimes drawn to their masters' domains, particularly after they have lost all functional ties to Here, and this is also where the Castellans hold greatest sway as the harbingers and functionaries of dream life.

## Derelict Dreams

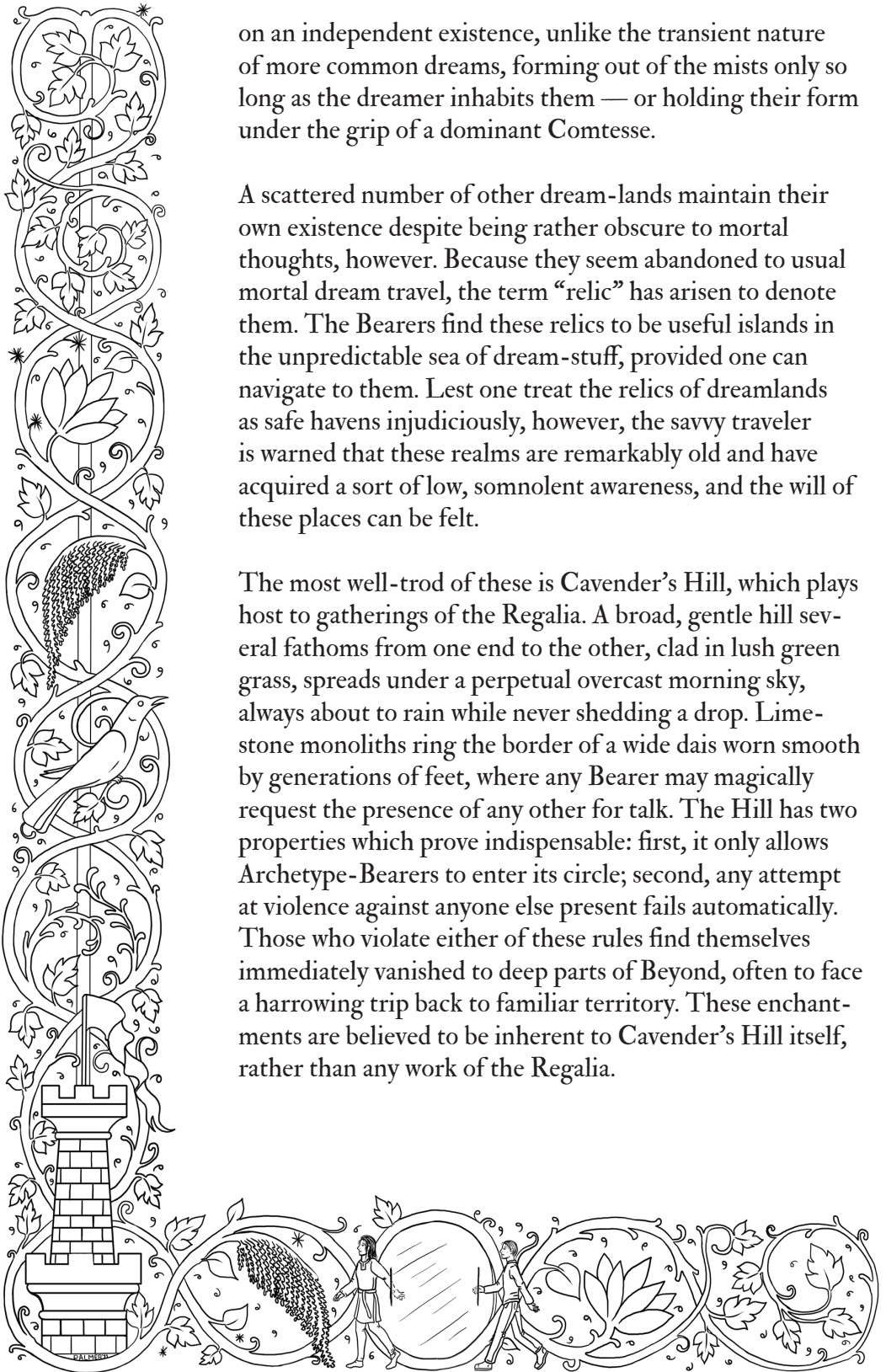
Because dreams are malleable under the hammers of mortal minds, and because there have been so very many minds since the dawn of humanity, there exist vast tracts of Beyond whose shapes have been made fixed, tempered by the repeated passage of dreamers. Many of these are familiar to the waking mind: Hyborian steppes and gloomy Carpathian castles unfurl like matte painting backgrounds in the personal nocturnal cinema of countless readers' reveries, and one can be led by frantic laporine courtiers or trails of gingerbread crumbs. More recent appearances have been noted of sleek, curving spaceship halls or peculiar schools of sorcery. Any vista frequently carved out of the eir by hundreds or thousands of minds eventually solidifies and takes



on an independent existence, unlike the transient nature of more common dreams, forming out of the mists only so long as the dreamer inhabits them — or holding their form under the grip of a dominant Comtesse.

A scattered number of other dream-lands maintain their own existence despite being rather obscure to mortal thoughts, however. Because they seem abandoned to usual mortal dream travel, the term “relic” has arisen to denote them. The Bearers find these relics to be useful islands in the unpredictable sea of dream-stuff, provided one can navigate to them. Lest one treat the relics of dreamlands as safe havens injudiciously, however, the savvy traveler is warned that these realms are remarkably old and have acquired a sort of low, somnolent awareness, and the will of these places can be felt.

The most well-trod of these is Cavender’s Hill, which plays host to gatherings of the Regalia. A broad, gentle hill several fathoms from one end to the other, clad in lush green grass, spreads under a perpetual overcast morning sky, always about to rain while never shedding a drop. Limestone monoliths ring the border of a wide dais worn smooth by generations of feet, where any Bearer may magically request the presence of any other for talk. The Hill has two properties which prove indispensable: first, it only allows Archetype-Bearers to enter its circle; second, any attempt at violence against anyone else present fails automatically. Those who violate either of these rules find themselves immediately vanished to deep parts of Beyond, often to face a harrowing trip back to familiar territory. These enchantments are believed to be inherent to Cavender’s Hill itself, rather than any work of the Regalia.



Surrounding the Hill, one can see the tops of the trees of Cavender’s Wood spread like a blanket in all directions, receding into faint mist. The Wood’s elms intersect copses of their kin Here on occasion, serving as one of the few methods for crossing into dream apart from using the mirror-roads. Though any may wander the Wood (not simply Bearers as is the case with the Hill), there are occasional crashes and groans caused by *something* unseen patrolling the Wood. The presence seems protective of the realm, for only those who harbor ill intent find themselves subject to the guardian’s all-too-visible wrath.

Wandering around the dream-seas is a relic known as the Labyrinthine Academy, made up entirely of agglomerated classrooms in endlessly shifting hallways, which scoops up dreaming souls in order to afflict them with dreams of having missed a vital test, or worse, to be waylaid by the relic’s only inhabitant, a dreadful dream-creature known as the Headmistress. (Peculiarly, all visitors to the Academy find themselves thrust into the position of students, even those who in waking life are teachers or principals of actual schools.) Sages are uncertain about her nature, debating whether or not she is a Comtesse and her realm is simply extraordinary in nature. The Headmistress can adopt the guise of any figure who has served as instructor in the past to the visitor, but her natural form is of a drape of featureless black robes completely obscuring an incredibly tall rail-thin figure. The Headmistress can configure the rooms in the Academy any way she desires, including twisting them into inescapable paradoxical loops or mazes. Observers note that the Headmistress, and the Academy itself, do not seem to seek out eir in the way that the Comtes do, but that they are driven incessantly by a need to “test” all beings they encounter for some inscrutable purpose.



BEARERS



































EXAMPLE: CHARACTER GENERATION

Janet creates a Bearer for an upcoming game. She does not have a definitive concept in mind when she begins, so she opts to draw her Archetype. The referee removes the World, and Janet draws the Hanged Man from the remaining Major Arcana. Pondering the card for a few minutes, she writes down five correspondences: ‘wisdom’ comes first to mind, followed by ‘isolation,’ ‘giving,’ ‘quiet,’ and ‘mentor’, and is inspired to have her character be a librarian.

Janet has 10 points to invest in her four Motivations. She starts with 4 points in Wands, inspired by the tree from which the Hanged Man is suspended. “I oppose falsehoods and lies.” She fights tirelessly against disinformation and ignorance. Janet allots 2 points to Swords: “I fight for education.” She notes that ‘education,’ to her character, encompasses libraries, schools, and books themselves. She cannot pass up the chance to unearth new knowledge, so she invests 3 points in Pentacles: “My greatest desire is secrets.” Finally, her last point goes to Cups: “I love the written word.” Though the texts are replaceable, she always finds a fine book or ancient manuscript appealing.

With these answers in mind, she looks at the sample Greater Powers, choosing Odin’s Eye as the most appropriate for her character. She also notes the Lesser Powers available to all Bearers on her sheet.

Janet names her librarian Genevieve Renier, deciding she is an archivist at Bibliothèque Nationale de France. She is now ready to join the battle against the enemies Beyond. As a newly-imbued Bearer, her starting hand is 5 cards, which she will draw at the beginning of the first session.



# GENEVIEVE RENIER

Bearer of The Hanged Man

## Correspondences

Giving, isolation, mentoring,  
silence, wisdom

## Motivations

Cups: 1 - The written word

Pentacles: 3 - Secrets

Swords: 2 - Education

Wands: 4 - Falsehoods and lies

## Powers

*Odin's Eye (G)*

*A Thousand Faces (L)*,

*Dream-sense (L)*, *Evocation (L)*,

*Inspire (L)*, *Mirror Walk (L)*

HAND 5



LAWS



The cards determine success or failure, but to know which is which, you have to learn how to read them.

## The Minor Arcana

Either one or two decks of cards are used to play *House of Cards*, depending on how frequently you want action to progress. The preferred method is to use two Tarot decks with the Major Arcana removed: one deck is shared amongst the players, while the referee draws from the second. Because plot twists occur when a deck is depleted (known in the rules as a Shuffle), a group may agree to increase the dramatic pace of their story by using only one deck for the entire table.

Each player holds a hand of (initially) five cards representing the ever-changing flow of energies at their disposal. Unlike most role-playing games, these cards represent at once a character's status and ability to perform tasks. Think of them as serving simultaneously as die rolls and health levels.

Players begin each session by *replenishing* their hands, unless the previous session ended in the middle of a dramatic moment (see "The Three Rs," page 51). Otherwise, during a session, players have only the cards in hand with which to act.

Archetypes empower their Bearers in small but important ways on a regular basis. So long as there is no probability of failure, players may narrate their character's activity at a free pace: this is called *Narrative Time*. The net effect of this in game terms is that Bearers always succeed at mundane tasks unless one of the three following things is true:

- the player desires for narrative reasons to fail.
- there is a negative consequence for failure.



- the action is opposed by an outside force or being.

When a Bearer takes an action that requires the expenditure of energy, meaning that it is an action which is opposed or has negative consequences for failure, the character must take an *action*. In game terms, an action is specifically defined as an attempt to perform a feat which could fail: mundane tasks are not considered actions by the rules for purposes of resolving them. When an action may fail, the time in the game slows to *Dramatic Time*, broken into *rounds*, which means each player around the table gets to take one action before returning to the beginning of the sequence.

### Taking Actions

When a character wishes to perform an action that has some chance of failure, the player expends a card (or several cards, in some cases) in an attempt to match or beat the difficulty of the related task, as determined by the referee.

♠ Swords/Spades key to *physical combat, use of force or intimidation, the nobility and military, the intellect and the element of air.*

♣ Wands/Clubs key to *creativity, will, the peasantry and the element of fire.*

♥ Cups/Hearts key to *interpersonal relationships, empathy, communication, the clergy and the element of water.*

♦ Pentacles/Diamonds key to *commerce and merchants, protection, the body, physical or material things, and the element of earth.*

Thus, in order to attack another being physically, one would ideally play a Swords, while to defend, one would prefer to play a Pentacles. Intimidating a creature also falls under Swords, but dealing with it diplomatically requires a Cups,



## Difficulty Numbers During Task Resolution

Face cards always represent magical actions, while number cards may be normal actions or magically-enhanced.

The numerical equivalent of each face card is provided in brackets.

Ace [1] has two special benefits: first, it can be played along with another card freely, adding 1 to its total; second, it makes the action into a magical action that is of either suit (the suit of the original card or the suit of the Ace).

2-3 accomplishes the most basic tasks.

4-5 is the difficulty of routine actions.

6-7 represents activities which require attention and skill.

8-9 denotes significant challenge.

10 is the upper limit of human ability

Page/Jack [11] employs simple magic equivalent to peak human achievement plus luck.

Knight/Joker [12] is the first obviously magical level of difficulty.

Queen [13] defies most explanation.

King [14] accomplishes what seems impossible.

Remember, when a Bearer uses a card of the appropriate suit for the action, the player may draw another immediately, and if the Bearer remained in character for the entire scene, the player replenishes his or her hand afterward.



## Regaining Cards: The Three Rs

There are three important terms that define different ways in which cards cycle: renew, replenish, and refresh.

To *renew* a hand is simply discard your hand and draw back up to your current hand maximum. This represents a dramatic change that throws everyone off-kilter. When a Shuffle occurs, for instance, everyone has the option to renew their hand, becoming part of the plot twist that accompanies the Shuffle if they do. Some Powers meant to cause confusion in a target will force a renewal. This is the simplest and least powerful form of hand management, if for no other reason than that it causes lots of cards to be “cycled”, but it is the baseline from which the others extend.

By comparison, *replenishing* your hand means you keep the cards that you have and draw back up to your maximum. The advantage over renewal is that powerful cards remaining in hand aren’t discarded. It also doesn’t press quite so aggressively toward another Shuffle, since fewer cards are being pulled from the deck. A number of Lesser and Greater Powers include replenishing one’s hand as a part of using them, almost always at the expiration of the power – a notable exception being the Dream-thief ability possessed by denizens of Beyond.

When you *refresh* your hand, you can selectively discard and draw, making it the most potent option. One of the Fool’s possible Greater Powers allows the Fool to refresh his or her hand at a Shuffle instead of renewing; the rarity of this event is a natural limit which reins in the scope of this Power, which thematically represents the Fool’s ability to hold onto lessons learned in preparation for new journeys.



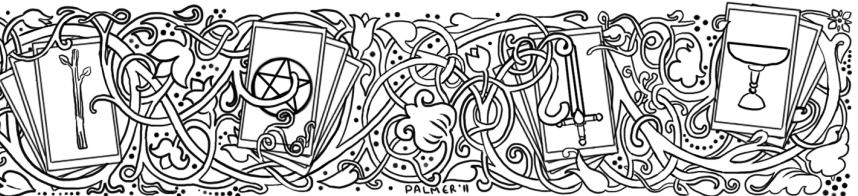
and holding fast against either approach calls for Wands.

These suit correlations are preferred, but a player may potentially play any card in order to resolve a task: whether the card is considered “suited” for the action determines when it is replaced in hand, as well as coloring the details of the action’s resolution, as discussed further below.

The form of the action always mirrors the card played: its suit determines the tone of the action, while the numerical value of the card determines its level of efficacy. The numerical value is of primary importance in determining success or failure: *the action succeeds regardless of suit correspondences if the number is sufficient to meet the difficulty.*

The suit of the card signifies how the action succeeds, which may lead to a Bearer recovering spent cards by being suited or by acting in tune with their Archetype’s correspondence. When a Bearer uses a card for an action to which it is on-suit, that card is replenished immediately: for more on the types of card replacement, see “The Three Rs” on page 51. The universe rewards right action; an Archetype behaving in ways appropriate to their correspondences for an entire scene will replenish their hand completely at the end of a scene. This restriction applies to cards lost in combat, as well (unless the Archetype is Reversed or all cards are depleted – see below). Otherwise, characters moving from one scene to another draw one card if they are not already at their maximum hand size, or if the World deems that a significant amount of “off-screen” Narrative Time passes between scenes.

Let’s say a Bearer is in a situation in which she needs to impress some mortals (under the influence of mental magic) by appearing to be a person worthy of respect. While the five



of Swords is typically only useful when played for a fighting action, for instance, our savvy Bearer could use it to relate tales of martial prowess so convincing and properly tailored to the audience that her standing in their eyes improves. The referee may deem this as an appropriate use of the card, and allow the player to draw to replace it as a suited action. On the other hand, using the five of Swords in an attempt to calm a panicked group of children by shouting at them would almost certainly be a difficult fit, and while it might succeed in the moment, would not be replaced.

## The Shuffle

The cosmos operates in spirals, circular patterns that never quite return to their original point. Any time a character draws the last card in a deck, a Shuffle occurs. Besides reshuf-

### So When Do I Get My Cards Back?

In summary:

If the card you played for an action was on-suit, it is replenished immediately. That includes playing an Ace to shift the suit of an action: both cards are replenished.

If the card you played was in character either for your Bearer or your Archetype, you replenish the card at the end of the scene. Archetypes operate on much more grandiose scales of time.

If the card you played was not suited to the action or in character, sorry. It is up to the World to determine when you have had enough time to rest and regain your cards — typically in between sessions, though not always. (Or, use Inspire.)



fling the discarded cards and starting a new deck, this event signals a dramatic shift in the game. Some climactic event occurs with every Shuffle: a secret is revealed, a new foe appears, a character has a fundamental change in perspective, et cetera. The Shuffle always creates a dramatic change for the player who caused the Shuffle. All other players have the option of keeping their hands as they stand, or renewing their hands by allowing the Shuffle's dramatic effects to directly impact his or her character as well.

### Complications: Losing Cards

Archetypes can expend even a trivial amount of energy to preserve a mortal Bearer from even the most grievous harm. When a Bearer would suffer damage that would significantly injure or even kill them, discarding a card averts all damage. This is only an immediate and momentary effect, so players are encouraged to find more effective ways of dealing with lingering damage sources like fire, radiation, having one's bone marrow turned into locusts, and so on. If the action to prevent the damage is appropriate to the Archetype, the card is replenished immediately.

An Archetype can be caught having expended all its energy, and thus vulnerable to harm. As a result, when a Bearer needs to use a card from hand and has none, one of two possible events occurs.

First, if the Bearer is in a crucial dramatic situation in which the Archetype's correspondences are at stake, its Bearer is preserved even under extreme duress, at a cost to the Archetype's stability. When thus pushed to the brink, an Archetype will become Reversed.



When this occurs, a Shuffle takes place immediately, introducing a plot twist (or revealing a Plot Card, if those optional rules are in play), and then the character's hand is refreshed. A Reversed Bearer's maximum hand size decreases by one. A Reversal means that the Archetype becomes a mirror of itself, associated with contrary elements generally opposing its former self. This is a traumatic and dramatic occurrence (hence the Shuffle), and should not be taken lightly. The Bearer of a Reversed Archetype has gone through the equivalent of a change in fundamental world view or an unforeseen catastrophe, and is now beholden to a being which fundamentally contradicts his or her former role. Unless the Bearer wishes to wait until his or her Archetype is forced to Reverse a second time (a truly spectacular dramatic instance like this should be undertaken

### Paradigm Shifts

Archetypes drive their Bearers to action through cryptic visions, waking dreams, and sudden urges. Fortunately, an Archetype always selects a person with fundamental inclinations towards its nature as a host, but mortals and Archetypes are both complex, multi-faceted beings. Either party may change their focus over time; for mortals, this is a change of heart, while Archetypes sometimes shift emphasis from one part of their domain to another.

A Bearer may adopt another Archetype, provided that the referee has not already designated the new Archetype as having a host. This is a dramatic shift on the level of a Shuffle, but takes place off-stage, so to speak, so the player and the referee should discuss the repercussions for the story. Like realigning from a Reversal, it requires the character to spend an entire session out of the action, meditating and coming to terms with a very deep shift in perception, before returning to play with a new portfolio and outlook.



once a campaign at most), the character may spend an entire session in seclusion and meditation to realign the Archetype to its former state through symbolic action in keeping with the desired character. At this point, the Reversal ends, and the Bearer walks away with a wiser perspective: the player may rewrite any of their correspondences to reflect the progression of their world view.

Unfortunately, there is a second possibility when a Bearer is threatened. A Bearer is more vulnerable to trauma when their actions are not aligned with the Archetype's concerns. Reversal only occurs when the Archetype faces a dramatic situation and is forced to make the Bearer persevere in order to achieve a crucial task. Otherwise, further significant harm will impair or incapacitate the Bearer: if the Bearer is in a lethal situation with no cards available, the Archetype departs and the Bearer suffers the full effects of the ambient danger, no longer protected by the universe's graces. The process of losing an Archetype is not itself fatal, but the situation that prompted it may well be. (Incidentally, this is sometimes how the character came to bear the Archetype to begin with.)

An Archetype bereft of a Bearer will find a new one at the next sunrise or moonrise (whichever occurs first). The new Bearer will somehow attract the Archetype through some action resonant with the Archetype's correspondences. The new investiture is not reincarnation, nor is there shared memory between subsequent Bearers, as Archetypes themselves do not have what we would term minds or fixed personalities, only patterns and tendencies. A new Bearer may have a different list of correspondences than a predecessor, therefore.



## Advancement: Powers and Cards

Archetypes channel almost limitless power through the patterns of their symbolic correspondences, but the practical limit of this ability rests with the mortal Bearer. Fortunately, a Bearer can become more adept over time. Each time a character completes a story arc, a Bearer may choose either to increase their maximum hand size by one card, or to develop a new Greater Power. An increase in hand size reflects a Bearer's increased confidence and experience, mastery over the flow of raw dream-energy, and synergy with their Archetype. By comparison, a new Greater Power represents a focus on the esoteric aspects of their eir, tying it into a reliable magic which can be exercised reflexively. As always, the Greater Power must reflect the Archetype's correspondences in theme and function.

When an Archetype becomes Reversed or a Bearer changes Archetypes (see "Paradigm Shifts," page 55), that character's hand size decreases by one, a sign of instability and uncertainty. Lesser Powers remain the same, but Greater Powers may change slightly to reflect thematic shifts in the character, and should be discussed with the World.

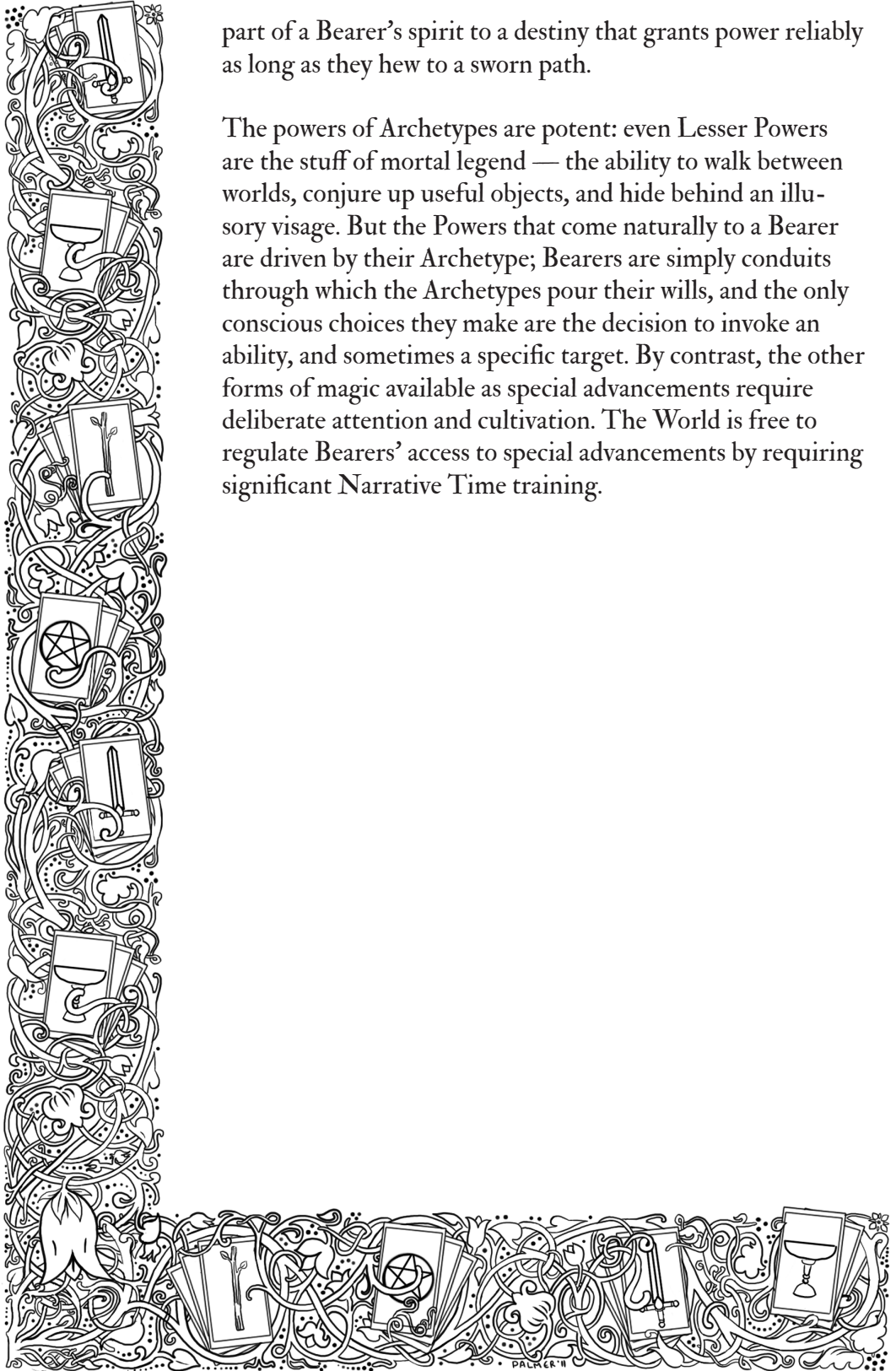
### Special Advancement

A Bearer's growth and experience manifest in either the increase in raw potential represented by more cards in hand, or in the focused application of a new Greater Power. A Bearer may follow other paths, however. At the discretion of the group, players may incorporate the following additional special forms of advancement: *high magic*, including *Divination* and *Sorcery*; *wonderments*, natural non-Archetypal formations in the magic of Here; and *weirds*, the commitment of a



part of a Bearer's spirit to a destiny that grants power reliably as long as they hew to a sworn path.

The powers of Archetypes are potent: even Lesser Powers are the stuff of mortal legend — the ability to walk between worlds, conjure up useful objects, and hide behind an illusory visage. But the Powers that come naturally to a Bearer are driven by their Archetype; Bearers are simply conduits through which the Archetypes pour their wills, and the only conscious choices they make are the decision to invoke an ability, and sometimes a specific target. By contrast, the other forms of magic available as special advancements require deliberate attention and cultivation. The World is free to regulate Bearers' access to special advancements by requiring significant Narrative Time training.



## Special Advancement: High Magic

To become a magician requires a notable blend of qualities: one must have an indomitable will as well as the motivation to impose that will upon one's surroundings. Without that driving personality, the arduous and intricate tasks required to shape magic are beyond the reach of the mundane. It is inevitable that some Bearers find themselves in the possession of such traits, with the added benefit of the magical boost provided by their Archetype, and so set to investigating more arcane techniques, of which there are plenty to explore.

Blessed with the esoteric force of the Archetypes and the dedication to indulge the study necessary, a Bearer so inclined can choose to pursue the paths known as “high magic”. The word “high” does not describe the quality of the magic – Greater Powers can sometimes outstrip these effects – but instead describes their complexity. One must be tutored in these arts by one who knows them, unlike the instinctive gifts of the Lesser and Greater Powers.

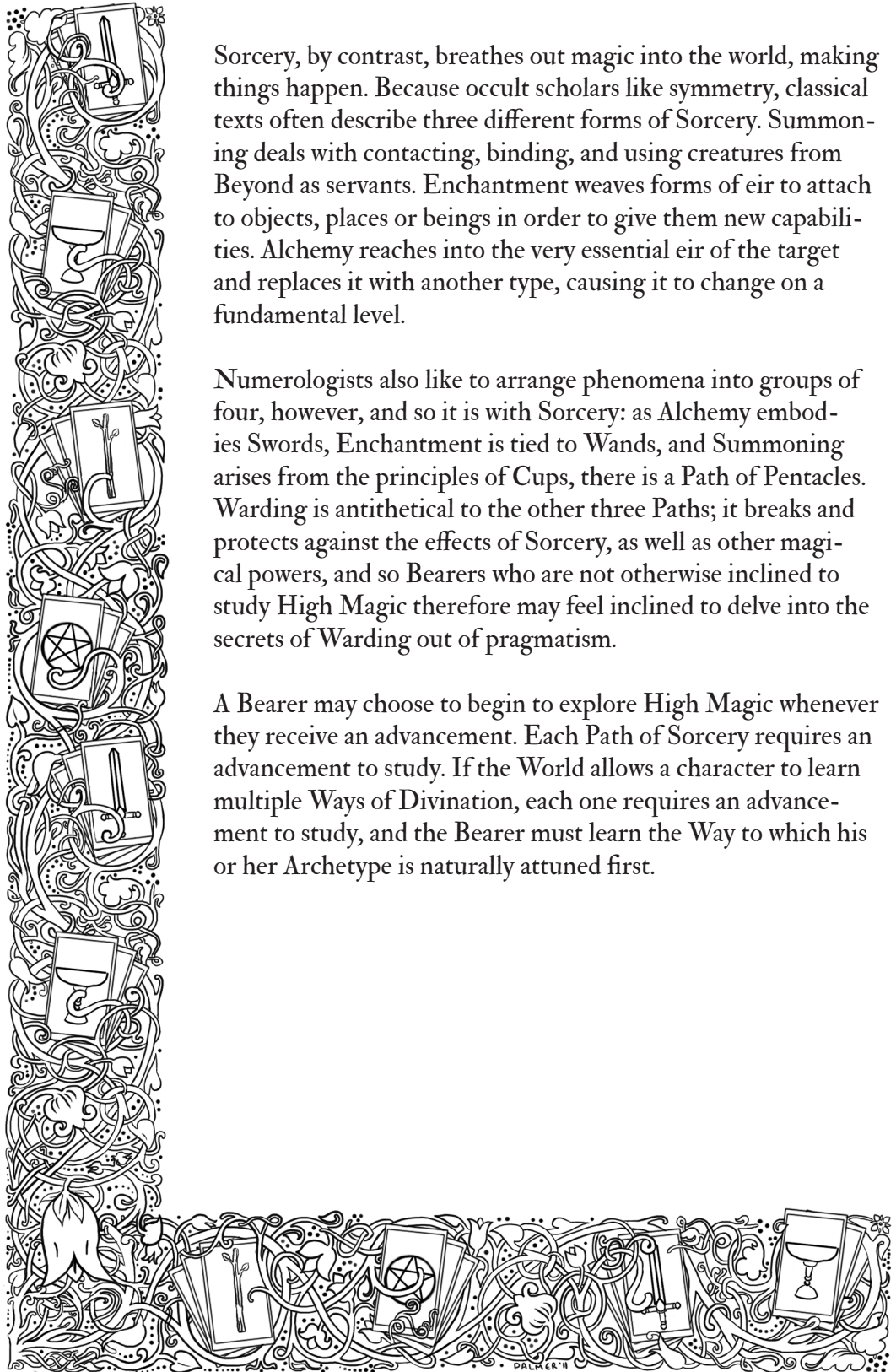
Ancient Greek mystics wrote of “pneuma,” or breath, as a symbol for magic; their metaphor has been informally adopted by the few Bearers and their acolytes in magical studies. There are two forms of high magic: Divination and Sorcery. The former is akin to breathing in, and involves the processing of magical patterns on a much finer level than the Dream-sense Power. In a way, Divination requires the Bearer to both look outward at the world and inward at the patterns of their own Archetype for inspiration. Divination is sub-divided into three modes; each Archetype has a natural affinity for one of the three modes of Divination.



Sorcery, by contrast, breathes out magic into the world, making things happen. Because occult scholars like symmetry, classical texts often describe three different forms of Sorcery. Summoning deals with contacting, binding, and using creatures from Beyond as servants. Enchantment weaves forms of eir to attach to objects, places or beings in order to give them new capabilities. Alchemy reaches into the very essential eir of the target and replaces it with another type, causing it to change on a fundamental level.

Numerologists also like to arrange phenomena into groups of four, however, and so it is with Sorcery: as Alchemy embodies Swords, Enchantment is tied to Wands, and Summoning arises from the principles of Cups, there is a Path of Pentacles. Warding is antithetical to the other three Paths; it breaks and protects against the effects of Sorcery, as well as other magical powers, and so Bearers who are not otherwise inclined to study High Magic therefore may feel inclined to delve into the secrets of Warding out of pragmatism.

A Bearer may choose to begin to explore High Magic whenever they receive an advancement. Each Path of Sorcery requires an advancement to study. If the World allows a character to learn multiple Ways of Divination, each one requires an advancement to study, and the Bearer must learn the Way to which his or her Archetype is naturally attuned first.



## Special Advancement: Divination

The power of Divination lies in the synthesis of the Archetype's omnipresence and the mortal's mind. Archetypes are complex collections of patterns, and investiture creates a microcosm of all the possible patterns within an Archetype inside the Bearer's spirit. When those patterns occur in the universe, a Bearer can, with practice and effort, listen to the way their own internal panoply of dream-energy resonates sympathetically with them.

Learning Divination opens a Bearer to a specific Way listed below. At the referee's discretion, a Bearer may take additional Ways of Divination at subsequent advancements, but normally, each Archetype is innately aligned to only one of the three Ways, listed in each of the following entries.

The uninitiated typically approach the three Ways of Divination – Secrets, Lore, and Visions – by viewing them as means of learning the past, the present, and the future, respectively, but the truth is more subtle than these facile labels. Both Secrets and Lore can discover things which happened long ago, for example; the primary difference is the obscurity of the information desired. Referees should consider the possible effects that Divination could have on their ability to structure and implement stories: if one or more of your Bearers is a Diviner, it is always fruitful to plan ahead!

Each Way is described in more detail on the following pages.



## *The Way of Secrets*

That which is unknown or concealed may still be seen. The Way of Secrets covers a diverse selection of information: information no longer circulating among living beings. Knowledge which has never been shared with another creature qualifies, as does information no longer being shared. If the last book containing a fact is burned or crumbles into dust, that information passes into the realm of Secrets.

The Archetypes attuned to the Way of Secrets are the Empress, the Fool, the Hermit, the Lovers, the Star, the Tower, and the Wheel of Fortune.

When a piece of information becomes secret (for instance, when the book that contains it is lost, or the last person who knows it passes away), Bearers attuned to Secrets feel it as a sort of rush, like a change in pressure or standing up too rapidly. Nothing is intimated regarding the nature of the secret, only that it exists.

### Difficulty Numbers for Secrets Divination

Secrets tasks increase in difficulty with the obscurity of the information - that is, how long ago it last circulated. A successful Divination of Secrets reveals information that was last shared:

- 10: within the past year.
- 11: over a year ago.
- 12: at least 10 years ago.
- 13: at least a century ago.
- 14: at least 250 years ago.
- 15+: at least 500 years ago.



## *The Way of Lore*

Some information is known and yet obscure, such as the teachings of secret societies or long-lost accounts of the distant past. Information which exists with the intent to be known – anything not encompassed by the Way of Secrets, in other words – can be ferreted out by the Way of Lore.

The Archetypes with access to the Way of Lore are the Chariot, the Devil, the Emperor, Justice, the Magician, Strength, and the Sun.

When new lore enters the realm of knowledge (such as when a scientist or philosopher makes a significant new discovery that is then shared), Bearers attuned to Lore feel a sudden wash of sensation like the satisfaction of a fulsome meal. The content of the lore is not conveyed, only its existence.

### Difficulty Numbers for Lore Divination

- 10: whether the information sought exists or not, and who possesses it/where it is contained, but no content
- 11: a specific fact sought: the motto of an obscure society, or the alternate names of an ancient king, but not the society's practices or the king's successors.
- 12: a basic abstract of information, equivalent to the introductory paragraph of an article on a subject.
- 13: general knowledge equivalent to an expository essay about the topic; student-level comprehension.
- 14: broader knowledge, as if one had read a complete book on the subject; proficiency in the subject matter.
- 15+: nuanced understanding, including implications or inferences that require connections between facts.



## *The Way of Visions*

What is to come arises out of what is. Though not as concretely reliable as the Ways of Secrets or Lore, the Way of Visions casts the Bearer's mind forward to discern likely outcomes in the future based on the present, including that which is not explicitly known about the present.

The Archetypes wise in the Way of Visions are Death, the Hanged Man, the Hierophant, the High Priestess, Judgment, the Moon, and Temperance.

The future never yields its results in an easy or straightforward way. Shuffles in particular represent imminent significant events, and Bearers attuned to Visions feel the approach of such pivotal moments as a sense of growing tension; the player can ask the World at any time how many cards are remaining in either deck. If the referee is using the optional Plot Card rule, a specific use of Visions allows that Bearer's player to look at the Plot Card.

### Difficulty Numbers for Visions Divination

Visions tasks, unlike other Divinations, scale to more distant events rather than more specific information. A Divination of the following levels provides insight into the likely outcome of:

- 10: the next action this scene
- 11: any action this scene
- 12: the end of this scene as a whole
- 13: a later scene this session
- 14: the end of this session as a whole
- 15+: the story arc in progress



## Special Advancement: Sorcery

Each type of Sorcery is bound to one of the four suits and requires the expenditure of a card or cards of only that suit (with some exceptions).

*Alchemy*, the art of Swords, reaches into the eir of a subject to effect a fundamental change.

*Enchantment*, the art of Wands, wraps subjects in shrouds of eir designed to create lingering effects.

*Summoning*, the art of Cups, crafts subjects directly from the ambient eir.

*Warding*, the art of Pentacles, opposes the other three arts of Sorcery, undoing or hindering changes.

Sorcery requires significant time and effort to perform: unlike the casual use of Powers or even the passive opening of the self to inspiration one finds in Divination, the metaphysical bent of Sorcery requires focused, dedicated action to carry it off.

Like other forms of magic, it is possible for mortals to pursue Sorcery if they possess specific will and training, but most only attain one Path with any puissance.

### The Ladder

Sorcery uses a technique known generally as “the ladder.” A

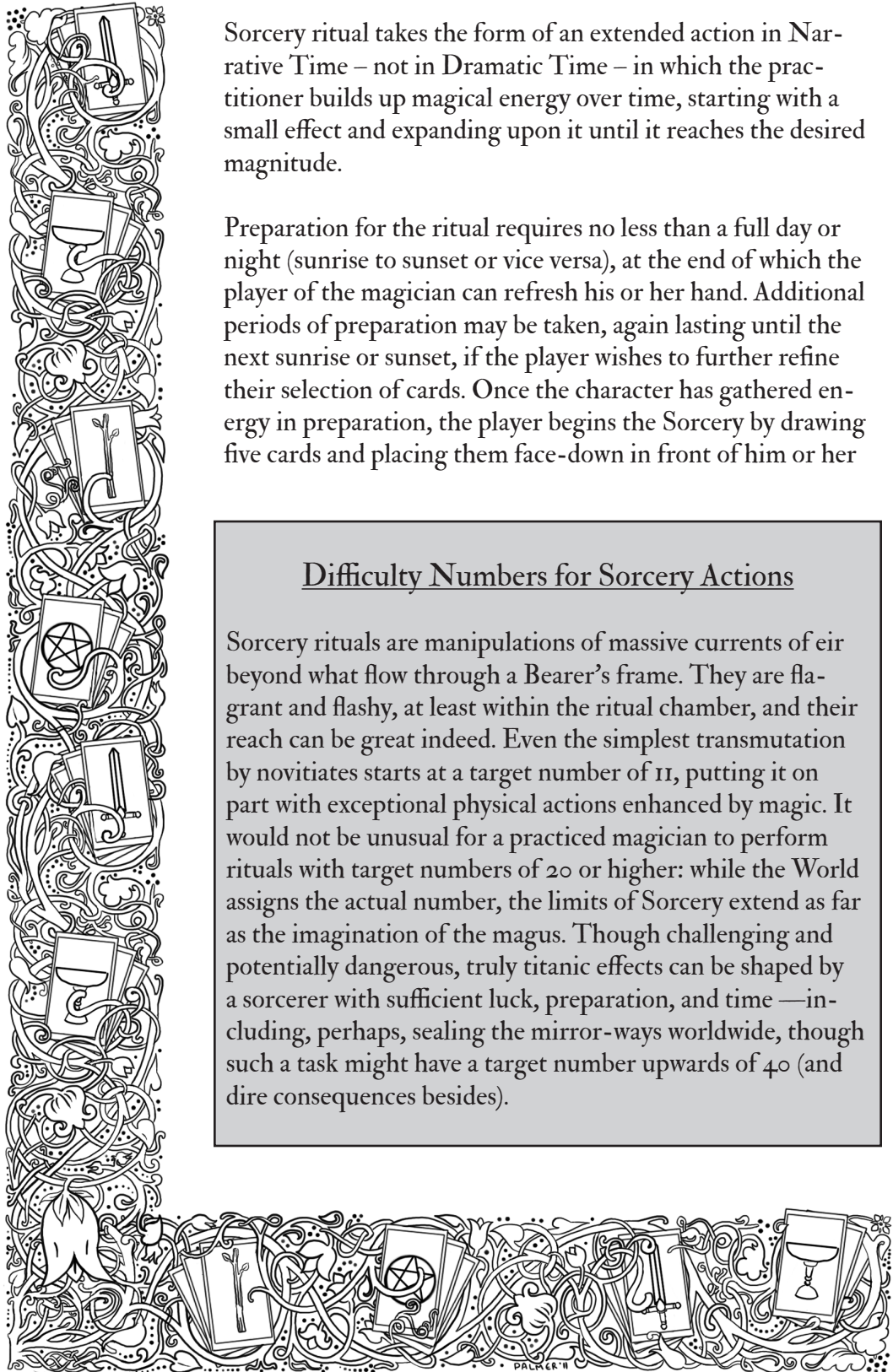


Sorcery ritual takes the form of an extended action in Narrative Time – not in Dramatic Time – in which the practitioner builds up magical energy over time, starting with a small effect and expanding upon it until it reaches the desired magnitude.

Preparation for the ritual requires no less than a full day or night (sunrise to sunset or vice versa), at the end of which the player of the magician can refresh his or her hand. Additional periods of preparation may be taken, again lasting until the next sunrise or sunset, if the player wishes to further refine their selection of cards. Once the character has gathered energy in preparation, the player begins the Sorcery by drawing five cards and placing them face-down in front of him or her

### Difficulty Numbers for Sorcery Actions

Sorcery rituals are manipulations of massive currents of eir beyond what flow through a Bearer's frame. They are fla-grant and flashy, at least within the ritual chamber, and their reach can be great indeed. Even the simplest transmutation by novitiates starts at a target number of 11, putting it on par with exceptional physical actions enhanced by magic. It would not be unusual for a practiced magician to perform rituals with target numbers of 20 or higher: while the World assigns the actual number, the limits of Sorcery extend as far as the imagination of the magus. Though challenging and potentially dangerous, truly titanic effects can be shaped by a sorcerer with sufficient luck, preparation, and time —including, perhaps, sealing the mirror-ways worldwide, though such a task might have a target number upwards of 40 (and dire consequences besides).



without looking at them: this is the ladder. Meanwhile, the referee likewise draws three cards and places them face-down on the table without looking at them to represent possible challenges.

Each action during the Sorcery ritual represents approximately an hour or so of painstaking recitations, the sacrifice of rare reagents, physical crafting of items, and so on, at the end of which the player flips one of the cards in the ladder face-up. If the card is on-suit, it represents successful progress toward the goal. *The rule of changing the suit of a played card by supplementing it with an Ace does not apply during Sorcery rituals.* If the player has revealed on-suit cards that total or exceed the target number for the ritual, the Sorcery ends successfully; if the target has not yet been met, the character spends another extended action on performing Sorcery and repeats this process. Sorcery rituals may not be interrupted once begun, and if the character cannot complete or continue the performance, the Sorcery ends and the effort is wasted.

If the card revealed in the ladder is off-suit, the player has three options:

- substitute an on-suit card from hand for the revealed card.
- accept the result and lose ground.
- take a challenge.

Substituting an on-suit card from hand for the revealed card is the safest option, representing the Bearer calling upon his or her own magical reserves to focus the eir into the desired effect, and this is why advance preparation is vitally important. Bearers performing a Sorcery ritual cannot refresh their hands, however, and so this is not always a viable option.



Losing ground means that some mistake has caused the ritual to become unfocused, the character's ingredients were not sufficiently pure, a word in the incantation was inflected improperly, etc. The ritual loses some of the accumulated *air*; the card revealed *deducts* from the total accumulated. Accepting failure on lower-value cards can be a tolerable setback, but if the card would reduce the accumulated total to 0 or lower, the ritual ends in failure and must be started over from scratch.

Sometimes the flow of magic takes unexpected turns, but the end result can be salvaged. Taking a challenge means opting to accept narrative consequences in exchange for diffusing the mechanical failure. The referee turns over one of the face-down challenge cards and narrates a complication to the desired end result of the ritual, perhaps a flaw or limitation or unexpected side effect, but the player's card is considered to be on-suit for meeting the target number and completing the ritual. The magnitude of the challenge is dictated by the value of the challenge card, while its nature is suggested by the suit of the challenge card. For instance, an attempt to enchant a carved crystal goblet reveals a 6 of Cups: Cups is tied to Summoning, not Enchantment, and so the player opts to take the challenge that a fragment of a moderately powerful dream creature was woven into the spell, and it tends to imbue those who drink from the goblet with its personality quirks for about a day. *Pentacles revealed by a player may never be replaced with challenges.*



## Alchemy Tasks

The metaphor of transforming lead into gold symbolizes the elevation of the mundane toward the perfect. In mechanical terms, Alchemy turns items into exceptional versions of their normal selves: a blade cuts, but an alchemical blade can cut shadows or love; a draught of water can refresh and purify, but an alchemical draught can knit wounds or counteract toxins.

The player describes the desired effect at the ritual's outset, and the World sets the difficulty number (at least 12: every 2 points above the baseline of 10 translates to a bonus of +1 to the relevant task).

Alchemical challenges often take the form of weaknesses or violent reactions to other substances (water, moonlight, etc.).

## Enchantment Tasks

Enchanted items carry persistent Powers; therefore, the same guidelines for creating custom Powers applies to laying enchantment. An enchanter does not need to know a Power to craft an aura to simulate it.

Beyond the baseline difficulty of 10, imbuing a Lesser Power or its equivalent into an object via Enchantment increases the difficulty by 10, and a Greater Power or equivalent adds 20. If the item has limited uses, those values are halved (5 for Lesser, 10 for Greater), but the number of uses is added to the difficulty. For instance, spectacles that grant Dream-sense (L) three times only would require  $10+5+3$ =difficulty 18 to craft, or  $10+10=20$  if permanent.



## Summoning Tasks

The ritual of Summoning calls to a being, but in game terms, the target is constructed by the ritual's performance. The player describes the type of creature desired (or names one that already exists), and the difficulty is based on the "value" of the creature, above the baseline of 10: points of Motivation cost 1 point each; 2 points buys a card in hand or a Lesser Power; a Greater Power or its equivalent (any form of special advancement) costs 3 points.

To Summon a being equivalent to a starting Bearer, then, would be a difficulty of  $10+10$  (Motivations)+ $10$  (5 Lesser Powers  $\times 2$ )+ $10$  (5 cards in hand  $\times 2$ )+3 (a Greater Power)=difficulty 43. Summoners typically call up inferior creatures with specialized capabilities, rather than generally potent beings.

## Warding Tasks

Warding is rather straightforward in application: it is easier to maintain what exists than to create something new, or to disrupt a carefully crafted pattern of eir than to build it. Glyphs and geometric seals used in Warding draw in the eir that would normally be captured for a magical effect and disperses the effect harmlessly.

Warding rituals that create protections against specific effects simply match or exceed the target effect's difficulty to unmake them. Temporary Wardings, which persist until they cancel the first applicable effect require a difficulty of 10 plus 3 for a physical or non-physical attack, 6 for a Lesser Power, or 9 for a Greater Power. Permanent Wardings calculate their difficulty as above, but then double it.



## Special Advancement: Weirds

From the Old Norse *wyrd*, for fate or destiny, a weird is best thought of as a specific knot in the threads of one's existence. Weirds are known in various cultures as geases, oaths, and by other names. An individual binds a part of their life's skein to a quantum of eir in exchange for an obligation literally incorporated into their soul.

A weird consists of two parts: first, the player commits a card in hand to the weird. Because a weird is woven at character advancement, the player gets to draw a card and then choose which to commit from among the available cards. The weird is then bound by a Restriction: as long as the character takes an action explicitly adhering to the tenets of their Restriction, they may use the card bound to their weird to perform the action instead of playing a card from hand. If the Restriction is broken, however, the card is discarded – a dire price to pay. The weird can be rewoven with a new card after a session has passed.

### Example Weird: The Way of the Gun

Kogo Katsuro was the Death-Bearer for several decades following the Second World War. His time as a young man witnessing the conflict in the Pacific theater exposed him not only to frequent violence, but to Japanese Zen practice. Following his investiture, he regularly wandered the criminal underground from Singapore to Hong Kong, carrying the vivid memories of his youth of lead and blood. Though not bloodthirsty, Katsuro took to heart a pragmatic approach to

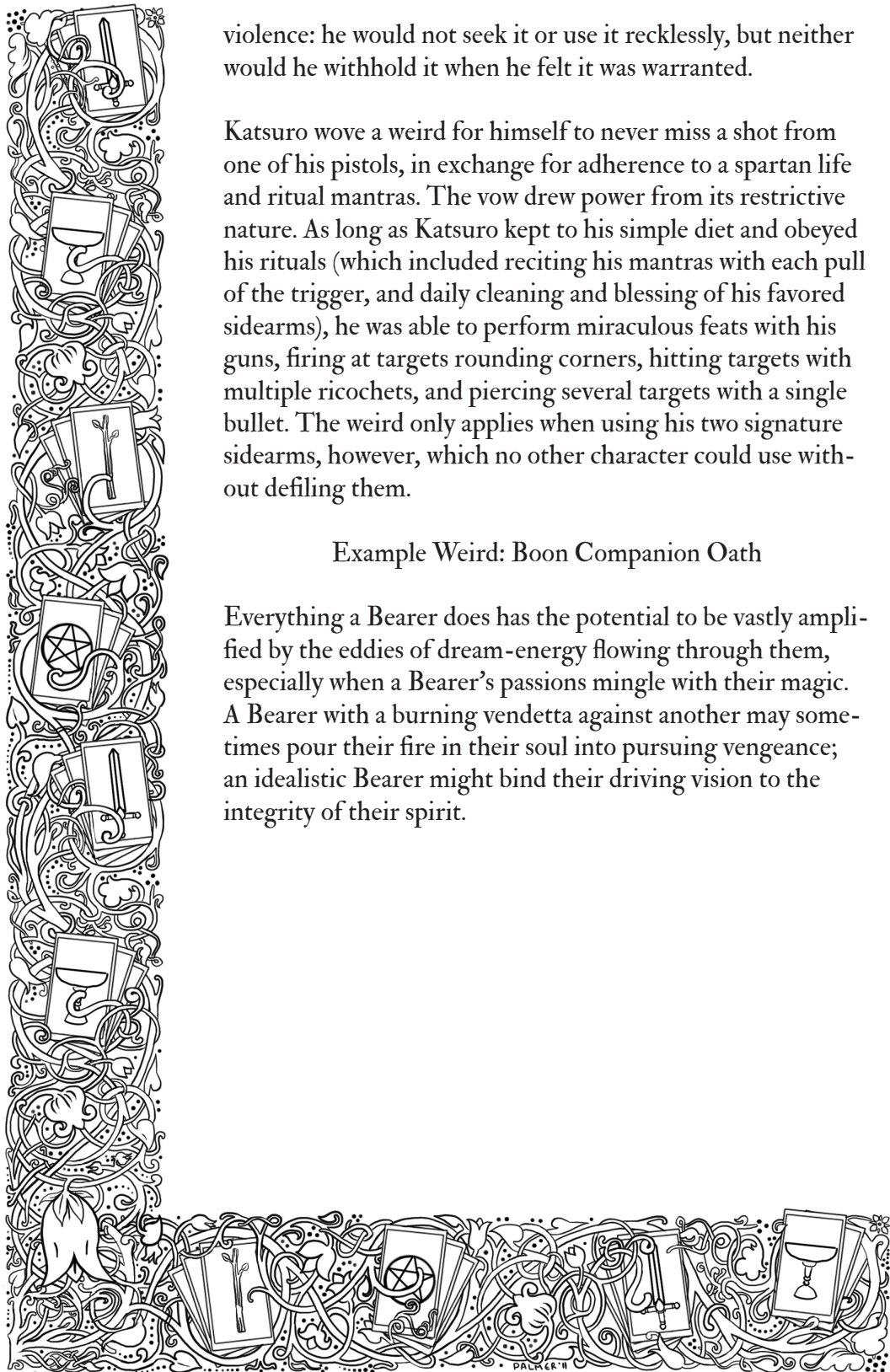


violence: he would not seek it or use it recklessly, but neither would he withhold it when he felt it was warranted.

Katsuro wove a weird for himself to never miss a shot from one of his pistols, in exchange for adherence to a spartan life and ritual mantras. The vow drew power from its restrictive nature. As long as Katsuro kept to his simple diet and obeyed his rituals (which included reciting his mantras with each pull of the trigger, and daily cleaning and blessing of his favored sidearms), he was able to perform miraculous feats with his guns, firing at targets rounding corners, hitting targets with multiple ricochets, and piercing several targets with a single bullet. The weird only applies when using his two signature sidearms, however, which no other character could use without defiling them.

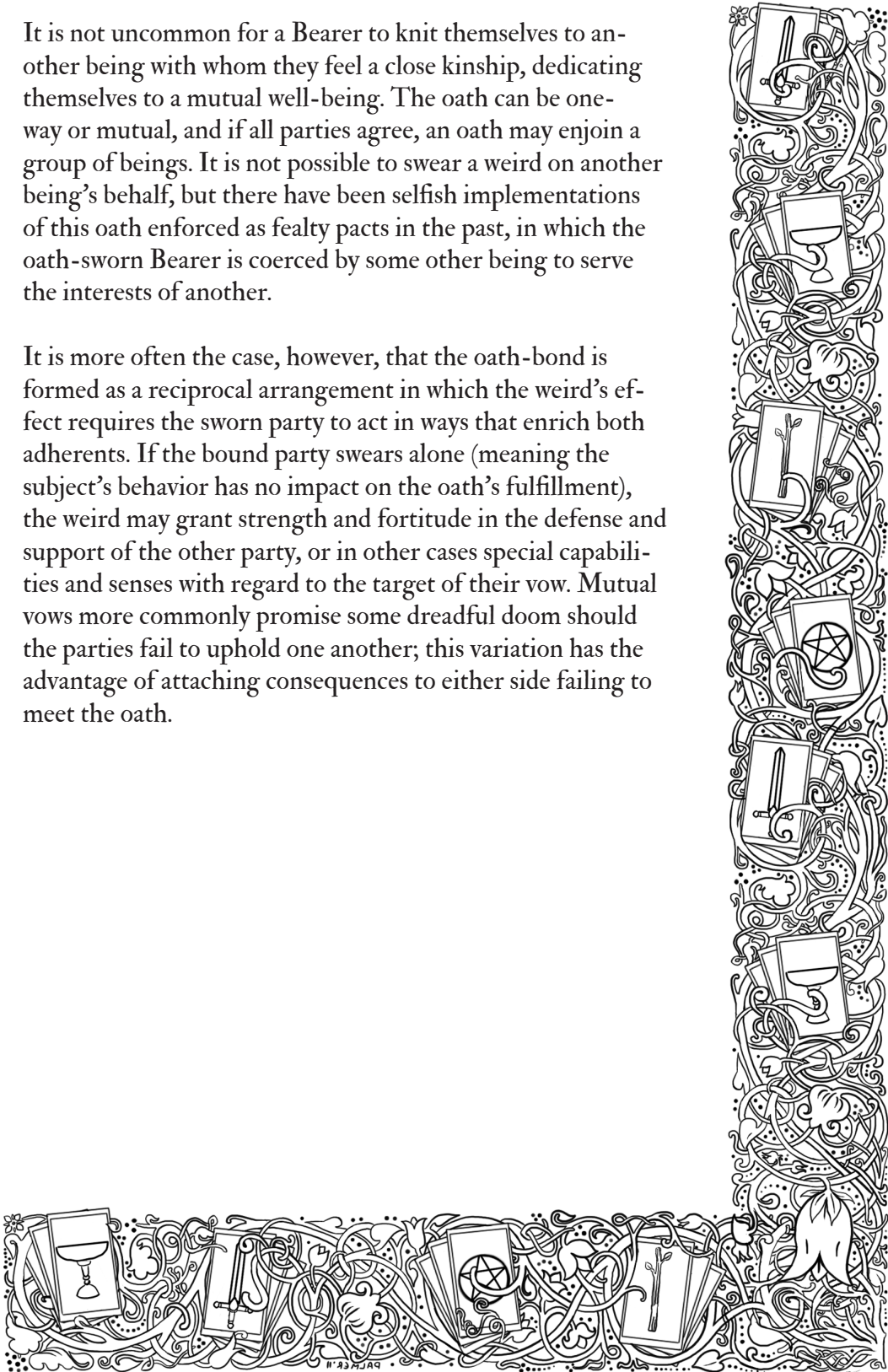
#### Example Weird: Boon Companion Oath

Everything a Bearer does has the potential to be vastly amplified by the eddies of dream-energy flowing through them, especially when a Bearer's passions mingle with their magic. A Bearer with a burning vendetta against another may sometimes pour their fire in their soul into pursuing vengeance; an idealistic Bearer might bind their driving vision to the integrity of their spirit.



It is not uncommon for a Bearer to knit themselves to another being with whom they feel a close kinship, dedicating themselves to a mutual well-being. The oath can be one-way or mutual, and if all parties agree, an oath may enjoin a group of beings. It is not possible to swear a weird on another being's behalf, but there have been selfish implementations of this oath enforced as fealty pacts in the past, in which the oath-sworn Bearer is coerced by some other being to serve the interests of another.

It is more often the case, however, that the oath-bond is formed as a reciprocal arrangement in which the weird's effect requires the sworn party to act in ways that enrich both adherents. If the bound party swears alone (meaning the subject's behavior has no impact on the oath's fulfillment), the weird may grant strength and fortitude in the defense and support of the other party, or in other cases special capabilities and senses with regard to the target of their vow. Mutual vows more commonly promise some dreadful doom should the parties fail to uphold one another; this variation has the advantage of attaching consequences to either side failing to meet the oath.



## Special Advancement: Wonderments

Not all that is impossible comes from Beyond. Our side of the mirror holds its own share of magic. Much of this magic exists as spaces or ideas, not necessarily as objects, but can be wielded most potently nonetheless. The first to catalogue these, a Tibetan nun named Sherap, used a term for them which translates as "wonderment", and so that appellation has stuck. Her index is itself a wonderment, as it continually updates itself to include the existence of new wonderments apart from itself.

The referee is encouraged to seed possible wonderments through the story, providing Bearers with an opportunity to encounter them in a natural way and adopt them if interested. Many wonderments have a custodian willing to pass them along after a time, while others are obscure and unguarded. A wonderment's level of effect is generally equivalent to a Greater Power, meaning that it generally has power to affect everything and everyone in a scene, or all of a particular class of being or concept, but wonderments often come in a material component that must be maintained or protected.

### Example Wonderment: The Index Matière

It is said that each time we all breathe in, we take into our lungs one molecule from Caesar's last breath. The caretaker of the Index Matière has the ability to know for certain whether or not this is true. It is the central library of all physical matter.



Spanning every atom on Earth and the moon out to the space-atmosphere interface, the Index gives not only the precise number of each element present, but extends to their provenance: the Index's curator can instantaneously call up the history of a particular particle all the way back to the coalescence of the primordial planet. Whenever a request is made, a book, scroll, or other written artifact materializes at hand, containing the requested information. (Recent visitors have been able to locate tablet computers amongst the shelves containing the relevant data.) This information is usually perfectly accurate, although modern advanced particle science has complicated maintenance of the Index. A few Bearers extant still recall the frantic panic of the then-curator at the moment the first atomic bomb detonated, and particle colliders sometimes trigger fits as the curator's consciousness becomes aware of a discrepancy.

The Index can also be made manifest at its librarian's behest, as long as there is a solid, permanent door or doorway nearby that can be reappropriated to access it. Only one side of the door functions as entry to the Index, chosen by the caretaker when invoked. The door still functions normally for mundane passage between the two spaces: those who wish to use the correct side of the doorway to enter the Index must opt to do so.

Beyond the entrance, the shelves stretch down either side of a narrow and impossibly far hallway. The librarian of the Index can immediately find any piece of information therein, or control how difficult an item is to find in the shifting stacks (the custodian sets the difficulty of searching the Index for any other being wandering the stacks). The guardian of the Index may also evict anyone inside at will through the repurposed door, or may even choose to enter and then dissolve the

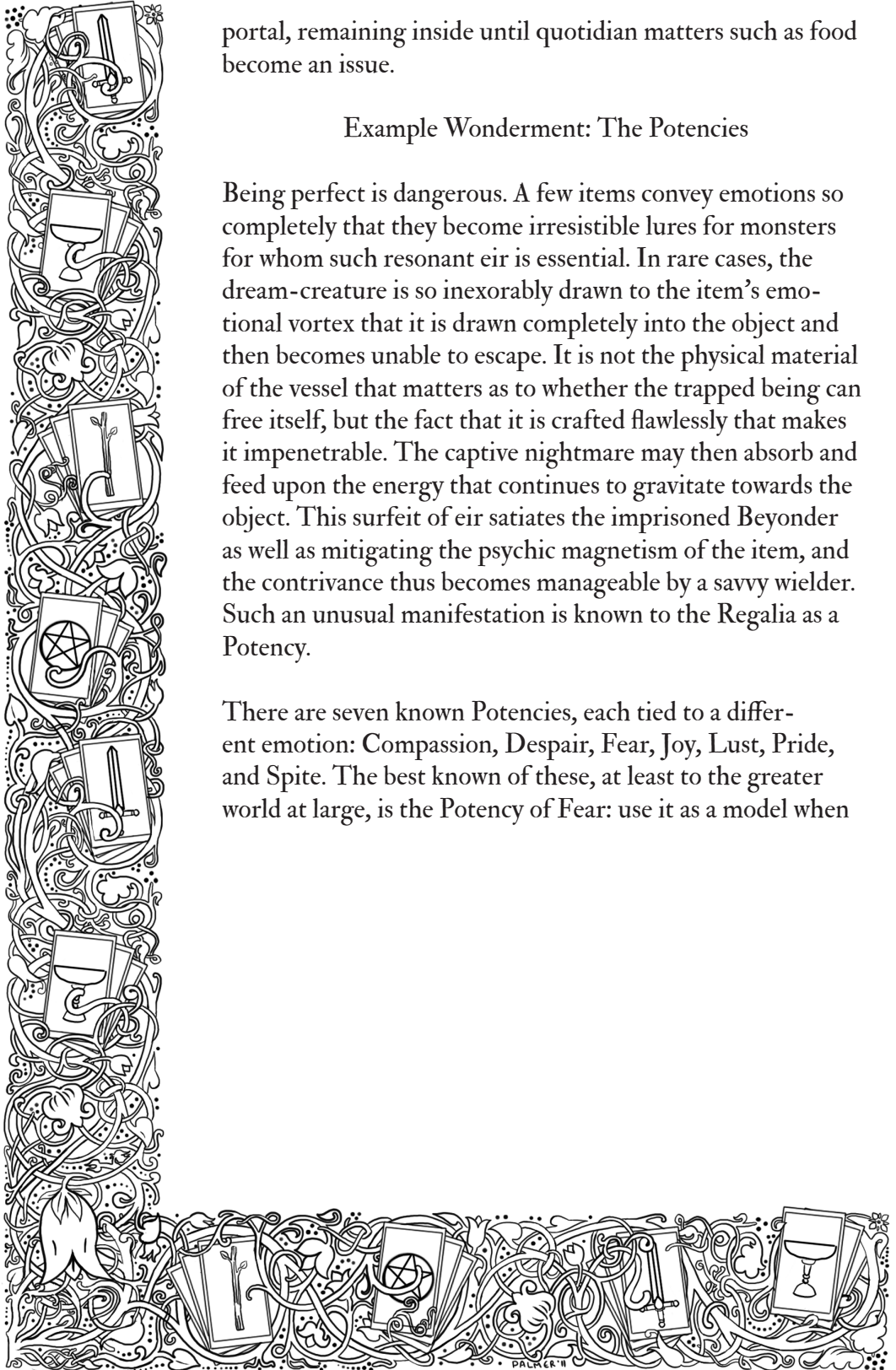


portal, remaining inside until quotidian matters such as food become an issue.

### Example Wonderment: The Potencies

Being perfect is dangerous. A few items convey emotions so completely that they become irresistible lures for monsters for whom such resonant eir is essential. In rare cases, the dream-creature is so inexorably drawn to the item's emotional vortex that it is drawn completely into the object and then becomes unable to escape. It is not the physical material of the vessel that matters as to whether the trapped being can free itself, but the fact that it is crafted flawlessly that makes it impenetrable. The captive nightmare may then absorb and feed upon the energy that continues to gravitate towards the object. This surfeit of eir satiates the imprisoned Beyonder as well as mitigating the psychic magnetism of the item, and the contrivance thus becomes manageable by a savvy wielder. Such an unusual manifestation is known to the Regalia as a Potency.

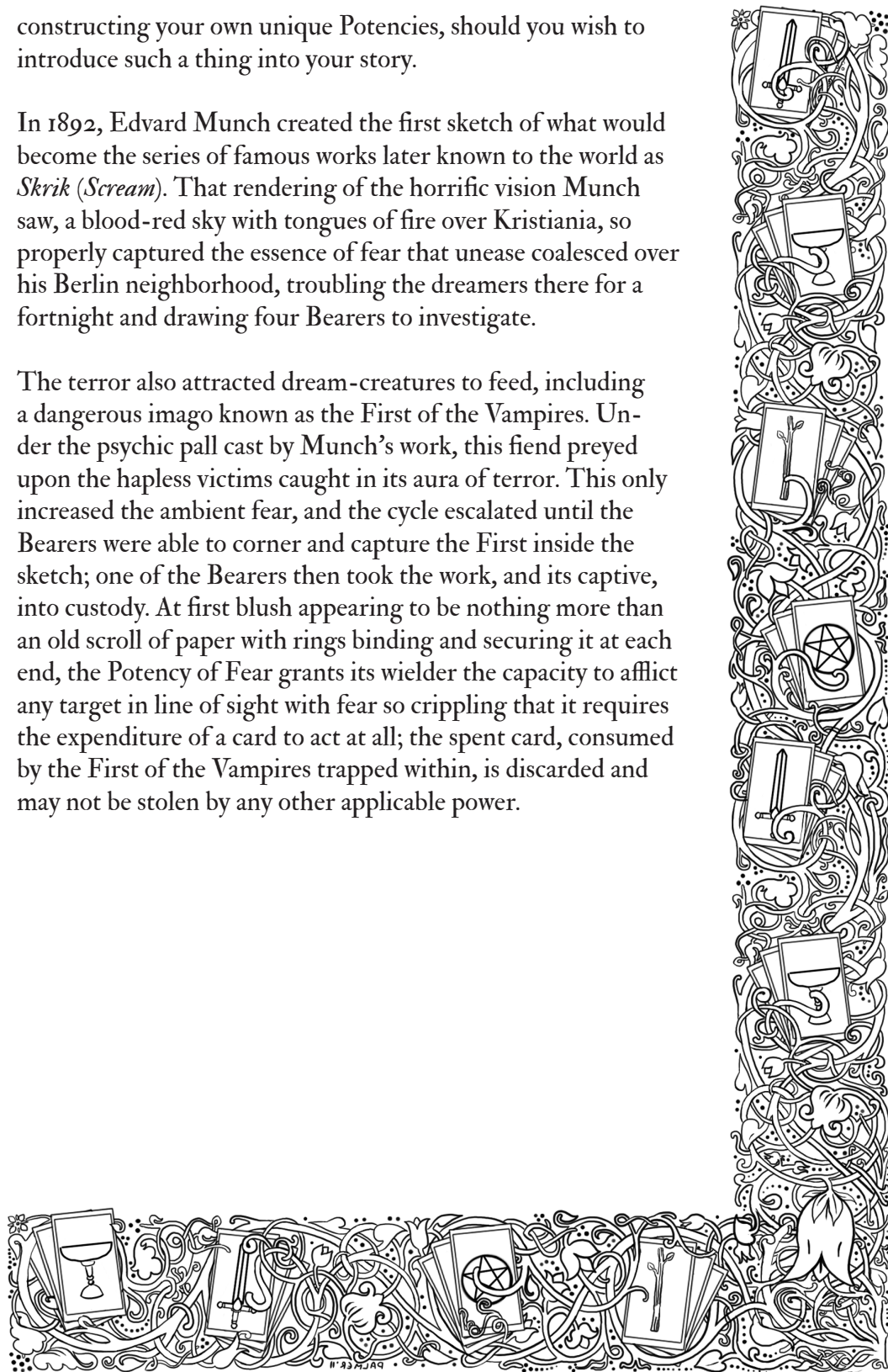
There are seven known Potencies, each tied to a different emotion: Compassion, Despair, Fear, Joy, Lust, Pride, and Spite. The best known of these, at least to the greater world at large, is the Potency of Fear: use it as a model when



constructing your own unique Potencies, should you wish to introduce such a thing into your story.

In 1892, Edvard Munch created the first sketch of what would become the series of famous works later known to the world as *Skrik* (*Scream*). That rendering of the horrific vision Munch saw, a blood-red sky with tongues of fire over Kristiania, so properly captured the essence of fear that unease coalesced over his Berlin neighborhood, troubling the dreamers there for a fortnight and drawing four Bearers to investigate.

The terror also attracted dream-creatures to feed, including a dangerous imago known as the First of the Vampires. Under the psychic pall cast by Munch's work, this fiend preyed upon the hapless victims caught in its aura of terror. This only increased the ambient fear, and the cycle escalated until the Bearers were able to corner and capture the First inside the sketch; one of the Bearers then took the work, and its captive, into custody. At first blush appearing to be nothing more than an old scroll of paper with rings binding and securing it at each end, the Potency of Fear grants its wielder the capacity to afflict any target in line of sight with fear so crippling that it requires the expenditure of a card to act at all; the spent card, consumed by the First of the Vampires trapped within, is discarded and may not be stolen by any other applicable power.



POWERS



Beings who walk amongst dream learn to wield power as phenomenal as any one might imagine.

## Lesser Powers

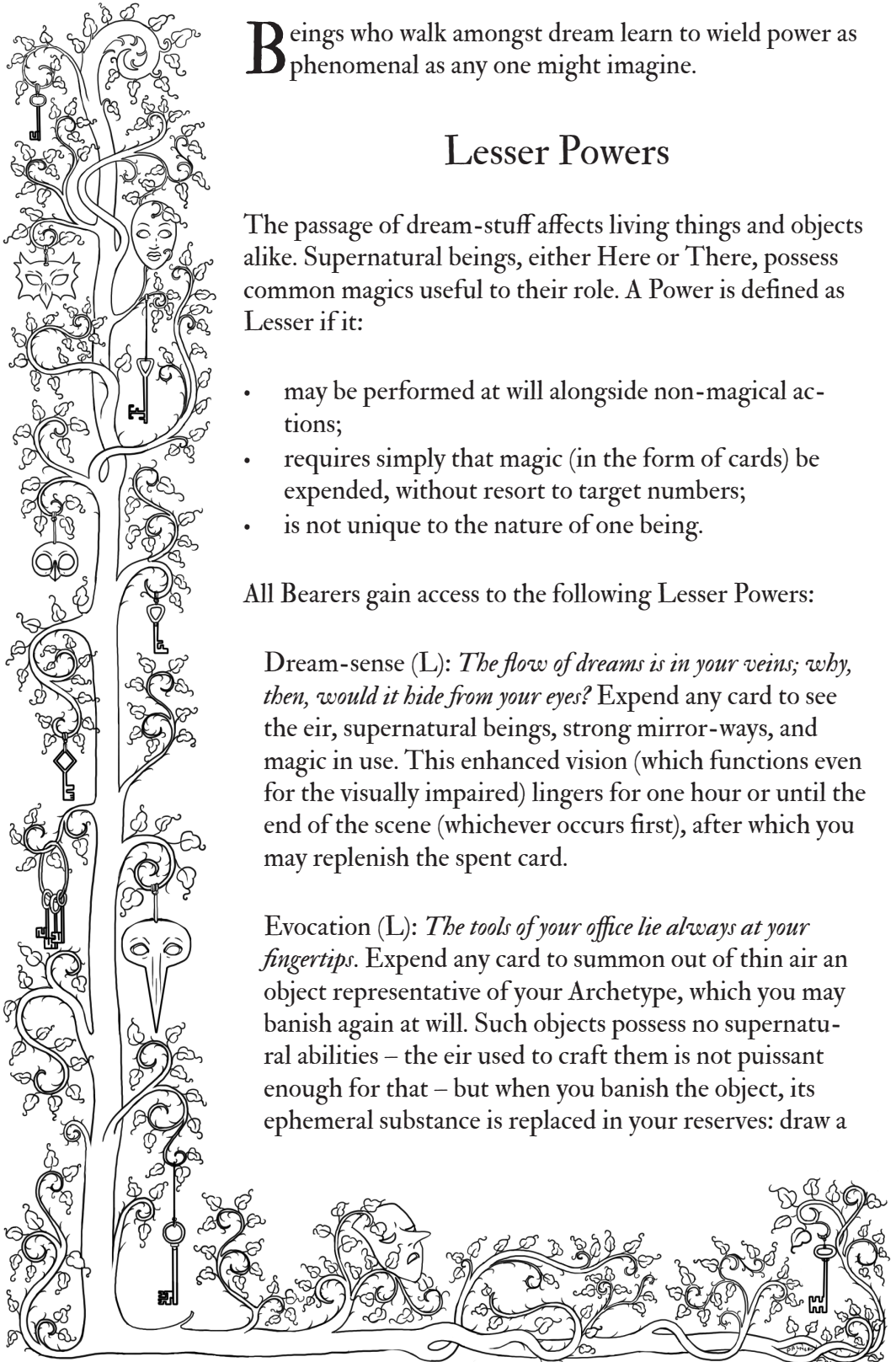
The passage of dream-stuff affects living things and objects alike. Supernatural beings, either Here or There, possess common magics useful to their role. A Power is defined as Lesser if it:

- may be performed at will alongside non-magical actions;
- requires simply that magic (in the form of cards) be expended, without resort to target numbers;
- is not unique to the nature of one being.

All Bearers gain access to the following Lesser Powers:

*Dream-sense (L): The flow of dreams is in your veins; why, then, would it hide from your eyes?* Expend any card to see the eir, supernatural beings, strong mirror-ways, and magic in use. This enhanced vision (which functions even for the visually impaired) lingers for one hour or until the end of the scene (whichever occurs first), after which you may replenish the spent card.

*Evocation (L): The tools of your office lie always at your fingertips.* Expend any card to summon out of thin air an object representative of your Archetype, which you may banish again at will. Such objects possess no supernatural abilities – the eir used to craft them is not puissant enough for that – but when you banish the object, its ephemeral substance is replaced in your reserves: draw a



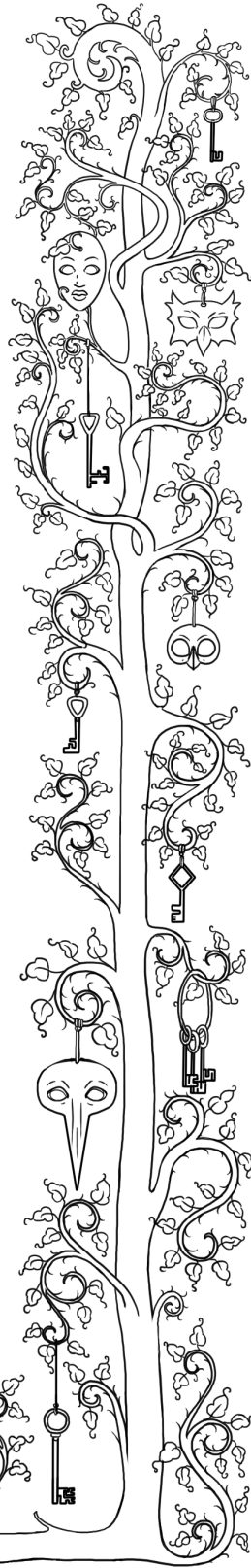
card. (The referee is free to disallow use of this power, or the card-drawing stipulation, if players are abusing them.)

**Inspire (L):** *The echoes of existence reverberate in your soul.* When you induce another being in your presence to act in a way that reflects your Archetype (as defined by your correspondences, or by consensus of the other players), you may draw a card if your hand is not already full. If the being expends a card on such an action, you may take that card into hand instead of drawing.

**Mirror Walk (L):** *All mirrors are doors with one key.* Expend any card to use any reflective surface to pass from Here to Beyond, or vice versa. The magic guarantees only a safe transit at best and does not protect from inclement danger at the exit, but if the traveler has a moment to concentrate, a known location in the destination realm may be selected. Remember that this power is not required to traverse an unbound glass, or some particularly frequently traveled paths (mirror-ways).

**Thousand Faces (L):** *Archetypes wear countless guises, yet are always recognizable as themselves.* Expend any card to adopt an aura identifying you to all sapient beings as the Bearer of your Archetype for a scene. You may guise your face in an elaborate mask symbolic of your Archetype, or you may change your appearance to appear to be a non-specific person clearly related to your correspondences. This action is always considered in character, and thus you may draw immediately to replace the spent card.

Beings from Beyond may possess unique Lesser Powers, as well as some or all of the following Lesser Powers:

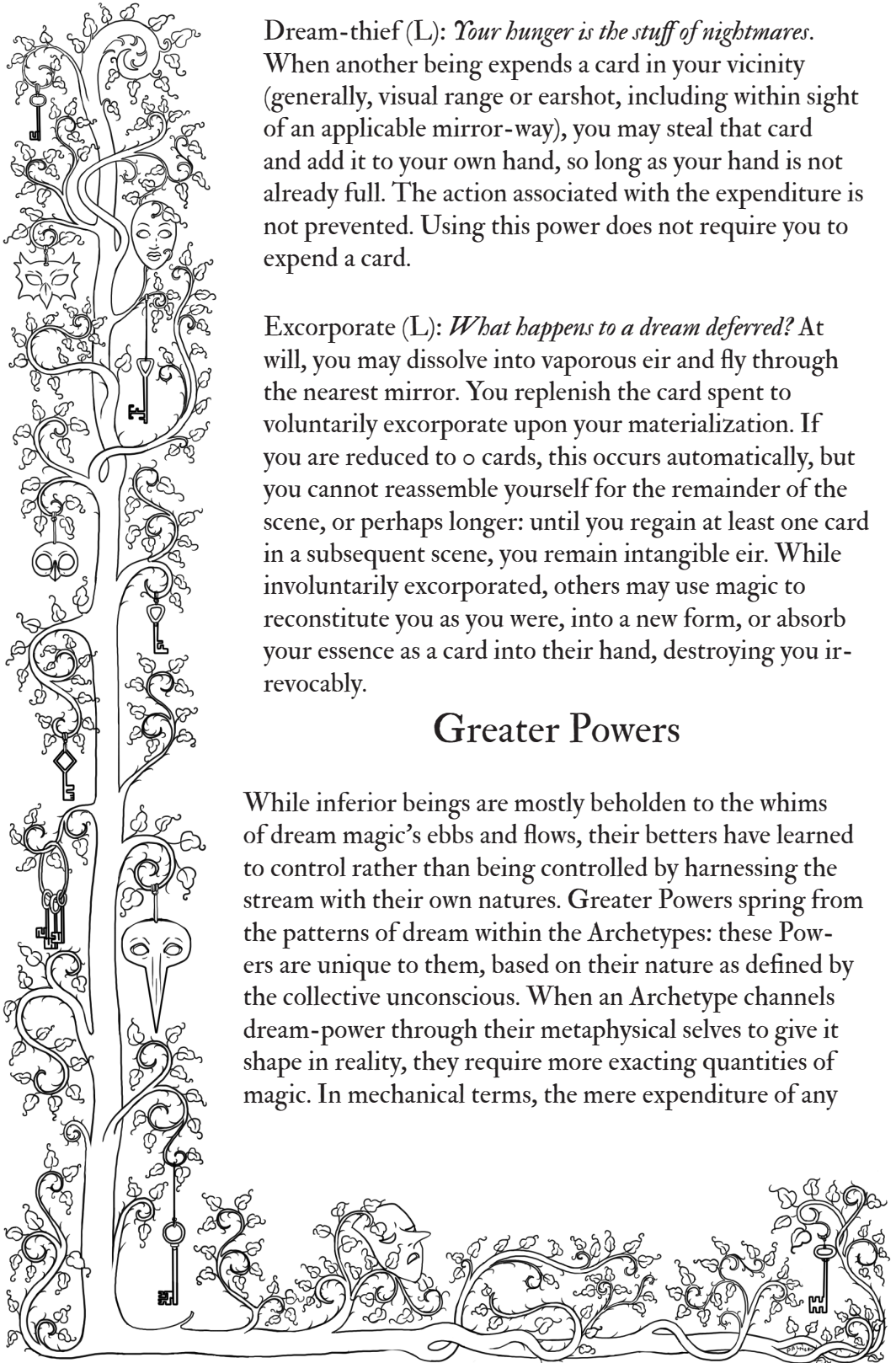


**Dream-thief (L):** *Your hunger is the stuff of nightmares.* When another being expends a card in your vicinity (generally, visual range or earshot, including within sight of an applicable mirror-way), you may steal that card and add it to your own hand, so long as your hand is not already full. The action associated with the expenditure is not prevented. Using this power does not require you to expend a card.

**Excorporate (L):** *What happens to a dream deferred?* At will, you may dissolve into vaporous eir and fly through the nearest mirror. You replenish the card spent to voluntarily excorporate upon your materialization. If you are reduced to 0 cards, this occurs automatically, but you cannot reassemble yourself for the remainder of the scene, or perhaps longer: until you regain at least one card in a subsequent scene, you remain intangible eir. While involuntarily excorporated, others may use magic to reconstitute you as you were, into a new form, or absorb your essence as a card into their hand, destroying you irrevocably.

## Greater Powers

While inferior beings are mostly beholden to the whims of dream magic's ebbs and flows, their betters have learned to control rather than being controlled by harnessing the stream with their own natures. Greater Powers spring from the patterns of dream within the Archetypes: these Powers are unique to them, based on their nature as defined by the collective unconscious. When an Archetype channels dream-power through their metaphysical selves to give it shape in reality, they require more exacting quantities of magic. In mechanical terms, the mere expenditure of any



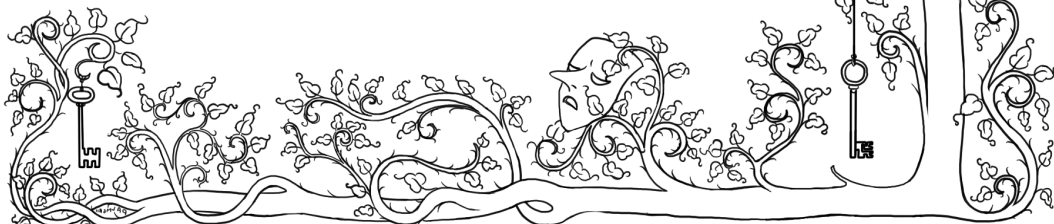
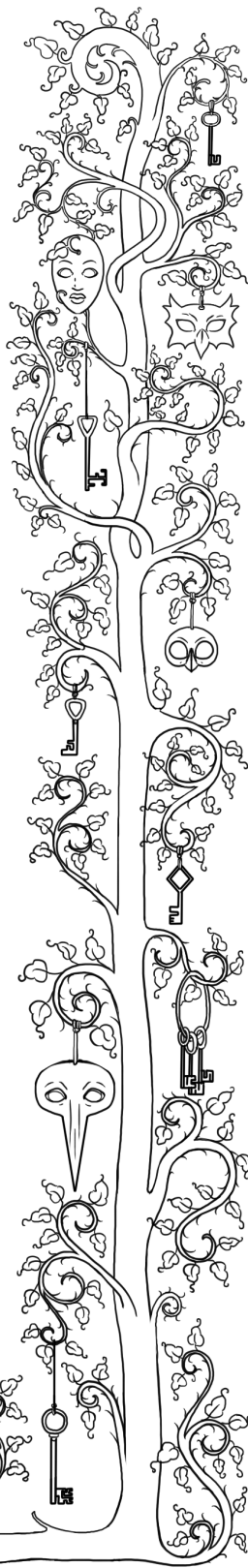
card is not sufficient to fuel a Greater Power. The value of the card expended to fuel a Greater Power may affect the outcome of the power. (In contrast, note that Lesser Powers typically only require “a card” as a requisite — any card will typically do.) While Greater Powers are usually defined in terms of affecting a scene — all of the characters present in the scene for as long as the scene lasts — the mechanically-defined effect felt by each of the targets may increase in proportion to the card, when specified in the Power’s description.

Each Bearer starts with one Greater Power during character creation; players may choose from the following examples, or use them as guidelines for creating unique powers (which is wholly encouraged). As described in Advancement (page 57), players may choose to gain Powers instead of adding cards to hand during normal advancement.

### Committing Cards

Most Powers are the result of a constant flow of dream-stuff: the eir expended to instantiate the power is consumed in the moment, and its place in the character’s spirit refills from the ambient magic. Others, however, require a certain level of concentration by the character, who imposes the magic on the scene and holds it in place to maintain the Power.

In these cases, the Power requires the character to commit the card. While a card is committed, its place in the player’s hand does not refill by any means; conversely, releasing the card from commitment ends the Power’s effect, apart from residual consequences, and the card is taken back into hand (unless stolen by another Power such as Dream-thief).



## The Magician

Mountebank (G): *Just because sleight of hand isn't real, that doesn't mean it isn't useful.* You may invoke this power as you are playing a card to perform an action. You may replace the suit of the card with that of another card in your hand, although you keep the numerical value of the original card, as if the second card were an Ace. After the action resolves, determine randomly which of the two cards is spent, and return the other to hand.

Initiation (G): *The tools of the trade lay spread out before you.* Instead of selecting a Greater Power at character creation, you may select a Way of Divination or a Path of Sorcery with which to begin play.

Unity in Infinity (G): *The left hand toward earth, the right toward heaven: the Magus stands in both.* Expend a card to create a duplicate of yourself in the realm you do not currently occupy. Each has access to the senses and thoughts of the other at will. The twin selves act in perfect synchronization and may each take an action per round in Dramatic Time; you must share the same hand, and both twins must expend cards to take actions, but either may choose to use the value of the card expended as a default result in lieu of using a card on a non-magical action while this Power is in effect. *Example: The Magician-Bearer activates Unity in Infinity, playing an 8 of Cups. There are now two copies of the Magician-Bearer, one Here and one Beyond: each one has to play a card from their shared hand to take an action. However, either twin can default to the 8 of Cups that fuels the Power as their default card for any non-magical action while the Power is running.*

## The High Priestess

**Book of Wisdom (G):** *True enlightenment is not in the words, but in the reading.* You possess the ability to read any written text regardless of its language, encryption, or defacement. The subject of the power must in fact be a text in a language, not the markings left by unintelligent beasts, scribbles, or other non-textual symbols. The intent of the author is always clear to you as well as the literal text, although you learn nothing else concerning their identity beyond what the text already contains (so, an unsigned note does not betray the name of the writer, only what they meant to communicate).

**Mantle of Light (G):** *Become the glory that emanates from above.* Expend a card to inspire spiritual reverence in all mortal onlookers for one scene. This manifests as an appearance of immanent holiness and sanctity that evokes respect regardless of the spectator's beliefs; no mortal being may willingly attack you for the remainder of the scene. Supernatural targets suffer a penalty equal to the value of the card expended on any attempts to attack you.

**Sacred Mystery (G):** *You stand before the veil of the temple.* Mortal followers who listen to your teachings gain access to potent secrets. If you expend a card, you may imbue one such acolyte with Dream-sense for a scene. When you invoke Thousand Faces, you may include any number of mortal disciples, disguising them along with yourself.

## The Empress

Shield of Venus (G): *All life is its own sanctum sanctorum.*

Expend a card, and name a subject. The subject gains that card as a supernatural health level. When the subject takes damage, he or she chooses whether to lose this protection or to discard from hand as normal. If the magic is not removed via damage by the end of the scene, the card thus committed returns to your hand at the beginning of the next scene.

Throne of Demeter (G): *Abundance flows from your hands.*

Like the classic miracle of multiplying loaves and fish, you can create a cornucopia of food from just a small amount. You must have some sort of food available, and the new food is identical in nature to the source (you cannot create bread from meat, for instance). Expend a card: the amount of food is increased to feed people equal to twice the value of the card expended.

Treasure (G): *You hold wondrous riches.* Whenever you deem it necessary, you may commit a card to gain access to any material need that can be purchased or any favor that can be leveraged by being fantastically wealthy. The wealth does not actually exist, but is created via magic from dreams of prosperity as well as lost or forgotten money.

## The Emperor

**Crux Ansata (G):** *The scepter of authority enforces the crown of wisdom.* Expend a card to imbue yourself with supernatural power of adjudication. For one scene, you radiate a mien of knowledge and impartiality which draws mortals to petition you for advice; this aura empowers you to make judgments even on subjects in which you possess no expertise, though such decisions will be at best educated guesses rather than perfect guidance. You are considered to have a bonus equal to the value of the card expended before playing any further cards to discern relevant knowledge.

**Status Quo (G):** *Stability versus stagnation: four walls to fortresses and prisons alike.* Your word locks patterns into place, for good or ill. You may commit a card to “freeze” all cards that have been played previously in the scene; all characters in the scene continue to use the last card they played for all subsequent actions until the Power ends. New characters entering the scene come under the effect of this Power upon playing a card.

**Throne of Zeus (G):** *Your word is law from on high.* You stand firm like stone, and none may gainsay your edicts: when you expend a Wands to perform an act of intimidation or exert your authority, or expend a Pentacles to maintain your authority against an outside force, you double the value of the card.

## The Hierophant

**Benediction (G):** *Your hand bridges Heaven and Earth.* You may name a target and perform a ritual blessing upon them, upon the completion of which you may expend a card. The blessed subject may use that card at any point during the scene as if it were their own, but the card may not be lost or stolen by any means. If the card is not used by the end of the scene, it returns to your hand at the beginning of the next scene.

**Crossed Keys (G):** *Enlightenment lies at your feet.* Expend a card to open your mind to ecclesiastical secrets. The most subtle and arcane rituals of all religion are apparent to you. This influx of esoteric wisdom grants everyone present in the scene an insight into the current story, provided by the World, which may be cryptic, but is always accurate and beneficial. In practical terms, all beings receiving this enlightenment gain a bonus equal to the value of the card expended on one action related to advancing the current story. Further enlightenment may not be obtained until the matter to which a previous epiphany pertained has been resolved.

**Twin Pillars (G):** *Law and liberty define the bounds of your purview.* You may reveal the highest and lowest value cards in your hand when any other character takes an action; the character may then not play any card lower than your lowest card or higher than your highest card. A card played outside of those limits fails automatically, and is not replaced. You then discard one of the two cards you revealed and draw.

## The Lovers

**Difficult Choice (G):** *Nobody ever said love was easy.* When this Power is invoked, expend a card and name a target character. If the character has Motivations, you learn what they are and their ratings; otherwise, the World will tell you the character's main goal in the scene. You may then create a dilemma forcing the character to choose between their goal/Motivation and an action of your choice. If the character chooses their goal/Motivation, they suffer a penalty equal to the card you expended on their next action. If the character acquiesces to your demand, you renew your hand, and the target suffers the usual consequences for acting out of character or against their Motivation.

**Fruit and Flame (G):** *What tempts you?* You may commit a card and name a target, infusing it with an intense desire of your making. That character gains a Motivation 5 (treated as Pentacles) to an object, person or place you designate, for as long as the card remains committed.

**In Accord (G):** *Two sides to an argument, but twice as strong in agreement.* This power requires you to have a positive emotional bond with the target for at least one scene prior to use; the World may rule whether or not this power is applicable. Expend a card to allow your target and you to combine your hands for the remainder of the scene, drawing and expending from the common pool of cards you share. Effects that target your shared hand or cards expended may be directed to one or both of you as you decide. You and the target replenish your hands at the end of the scene.

## The Chariot

**Binding Triumph (G):** *Its riddle answered, the sphinx bows to the yoke.* When you defeat an enemy in physical or intellectual challenge, you may expend a card to bind that being to later service. No more than two beings may be so bound, the bond can only be created at the moment of triumph, and the bound may not be more powerful (that is, have a greater hand size) than you. Later, you may expend a card to summon a bound being to perform one scene-long task to which it is suited, at which point it is dismissed from the bond.

**Perpetual Motion (G):** *Become the unstoppable force.* You can move preternaturally fast, with nearly irresistible momentum. As long as you commit a card to only movement, taking no other actions, you can cover a number of meters in Dramatic Time or kilometers in Narrative Time per action as the value of the card committed. Any being attempting to hinder your movement suffers a penalty to their action equal to the committed card's value, and if their card's value is reduced to 0 or lower by the penalty, the would-be obstacle takes damage equal to the remaining value of your card.

**Strength in Opposition (G):** *You build strength from contradictions.* You may commit a card at the beginning of a scene. Each time another character opposes or resists your actions in the scene, you may increase the value of the reserved card by one. You may use the card at any point later in the scene, treating it as if it were the modified value instead of the printed value. At the end of the scene, discard the card.



## Justice

Fair Decision (G): *No blindfold hinders your reasoning.* Your power over impartiality and balance makes hidden things known. You may choose for all players with characters present in the scene, including yourself and the World's characters, to reveal their hands to one another.

Sword's Point (G): *Order will be enforced.* Expend a card. All cards expended for the remainder of the scene have the same value as the card you expended. Supernatural beings may shatter this effect only by expending a King for no other purpose than to negate the Power.

Weighed Upon The Balance (G): *All things even out in the end.* When a card is expended in your presence, you may expend a card, replacing the value of the card originally played with yours. If you replace the card with one of a lower value, the player of the original card may draw a replacement card following the action. If your card is of higher value than the card played, you may draw a replacement card.

## The Hermit

**Cloak of Knowledge (G):** *Does the sage conceal learning, or does learning conceal the sage?* Expend a card to move yourself instantaneously to any secluded location concerned with information: suggestions include a library, monastic archive, or computer lab. While you remain in that location, or for one scene, you are immune to supernatural attempts to divine your location. You do not pass through Beyond as you travel, nor do you pass through intervening space or objects — you simply cease to be in one place and begin to be in another.

**Conceal the Lamp (G):** *The light is drawn beneath the mantle.* If you expend a card, you may conceal any secret perfectly for a scene; no matter the means taken to attempt to draw out the information, you supernaturally betray no sign whatsoever that you even possess the protected knowledge. Supernatural actions to counteract this Power, including use of the Way of Secrets, are automatically penalized by the value of the card expended before resolving the attempt.

**Lingua Franca (G):** *No wisdom escapes your scrutiny.* Expend a card to perfectly understand any spoken communication in any language for a scene. You understand idiom or slang as if you were a native speaker of every language. You may also readily discern what multiple persons are saying simultaneously, making you capable of eavesdropping on an entire crowd of conversations at once.

## The Wheel of Fortune

Destiny (G): *The circle of fate spins around you.* Instead of selecting a Greater Power at character creation, you may create a weird with which to begin play. Before the first session begins, draw three cards and choose one to bind to the weird, discarding the other two before drawing your hand at the start of the game.

Forever Turning (G): *How can a wheel not turn?* Expend a card to gain perfect stability for a scene: no change, literal or metaphorical, can cause you to lose your composure. Whether it is physical movement or political intrigue, an ambush or a surprise declaration of love, you adapt perfectly to all changes you encounter as if you had expected them in advance.

ROTA (G): *Forget what others say: by definition, chance favors none.* Expend a card and then collect all the cards held by all beings present in the scene; without looking, shuffle and redistribute them as evenly as possible to everyone.

## Strength

**Broken Pillar (G):** *Your fist can smash stone; what soul can withstand you?* When you cause damage to another supernatural being with a punch (no other hand-to-hand strike will suffice), you may deliver a blow so forceful it disrupts their metaphysical stability. Each time you invoke this Power, the being struck loses the use of a Power for the remainder of the scene — Lesser Powers are lost first, then Greater Powers if applicable.

**Close the Lion's Jaws (G):** *A chain of flowers may ensnare the strong.* Expend a card as you perform an act of kindness towards an enemy or hostile being. Your generosity stymies their enmity for a scene, preventing any act of aggression. Supernatural entities have no special protection against this Power. Affected supernatural beings may return your kindness with a favor of their own, a task of difficulty equal to the value of the card you expended, and thence frees themselves from this stricture, though they may not necessarily be aware of it. (Normal mortals usually cannot accomplish this, so a mundane act of kindness is sufficient in their case.)

**Mighty Feat (G):** *You make the incredible look easy.* You can perform amazing physical tasks. Once per scene, you may double the value of a Swords or Clubs played as an action of athleticism or raw strength.

LA · FORCE ·

## The Hanged Man

Martyr's Mystery (G): *Life arises from sacrifice.* When you or another being present in a scene would lose their last card due to damage or trauma, or when a mortal being without cards would suffer a catastrophic wound, you may reduce one of your Motivations by 1 point to prevent this from happening.

Odin's Eye (G): *Wisdom comes with sacrifice.* You may undergo a harrowing ascetic ritual in which pain is exchanged for knowledge. You may discard any number of cards from hand; the ceremony requires an equivalent number of hours. At the conclusion of this time, you may ask the World one question per card discarded, to which you must receive a truthful answer (although the information may be cryptic or symbolic in presentation). You replenish your hand at the end of the scene.

Serenity in Peril (G): *Threats cannot overcome your perseverance.* If a being harms you, you may expend a card of equal or greater value to the one your opponent used, and that being can harm you no further through normal means for one scene. If that being then uses magic to counteract this Power, you replenish your hand immediately.

## Death

**Black Banner, White Rose (G):** *The white bloom on the black field: growth from loss.* Expend a card and name a target character. That character's player must discard all cards in hand and then choose whether or not to suffer the effects of losing one's final card (excorporation, Reversal, etc.): if the character accepts such a narrative consequence, their hand is refreshed at the beginning of the following scene; if the player opts not to accept, they draw as many cards as were discarded.

**Scythe's Edge (G):** *Hesitation falls away; a steel blade only has two sides.* Expend a card, and no being in your presence can be indecisive about any matter for one scene. If a definitive resolution is clear, an affected being must act upon it; if more than one possible solution presents itself, the most direct will be taken.

**The Unnamed (G):** *The superstitious cross themselves rather than speak your name.* You may invoke this Power even if your character is not present in the scene. While you commit a card to this power, the difficulty to identify or interact with your character is raised by the value of the card committed. Mortal beings will fearfully avoid mentioning you to other characters, describing your appearance or actions, or otherwise attempting to communicate anything regarding your character while the Power is in effect.



## Temperance

**A Distant Crown (G):** *Beyond the next hill, glory awaits those who persevere.* You may expend a card to temper another being for one scene, granting them supernatural focus on some dear cause. This cause acts as a new Motivation with no suit and a rating equal to the value of the card expended. If this cause overlaps with an existing Motivation, the value of the card replaces the rating of the permanent Motivation for the duration of the scene.

**All Things in Moderation (G):** *How much is too much? That's your decision.* Expend a card. For the remainder of the scene, no card may be played of greater value than the card you expended. Supernatural beings may shatter this effect only by expending a King for no other purpose than to negate the Power.

**Water and Wine (G):** *Not too much, not too little.* You may expend a card when another character uses a card; you may reduce the value of their card by any amount up to the value of your own card. If you reduce the value of their card to zero or lower, they may draw to replace their card.

## The Devil

A Torch to Ropes (G): *Any bond can burn.* You may expend a card to view all the ways in which the characters around you are restricted, magically or not, including everything from imposed geases and oaths to personal codes and principles. This Power does not affect Motivations. You can discern the strength of these bonds (the World will assign them a difficulty rating from 1 – a reluctant or unwilling obligation with negligible enforcement – to 10 – a deep personal principle with dire consequences). If you choose, you may dissolve one of these obligations for the remainder of the scene — or permanently, if its strength is equal to or less than the card you expended. Any magical abilities that come from abiding by this restraint, such as a weird, are immediately lost as well.

Horns Pierce Heaven (G): *Lust becomes the only law.* Expend a card, and all beings in your presence become ruled by their most irreverent impulses for one scene. All affected are compelled to engage in riotous and self-satisfying behavior; attempts to behave otherwise suffer a penalty to those actions equal to the value of the card expended. Supernatural beings have no special protection against this Power, but may expend a card after its expiration to realize that their debauchery was magically inspired.

Obsession (G): *You don't give people what they want; you give them the want.* You may expend a card, raising one of a target character's Motivations by the value of the card expended for the remainder of the session. You draw to replace the card only when the target next takes an action to directly fulfill their enhanced Motivation.

## The Tower

**Catastrophe (G):** *A lifetime to build, a second to shatter.* Once per session, you may deal a terrible misfortune to a target. You may discard any number of cards as you name your target: the target must then either choose to take damage equal to the number of cards discarded, or have a single Motivation reduced by that amount.

**Façade (G):** *Reason withers in your long shadow.* You adopt an illusory guise, appearing for a scene to all beings present as a fearful or menacing figure of authority. This guise works differently from the Lesser Power Thousand Faces, in that each target sees their own personal fear reflected in you, rather than a single unified disguise. All attempts to resist or oppose your actions or commands carries with it a penalty equal to the card expended. The illusion may deteriorate, however; the efficacy of the illusion drops by one point each time a target successfully defies you, or each time a target is made aware that what they perceive is not the same as what others perceive.

**Lightning Strikes (G):** *Lies crumble like weak masonry in a storm.* Expend a card, and all lies expressed in your presence are revealed as falsehood for one scene. This awareness extends to all beings present, not simply yourself. Disguises and other non-verbal deceptions are likewise supernaturally obvious as such. This does not grant any special knowledge of the corresponding truth, only that subterfuge exists, though any being present attempting to investigate further gain a bonus equal to the value of the card expended to uncover the specific nature of the lie.

## The Star

**Brightest in Heaven (G):** *One light outshines all others: yours.* You have a natural aura of attractiveness that entralls others, blinding them to contravening advances. When you successfully perform a non-violent social action, you may then commit the card to raise the difficulty of other social actions to distract from, contradict, or compete with yours by the value of the card you played.

**Hope for the Future (G):** *Far lights can guide you to your destination.* You may set a card aside at the beginning of a session; at any point for the remainder of the session, any player may choose to use that card, at which point you refresh your hand.

**Water Offering (G):** *Pour the ewers of life over land and sea.* When you invoke this Power, you may discard any number of cards, designating one player for each card discarded. Those players then draw a card and add it to their hand; they may discard a card before drawing if they have a full hand.

## The Moon

Beasts of Land and Sea (G): *Your mien fascinates the things of the wild.* You may expend a card to create a magical nimbus invisible to other people but which attracts and mesmerizes animals (including their mirror-counterparts). All such creatures within visible range are drawn to your presence; they are made somewhat docile by the aura, and are generally nonaggressive in your presence, even to the point of not automatically attacking creatures they would normally view as prey. (While they will never attack you, the summoned beasts can still be provoked to violence, but will prefer to flee rather than fight if the option is available.)

Silver Light (G): *Dreams and moonlight are cousins.* Because deception falls under your purview, it has no hold on you. Your Dream-sense is enhanced: you always see creatures from Beyond as they truly are, piercing any disguise they might wear, as well as knowing what type of creature they are (chimera, commoner, Castellan or Comte). You may expend an additional card to emanate a pale aura that illuminates the scene, sharing this benefit with all others present.

Winding Path (G): *No wolves will hinder your passing.* Expend a card to bless a journey you are about to undertake. The effect covers you and a number of companions equal to the card spent. No accidents or unforeseen obstacles will delay or prevent your voyage, or any of your traveling party from reaching its destination unharmed. The effect ends at the boundary between worlds, but encompasses the mirror-way itself, and can be extended with a second card at the time of crossing. Supernatural beings intent on interfering must expend a card to overcome this effect even before taking any action.

## The Sun

Inner Light (G): *Your power beams forth, terrible and brilliant.* Incandescent light streams from you, as bright as daylight. It passes through material objects (thus casting no shadow) and illuminates a number of meters equal to the value of the card expended to invoke this power in all directions (and is visible as normal light beyond that range). Those allied with you are filled with optimism, gaining a bonus to their next action equal to the value of the card expended, while those opposed to you find the light glaring and inimical, suffering a like penalty on their next action.

Red Banner, White Horse (G): *Innocence and leadership are entwined in you.* You exude an aura of moral incorruptibility which mortals (and other supernatural beings) find amiable. If you expend a card, you may enhance that aura to draw others to your side; mortals gain a belief in a cause you support, and will fervently work to realize that goal. Supernatural beings may expend a card to avoid being swept up in your crusade, but cannot actively work against your mission for a scene. The affected group will work toward the cause you inspire with whatever abilities they have, whether or not the goal is actually attainable.

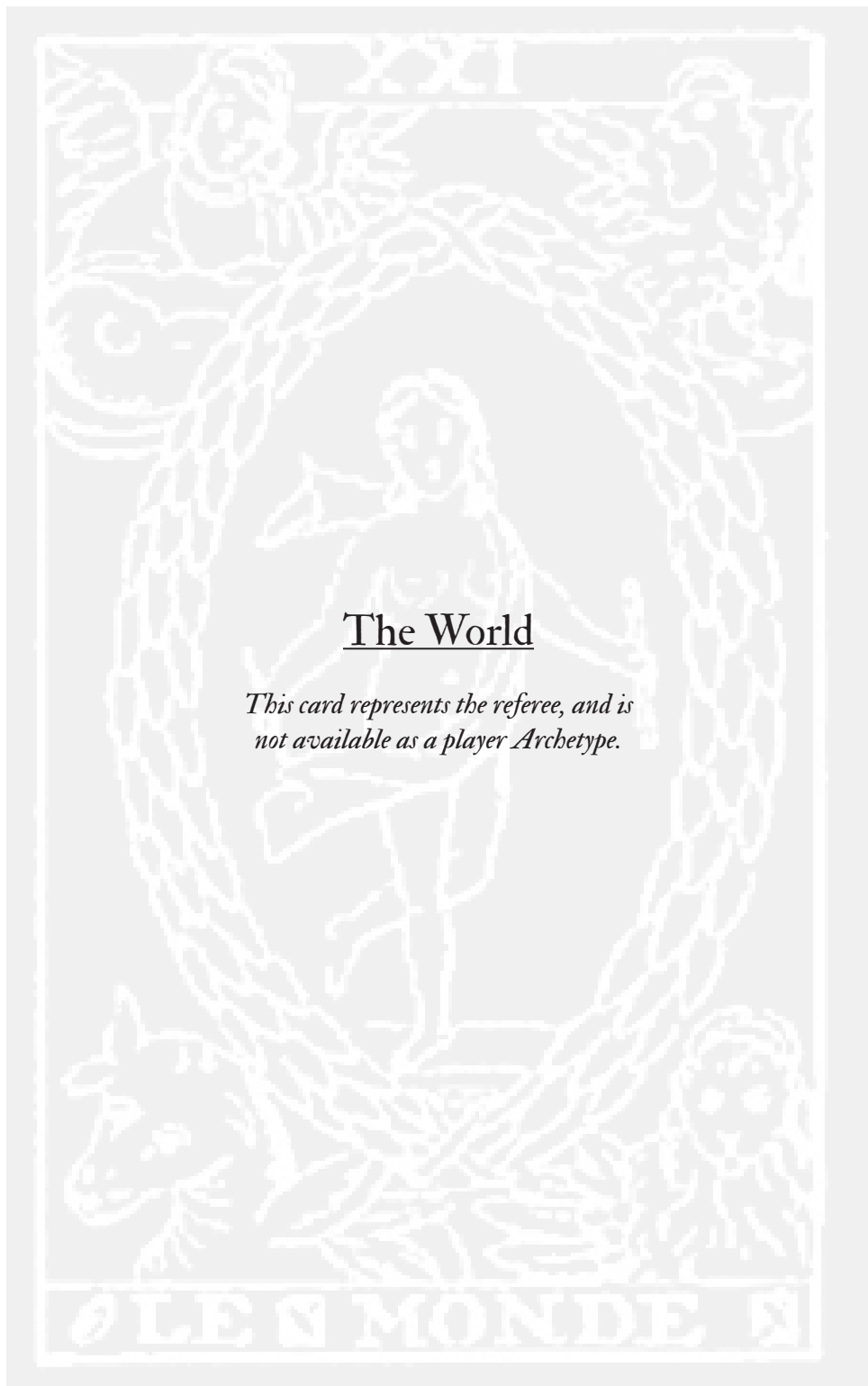
Sunflowers (G): *Everything blooms in your light.* You can strengthen and invigorate life. You may discard your highest value card and then distribute the rest of your cards in hand to any characters present in the scene. If those characters do not have their maximum cards in hand, they may keep the card you give them; if their hands are full, they may choose to discard a card in order to keep what you give them. Afterward, replenish your hand. This Power may be used once per session.

## The Last Judgment

**The Angel (G):** *The ancients feared and respected divine messengers in equal measure, for good reason.* With a terrible mien, you invoke strange and ancient power to pass sentence on those before you. When any being expends a card in your presence, you may immediately expend a card of equal or greater value to cancel its effects entirely. The target does not and cannot regain the spent card until a complete scene has passed, regardless of whether the corresponding action would allow otherwise: your Power obliterates all trace of its use. Any use of this Power is obvious to all nearby, and it will always be traced back to you, no matter what guise you wear.

**Desperate Prayers (G):** *The wicked confess in the face of their judge.* Calling upon your fearsome aura, you compel mortals to unburden their souls reflexively. You take the essence of the local law and mores to craft this effect, so the effect depends on the prevailing standards. Expending a card causes all mortals to confess all of their offenses or misdeeds, no matter how petty, committed within a number of days equal to the value of the card expended. Supernatural beings blurt out their most recent crime when this power is invoked, unless they expend a card of equal or greater value to suppress the effect.

**Resurrection (G):** *You bear the Alpha and the Omega.* When a character suffers the effects of damage or trauma after losing their last card, you may expend a card immediately to preserve them. If the affected character is a supernatural being, he or she draws a card, allowing them to continue to function, albeit shaken by the experience (possibly experiencing a Reversal, at the World's discretion). Mortals are simply kept alive, but are unconscious and unable to act.



## The World

*This card represents the referee, and is not available as a player Archetype.*



## The Fool

Jack of All Trades (G): *...but master of none.* You may invoke a Greater or Lesser Power you have seen another supernatural being use. Any other Power may only ever be invoked once through this Power, after which you may never use it again, even if it is possessed by multiple beings or you witness the Power being used multiple times.

That Last Step (G): *...is a real doozy.* If a Shuffle occurs in your presence, you may expend a card, then set aside one or more cards remaining in your hand. Any cards not set aside are discarded. After the Shuffle, you are dealt five new cards, and you may choose your new hand from among the cards previously set aside and those newly dealt.

The Unnumbered (G): *The beginning is the same as the end.* You may play an Ace as if it had a value of either a 1 or a 15. If you choose to play an Ace as a 15, you may not add it to another card as usual.

ENEMIES



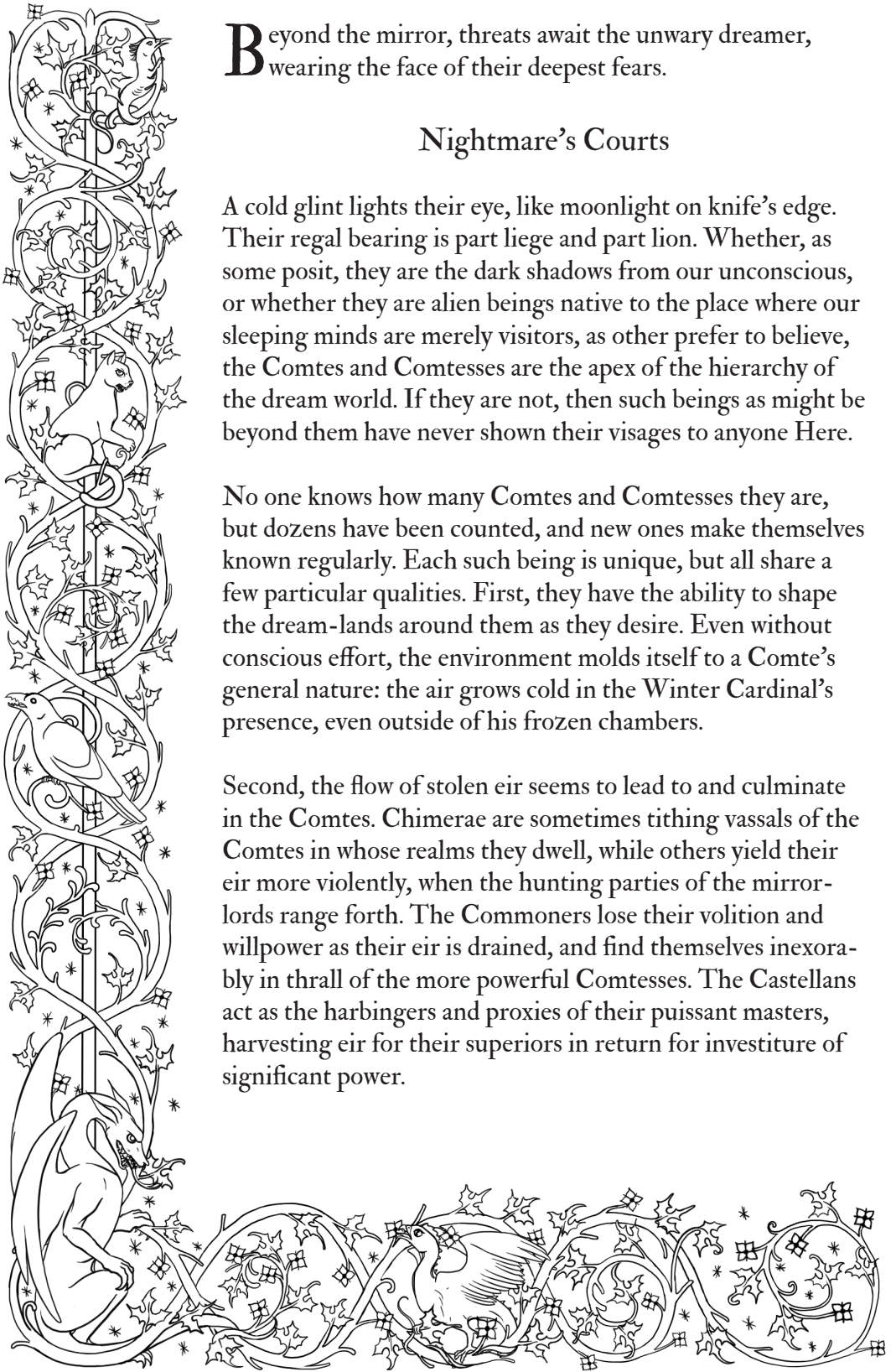
**B**eyond the mirror, threats await the unwary dreamer, wearing the face of their deepest fears.

## Nightmare's Courts

A cold glint lights their eye, like moonlight on knife's edge. Their regal bearing is part liege and part lion. Whether, as some posit, they are the dark shadows from our unconscious, or whether they are alien beings native to the place where our sleeping minds are merely visitors, as other prefer to believe, the Comtes and Comtesses are the apex of the hierarchy of the dream world. If they are not, then such beings as might be beyond them have never shown their visages to anyone Here.

No one knows how many Comtes and Comtesses they are, but dozens have been counted, and new ones make themselves known regularly. Each such being is unique, but all share a few particular qualities. First, they have the ability to shape the dream-lands around them as they desire. Even without conscious effort, the environment molds itself to a Comte's general nature: the air grows cold in the Winter Cardinal's presence, even outside of his frozen chambers.

Second, the flow of stolen eir seems to lead to and culminate in the Comtes. Chimerae are sometimes tithing vassals of the Comtes in whose realms they dwell, while others yield their eir more violently, when the hunting parties of the mirror-lords range forth. The Commoners lose their volition and willpower as their eir is drained, and find themselves inexorably in thrall of the more powerful Comtesses. The Castellans act as the harbingers and proxies of their puissant masters, harvesting eir for their superiors in return for investiture of significant power.



Some among the royalty of Beyond are excessively genial, like the Lady of Ivory, who lures dreamers into her alabaster court with endless masquerades and feasts. But such politesse is never altruistic: the Lady goads her guests to exhaust themselves so that she may feast on their expended eir. That harvested dream is given to her twisted engineers to build onto the endless string of forever decaying halls hidden just behind the lavish façade, an endlessly traveling carnival within the walls of an ever-expanding ruin. Other Comtes are more overtly hostile, which is both a blessing and a curse. The Warden of the Antiphon forbids any being to speak in his realm; violators' dream-forms are rendered into their constituent eir with wicked blades and stored in the array of gleaming stained glass windows adorning his redoubt. This process does not kill the dreamer, but leaves them severely traumatized when they wake suddenly — and they find themselves dreaming fitfully, if at all, after the experience, of the Warden's ominous footsteps approaching.

While in their domains, a Comte is nearly indomitable in physical or magical might, and the world itself obeys their command. Defeating the Comtes is always a matter of thwarting their schemes, and is nearly always a temporary state of affairs. Truly vanquishing a Comte, dispersing its essential eir and unmaking its self, is so rare as to be unknown; further, if the tales are to be believed, doing so causes catastrophic ripples through the dream-lands which could cause harm to dreamers caught in the wake. Finally, even the dissolution of a Comte's person is not final destruction: the agglomeration of dream-energy that constitutes their core frequently takes on a new manifestation.

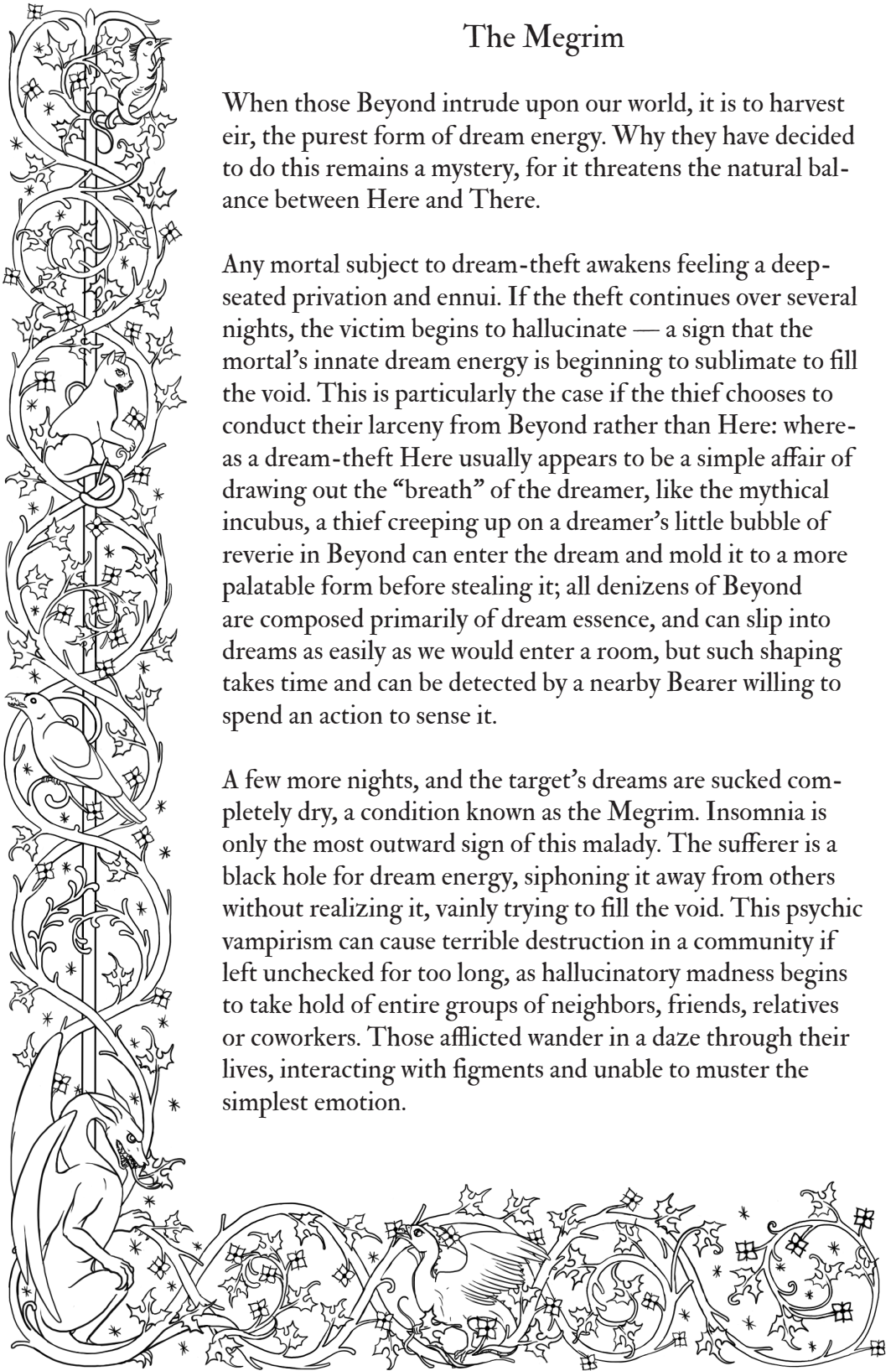


## The Megrim

When those Beyond intrude upon our world, it is to harvest eir, the purest form of dream energy. Why they have decided to do this remains a mystery, for it threatens the natural balance between Here and There.

Any mortal subject to dream-theft awakens feeling a deep-seated privation and ennui. If the theft continues over several nights, the victim begins to hallucinate — a sign that the mortal’s innate dream energy is beginning to sublimate to fill the void. This is particularly the case if the thief chooses to conduct their larceny from Beyond rather than Here: whereas a dream-theft Here usually appears to be a simple affair of drawing out the “breath” of the dreamer, like the mythical incubus, a thief creeping up on a dreamer’s little bubble of reverie in Beyond can enter the dream and mold it to a more palatable form before stealing it; all denizens of Beyond are composed primarily of dream essence, and can slip into dreams as easily as we would enter a room, but such shaping takes time and can be detected by a nearby Bearer willing to spend an action to sense it.

A few more nights, and the target’s dreams are sucked completely dry, a condition known as the Megrim. Insomnia is only the most outward sign of this malady. The sufferer is a black hole for dream energy, siphoning it away from others without realizing it, vainly trying to fill the void. This psychic vampirism can cause terrible destruction in a community if left unchecked for too long, as hallucinatory madness begins to take hold of entire groups of neighbors, friends, relatives or coworkers. Those afflicted wander in a daze through their lives, interacting with figments and unable to muster the simplest emotion.



No sure cure exists for the ravages of the Megrin. While some afflicted individuals have been returned to a semblance of normality by being rescued from the depredations of their nightly harrowing, and eventually heal enough to begin to dream again tentatively, others are utterly shattered by the experience and never truly dream again. The sooner a dream-ravisher can be found and stopped, the better.

### The Enemy:

#### Chimerae, Commoners, Castellans, and Comtesses

The hierarchy of Beyond spans a dizzying array of entities. There are as many nightmares as there are dreamers to imagine them, but categories emerge. Those lower on the ladder are most vulnerable to the impressions of dreaming minds, and their forms are modeled from mythology and fiction, which are practically infinite in number and yet somewhat recognizable. As one encounters the more powerful levels, the specimens of Beyond become unique and abstract, possessing their own wills and existences. Smart Bearers should not underestimate even the least creature, however.

#### ♣ *Chimerae* ♣

Many of the interlopers from Beyond are little more than beasts — but what passes for a beast in the mirror-lands is threat enough. The general term “chimera” applies to all manner of creatures native to the Other Side. Some are amalgams of recognizable animals (called ‘hybrids’ by scholars interested in such things), while others are analogues of familiar creatures with exaggerated features (dubbed ‘reflections’). The final category, and in some ways the most dangerous, are the ‘imagoi’, dream-monsters formed from humanity’s

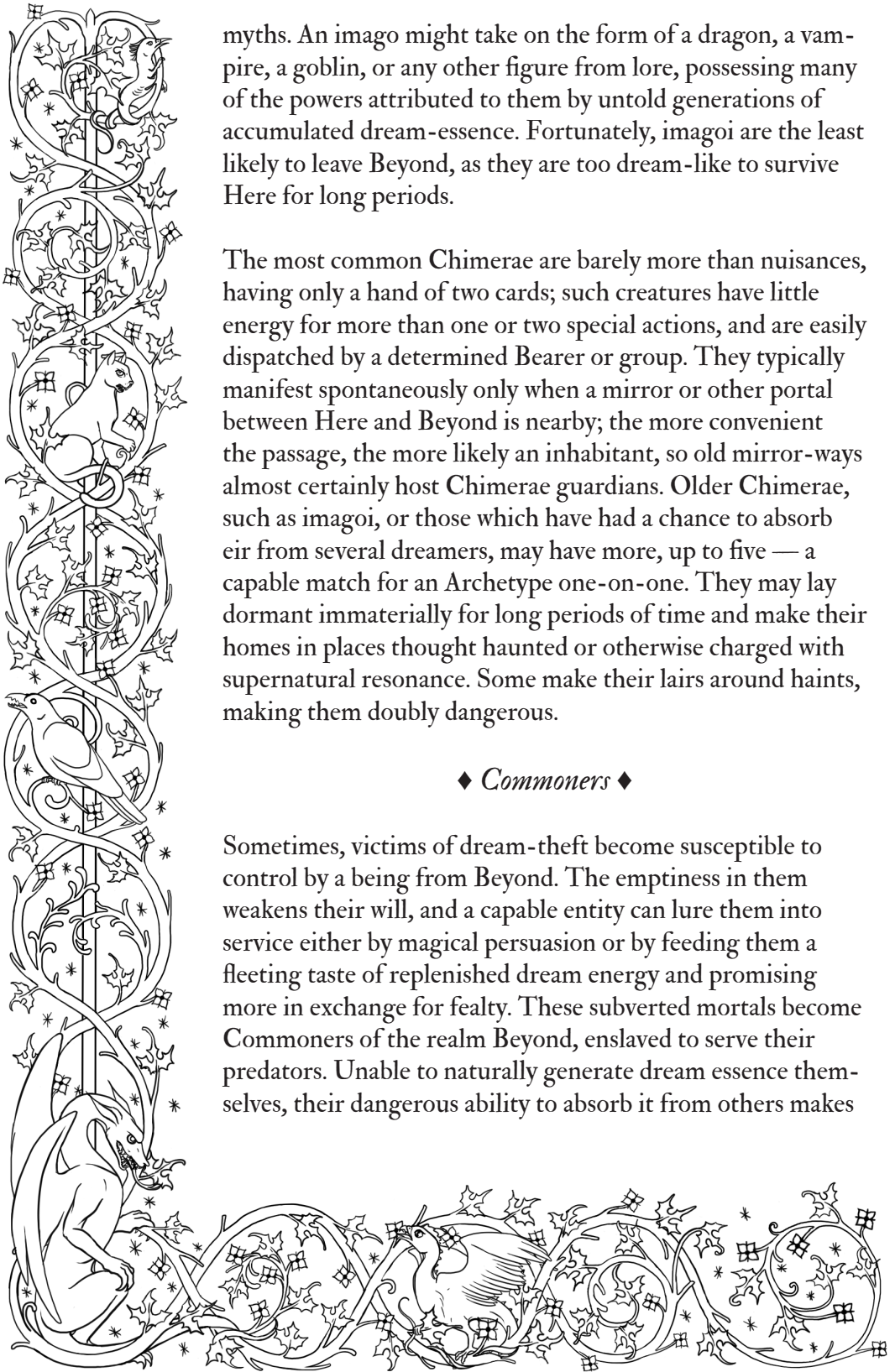


myths. An imago might take on the form of a dragon, a vampire, a goblin, or any other figure from lore, possessing many of the powers attributed to them by untold generations of accumulated dream-essence. Fortunately, imagoi are the least likely to leave Beyond, as they are too dream-like to survive Here for long periods.

The most common Chimerae are barely more than nuisances, having only a hand of two cards; such creatures have little energy for more than one or two special actions, and are easily dispatched by a determined Bearer or group. They typically manifest spontaneously only when a mirror or other portal between Here and Beyond is nearby; the more convenient the passage, the more likely an inhabitant, so old mirror-ways almost certainly host Chimerae guardians. Older Chimerae, such as imagoi, or those which have had a chance to absorb eir from several dreamers, may have more, up to five — a capable match for an Archetype one-on-one. They may lay dormant immaterially for long periods of time and make their homes in places thought haunted or otherwise charged with supernatural resonance. Some make their lairs around haints, making them doubly dangerous.

#### ◆ *Commoners* ◆

Sometimes, victims of dream-theft become susceptible to control by a being from Beyond. The emptiness in them weakens their will, and a capable entity can lure them into service either by magical persuasion or by feeding them a fleeting taste of replenished dream energy and promising more in exchange for fealty. These subverted mortals become Commoners of the realm Beyond, enslaved to serve their predators. Unable to naturally generate dream essence themselves, their dangerous ability to absorb it from others makes



## There's No "Masquerade"?

The world as depicted in *House of Cards* is one in which magic and monsters roam pretty much freely, and yet everything seems much the same superficially. Why is that?

First of all, the tone of the game draws heavily from tales of magical-realism and whimsy. Think of Alice's reactions pursuing the White Rabbit down his hole or conversing with the Caterpillar: what put her off most of all was not their strangeness, but simply that the creatures of Wonderland didn't conform to her Victorian expectations of manners!

The denizens of Beyond have practical reason not to show their presence: even the lowest chimera has a predator's wits, and knows not to reveal itself while on the hunt. Bearers likewise have reason not to call attention to the war going on: mortals get in the way. For every one clever mortal hero, there are a hundred possible liabilities — or casualties. Even for one invested with the might and prestige of an Archetype, the transition to full awareness of dream-reality is a difficult one to master, and it is a rare Bearer who wants to impose that knowledge on their less-prepared friends and loved ones.

Finally, mortals themselves generally prefer their lives to be unplagued by rogue imps or bugbears. The capacity of the human mind to disregard things it doesn't (want to) understand is astounding. Rationalizations and evidence can be cooked up after the fact. As for the cases of those who do in fact want to see the truth of the world, the reality is less enchanting than they usually imagine, and brings with it a significant amount of peril: after all, chasing down dragons tends to simply result in a fed dragon.



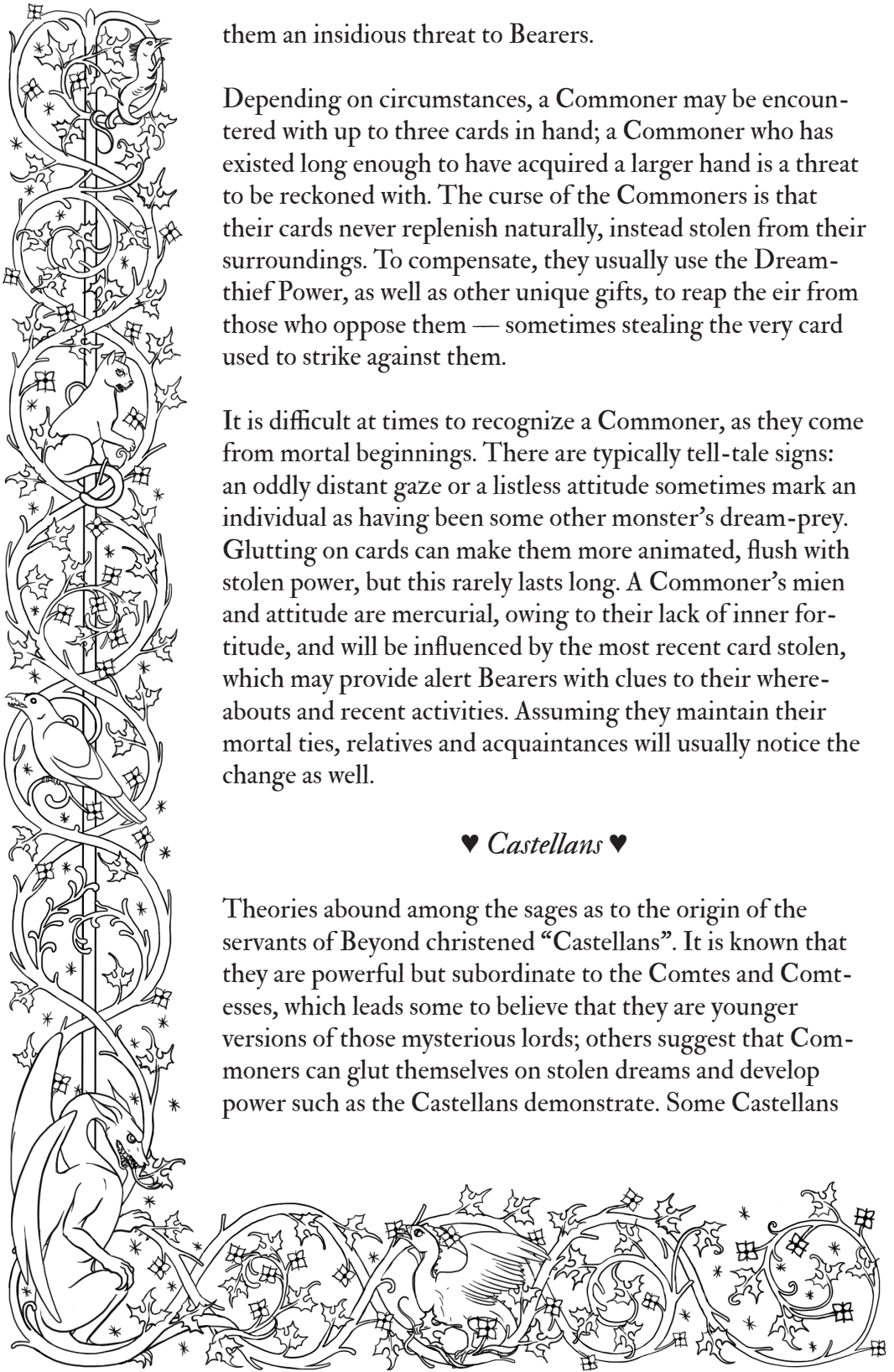
them an insidious threat to Bearers.

Depending on circumstances, a Commoner may be encountered with up to three cards in hand; a Commoner who has existed long enough to have acquired a larger hand is a threat to be reckoned with. The curse of the Commoners is that their cards never replenish naturally, instead stolen from their surroundings. To compensate, they usually use the Dream-thief Power, as well as other unique gifts, to reap the eir from those who oppose them — sometimes stealing the very card used to strike against them.

It is difficult at times to recognize a Commoner, as they come from mortal beginnings. There are typically tell-tale signs: an oddly distant gaze or a listless attitude sometimes mark an individual as having been some other monster's dream-prey. Glutting on cards can make them more animated, flush with stolen power, but this rarely lasts long. A Commoner's mien and attitude are mercurial, owing to their lack of inner fortitude, and will be influenced by the most recent card stolen, which may provide alert Bearers with clues to their whereabouts and recent activities. Assuming they maintain their mortal ties, relatives and acquaintances will usually notice the change as well.

### ♥ *Castellans* ♥

Theories abound among the sages as to the origin of the servants of Beyond christened “Castellans”. It is known that they are powerful but subordinate to the Comtes and Comtesses, which leads some to believe that they are younger versions of those mysterious lords; others suggest that Commoners can glut themselves on stolen dreams and develop power such as the Castellans demonstrate. Some Castellans



serve as seneschals in the courts of their superiors, while others seem to rule portions of their masters' mirror-fiefs as vassal-lords. In either case, a Castellan's forceful personality and idiosyncratic appearance reflect their niche as a significant inhabitant of the dream-world, though metaphysically less powerful than an Archetype.

Nearly all Castellans encountered by Bearers prove worthy foes; they often have four cards at their disposal, with one of those cards dictating the Castellan's appearance and a single core correspondence like that of an Archetype. This correspondence gives the Castellan a unique supernatural power and forms the heart of their identity — a strength, to be sure, but also a weakness, for if this card is expended, the Castellan loses their cohesion of identity and their power fades for an indeterminate time (until they can somehow replace their heart, at which point a new identity and power take shape). Usually, a Castellan's heart has been placed in him by his sovereign Comtesse, and it will be at her leave that a Castellan is restored, and at her whimsy as to what self he is to wear next.

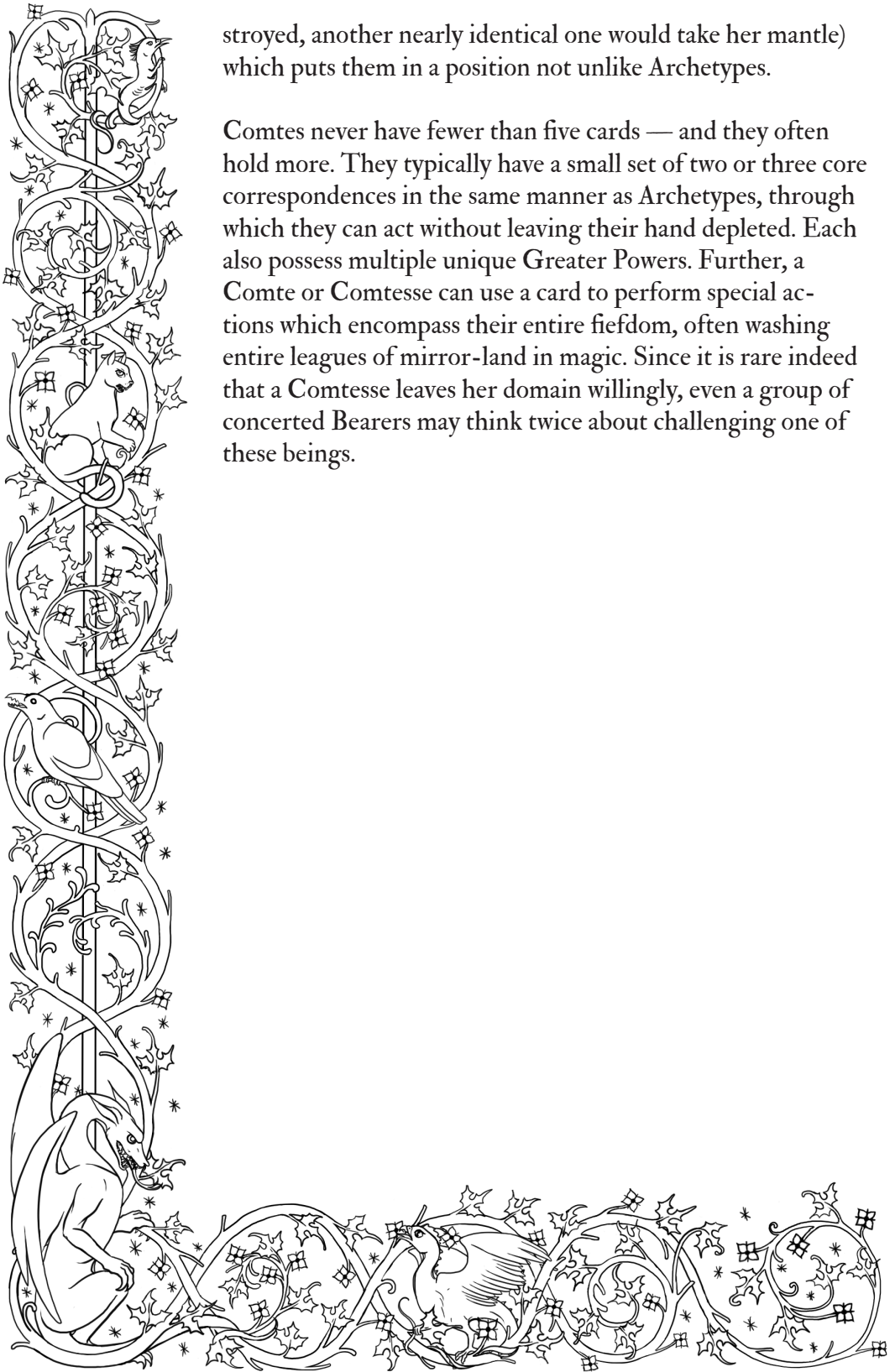
♠ *Comtes* ♠

It is a rare occasion for a Bearer to personally encounter a Comte or Comtesse. Furthermore, each is a wholly unique being, and so little is known for certain of them. The Comtes are the most puissant known inhabitants of the lands Beyond, and thus are assumed to be the top of the hierarchy. The power of these entities is such that entire swaths of dream-land are shaped by their presence and whim alone. If there is a guiding force behind the current conflict, it would have to be one of these mirror-lords. Each has a defined personality and title (which, it is supposed, may not be entirely independent — tales circulate suggesting that if a Comtesse were to be de-



stroyed, another nearly identical one would take her mantle) which puts them in a position not unlike Archetypes.

Comtes never have fewer than five cards — and they often hold more. They typically have a small set of two or three core correspondences in the same manner as Archetypes, through which they can act without leaving their hand depleted. Each also possess multiple unique Greater Powers. Further, a Comte or Comtesse can use a card to perform special actions which encompass their entire fiefdom, often washing entire leagues of mirror-land in magic. Since it is rare indeed that a Comtesse leaves her domain willingly, even a group of concerted Bearers may think twice about challenging one of these beings.



## A Menagerie of Chimerae

### Grimalkin

*A reflection*

Cards: 3

Powers:

- Dream-thief (L), Excorporate (L), Shadow Walk (L): As Mirror Walk, but via shadows
- Black Cat Curse (G): Expend a card to add its value to the difficulty of target creature's actions for a scene.

*A charcoal cat known to magi as familiars — capable of speech and holding valuable secrets, but driven to deceive*

### Cockatrice

*A hybrid*

Cards: 3

Powers:

- Dream-thief (L), Excorporate (L)
- Corrupting Breath (G): Expend a card to inflict a fatal wasting sickness on a mortal; supernatural beings may lose a card rather than contract the disease.

*A foul cross between a lizard and a cockerel, possessed of a fetid breath and sharp malice; its heart is a black jewel which must be crushed to cure its plague*

### Jersey Devil

*An imago*

Cards: 4

Powers:

- Dream-thief (L), Excorporate (L)
- Terrible Shriek (G): Expend a card to inspire overwhelming fear within earshot: mortals are incapacitated; supernatural beings suffer a penalty to actions equal to the value of the card expended

*A hideous monster with cloven hooves, leathern wings, and equine head, forever lurking at night*

## A Mob of Commoners

Boggan

*A child commoner*

Cards: 3

Powers:

- Dream-thief (L), Excorporate (L), Skitter (L): Expend a card to travel along any physical surface for an action
- Fright Face (G): Expend a card to create a frightening illusion; cards spent in reaction to this phantasm may be stolen

*A warped, diminutive urchin who reaps nightmares*

Banshee

*An advanced commoner*

Cards: 4

Powers:

- Dream-thief (L), Excorporate (L), Dead Eye (L): Expend a card to look at a character's hand
- Sing-song (G): Expend a card; every other character present discards a card of equal or lesser value if possible
- Brand (G): Expend a card to magically mark target

*Harshly beautiful envoys of Beyond who inflict their icy hate on the unsuspecting through magical song*

Scarecrow

*An adult commoner*

Cards: 3

Powers:

- Dream-thief (L), Excorporate (L), Shadow Puppet (L): Expend a card to either exchange places with your shadow, or to create the illusion that you did
- Straw Man (G): Expend a card to animate your shadow for one scene as an independent but obedient stuffed simulacrum which has your Lesser Powers

*Ragged, emaciated, and hollow-eyed minions of the Comtesses, often spies and agents*

## A March of Castellans

Eliza of Wyckhart

*A young castellan*

Cards: 4

Essence: Seven of Cups

- Dream-thief (L), Excorporate (L), Mirror Walk (L)
- Chalice of Laurel (G): You see what a given person's secret vanity is, and may thwart it. When a target expends cards to pursue their favorite personal vice, you may expend a card, reducing the target's card's value by the value of yours.

Jack Glasstooth

*A young castellan*

Cards: 4

Essence: Knight of Swords, Reversed

- Dream-thief (L), Excorporate (L), Mirror Walk (L)
- Flashing Smile (G): You may reinforce a lie or act of sleight-of-hand with magic to make it utterly believable; those magically attempting to see through the deception must expend a card higher than the one you expended.

Fenian Fitzroy

*A veteran castellan*

Cards: 5

Essence: Five of Swords

- Dream-thief (L), Excorporate (L), Mirror Walk (L)
- Riddle of Steel (G): Whenever you draw a Swords, you may set it aside as long as you have fewer than five Swords already set aside, and draw to replace it. You may use these cards to perform combat actions only, but they do not count against your limit of actions for a turn.

## A Majesty of Comtes

The Duke of Silvered Shears

Cards: 5

*A young Comte*

Correspondences: Sudden endings, tailors, bladed tools

- **Cut Short (G):** Expend a card to render the value of an equal or lesser card halved
- **Endless Thread (G):** Expend a card; your sense of touch and hearing extends to every piece of woven cloth in your domain

Grandmother Wolf

Cards: 6

*An uplifted reflection, now Comtesse*

Correspondences: Ravenous hunger, lies, deep forested places

- **Disguise (L):** If you can don an article of an individual's clothing, you appear to be that individual as long as you commit a card to maintaining the illusion.
- **What Sharp Teeth (G):** When you reduce a character to 0 cards, you may then swallow them whole. You gain an additional card in hand for each being swallowed.

The Lady of Ivory

Cards: 6

*A Comtesse*

Correspondences: Envy, rivalry, social maneuvering, verbal sparring

- **If Looks Could Kill (G):** Expend a card to raise the difficulty of spoken argument (except yours) by the value of the card expended for one scene
- **Not To Be Outdone (G):** If a being expends a card on an action regarding social or physical grace and poise, you may immediately discard a card to take it into hand, and may use it for a similar action of your own



## The Masked Prince of Luthiers

*A Comte*

Correspondences: Melancholy, deception, musical performance

### Powers

Dream-thief (L)

Excporate (L)

Chord (G): Expend a card. You may sing a falsehood rather than speak it, and your song cloaks its untruth. The difficulty to disbelieve or discern the statement as a lie is increased by the card expended for the rest of the scene.

Fret (G): Characters do not gain Motivation bonuses to actions in your presence.

Motley (G): You may see through the eyes or hear through the ears of a being who wears a piece of your clothing.

Cards: 7

# MYSTERIES



## The World is in your hands

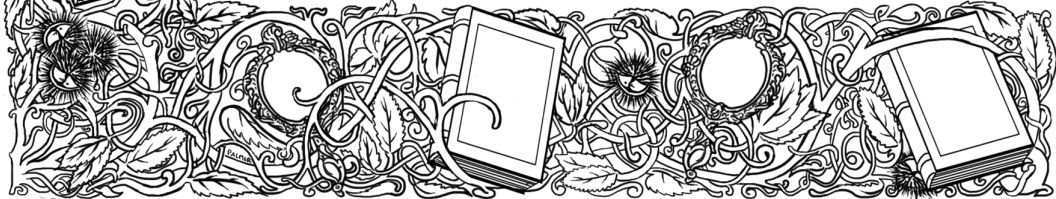
This section provides guidance to players and referees with regard to playing *House of Cards*. The text of the game aims to be clear but concise. However, it is not only likely but probable that some readers will not view the tones or themes presented here exactly as the author intends; others may have less trouble with the esoteric aspects of the game's background than with how the rules are to be implemented practically as a game. Some clarification is thus necessarily in order.

### Beginnings

The investiture of a Bearer is a personal thing, so it is perfectly appropriate to go through an introductory session with each player separately if time permits. The eir that forms the miniature Archetype within the Bearer's spirit coalesces over a period of time before the actual trigger event, which is usually some sort of fateful moment — a powerful dream, or an encounter with a monster from the mirror, are excellent possibilities, but a more prosaic crisis could also potentially jump-start a Bearer's ascendancy.

Before that, find out what your players expect, and give them some idea of what you want to do with the game. *House of Cards* makes no attempt to be all games to all players, but it is flexible: your group's taste for high adventure or whimsical fantasy, or for suspense and perhaps even for horror, can be accommodated by the material and the rules.

Collaboration during character creation is not just for the players' benefit: it also allows you as the referee to see what characters are being brought to the table, and what story hooks they provide. Feel free to get into the mix by suggest-



ing correspondences or Motivations along with the rest of the group, but don't try to steer them into a particular approach or play style if they seem to be going a different direction than what you had in mind. Also, take what you observe and begin planning ahead: foreshadowing using the players' own narrative contributions will almost certainly delight them.

## Mortals and Magic

This is a game about people with power, but not in the mold of more conventional takes like the super-hero genre. It is true that, in the world presented here, power comes pre-loaded with responsibility, and on a cosmic scale. It is also true that the Bearers live in duality like a super-hero would: they have mundane, even quotidian, existences as humans and are prone to the foibles of mortal life, even as they travel across dimensions and employ magical abilities in the service of metaphysical forces in an unseen battle against impossible enemies.

The key difference is a sense of wonder and surrealism foregrounded more than in super-hero stories: the characters in comic books react to the unusual in melodramatic ways or else with absolute credulity, because they're used to what they're seeing. The Bearer of an Archetype should not necessarily be so jaded (at least, not at first). What the protagonists in this game experience is continually new to them, and should not be rationally possible; while guided by the Archetypes, a Bearer is still a person, and any normal person thrust into a spell-weaving duel with a mythological foe on the far side of the mirror can be excused a certain amount of mystified awe.

However, don't overdo it, either. The manifestations of Dream-reality are patently and demonstrably real to the

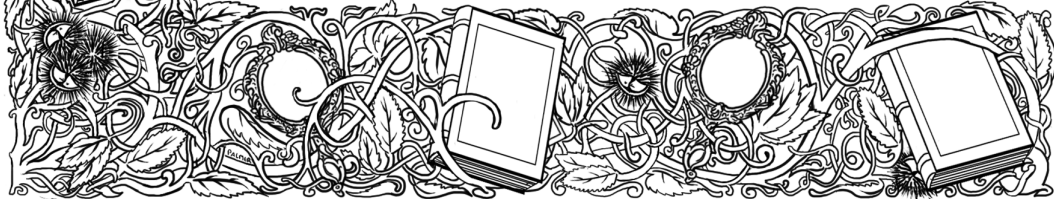


Bearers, which should curtail tales of Bearers trying to get themselves psychoanalyzed or committed, which make for poor fantasy. An Archetype would not choose a Bearer who would do nothing but complain loudly over their plight or seek a way out of their duties. Bearers are heroes, in the broad sense of the word; they will adapt to their new situation, not flee from it.

Other mortals, however, can and often do retreat from the intrusion of Beyond into their lives, which happens with some frequency given that Bearers are under no mandate to maintain any illusion otherwise (though they often do simply to keep the peace; see the sidebar on page 113). Whatever the personal beliefs of a normal person on mysticism and the universe, they typically find any initial wonder quelled by contact with the realities of the mirror-world: creatures of Beyond are rarely anything but menacing (and those that are not are perhaps the *truly* dangerous ones). Bearers may occasionally recruit an individual to assist them in limited ways or for a finite amount of time, but do not count on permanently recurring mortal characters alongside the Bearers. The Regalia are thus even more inclined to trust their peers for this reason: the allies the Regalia truly have are one another.

### A World of Symbols

Interpreting the symbolism of the Tarot is a full-time job for some people, and so no player or referee is expected to burden themselves with the task of occult scholarship. Symbolism changes from card to card and from deck to deck, and any guide approaching usefulness would have to be encyclopedic. The game does not seek, obviously, to impose a set pre-determined list of strict interpretations on the audience, because there's no fun in that. Symbols are mutable things by defini-



tion, too, so attempting to reduce an Archetype's powers to a laundry list runs contrary to the spirit of the game.

Referees and players are encouraged to consult any of the numerous texts available at your library, many of which provide concise lists of correspondences or interpretive cues. A few classic works persist as reference material despite their age: Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers' *The Tarot: Its Occult Signification, Use in Fortune-Telling, and Method of Play, Etc.* contains some useful lists of symbols and meanings for all of the cards, Minor and Major Arcana alike, while Arthur Edward Waite's *Pictorial Key to the Tarot* continues to be packaged with the deck he helped design, and unlike Mathers, Waite's book contains plates of the cards for viewing. The lists of suggested correspondences in the Bearers chapter draws in particular from both of these texts, which can be obtained freely online.

Just as players jot keywords down for their Bearer's correspondences, everyone is encouraged to make a few quick notes on other cards representing frequently encountered characters, either cribbed from a preferred text or (better yet) as they pop into mind spontaneously. Just spend a few moments pondering the image on your card periodically; ideas will come.

Cooperation also helps players navigate symbols; it is often useful during the correspondence stage of character generation to write down a longer list to be winnowed down to the five choices to add to the character sheet, and sharing the lists of ideas with the other players can help greatly. Not only do the players get to solidify their concepts in front of the others around the table, but they can coordinate their choices to mesh well with the other character concepts.



## Help! I Need A Character!

It happens to every referee at some point. You're in the middle of a session, when one of your players decides to start interacting with a character you just threw in as scenery.

Don't panic.

A. E. Waite's *Pictorial Key to the Tarot* contains lists of characteristics for the Major and Minor Arcana alike, so it serves just fine as an impromptu NPC (non-player character) generator. Draw a card, then look at what Waite says about that card. Answer the questions about their Motivations quickly in your head, and you're set — you don't even have to assign numerical ratings to those unless you think the player characters will do anything to prompt or affect those Motivations.

## Structuring Stories

Have a structure. It seems obvious stated so bluntly, but many gaming groups progress forward completely by improvisation. If you're good at winging it, that's fine — that can be tremendously fun and rewarding — but plan something just in case for those times when you hit a block or the pace slows down.

Fortunately, good story structures have been studied exhaustively for several thousand years. The five-act structure of a drama works wonderfully, and can be adapted several ways: below is one alternate spin to the traditional plot diagram.



1. Intersection. *One or more players discover the potential conflict. Trouble often finds Bearers, and Bearers often find trouble. This may or may not involve a direct fight with the would-be enemy; if it does, they should be minions or lesser threats, not the greater menace behind the plot.*

2. Investigation. *The characters should have been motivated enough by part 1 to find out more about the situation. Exposition congregates here, but don't overdo it.*

3. Encounter. *Typically, if you haven't had a direct confrontation with the enemy before, this is where it happens. If you have fought a minor threat before, a more formidable one appears — perhaps the superior to the minions.*

4. Regroup. *The characters either press their success from the previous step towards the enemy's home territory, or they retreat to lick their wounds and learn more about how to beat the foe.*

5. Completion. *The "boss fight" happens here, and should be satisfying. The significant threat is met and challenged.*

Depending on the pace you're keeping and what scenes are bookending it, you may also have a denouement or resolution scene in which loose ends are tied up.

Ring their bells. That is to say, look for the things they have defined as important and cater to them. The list of correspondences they write down for their Archetype and the answers to their Motivations provide you specifically with fodder around which to craft conflicts that interest the players and characters alike.

Give each character one ring per act of the story to keep



them engaged. Threats to either the characters' personal interests (the Motivations) or their obligations as a Bearer (the correspondences) are quite effective, and there may be some overlap that allows you to draw in more than just one character at a time, especially if your group collaborated to write these traits.

Recurring motifs add depth. Not every instance succeeds, but there's no substitute for the feeling of continuity provided by a symbol that appears at significant points in the narrative. Don't overload your story with symbols: one or two typically suffice. Among other things, a motif could represent the influence or presence of a major character involved in the plot, or could act as a thematic key concerning a lesson contained in the plot.

When in doubt, include a recurring image or object and let the players speculate on what it could mean without your prompting (and they will, I can assure you). They may provide you with a free interpretation that works wonderfully, which you can then steal and implement as if you had planned it all along.

## Making Scenes Count

There should be something important for the characters to do or learn in every scene. There should also be some kind of conflict to provide tension — *will* the characters do or learn what they must? That part is relatively easy, given the structures built into roleplaying games to determine the chances and degree of success at actions. If there's no penalty for failure, however, the tension dissipates.

Experienced referees will note that there are always more



ways to solve a problem than the ones you think of when creating the problem. Players are resourceful and devious, and they'll easily knock aside threats or challenges that seem bedeviling to you at first. As such, a helpful method to use in planning out potential scenes is not to set a predetermined goal. A smart player can find a way to rationalize a round-about way of achieving success, so fixed goals are not always much of an incentive.

Instead, construct your scenes in terms of boundaries, limitations, and consequences for breaking them: what lines will the characters cross? What will they risk to move ahead, and what gives them pause? Note that there are several mechanical implementations of this approach in the game already: weirds, as well as a Comte's realm traits, are constructed as restrictions that come packaged with story-changing events triggered when they are broken. Scenes can operate the same way effectively, again, by using the characters' Motivations and correspondences to provide players with appropriate threats to what they have defined as dear to their characters. A Bearer with "peace" amongst his correspondences has a driving need to intervene in a scene if its outcome would result in an increase in aggression and hostility.

### Framing and Facing Conflict

After perusing the rules for conflict resolution, it should be apparent that combat is not an ideal circumstance for Archetypes: even with the use of their prodigious Powers, an Archetype who spends more than two or three actions on fighting a concerted supernatural foe with any notable potency of its own will leave one drained. Because your hand represents both your "die rolls" and your "hit points," to steal terminology from other games, using an Archetype's Powers or

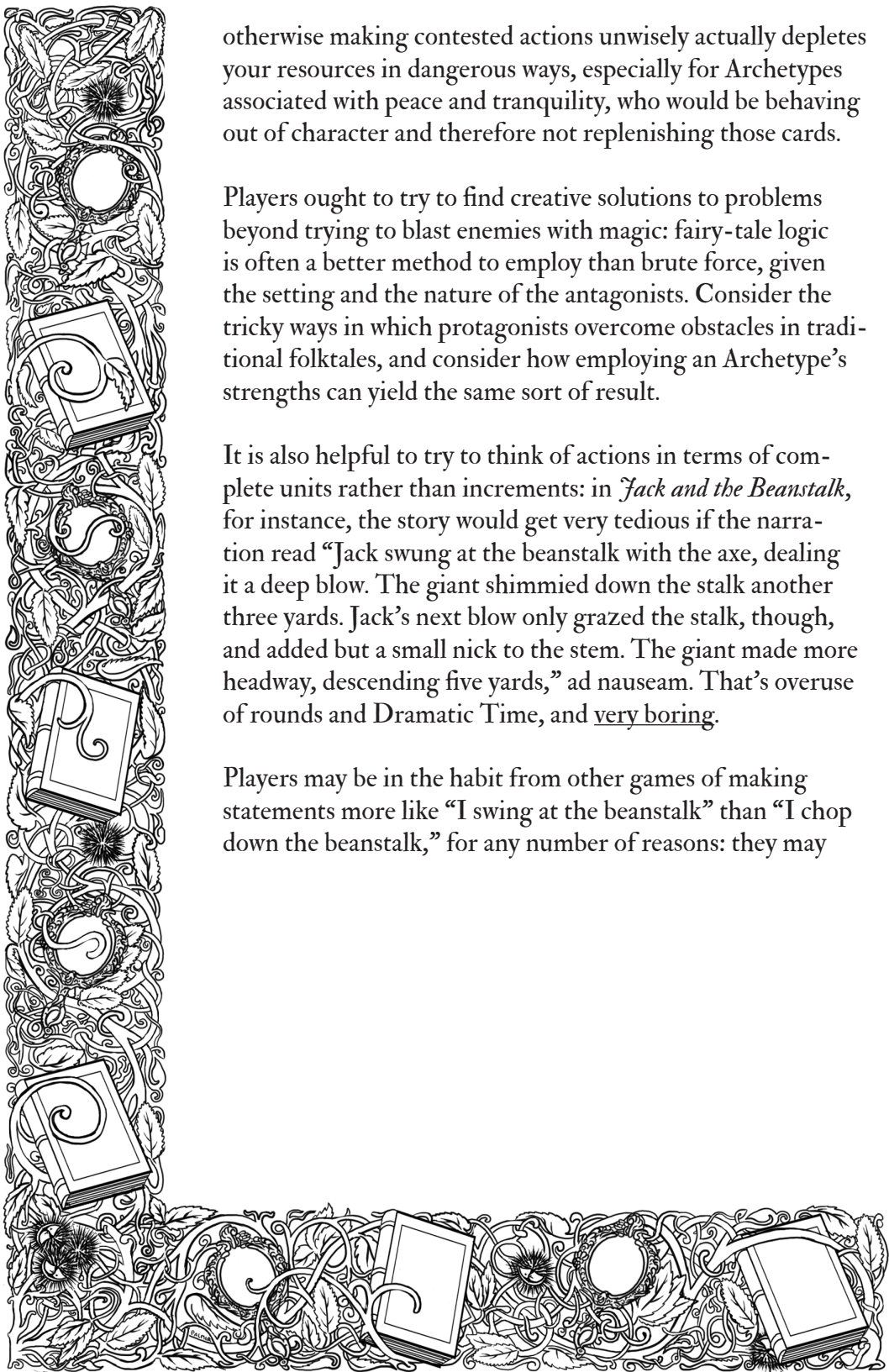


otherwise making contested actions unwisely actually depletes your resources in dangerous ways, especially for Archetypes associated with peace and tranquility, who would be behaving out of character and therefore not replenishing those cards.

Players ought to try to find creative solutions to problems beyond trying to blast enemies with magic: fairy-tale logic is often a better method to employ than brute force, given the setting and the nature of the antagonists. Consider the tricky ways in which protagonists overcome obstacles in traditional folktales, and consider how employing an Archetype's strengths can yield the same sort of result.

It is also helpful to try to think of actions in terms of complete units rather than increments: in *Jack and the Beanstalk*, for instance, the story would get very tedious if the narration read "Jack swung at the beanstalk with the axe, dealing it a deep blow. The giant shimmied down the stalk another three yards. Jack's next blow only grazed the stalk, though, and added but a small nick to the stem. The giant made more headway, descending five yards," ad nauseam. That's overuse of rounds and Dramatic Time, and very boring.

Players may be in the habit from other games of making statements more like "I swing at the beanstalk" than "I chop down the beanstalk," for any number of reasons: they may



be conditioned to expect that their results will be randomly decided, or they may simply not be used to being empowered to make narrative decisions, seeing that as the referee's domain. It's difficult to lead by example in this regard, also, because players are typically used to the referee being able to make such statements themselves because of their perceived authority.

## The Bigger Picture

In many cases, the plot of a story arc escalates in a familiar way: the protagonists discover something is amiss, involve themselves in the proceedings, and tangle with ever-increasing levels of opposition from the minions to the mastermind.

But what then? That's a good question, and the answer is whatever your group wants. There are larger mysteries to explore *House of Cards* that reach beyond even the plans of individual Comtes; many of these hooks will come to the players' attention naturally through play, as they are woven into the setting details. Watch the players' reactions: what makes them curious? Pursue that further. Alternately, you might even discuss a possible all-encompassing "super-arc" exploring these enigmas. Likewise, the actual resolution is up to you and your group: no canonical answer to these puzzles exists, except the one you create.



## The Fate of Le Monde

The World has no known Bearer. This has been a point of consternation and concern among the Regalia since it vanished at the turn of the twentieth century. No manner of Divination has revealed any fact concerning the situation, whether the reason for the absence or the current status of either the Archetype or its last known Bearer.

On occasion, the World's presence seems to be felt indirectly, via subtle and indirect magic. Those few individuals capable even of sensing such intervention remain unenlightened as to the motivations behind such events: at times, witnesses remark with puzzlement, random events seem to occur which hold no apparent bearing on the circumstances, while other such magics spring into being which seem at best to hinder the actions of Archetypes... or at worst to actively aid the Comtes and their subordinates.

Below are two possible explanations which a referee might want to use in their group's stories.

### *Grand Reversal*

Until approximately one hundred years ago, the Bearer of the World had never experienced a Reversal. When it happened, the ramifications were severe and far-reaching: one of the fundamental correspondences of the Archetype, taken for granted until its conspicuous absence, was the reinforcement of the barriers of existence — what is inside, and by contrast what is outside. The incursion of the Comtes and the instability of the division between Here and Beyond is a direct consequence of this Reversal. Archetypes may be drawn into a quest to find the Lost Bearer, culminating in a climactic attempt to Reverse him or her once again.

### *The Chessmaster*

As the Archetype responsible for the totality and harmony of both Here and Beyond, as well as all their myriad denizens (including the Archetypes themselves), the World perceives an interplay of cosmic patterns incomprehensible even to most of its fellow Arcana. Its Bearer knows details hidden to the other Regalia, and is acting independently for some greater secret purpose. Whether that is compatible with, or inimical to, the actions of the player Archetypes can serve as a source of dramatic tension; this strain can be amplified by the referee by keeping in mind that the World is by definition imperfect, and the great plan may be flawed.

## The Machinations of the Comtes

The Comtes are alien beings in the truest sense of the word, but not incomprehensible. Their actions may recall the caprice of the faerie of legend, but the sages remind us that the Comtesses are created of vast accumulations of dream-pattern, and that they may simply act that way due to being shaped by the expectations of mortal minds — or, perhaps, legends of fickle fair ones are half-memories of the Lords and Ladies Beyond. The eir does not conform to linear time.

What matters is that the Comtes are not creatures of pure, mindless chaos. Though the full sweep of their plans or their ultimate goal may be kept secret even from their closest servants, the nightmare royalty make their moves according to a pattern however complex.

Below are two possible explanations for the war between the Comtes and the Archetypes.

### *Sibling Rivalry*

A heretical theory among occult scholars holds that the Comtes and Comtesses are cosmic counterexamples of the Archetypes, inhabiting the negative space shaped by the power of the Arcana to define them by antithesis. Their enmity may thus arise from an innate need to act counter to the Archetypes (and vice versa), a fundamental drive as inescapable as the need for fire to melt ice and water to quench flame. It may also be true that the Comtes represent nascent proto-Archetypes, patterns with potential to transcend to the universal subconscious, and hope to amass power to supplant or rise to join the Regalia in stature.

### *Lesser of Two Evils*

The universe may consist of more than just two layers. It is possible that there is another realm, or even multiple realms, on the far side of Beyond. These additional segments of existence would presumably be as confusing to those Beyond as that realm is to those from Here, and may be even more rapacious and destructive. The stolen eir taken by those Beyond may be their attempt to stave off an invasion of their own realm, making them unlikely and misunderstood heroes fending off an even more terrible threat. The player characters are faced with rich opportunities to explore moral ambiguities in such a scenario.

## Dream-Vines and Ambrosia

Most would not consider plants to be sapient, and certainly not capable of dreaming: flora are not known to generate eir on their own, for one thing. Plant life flourishes in high concentrations of dream energy, though, with vines springing seemingly out of nowhere to mark well-trod mirror-ways.

Further, the spontaneous generation of true lotus and amaranth blossoms holds strange implications for those who study oneirobotany: does eir cause these changes in physical life beyond its mundane genetic capacities? If so, does this effect extend to other living things?

Besides the lure of harvesting the ambrosia, dream-fruit of the lotus and amaranth, player characters might find themselves drawn into deeper mysteries amid the tangle of the vines. Below are two suggested plots.

### *The Dreams of the Green*

Plants do dream, but not in the way any more complex organisms would recognize it. Just as the Archetypes and the Comtesses are gestalt reflections of human dreamers, the true lotus and amaranth are the exalted dream-selves of all plantkind. Like their earthly kin, they proliferate whenever the opportunity arises, sensitive to environmental conditions we normally overlook. Just as moss prefers to grow on one side of a tree, the iridescent lotus finds its niche on our side of the looking-glass, while the gilded amaranth grows on the far side of the mirror. And also like their human-like counterparts, they are aware and powerful.

### *An Eir-borne Disease*

Those who advise watching for wild vines as a sign of danger are more right than they know. The lotus and amaranth represent a greater peril caused by the chaos between Here and Beyond. They hail from a third universe, the dimension of the infinitesimal space which mirrors and thresholds inhabit, kin to the strange things recorded in the Voynich Manuscript. In the strife against the Comtes, the wearing of the mirror-ways has caused cracks to open at the joints between our worlds, and the vines are the first things to creep through. They are not likely to be the last.

## Reflections

Is there more to the struggle between Here and Beyond than the Archetypes have intimated in their circumspect way? There are peculiar similarities between the ways that Bearers and the denizens of Beyond take in dream-stuff for their own purposes; the Inspire and Dream-thief abilities are a bit too similar for the comfort of some occult scholars. What's more, those who delve into these secrets tend to draw the attention of dream-creatures, often to a miserable end. Such investigations are said dismissively by many to have run across the ire of a chimera or stumbled into the plans of a Comtesse, but others are not so sure.

Players who notice the interesting dichotomy between Bearers' abilities and those of the nightmares Beyond may decide to have their Bearers conduct their own inquiry. Other Bearers tend to look askance at such lines of questioning, and they often stonily refuse to cooperate. If the players decide to press forward, below are two possible revelations to uncover.

### *Sides of a Coin*

As postulated in *Sibling Rivalry* (page 135), the Comtes and the Archetypes may be related. They could inhabit the same cosmic niche on opposite sides of the mirror, or they could be more direct counterparts, Comtes perhaps directly corresponding to an Archetype (or vice versa). If this is the case, Bearers would serve the same role to the Archetypes as the Castellans do to their masters and mistresses. This presents staggering implications as to the possible taxonomy of dream-beings, placing Bearers and Castellans in a sort of family or genus together.

### *Banks of a River*

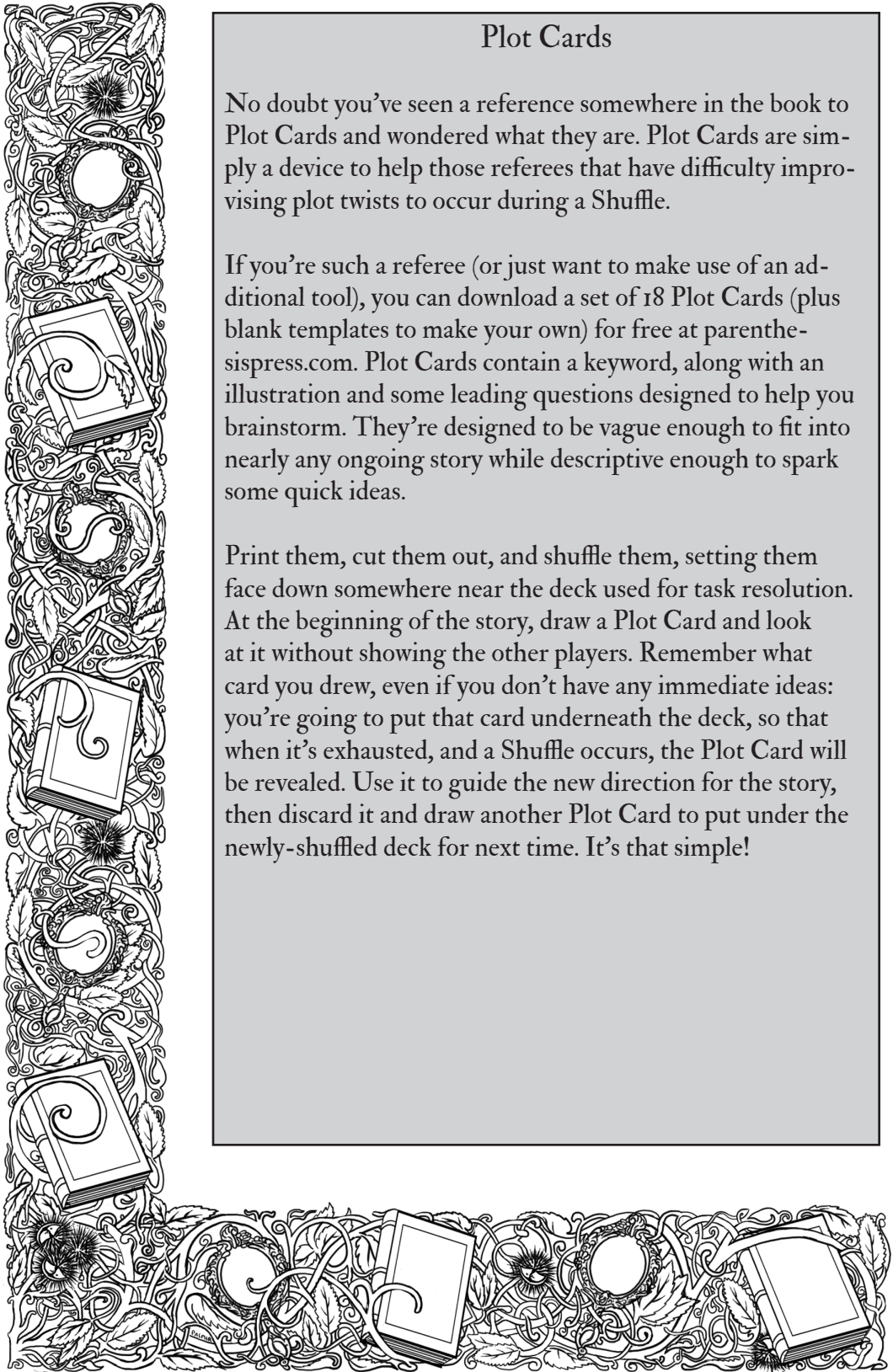
The creatures of dream are shaped by the eir that flows through them, not the other way around. From Archetypes down to the lowest chimerae, it is the flow of dreams from mortals that dictates all that happens in the spiritual plane. Nightmares and Bearers alike do not harvest dream-energy so much as their actions are determined by the complex fractal streams of thought broadcast constantly by billions of people. Many struggle with this deterministic view of existence, and question what it means for the war between Here and Beyond: if it is the mortal mind that ultimately dictates all reality, why are the two sides of the mirror engaged in battle?

## Plot Cards

No doubt you've seen a reference somewhere in the book to Plot Cards and wondered what they are. Plot Cards are simply a device to help those referees that have difficulty improvising plot twists to occur during a Shuffle.

If you're such a referee (or just want to make use of an additional tool), you can download a set of 18 Plot Cards (plus blank templates to make your own) for free at [parenthesispress.com](http://parenthesispress.com). Plot Cards contain a keyword, along with an illustration and some leading questions designed to help you brainstorm. They're designed to be vague enough to fit into nearly any ongoing story while descriptive enough to spark some quick ideas.

Print them, cut them out, and shuffle them, setting them face down somewhere near the deck used for task resolution. At the beginning of the story, draw a Plot Card and look at it without showing the other players. Remember what card you drew, even if you don't have any immediate ideas: you're going to put that card underneath the deck, so that when it's exhausted, and a Shuffle occurs, the Plot Card will be revealed. Use it to guide the new direction for the story, then discard it and draw another Plot Card to put under the newly-shuffled deck for next time. It's that simple!



## Dreams in the West End

### *A scenario*

Nightmares are on the rise on the west side of town. Couples are being accosted in the local park by what they describe as small gray men. Are the two related?

*Alderton is a small American college town located inside a bend along a river. Founded as a major hub for rail traffic in the southeast, the town has settled into a sleepy shadow of its former self as its industries withered, and the university is the only part of the community that remains vital.*

*The basic premise of the scenario, laid out at the top of the page, has become common knowledge to the principality through whatever narrative devices you want to use (including fiat). The strange reports from the park make the local newspaper, and the characters' Dream-sense will pick up on the peculiar malaise. The details laid out below may be explored in any order the group sees fit to pursue: an explanation of how they interweave is included to allow them to follow the trails to their confluence.*

### *The Funhouse Mirror*

The catalyst which set these events in motion is a large unbound glass taken from the old funhouse at Gull Island, a run-down seasonal amusement park, by one of the artists in the exhibit, a photographer named Catherine Decker. It stands propped up, like a strange menhir, in her studio. She places items in front of it, or positions it facing the view from her window, and captures the warped reflections; all the while, the distorting mirror radiates eir like a pall over the West End. The peculiarities of this glass make our side of the glass function like an amplifier, the way a Fresnel lens's rippling surface magnifies light.

Those walking through this mirror find that the mirrorlands immediately Beyond actually are distorted and unstable: navigation there is more difficult than normal. Outside the mirror's immediate vicinity, the distortion lessens, and the realm into which visitors are deposited seems like nothing so much as a lush watercolor painting of a wild, overgrown valley — much like Alderton on undespoiled by settlement would look. The stronghold of

the Chestnut King (a Comte; see below) sits atop the hill Beyond where the Alderton Museum of Art stands.

### *Dreams in the West End*

A new exhibition has been installed at the Alderton Museum of Art. The art predominantly features somewhat unsettling and surreal imagery, which Bearers might be able to discern as snatches of images from Beyond. All of the participating artists are members of an artists' colony living in the southern section of town, a formerly upscale neighborhood which has slunk into decrepitude.

The pieces are evocative, but by themselves they would not likely clue Bearers in as anything other than particularly inspired surrealist work. One of the pieces, however, portrays small stone-colored creatures matching the descriptions in eyewitness accounts of the attacks in the park. If questioned, the creator of the piece, a painter named Jennifer Perkins, reveals that she hasn't actually seen the creatures, but that the image came to her in a dream.

### *The Moss People*

In our world, Knecht Park abuts the West End, so the eir unleashed by the unbound funhouse mirror sweeps through the foliage of the park and gives rise to the moss people. The moss people are minor chimerae given shape by a senile old German man (Fritz Gorman) in a nearby assisted elderly home, fixated in his dementia on the recollection of legends told to him when he was a child. Although folklore would have them be helpful domestic spirits, their creator's fractured mind has imprinted upon its unwitting creations: the moss people are silent and prone to sudden shifts in mood. Because of their weakness of mind, they are pressed into the service of the Chestnut King.

The moss people are enthralled by the Chestnut King to such a degree that they are initially not much more than automata: they could possibly attack the player characters if sorely pressed, but prefer to use their earthy nature to simply withstand physical punishment in dogged pursuit of their assigned goal. (Using Pentacles to defend via perseverance is always in character for them.) Otherwise, they have been given very succinct orders and

will follow them to the exclusion of all else. Portray them at first like ants or other social insects: they selectively interact with their surroundings only when they impact the object of their focus.

### Moss People (*Commoners*)

Cards: 2\*

Powers:

- Dream-thief (L), Excorporate (L), Synergy\* (L): Moss people are a gestalt entity: rather than having individual hands, they pool their cards into a single shared hand while in proximity. Besides gaining strength in numbers, they also gain increasing glimmers of intelligence when gathered together. Dealing two points of damage to a moss person will cause it to dissipate as per Excorporate.
- Purloin (G): A moss person can steal anything it can see, even the abstract and intangible. Targets may resist if they have a card of higher value than the moss people have in their pool. Any theft that would impact a Bearer's Motivations fails automatically.

This may change, however: see "Possible Complications" for more.

### *The Witch Ball*

The Chestnut King has tasked the moss people to gather the glint in lovers' eyes for use in crafting a magical glass which would enthrall any mortal. The globe is currently under construction in the catacombs deep under the Chestnut King's hold. It appears to be a breathtakingly delicate sphere of iridescent glass about the size of a grapefruit, threaded through inside with an half-finished web of strands of captured eir. The moss people bring their bounty to these chambers, forge the ephemeral substance into wispy strands, and then carefully arrange them, painstakingly avoiding breaking any of the prearranged fibers of eir as they add to the complicated pattern.

The ball is currently a little over halfway finished; it already holds an ability to entrance viewers, but can be resisted by a wary individual. The moss people are close enough to mindless to avoid being captured by its power or to use it. Currently, any being in the presence of someone holding and willing the device to function finds themselves predisposed in the holder's favor, giving them the benefit of the doubt, trusting even flimsy excuses, and so on. A knowing controller could force a target to discard their highest card

before engaging in social contested actions such as a debate or negotiation, due to the distracting enchantment. When complete, its power will be such that any viewer without some kind of overriding magical protection will treat the holder of the ball as a trusted, beloved figure.

If a player were to decide to have his or her character pursue keeping the witch ball, it would need to be completed, but could be treated as a wonderment once finished.

### *The Chestnut King*

South of town, the Alderton Museum of Art overlooks the town from atop a broad hill. Beyond the mirror, though, a wide circular stone keep looms, its walls held up by the spreading branches of an incalculably old chestnut tree growing up through the center of the structure.

Bearers can mirror-walk directly into the keep from any mirror in the Museum; they find no other rooms apparent when they enter, but spiraling steps lead down between the tree's roots. A few moss people are nearby, but easily scattered, and at the foot of the stairs, their workshop can be found, where the witch ball rests in a vice on a rough bench. Unfortunately, upon their arrival, the Bearers caught the attention of the Chestnut King. The stronghold itself creaks in time with his footsteps as he descends from some unknown place to confront them in the workshop.

The Comte of Alderton's mirror-realm is the Chestnut King, an incredibly tall old man who looks like a gnarled old tree branch brought to life. The King has slumbered for generations, only now awakened by the sudden shift in air; he has no conception whatsoever of modern existence, and is very disoriented and easily angered. He also takes very little direct action of any sort, compelled by his royal bearing to make subordinates perform nearly every task.

The King is relatively guileless: if asked, he will reveal his plan directly. Once the witch ball is complete, he will kidnap residents from Alderton and interrogate them using its power to enthrall. He needs to learn about the modern world in order to properly resituate himself, and since he sees mortals as a resource rather than beings worthy of respect, the most straightforward solution is to take that information.

**The Chestnut King** (*Comte*)

Correspondences: age, trees, storms, natural light (sun, moon or stars).

Hand: 7

Powers:

Dream-thief (L), Excorporate (L)

Deep Roots (G): Expend a card. Draw as many cards as you have remaining, and then discard your choice from among the cards in hand until your hand has as many cards as it did following your expenditure.

Leaf Falls Short (G): Commit your highest card in hand. Place it face down on the table while this power is active. No direct attack or opposed action against you succeeds unless the card expended exceeds the committed card. You discard the card at the end of the scene or when a higher card is used against you instead of returning it to hand.

*Possible Complications*

- One of the moss people is on the cusp of accumulating enough awareness to have individual thought. There are a number of ways this could come about: chimerae develop personality naturally as time goes on, and the exposure to many different mortals' dream-flows and the stimulation of interacting with Here hastens this process. This individual has only rudimentary autonomy, but has used her native talent to forge a small trinket to cement her individuality, a tiny baroque key on a chain around her neck. She lacks even a name, though a canny Bearer could provide one and nudge her further into selfhood. Because of the moss peoples' Synergy power, her self-awareness could potentially spread if a sufficient number were to gather in one place. The moss people might then rebel, and it would not be clear whether they would be an asset against the Chestnut King or a threat in their own right.
- Sadly, not all lovers have pure intentions. Unaware, the moss people risk Purloining more than just the gleam of adoration from their mortal targets. Tainted threads flavored with infatuation or the darker forms of lust could make their way into the witch ball; its powers could thus be warped, inspiring madness or obsession instead of devotion. The light from this contaminated eir might even be subtly affecting the moss people or even the Chestnut King.
- The witch ball is a tempting item to keep, but as long as the item remains intact, the glints inside remain captive. Mechanically, the mortals affected have their Cups and Pentacles Motivations ratings are

effectively o. Possessing the ball could present a moral dilemma. On the other hand, smashing or otherwise unmaking the witch ball releases the captured glints back into the world: nine months from then, a minor but notable spike in the birth rate in Alderton will occur. The children will have a dreamy, artistic predilection, and will tend to pester their parents with tales of invisible friends and trips through mirrors.

- Other nearby forces learning of the Chestnut King's contrivance could attempt to take it for themselves. An old, surly being known as the River Dragon – an imago so old as to be as potent as a Comte – would interfere simply out of spite. With his waters rendered toxic by pollution and his banks choked with painful refuse, the dragon's predilections are unpredictable, and dealing with him should be a very precarious option for Bearers, who no doubt would have to perform tasks such as restoring the river in order to gain its assistance.

### *What Next?*

The Chestnut King's plot can easily be derailed by the Bearers, who need only give him an alternative to his current scheme to gain information about the modern world. This means they may not have to fight him at all, but a détente between a restored Comte, a Comte-like imago, and a quietly-evolving tribe of Commoner servants may come back to create even more drama for the Bearers in the long run. And that assumes the Chestnut King holds to any arranged bargain: while not duplicitous, the Comte is as unpredictable as any, and it is in his nature to bend whichever way the wind blows.

And what of the witch ball? If it is not destroyed, such a tool is desirous of nearly any being from Beyond. Any use of it will lead to word of its existence spreading through the dream-world, and powerful beings may come to see if they can seize such a useful artifact.

The aged Fritz Gorman will pass away soon; once that happens, the moss people risk fading unless they have achieved independent thought. This should prove a tough decision for the Bearers between allowing potentially dangerous creatures from Beyond to persist, or taking part in an unusual experiment to determine if the moss people can be “rehabilitated” to peaceful coexistence. And what about the moss peoples' say in things?

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# HOUSE OF CARDS

Bearer

Archetype

Correspondences

*Who/what do you love?*



*Who/what do you desire?*



## *Motivations*



*Who/what do you fight for?*

*Who/what do you oppose?*

*Lesser Powers (any card)*

*Greater Powers*

Dream-sense

Evocation


Inspire

Mirror Walk

Thousand Faces

HAND SIZE






A Major Arcanum of the Tarot has chosen you as its agent.

Now, every mirror is a doorway,

every nightmare an enemy,

every hope a weapon.

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