

Reaching
in the



Dark

By Josh Hittie

Reaching in the Dark

A misty fantasy PbtA game inspired by the tone and feel of Florence + The Machine's High as Hope, best played over short series or one-shots.

Credits and Acknowledgments

Reaching in the Dark is inspired by **High As Hope** by Florence + The Machine.

This game was originally written for the **Record Collection 2k19** jam hosted by Riley Hopkins. The original #ReCo2K19 jam edition is available at ostrichmonkey.itch.io.

Thanks to everyone who read, played, or downloaded *Reaching in the Dark*!

Layout revised October 2021.



Overture

If you've downloaded *Reaching in the Dark* before, thanks! This revised edition contains a few mechanical tweaks and extra notes on the intent behind some aspects of the game, how to play it, how to run it, and how to add additional character advancement.

What is, Misty Fantasy?

Wandering through a forest, dew on your lip, sunlight dappling the mossy earth. An old doorway stands alone at the end of a crumbling brick road. Ocean spray on a cliffside as the pale clouds gather. Soft sounds and sights that flicker at the edge of your perception.

Weightless beings that hide amongst the shadows and reflections. Misty fantasy is meant to be evocative. You are here to capture emotional and sensory moments, with a hint of the vague and surreal. Misty embodies the enthralling melancholy of the album that inspired this game, and fantasy is here because the world you play in is magical. But in keeping with the swirling and mysterious tone, the magic isn't meant to be explained. It is meant to be experienced.

To best play *Reaching in the Dark*, you should put aside ideas of a strong pre-planned story or traditional linear narrative. Part of the intended experience is to discover more about your character, your Form, and the world of *The Land* as you play. That being said, if you find the opportunity to tell long-form narratives, or structured story-arcs within this game, go for it! You should always play toward what you believe is fun and exciting, so long as everyone else at the table is on board.

Traveling & Inhabiting

The Land

Reaching in the Dark is a game of having Lost and hoping to Find. Of exploring *The Land* encased in mist and dew. Players take on the role of beings who have drifted into *The Land* having lost pieces of themselves. One person takes on the role of the Choir. It is the Choir's job to weave together the strings of narrative the players provide and act as the conduit for *The Land's* will.

A somber mist pervades *The Land*. Infused with Spirit, this mist obscures what is Lost and waiting to be Found. Loam and moss. Stained glass and rough brick. Aged bronze and green stone. Warping and shifting, *The Land* takes on many shapes but is always cloaked in the same obscuring mists. Endless days that never turn to night, overgrown cities without seasons, white cliffs and shrouded woods.

Within *The Land* you will find other beings and creatures who were consumed by their Loss and reach out toward any point of hope, aiming to snuff it out. *The Land* both acts to ruin those who have Lost, and cradle those who wish to Find.

There are four Forms that players can take while exploring *The Land*.

Hazes *who draw their power from bonds and promises.*

Beasts *who run wild, burn bright, and risk being consumed by their passion.*

Weavers *who draw forth and shape the mists that blanket The Land.*

Torrents *who let nothing stand in their way, rushing in and washing it all away.*

Forms have no names, only descriptions. Forms are malleable, and as they Find what they have Lost they may change and gain new descriptions. Forms are transient beings only temporarily visiting *The Land* and players may find themselves dissipating into the very mists they seek to clear. This is okay. Sometimes you have to let something go and find something new in its stead.

Experiencing The Land

There are four Forces that drive each Form; *Hunger, Song, Grace, and Thunder.*

Hunger: Roll with Hunger when you seek, want, need, lust. Hunger is ravenous, passionate, full of wild abandon and revelry. Hunger can never be truly satisfied.

Song: Roll with Song when you wish to imprint your will onto *The Land* and its creatures or conjure forth the Spirit that infuses all things within the mists. Song is triumphant and pleading, it is a battle of heart between you and *The Land.*

Grace: Roll with Grace when you act subtly and carefully. Grace dances around the edge of vision, its absence is noticed but rarely is its presence felt.

Thunder: Roll with Thunder when you storm, rage, or push forward. Thunder is loud and bold. It is the crashing against what tries to hold you back.

There is one Move in *Reaching in the Dark*, and it is **The Way.**

When you try to conjure, summon, or reshape the Spirit infusing *The Land*, face the dangers in the mist, or reach to Find what was Lost, roll 2d6 and add an appropriate Force.

On a 10+ you accomplish what you set out to do. Narrate your triumph with the Choir.

On a 7-9 your accomplishment is not without complications. With the Choir, determine what obstacles it reveals to you.

On a 6- your work has been twisted. With the Choir, narrate how things the situation has transgressed beyond your initial grasp.

For every **11+** you roll, you may regain one point of *Spirit* up to your current maximum. You may choose to spend 1 Spirit to roll with advantage (*roll 3d6 and keep the two highest results*). When you roll with Force using something you are skilled in or if a tag you possess applies to the action, you may also roll with advantage.

Piercing the Mist

Conjuring your Form

The first step to creating your Form is to select one foundation from the four options detailed on the following pages: *The Haze*, *The Beast*, *The Weaver*, or *The Torrent*.

Once you've picked your Form distribute a total of 3 points to your Forces. No Force may be greater than +3 (unless modified by a special ability). You cannot subtract points from any Force.

Lastly, assign your Form one tag. Tags are descriptive and evocative elements that have narrative effect. If you see text between brackets [*like so*], it is a tag. You do not need to know what your tag does at the start of the game. Consider tags permanent unless they're suddenly not. Remember to follow where the narrative leads you when you invoke a tag.

An example of a Form's tag could be [*reforged*]. What does this mean? You play to discover its purpose and effect, but this tag evokes something remade or repaired, new but with ties to the old. What or who did the reforging? Do you even know? How do you use this tag? Perhaps you are resilient and sturdy, resisting physical harm. You can see how a simple tag can quickly fractal off into many questions, answers, and most importantly, potential.

You should also answer the following questions when starting the game, or when taking on a new Form.

*What core piece of you do you **believe** you have Lost?*

*How do you **hope** to Find it within the mists?*

*How did you **emerge** into The Land?*

*What indelible **mark** do you bear upon your form?*

The Haze

Your starting Forces are:

+1 Grace, +0 Song, +0 Hunger, -1 Thunder

Your starting attributes are:

6 Spirit & 4 Body

Your special abilities are:

When someone makes you a promise, gain +1 Spirit. So long as that promise remains unfulfilled you maintain that extra Spirit.

When you whisper a promise to *The Land* you may create a bond with something you can feel. Spend 1 Spirit to call on that bond when you need it most. Once called upon, the bond is broken and cannot be remade.

You are skilled in; *locks and keys, silvered tongues and honeyed words, with grimoires and circles.*

The Beast

Your starting Forces are:

+1 Hunger, +0 Thunder, +0 Song, -1 Grace

Your starting attributes are:

2 Spirit & 8 Body

Your special abilities are:

When you pursue what you want, single-mindedly, you may choose to give in to your passions. You gain the tags [*burning*] and [*bestial*]. These tags last until you have satiated your passion.

You may spend 1 Spirit or 2 Body to share the fire that burns within you with another. They regain 2 Body. When you spend Spirit, learn a truth about *The Land*. When you spend Body, you burn ever brighter; gain +1 forward when you roll with Hunger.

You are skilled with; *bone and blood, in rending and breaking, and bell and herb.*

The Weaver

Your starting Forces are:

+1 Song, +0 Grace, +0 Thunder, -1 Hunger

Your starting attributes are:

8 Spirit & 2 Body

Your special abilities are:

You can see the strings that tug and pull within the mists. When you tug on those strings you may spend 1 Spirit to release the seams of *The Land* beneath your feet, or clear the mist clouding your vision.

Choose two tags [*light, glass, dewed, stone, dusk, wind*]. You can conjure forth these properties from within the mists by spending 1 Spirit.

You are skilled in; *stars and moons, of fortunes and fables, and secrets whispered.*



The Torrent

Your starting Forces are:

+1 Thunder, +0 Hunger, +0 Grace, -1 Song

Your starting attributes are:

4 Spirit & 6 Body

Your special abilities are:

You wield a shape that tears apart what stands in front of you. Describe this shape, assign it two tags [*hallowed, darkened, hidden, raging, hunting, weeping*].

You may spend 1 Spirit or 1 Body to push back the mists that cloud you and those near you. Those you trust regain all spent Spirit as their doubts are washed away.

You are skilled in; *the deluge and flow, in sheer overwhelming force, and piercing that which obscures.*

Inhabiting your Form

Each Form has a pool of *Spirit* and *Body*. Spirit represents the essence of *The Land*. It infuses every Form, being, and creature. This essence may be called on and manipulated by those with powerful Song. If your Spirit is reduced to zero, you can see through the mist clearly but cannot interact with *The Land*. For every 11+ you roll, you may regain one point of Spirit up to your current maximum.

Body represents the physicality of a Form. When you take damage, that damage is most often applied to your Body pool. Body can be replenished to your current maximum by choosing to Lose something you hold, or by reclaiming something you have Found.

When you Lose or Find something, describe how your Form changes. If your Body is reduced to zero you

become a shade, easily influenced by the mists. When both your Spirit and Body are reduced to zero, your Form dissipates and you leave *The Land*. Unless otherwise stated, any kind of harm reduces Body by one.

What does “seeing through the mist clearly”, “interacting with *The Land*”, and “influenced by the mists” mean? This will largely depend on how *The Land* is shaped during your game. It might mean you can see through illusions and temptations, but lack the will to change what’s about to happen. Maybe it feels like you’re stuck in a dream; you know this isn’t real and it feels like you’re running through quicksand. The interpretation of these effects will likely be different for each Form and each game. *The Land* is alive in its own way, and through the Choir, tailors itself to your perceptions.

Form Advancement

For every piece of you that you Find and reclaim back into yourself, you may choose one of the following options. Additionally, describe how your Form changes in appearance, reflecting this newly Found piece of yourself.

Increase Body or Spirit by 1.

Increase one Force by 1 (to a maximum of +3).

Create a new tag for your Form.

Create something new you are skilled in.

Principles of the Forms

When you play a Form, you gain a set of responsibilities to yourself, the other players, and the Choir. Use the following Principles to guide you as you navigate *The Land*.

Push ever forward.

Embody your Form.

Weave your story.

Walk with others.

Embrace the melancholy of The Land.

Push ever forward. When you play a Form, a large part of your responsibility is to drive yourself forward. Characters in *Reaching in the Dark* should not be passive, this will only lead to you being swallowed up by the mist. You are on a journey of loss and discovery; you have to be ready and seek to lose and discover in turn.

Embody your Form. Being an active player also means providing useful information and flags for the Choir and other Forms to play off of. *The Land* cannot present you with challenges, temptations, and revelations if you don't supply the Choir with proper strings. If there's something you want to see happen in the game, let the table know. The first and easiest way to do this is to think carefully on the four questions you answer when you conjure your Form. Explaining what you think you have Lost, and you hope to Find helps give the Choir their initial spark of inspiration.

Weave your story. Don't be afraid to ask for control of a scene if you think it fits with your narrative. If you all

encounter stone ruins amidst a windswept field, and this location resonates with you, bring it up. Explore the scene. Incorporate your Form into the scene, and perhaps the Forms of the others.

Walk with others. You are not playing this game alone. Try and draw other players into your stories. When you are describing a scene, try to ask questions on how other Forms are feeling and reacting. But always remember that your fellow players' comfort comes first. If at any point a scene ventures into uncomfortable territory (whether through yours, others, or the Choir's narrative) let the table know. Be considerate and respectful of your fellow players.

Embrace the melancholy of *The Land*. Narratives need not always be positive. Sometimes, creating a scene that is sad is the most interesting and thematically appropriate option. While *Reaching in the Dark* is intended to have emotional ups and downs, play into only what you feel comfortable with.

Principles of the Choir

When you play the Choir, you take on a different set of responsibilities than the other players. You act as a conduit for the will of *The Land*. What that means is that you are the one who is primarily presenting this strange and misty world to the rest of the players. Use the following Principles to guide you.

Be evocative.

Embody The Land

Use tags with reckless enthusiasm.

Creation comes before Interpretation.

Let the players clear the mists that they believe obscure them.

The Land is responsible for creating the obstacles players face.

Be soft when players succeed, be hard when they fail.

There is always a glimmer of hope out amidst the dark.

There is always, always, a grand triumphant crescendo before the final ending.

Be evocative. Use contrasting descriptors to create the world. *The Land* is both lush and barren. It is tasting melancholy on the tongue, while being jubilant in the chest. *The Land* should reflect the tonal dichotomy between Losing and Finding. The best way to get across the tone of this game is through your descriptions. There are no names in *The Land*. There may be titles, and there are always descriptors. When you introduce or embody another being or Denizen, give them an identifier that reveals a facet of their essence to the rest of the players, but keep them swirled in mist. Encourage the other players to peel back the layers of mystery. Who knows what you'll find.

Embody *The Land*. *The Land* is a world of dichotomy and reflections. Losing and Finding; Spirit and Flesh; Obfuscation and Vision. However, *The Land* is never black and white. Mist is grey. Don't focus on neutrality, but rather ambiguity. As you and the other

players search for meaning in *The Land* use this concept to further shape the situation in one or more directions. If one player latches onto something, pursue it. See what happens.

Use tags with reckless enthusiasm. But make sure they're more evocative than mechanical. Each tag is up for interpretation, just like everything else about this game. Tags are an important tool in your toolkit. When you create something from the Mists, give it at least one tag, this will help ground it in within the world.

Creation comes before interpretation. As the Choir, your goal is to introduce evocative scenes to the rest of the players. As this is a partly game of Finding, you don't need to assign meaning to these evocations just yet. After you present a scene, you should turn to the rest of the players and together try and derive meaning (if meaning even exists) from what you've just encountered. The players will often

see meaning in these situations, in relation to their Forms, that you were not aware of. But now you are.

Let the players clear the mists that they believe obscure them.

If a player begins to create interpretations of the game world and the events that have been taking place, perhaps beginning their path to Finding, support that. It's not your job to prevent players from reaching their goals, only place interesting obstacles in their way that they will overcome. You may have specific moments you want to introduce to the players; things for them to Find and Lose. This is good as *The Land* cannot exist without you. But often, the other players will drive their own story, seeking their own Findings and Losings. Your role is not to guide the other players in one concrete direction, but to create sparks within *The Land* that will cause them to guide themselves. You present the world you are all here to explore. Your vision is the initial starting point and foundation, but you should be just as curious as the other players to see what happens next. And always move the narrative forward. If a player rolls a 6 or less, that means that something unknown, exciting, and complicated occurs. Not that the story halts in that direction. Move ever forward.

***The Land* is responsible for creating the obstacles players face.** These obstacles should be linked to what their characters have Lost or what they wish to Find. Listen carefully when the rest of the players answer their questions when they first embody their Forms. These answers will often be your starting narrative hooks. For example, if someone hopes to Find their heart, this is your cue to present scenes of love, loss, other strong emotions, or whatever you think will condense a heart from the mists. Ask your own questions of the other players as well. If you're ever stuck on what to do, turn it back to the other

players and ask them what they think. These sorts of games are built on dialogue and conversation. These are your strongest tools of creation.

Be soft when players succeed, be hard when they fail. *The Land* is strange and fickle. It will embrace those who Find what they seek but scorn those who Lose themselves in the mist. You must be a fan of the other players, but as the Choir you also

have certain duties to *The Land*. There is a duality to *The Land*. It is here to test, tempt, but ultimately reward the wandering Forms within it. Failure and Loss should bring moments of despair, but this despair must give way to a slow crescendo toward hope and eventual Finding. There may be a pervasive sadness within the Mist, but ultimately, *The Land*, and by extension the Choir, is here to push the characters toward Finding what they had Lost, or discovering something new instead.

There is always a glimmer of hope out amidst the dark. It may be small and fragile, but it is there. You want to invoke despair without it being punishing or uncomfortable. Ultimately, this is a game that is meant to be fun. Potentially emotional, but fun and satisfying. Maybe even cathartic. Be open to the players with what you plan to introduce into a scene. If someone finds a scene or evocation uncomfortable, move onto something else. Be respectful and kind.

There is always, always, a grand triumphant crescendo before the final ending. Closely intertwined with the previous Principle, you should aim to help your players find a final triumph as you end the game. Whether this is over the course of a single session or a longer series, you want to aim for that last high note.

Denizens of The Land

The Forms of the players are not the only beings to wander *The Land*. Creatures, beings, half-formed thought-shapes await within the mists as well. We call these beings Denizens. Some may wish to harm you, trick you, or change you. Others may offer you wisdom and refuge. The list of Denizens below is not exhaustive, there are many, many more beings out there waiting for you.

Denizens have a combined pool of Spirit and Body called Mist to represent their attachment to *The Land*. When their Mist is reduced to zero they vanish, swept away by the Forces of the players. If the Choir is creating a new Denizen, Mist is largely the only mechanical feature that needs to be determined. The higher a Denizen's Mist, the greater their power is. Some Denizens may have a special ability or description that is tied to their essence.

Angels

The Angels roam the cold skies circling the Lost like vultures. They know what hopes sit in your heart and wait to pluck it out should you fall.

1 Mist. [**luminous**].
*Should an Angel fall,
you can scavenge the
hope they have stolen.*

Wolves

All teeth, fire, smoke, and howls. Wolves are ravenous creatures that have been consumed by their Hunger. They are beautiful.

4 Mist. [**taken**]. *Their teeth deal 1 harm to Body. Their howls deal 1 damage to Spirit.*

Blossoms

Small flower-like beings who deal in favors, honey, and spring.

1 Mist. [**capricious**]. *If you gain their favor, they say great fortune awaits you.*

The Hidden

Ethereal creatures that flit between the streams of shadows and pools of light deep within winding forests. They steal secrets and memories.

2 Mist. [**shaded**]. *Their hands can only deal damage to Spirit.*

Artisans

These thin beings float along the winding currents of the canopy. When they touch the ground their movements are heavy, but they possess a weightlessness when soaring.

1 Mist. [**mercurial**]. *They seek new materials and experiences to inspire their works of creation.*

Statues

These are Spiritless Forms that have become trapped and bound to *The Land* by their regrets. They are wretched shells but possess deep knowledge. They wish to be freed.

1 Mist. [**pinning**]. *Each Statue possesses one unique truth, though they are loath to share it.*

Augars

The Augars slumber beneath soft moss and sweet brooks. Should they be woken they will offer guidance and prophecy to the worthy.

3 Mist. [**farseeing**]. *An Augars prophecy is always true but rarely obvious.*

The Displaced

Their roots wrap around empty cages. They crawl forward with a heavy beat and weaving rhythm. They may be slowed, but they cannot be stopped by arms and hands alone.

2 Mist. [**gloaming**]. *When their Mist is depleted, Displaced are only briefly banished from *The Land* before recondensing in another location.*

The End

Where the earth gives way to brick, the End waits. They dwell in the places in-between haunting the thresholds of *The Land*. They are naturally drawn to transient Forms. Avoid their gaze.

3 Mist. [**liminal**]. *Near The End, the mists behave wildly and unpredictable.*

Silhouettes

Diminutive and lyrical, these creatures cluster around powerful Song. They can do little on their own, but when their voices join together they are grand.

1 Mist. [**choral**]. *A large enough gathering may amplify one's Song.*

Final

How long should one play *Reaching in the Dark*? Theoretically, as long as you feel like it. As the author, I've imagined this game to best support one-shots or short series. The advancement options don't really support longer games. But you're the ones playing it, so go with whatever you feel fits your group best.

If you wanted to extend the Form advancements beyond what is presented, one option is to work out custom Moves with the Choir for each piece of themself a Form Finds. The Move should fit narratively and thematically with what is Found. When in doubt, keep it evocative over mechanical. Here's an example;

This Form has recently recovered their heart. When they take it back into themself they gain the new Move
Cosmic Love.

When you reach out with all your heart, your love, and offer yourself up to another, roll+Force.

On a 10+, the one you reached out to gains the tag [*illuminated*] as they are bathed in your own inner light. The two of you may recover Body or Spirit up to your current maximum.

On a 7-9, you and the one you reached out to each gain the tag [bound] as you are twinned together.

On a 6-, the one you reached out to shadows your own light, casting you into twilight. You gain the tag [eclipsed].

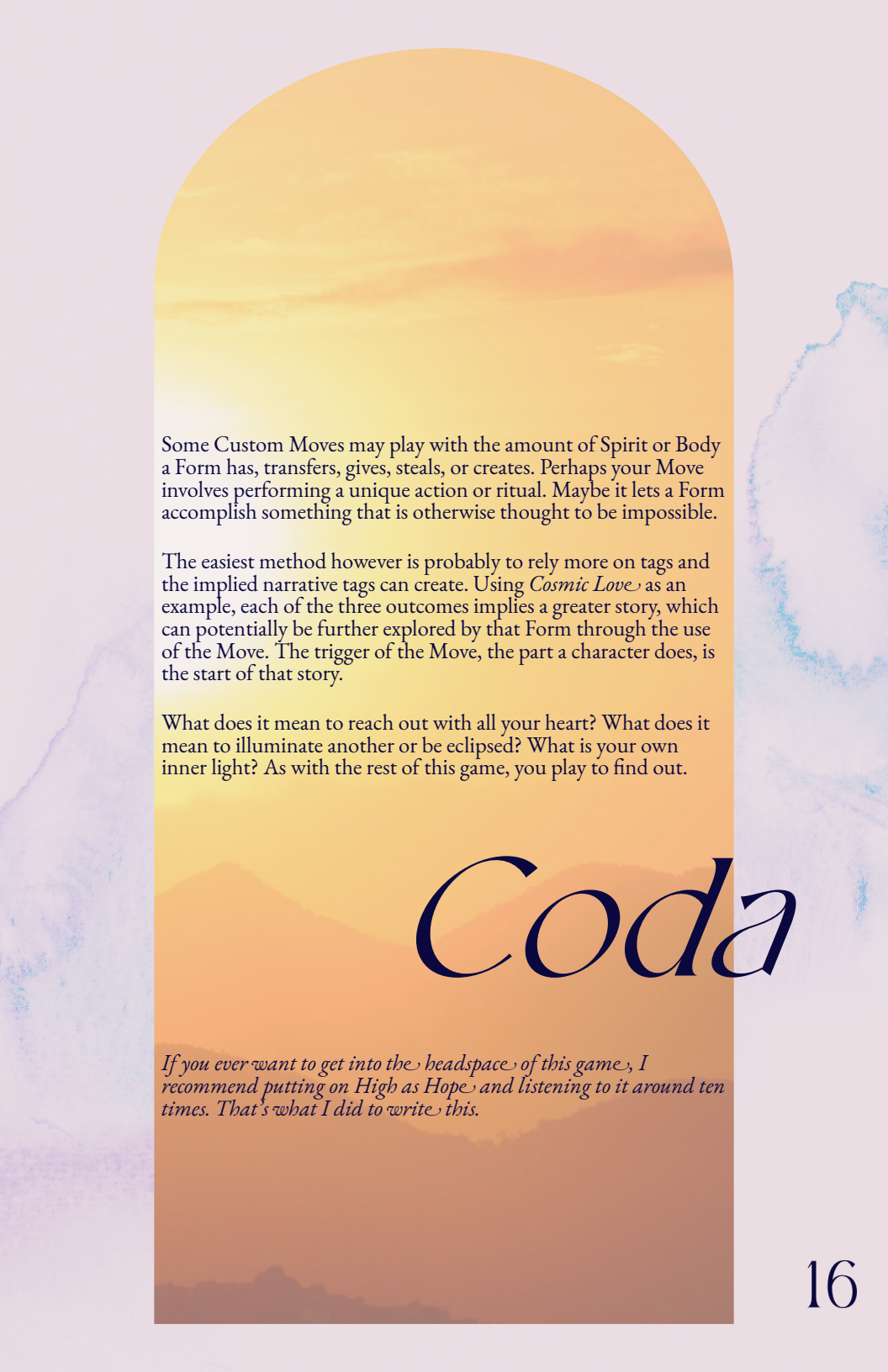
To break the design down, like most Moves in similar games you'll usually have 2-3 potential outcomes (sometimes 6- can just be implied failure with the Choir using their Principles to guide them, instead of being given a prewritten outcome statement) with each outcome signifying the degrees of accomplishment or success.

One thing to note, in *Reaching in the Dark* "success" is less important than accomplishment. If you go back to *The Way*, the core Move, the language avoids mentioning success and failure. When a player sets out to do something, they should do it. It's what happens alongside that accomplishment, and the potential complications that arise during that accomplishment, that creates the ongoing narrative.

That narrative is what you should aim to explore. Rolling a 6 or less is never meant to create a black and white failure state. Always, always move the narrative forward. Embrace the misty grays.

Reaching in the Dark doesn't have many individual moving mechanical parts. When you're looking for inspiration for Custom Moves, one place to start are the special abilities of the Forms.

Notes



Some Custom Moves may play with the amount of Spirit or Body a Form has, transfers, gives, steals, or creates. Perhaps your Move involves performing a unique action or ritual. Maybe it lets a Form accomplish something that is otherwise thought to be impossible.

The easiest method however is probably to rely more on tags and the implied narrative tags can create. Using *Cosmic Love* as an example, each of the three outcomes implies a greater story, which can potentially be further explored by that Form through the use of the Move. The trigger of the Move, the part a character does, is the start of that story.

What does it mean to reach out with all your heart? What does it mean to illuminate another or be eclipsed? What is your own inner light? As with the rest of this game, you play to find out.

Coda

If you ever want to get into the headspace of this game, I recommend putting on High as Hope and listening to it around ten times. That's what I did to write this.





