



The River

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Dedicated to Lex Dolan, who patiently points out our mistakes.

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THE RIVER

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THE BEGINNING...

The Cosmos is alive, and she wants us to worship her. 300 years past, she came in dreams and visions to millions of people both in the core worlds and on the verge. She gifted some of them with the power to bend and mold the universe. These were the Touched, and their powers were great, if sometimes unpredictable. To others, she gave profound knowledge of a cosmic deck that, with meditation and study allowed them both to look ahead in time, and to manipulate primal forces. This gift could be grasped by any willing to put in the time and effort needed to understand the deck's mysteries. Those who used it were called Weavers, because they wove with the fabric of the universe.

Although she was generous with her gifts, many resented not being chosen. One of them, Harrah Paradin, used a memory chip to copy the full knowledge of one of her earliest Weavers. She then implanted that chip, with all its knowledge into herself, and became the first of the Slicers. They could use the power to control reality just as the Weavers could, although their powers generally had a more destructive bent. Because they lacked a deep

understanding of the cards, they couldn't really divine the future from it, but they were able to react instinctively to things that were about to happen. This made them incomparable fighters and deft negotiators.

Those who often most deeply resented the Touched were those who had the will to support magic, yet were not chosen to receive it. This was especially true after Norvad Lithsom discovered through testing that all Touched shared a certain psycho/emotional sensitivity that many others who were not Touched also shared. Eventually, Norvad's student Bernard Ilson devised a cybernetic implant that allowed such people – called the Talented – to grasp chunks of magic and pull them from the universe, using them in ways similar but not identical to those of the Touched. Where the Touched drew magic from a universe that favored them, and thus could sometimes even change the nature of what they drew on, the Talented tore magic away from its moorings. However, while they could not influence the magic they drew subtly, they were quite able to rip a new chunk out where necessary and start over again.

PRONOUNS

We have chosen to leave the pronouns space blank so that you may choose your character's pronouns from all possible options including ones that we may not be aware of. Note to GMs – because of the presence of jacks in the deck, it is wise to have some NPCs that are non-binary or are one of the other potential genders other than male and female.

SAFETY MECHANICS

We strongly recommend the use of safety mechanics in this and every other game, including but not limited to the X and O cards. We also encourage discussion before play starts of the players' boundaries.

BASIC MECHANICS

THE ATTRIBUTES

The attributes are identical to the four suits of the Cosmic Deck: Spades, Hearts, Clubs and Diamonds. Each has multiple associations that can be used for comparison during mundane activities and drawn upon by Weavers and Slicers while using the Cosmic Deck.

Spades: Air, Gasses, Electricity, Science, Logical Processes, Bladed Weapons, Software, Computing, The Starweb, Speed, Agility

Hearts: Water, Animals, Fluids, Cold, The Humanities and Social Sciences, Emotions, Intuition, Non-Lethal Weapons, Charisma, Manipulation, Social Connection, Graceful Motion, Stealth

Clubs: Fire, Plasma, Heat, The Arts, Inspiration, Gunpowder or Plasma driven Weapons, Creativity

Diamonds: Earth, Plants, Magnetism, Engineering, Physical Objects (not otherwise mentioned), Blunt Weapons, Health, Stamina, Brute Strength

THE MUNDANE

When attempting anything that doesn't involve magick, this is handled by comparing appropriate attributes. NPCs are rated on the same scale as PCs. This should only be done if there is a chance of failure and if failure would be interesting.

For example, if a PC attempts to shoot an NPC with a plasma pistol and the NPC tries to roll out of the way, this involves comparing the PC's Clubs score (plasma weapon) to the NPC's Spades score (to dodge). If, instead, the NPC just held their ground, that would mean comparing Clubs to Diamonds (stamina). Alternately, if a PC is trying to fast-talk an NPC would compare the PC's Hearts (manipulation) to the NPC's Hearts (to see if they can intuit any lies).

A challenge can be used to resolve things on a task level ("Do I shoot the guy?") or on a scene level ("How does this fight turn out?") as the players and GM prefer. This way the group can zoom in or out on the action as they choose.

All things being equal, the higher attribute wins. However, any circumstances in the game fiction that benefit one side or the other can add to a character's effective score, according to the GM's judgment. No matter how many circumstances are in a given person's favor, the GM cannot add any more than 2 to a given character's attribute except through magick. A disadvantage is represented by a bonus to the opposing side; never subtract from an attribute.

For example, if the PC in the previous example with a plasma pistol is shooting the NPC from an ambush, that might increase their effective Clubs by 1. If the NPC was recently blinded by a flash-bang grenade, that might increase the PC's Clubs by another 1, for a total of +2. Even if the PC had a third advantage, such as an extremely good cyberlink to said plasma pistol, the bonus cannot go above +2 without magick.

If there is a tie, the tie goes to the "defender." If there is no obvious defender, tie goes to the NPC, unless magick is used. If this is a matter of an PC vs. PC challenge, the GM decides who wins unless magick is involved.

If the character is acting against the environment rather than another character, the GM simply examines the appropriate attribute and decides if it's high enough based on the circumstances, unless magick is involved.

Speaking of magick, if a PC is going to lose a challenge or there's a tie, they always have the option to use magick, unless they're completely surprised. And if their magick allows them to see the future or anticipate the future (basically, several Slicer and Weaver abilities), they should be allowed to use those relevant magick abilities even if they're surprised.

See above for the breakdown on what each attribute covers.

STRESS

Every character can take a maximum amount of Stress equal to three (3) plus their Hearts score plus their Diamonds score, representing both mental and physical fortitude.

Lots of situations could cause stress, but the most common is battle. When a character has been successfully attacked, they take stress equal to the difference between the higher attribute and the lower. In the case of a tie that went against the character, the character takes 1 stress. Note that attacks don't have to be physical, this could be a battle of wits as much as a fistfight.

When an NPC reaches their maximum stress or higher, the PC who got them to that point decides what happens to them. When a PC reaches their maximum stress or higher, the GM declares if they were taken out with mental, physical, or magickal stress, and the player describes how they are taken out of the action appropriately. They are gone until at least the next scene, unless the player decides they are dead. When they return, they must place a number of cards directly from the Cosmic Deck into the discard pile equal to their maximum Stress, but they no longer have any stress.

Stress can be removed with magick, or with an appropriate amount of time and care, as decided upon by the GM. The PCs exist in a very high tech setting, so unless they're in very dire circumstances, the GM should clear all stress if the PCs have had time to rest overnight, even if severely wounded. The medi-gel of future first aid kits are truly a gift of the Goddess.

MAGICK MECHANICS 101

To play *The River*, you will need a 54 card deck of playing cards (a 52 card deck plus two jokers), several index cards, paper, pencils, and a sense of cosmic wonder.

The deck of cards is the Cosmic Deck, representing the cosmic energy of the Goddess.

At the start of every session, deal five cards face up in the middle of the table, where everyone can access them. This is the River of Stars, or simply the River, representing the current flow of cosmic energy available to everyone.

Deal two cards to each player, including the GM. This is one's hand, and represents the personal magickal power available to one's character. The GM's hand is for whatever magickal NPCs are in a scene at a given time. Players can show their hands to each other, but the GM will generally hide their hand from everyone else.

Put the remaining cards someplace where people can access it, and have a spot set aside for a discard pile.

During play, whenever you discard a card for any reason, from your hand, the River, or even someone else's hand, you gain 1 XP. Depending on your playbook, a certain amount of XP will allow you to purchase an advancement. See the Advancement section for more details.

Jokers are wild cards that count as any card a given player wants it to be. There may be other side effects, however; see below.

If a move allows you to "replace" a card with another card, discard the card you are replacing and replace it with an index card, upon which is written the "new" card for reference purposes. This index card is held in one's hand or sits in the appropriate spot of the River depending on what was replaced, and generally counts as the regular card indicated on the index card. Discarding a card in this way counts for XP, except when replacing an index card with another index card. In any case, when an index card would go to the discard pile or be shuffled, it is instead removed from play.

DOOM

If someone needs to draw a card and there are no cards left in the Cosmic Deck, this signals a major story beat. The GM shuffles the discard pile back into the Cosmic Deck, and draws a single card to start a new discard pile. This card, interpreted according to the standard suit / rank card meanings for the game, should be interpreted freely by the GM to indicate the next move of the Dualists. Their plans move forward in some way, and the PCs will be forced to react.

For example, if the GM draws the 5 of Spades, this might represent the Dualists heavily modifying the Starweb, since 5 represents "to Change" and, among other things, Spades can represent the Starweb. While the PCs have been dealing with other matters, large swaths of the Starweb has become sympathetic to crypto-Dualist groups.

Whenever the deck runs out is a good time for the GM to pause and check in with the group and even themselves, to make sure everyone is OK and no one is being triggered or otherwise harmed by what has happened so far.

CONJURING

The Touched and the Talented use a form of magick called "Conjuring," where they call upon a large amount of cosmic energy for highly volatile effects. While each has different ways they interact with the cards (and cosmic energy) outlined in their playbooks, below are the attributes they share.

Game mechanically, conjuring makes heavy use of poker hands. If you don't know anything about poker hands, see the Appendix.

Level of Effect / Rank	Poker Hand
0	High card
1	One pair
2	Two pair
3	Three of a kind
4	Straight
5	Flush
6	Full house
7	Four of a kind
8	Straight Flush
9	Five of a Kind

For ease of reference, above are the five-card poker hands, in order from least to best. They are numbered, and for the purposes of conjuring, that is the "level of effect" for casting a particular spell.

The level of effect is not the only thing that matters, however. Many spells will specify additional effects based on what's in the poker hand you choose.

In order to cast a spell, discard both cards in your hand and make a poker hand from what's in your hand and in the River. If you use a joker, you take 1 Stress, though you are never required to do so. In fact, you can always choose to take a lesser poker hand than is possible, if you really wish to cause a lesser effect, or if you want to include a particular set of cards in the hand you create.

Those who conjure are always surrounded by energy, sometimes crackling and bright, sometimes hair-raising yet invisible, which protects them from other conjurers, called their Aura. If you are playing a conjurer, make the best five-card poker hand you can from what's in your hand and what's in the River. There is no penalty for using jokers in your Aura.

In order for the spell of another conjurer to affect you, they need to have a hand that is at least as good as yours. This isn't just a matter of level of effect; use the rules of poker to determine who has the better hand. However, if another conjurer overcomes this threshold, their effect is not dampened in any way. Some moves may also make use of your Aura, based on this poker ongoing poker hand, which doesn't change until you cast another spell.

See the individual spell descriptions for the actual effects of the different conjurer spells, and the Touched and Talented playbooks for how many spells are available to them, and which ones are available.

CONJURER SPELLS

See individual Charts for information on how you know which of these spells you have access to. Using these as examples, GMs are encouraged to add their own spells to this list, and players are encouraged to work with the GM to add spells to the list as well.

Spells are usually instant unless the GM decides there is a good reason that they shouldn't be.

For some spells, there is a name followed by a name in parenthesis. The first name is what the Touched typically call the spell; the name in parenthesis is what the Talented usually call the spell, though your character can do whatever they want.

Starfire

You blast energy from their fingertips, as bright and dangerous as a solar flare. This is considered to be a normal attack, but for the purpose of the challenge, instead of using any of the your attributes, use the level of effect of the spell. The blast can hit anyone that you can sense with unaided sight.

The makeup of the poker hand used to cast the spell can modify the spell. You may only use one of these modifications and aren't required to use any.

- If the hand contains at least three clubs, you may add your Clubs score to the level of effect.
- If the hand contains at least two hearts, you may project invisible, silent psychic energy instead of a solar flare. This damage is mental and non-lethal.
- If you have built the Dead Man's Hand (two black aces, and two black eights), you may double the level of effect, but if you take out your opponent, you must declare them dead.
- If you have at least two aces, you may shift the level of effect up by 1.
- If you have a joker, you may shift the level of effect up by 5, but if you take out your opponent, you must declare them dead.

The Goddess's Touch (Heal)

Lay your hands on someone, and heal them and soothe them. Remove one stress from them, and remove additional stress equal to your level of effect. You cannot use this spell on yourself unless the hand contains the Ace of Hearts. If your hand contains a Joker, you can heal one person (including yourself) and a number of additional people equal to your Hearts attribute score.

The Goddess Forgives (Adapt)

Space is very unforgiving. The Goddess, however, is kind and loving. Whenever you enter a highly dangerous and potentially lethal environment, including the hard vacuum of space, you may immediately cast this spell, even if you are unconscious. You instantly adapt to the environment, allowing you survive in that environment for one hour plus an additional number of hours equal to the level of effect.

The makeup of the poker hand used to cast the spell can modify the spell. You may only use one of these modifications and aren't required to use any.

- If the hand contains at least one heart, you can extend the effects of this spell to a number of people equal to the value of the card. Aces count as 1, and face cards count as 13 (a coven).
- If the hand contains at least three diamonds, duration is in days rather than hours.
- If the hand contains at least three aces, you may designate the spell to go off automatically the next time you enter the same environment or something similar. Write this down; it only happens once, but doesn't require truly casting the spell (you don't have to use the conjuration mechanic), and has the same level of effect as your current spell.
- If the hand contains at least one heart, you may extend the effects of this spell to a number of companions equal to the value of the card. Aces count as a one (1), face cards count as 13 (a coven).
- If the hand contains a Joker, help will arrive before the duration of the spell runs out.

Veil of the Goddess (Hide)

Shadows cloak you. People look away from you and assume you're supposed to be there. Cameras fail in your presence. This spell increases your stealth in these ways and more, as narrated by the GM. Add the level of effect of the spell to your Hearts attribute for the purposes of stealth. Duration is one hour, plus an additional hour per level of effect. Doing something blatant and loud, like talking loudly or getting into a fight, also ends the effect. Someone can still see you and not end the effect.

The makeup of the poker hand used to cast the spell can modify the spell. You may only use one of these modifications and aren't required to use any.

- If the hand contains at least one heart, you can extend the effects of this spell to a number of people equal to the value of the card. Aces count as 1, and face cards count as 13 (a coven).
- If the hand contains at least two hearts, after someone has seen you, they forget they saw you the moment they lose sight of you.
- If you have built the Dead Man's Hand (two black aces, and two black eights), combat does not end the effect.
- If your hand contains at least two spades, you move quickly as well as stealthily, and may add your Spades attribute to your Hearts for purposes of stealth in addition to the level of effect.
- If your hand contains a Joker, when someone sees you, once they no longer have eyes on you, they will think they saw someone else (GM decides).

Animism

When you cast this spell, all the inanimate objects in the immediate area gain the ability to talk. Most don't know much that's interesting; a table might know who sat at it last or have something to say about the sort of bowls that were on it last. But this can be an especially useful spell to cast near a personal compu-node or the physical location of a data store, though such objects tend to be "smarter" and more cagy about the information that they give out. The effect lasts for five minutes plus a number of minutes equal to the level of effect.

The makeup of the poker hand used to cast the spell can modify the spell. You may only use one of these modifications and aren't required to use any.

- If you have built the Dead Man's Hand (two black aces, and two black eights), only nearby weapons will speak. This includes things that aren't technically weapons but were used to attack or murder someone.
- If you have at least two hearts, instead of objects, you affect all nearby animals.
- If you have at least two diamonds, instead of objects, you affect all nearby plants
- If your hand contains a Joker, all of the objects are guaranteed to be friendly to you.

The Touched will tell you that all things do indeed have a soul, or at least the Goddess's soul is in everything, while the Talented assert that the talking is an audio projection of a sort of psychometry, and the voices and minds actually come from their own subconscious.

Antigravity

You can cancel and shape gravity around your person. This allows you to float and fly, and even enter orbit. The shaping of gravity protects you against and potential side effects of acceleration. You are not protected from anything else, such as, say, hard vacuum. The level of effect is the maximum speed, in Machs, you can travel at, as if you were in the Earth's atmosphere, regardless of where you actually are. For example, if you get a level of effect of 2, you can travel at Mach 2 as it would be calculated on Earth, or 2450 kilometers per hour (kph). If your level of effect is 0, you can travel up to 200 kph. The duration of the effect is three hours plus the level of effect, in hours.

The makeup of the poker hand used to cast the spell can modify the spell. You may only use one of these modifications and aren't required to use any.

- If your hand contains a joker, you can travel at up to half the speed of light.
- If your hand contains at least two spades, you can add your Spades score to the level of effect
- If your hand contains at least two diamonds, you may double the duration.
- If your hand contains at least three diamonds, the duration will be in days, not hours.
- If your hand contains at least two hearts, your movement will always be absolutely silent, even in atmosphere, even above the speed of sound
- If your hand contains at least two clubs, you are not harmed by anything you accidentally bump into or anything that accidentally collides with you while the spell is in effect
- If the hand contains at least one heart, you can extend the effects of this spell to a number of people equal to the value of the card. Aces count as 1, and face cards count as 13 (a coven).

Voice of the Goddess

This spell allows you to ask yes/no questions of the Goddess, with regard to actions you are planning to take. This is not a divination spell, so much as a way to get advice from the Goddess. For example, one might ask: "Should we follow the escaping Dualists?"

The GM will decide the answer to the question from the perspective of the Goddess. You get one question per level of effect, and you do not have to use them all, but you need to ask them all within five minutes of casting the spell; the Goddess is a very busy woman.

The questions are asked aloud, and the answers are heard inside your head. Note that while the questions must be answerable with yes or no, other answers are possible, such as "I don't know" or "It doesn't matter" or "You don't need to know that." The GM should remember that this is a *friendly* and *loving* Goddess, however.

If you have a level of effect of 0, you do not get to ask a question. Instead, you get a vague sense of a physical direction that the Goddess thinks you should go in. If your hand contains a Joker, instead of questions, you get a

vision from the Goddess designed to set you on the right path. You may then ask the GM a number of yes/no questions about the vision equal to the level of effect; these questions can be anything relevant to the vision.

Like all conjurer spells, this spell comes to the Talented and Touched intuitively. However, it is illegal to cast this spell in the Meritocracy. In the Meritocracy, it is believed this spell connects to the worst aspects of one's unconscious, disguised as a loving voice, giving advice the caster wants to hear.

Creation

This allows you to create an object from thin air. It must be an object that you've seen before.

- If you are intimately familiar with the object, as in you know how it works and/or could build it (or it's very simple, like a wooden club), you need a level of effect of 1 to create it
- If you don't know exactly how it works but have used it all the time, you need a level of effect of 3 or higher
- If you've seen the object many times but not used it, you need a level of effect of 4 or higher
- If you've only seen the thing once or twice, you need a level of effect of 6, possibly even higher at the GM's discretion if the object is particularly unusual

If you don't get a high enough level of effect, the GM decides what you get. Perhaps you get a statue or hollow non-working replica of the item, or a version of the item that doesn't work as well as it should.

The makeup of the poker hand used to cast the spell can modify the spell. You may only use one of these modifications and aren't required to use any. If you choose any of these, you have to have seen it before and need a level of effect of 4 or higher, or else things get *really* wild (GM option).

- If the hand contains at least two diamonds, instead of objects, you can create living plants.
- If the hand contains a joker, you can create a living being, anything short of person.
- If the hand contains a joker and a heart, you create a replica of someone who has died. They are exactly as they were when you last saw them alive, except they no longer have any magickal powers or Dualist abilities, if relevant.

Scanner

When you cast this spell, you become a magickal sensor array. You can automatically detect breathable atmosphere, and for every level of effect, you choose one of the following things to be able to detect:

- Life signs (high level)
- Valuable minerals
- Energy signatures
- Communication signals
- Radiation
- Dangerous microbes
- Edible plant/animal life
- Caustic and poisonous chemicals
- Heat/Cold

The spell lasts for three minutes, plus the level of effect in minutes. The distance you can detect things is 100 km plus 10 km per level of effect. The further out you detect, the less fine detail you have, and the GM may rule that certain things (ion storms, certain atmospheres, etc.) may limit the distance of your effect.

The makeup of the poker hand used to cast the spell can modify the spell. You may only use one of these modifications and aren't required to use any.

- If your hand contains a joker, with GM approval, you may permanently add something to the list of things you can detect.
- If your hand contains at least two spades, you can add your Spades score to the level of effect
- If your hand contains at least two diamonds, you may double the duration.
- If your hand contains at least three diamonds, the duration will be in hours, not minutes.
- If your hand contains at least two hearts, increase the distance of your detection by 1000 km.

Cantrips (Magick Multitool)

This is a workhorse spell that does a bunch of small, useful things all at once whenever cast. When cast, it produces a floating light near your head, about as strong as a flashlight, which lasts for 1 hour plus 10 minutes per level of effect, or until you decide to put it out. Putting it out ends the spell. In addition, for each level of effect, choose one of the effects below. You can choose the same effect more than one time.

- Recharge a battery, even a starship-sized battery
- Seal a hole in a starship hull about as big as a person
- Seal all leaks in a spacesuit, diving suit, or similar apparatus
- Instantly teach someone a language you know
- Heat emanates from the light you created, equal to about the output of a primitive 21st century consumer-grade space heater, until the light goes away
- Cold emanates from the light you created, equal to about the output of a primitive 21st century consumer-grade window air conditioner, until the light goes away
- Use your light as if it were a communicator, until the light goes away
- Create an additional light near someone else's head; it lasts as long as your light. One of the previous three effects can be attached to it instead of "your" light.
- Teleport 1 day of supplies of one type (food, water, power crystals, common medicines, etc.) for a number of people equal to a single card in your hand of your choice to your location. Ace counts as 1, face cards count as 13 (a coven). You don't know where the supplies come from.
- Teleport a single-person tent to your location. You don't know where it came from.
- Instantly repair anything that would take only a small amount of money to repair if you were in civilization (e.g. a crack in the handle of your pistol)
- Create a holographic screen and interface and connect to the Starweb, no matter where you are. Lasts until your light goes out.
- Gain the ability to dim the light, or any other light you created. However, as normal, if you put the light entirely out, it will not come back.

If your hand contains a joker, with GM approval, you may permanently add something to the list above.

FLOW

Slicers and Weavers are both capable of this sort of magick. Instead of having a set spell list, they can perform effects based on the interpretation of the cards they use to cast a spell. Basically, they are very dependent on the current flow of cosmic energy for their effects. That said, flow magic is very flexible.

Spells can use one or two cards. Cards can come from one's hand or from the River. Cards that are used are discarded; cards that are discarded are replaced from the Cosmic Deck after the effect is adjudicated.

The effect of the spell is based on the suit and rank (number) of the card or cards in question. The player describes the effect, and the GM decides if this is reasonable, based on the cards. The GM should be very liberal in these interpretations. For example, a 5 of Spades (To Change + Science) can be used to travel faster than light without using a stardrive, though this can be rather dangerous even when successful.

Effects that use two cards are generally more powerful. When using two cards, the caster takes 1 stress in addition to any other effects.

The GM should try to be consistent in what they allow, but if an effect turns out to be too powerful or too weak, between sessions they should discuss this with the players and let them know that the cosmic flow will be different in the future.

CARD NUMBERS/FACE CARDS

Card numbers are usually associated with a verb. Interpreting or using a card in magic is a matter of applying that verb to the meaning of the card's suit.

Number Meanings	
Ace - To Imbue or Nourish	8 - To Grow or Persevere
2 - To Mend or Heal	9 - To Gain or Deceive
3 - To Create or Produce	10 - To Complete or Integrate
4 - To Protect or Hide	Jack - A person of other gender
5 - To Change or Attack	Queen - A Woman
6 - To Communicate or Connect	King - A Man
7 - To Learn or Master	Joker - Wild

CHARACTER CREATION

CONCEPT

The first step in building your character is choosing a concept to base it on. Maybe you want a noble space pirate, who robs from the richest of the Grey Zone's denizens and uses the proceeds to fund a soup kitchen in Electron, the oldest and seediest of Exaltation's three space stations. Maybe you're a hardened mercenary, who's been fighting for a paycheck for twenty years. Maybe you're a Priest/ess the Goddess, come to spread Her word, or maybe you're a smuggler who pilots your own ship. Almost any concept will work, although keep in mind how many other people you'll be playing with, and be on the look out for potential contacts and connections.

CHART

Once you've chosen your concept, pick a chart. Read through it, circle the options you choose and fill in the necessary blanks as discussed below.

NAMES

You can choose any name you prefer, but we offer some examples appropriate to the Chart for flavor purposes and for those who are stumped.

PRONOUNS

You may choose any set of pronouns you prefer. We use pronouns instead of gender because there are several genders that have more than one potential set of pronouns, and because some people don't have a gender, but they still do have pronouns.

LOOK

The way your character presents themselves to the world. If you are not satisfied with any of the offered looks, feel free to come up with a different one.

EQUIPMENT

This represents the really major equipment you start with. You can always have a pen and some paper, or a TV at home, but these are the more expensive and significant underpinnings of your life and work. You may negotiate with the GM to trade such items for something of equivalent worth if you wish.

ATTRIBUTES

These are your character's mundane attributes, which are used in checks to see if you can accomplish mundane tasks. This includes things such as combat and stealth, although you are always able to cast a spell if you discover you cannot succeed at a check. Although we offer some suggested builds, any build consisting of 4 points distributed in any way among the 4 Suits is acceptable. Maybe you want a very social character who is not good at much else. If so, you are welcome to go with 4 Hearts and 0 in the other three suits. We generally recommend taking at least a point in Hearts or Diamonds because those two suits give you additional stress on a point by point basis.

Choose your preferred stats and write them down in that section, crossing out any selections you don't use.

MOVES

Moves are what makes your Chart special. They're the difference between a Slicer and a Weaver. Furthermore, the moves you choose as you advance will make your character unique.

In addition to the moves on your chart, during advancement you will also have the alternative of choosing Cosmic Advancements that represent your closeness to the Cosmic All and HQ Advancements that represent significant improvements on your group's chosen base of operations.

For more on Advancement costs and experience, see the Advancement section.

STRESS

Add together your Hearts attribute with your Diamonds attribute. Add 3 to the total, and you have your maximum stress.

For example, a person with Spades 2, Hearts 1, Diamonds 1 would have $1(\text{Hearts})+1(\text{Diamonds})+3(\text{base})$ for a total of 5 stress. 5 is a roughly average amount of stress for a PC.

CHOOSE CONTACTS

Write up two contacts you have from your life before this game. This doesn't have to be complicated; just a name and possibly how they might come in handy later.

Example: Chrissy Devdaughter – She's a hacker who I used to work with in the Meritocracy. She fled there a while ago, and I know she's living in Exaltation now.

CHECK WITH THE GM

Finally, you should show the GM your Chart with all of its information and modifications filled in, and get their approval.

Presto! You have a character! However, you're not quite done. Now you need to link up with the other PCs in your group.

GROUP STUFF

LINK YOUR CHARACTERS

Choose at least 2 of the other people in the group and come up with how you know each other. Maybe you're friends, maybe you've worked together, maybe you've saved each other's lives numerous times, or maybe you're frenemies who barely tolerate each other. This doesn't need to be a complicated story; just have an idea of who you love/like/hate/are siblings with and why.

Example: Jaquan is my brother, so I always have his back. Xi Mei and I have worked some jobs together. I respect her, but we're not close.

CHOOSE YOUR HEADQUARTERS

Your headquarters is the place your group works out of. It can be a long-term thing, or only temporary, and can be an official HQ building or the pilot in the group's spaceship. By default, it sleeps 8 people and choose 2

advancements between you.: It has extra storage space (Storage), it has strong defenses (Defensive Capacity), it is luxuriously appointed (Deluxe Accoutrements), it is a starship or is otherwise mobile (Mobility), it is unusually fast (Speed), it is an underground bunker, well protected from observation (Underground), it is a space station or other orbital object, and serves as a shipyard as well as possibly an entertainment sector (Orbital), it has an existing, loyal staff that serves your needs and purposes (Staff). You can find explanations for what these advancements entail under the HQ Advancements section.

You will each have the option of buying further advancements for your HQ at the same cost as standard advancements of that level. See HQ Advancements for details.

CHARTS



When an individual has, through birth, study or augmentation, gained the ability to practice magic, they are said to be Starborn. That is often shorted to Star, as in “She’s a Star, but she’s not Touched; she earned it the hard way”. The particular way in which they use magic is then called their Star Chart, or just “Chart”. Every Starborn who has access to the River of Stars belongs to one Chart or another. Your Chart is your paradigm, your way of understanding both the River and the greater reality it underlies.

For the purpose of the game, you are Starborn, and your Chart will determine what you can do and how you will do it. It will determine whether you conjure magic from the depths or ride on its flow. Here are the four existing charts.

TOUCHED

"I'm pulling from the good stuff now; it's all golden!"

Names: Phoenix, Aurora, Glow, Tessa, Agni, Aidan, Joash, Ember, Fiammetta, Adara, Aine, a fiery name, an unusual name, a God's name.

Pronouns: _____

Look: Clerical clothing, Mercenary garb, Bright eclectic clothing, Ethereal Clothing

Equipment: A communicator, a set of party clothing, and choose one of each: a plasma gun or a hand cannon, a sporty hovercar or an all-terrain gravbike, a medium sized apartment on a space station or a luxury condo planetside

Suggested Attributes: Clubs 2, Diamonds 1, Hearts 1 or Clubs 2, Hearts 2

You are the touched, one of the Cosmos's chosen children. The light of creation crashes through your veins. The river flows all around you, and you understand it in a way that dwarfs petty language and simple images; what's more, you always have. You are able to create amazing effects, and your deep connection with the River of stars often allows you to choose what power you draw from it. You can fly on an average day; with a good pull, you might even be able to move mountains.

MOVES

Always Taken

Guide the Stream: You may change the suit or number of one card in the river to another of your choosing.

Spell Use – you may use spells, accessing them through your connection to the Goddess through the River of Stars. See the section entitled Conjuring for more details.

Choose 1 other from Basic advancements to start.

BASIC ADVANCEMENTS

Charismatic Flame – You may add your clubs as well as your hearts to any social check.

Dramatic Overlay – You may use your magic to create an effect on a weapon of your choice. Add +1 to both the weapon check and to any damage dealt.

MODERATE ADVANCEMENTS

Metamorphosis – You may change one card in your hand to any card in the deck save the joker.

Elegant Reversal – You may trade one card in your hand for one in the River. This can be used at any time.

EXPERT ADVANCEMENTS

Joker's Wild – You may change any one card in your hand or the River into the joker.

Major Transformation – You may change any three cards in the River into any three other cards except the joker. You may use this ability once per session.

WEAVER

“The Queen of Wands guides you to the well, and the 10 of hearts allows you to drink deep!”

Names: Adrian, Elspeth, Grey Transience, Luna, Aristophanes, Xander, Clarice, Fabian, a elegant name, an esoteric name, an ancient name.

Pronouns: _____

Look: Clerical Robes, Elegant Clothing, Pilot’s Clothing, Quirky Clothing

Equipment: A communicator, a set of formal clothing, and choose one of each: a pair of monofilament swords or a stun pistol, a luxury hovercar or a luxury gravjet, a large apartment on a space station or a small mansion planetside.

Suggested Attributes: Hearts 2, Spades 1, Diamonds 1 or Hearts 2, Spades 2

Guides, spiritual leaders, counselors, and teachers, weavers are the thread that binds together life in the CCA. Beyond its boundaries, they are guides of another sort, using their magic to direct great ships through the stars. In the MRS, weavers are rare, hunted and outlawed. Their knowledge usually keeps them one step ahead of their pursuers, unless a Slicer gets involved.

In the Grey Area between, Weavers are captains and prophets, profiteers and sages. Their knowledge of the future makes them invaluable to any ship or settlement, but they are seen as strange, mystical, unpredictable beings. Even more so than the touched, their deep study and understanding of magic causes people to regard them with awe and consternation.

MOVES

Always Taken

Riding the Flow – You can use the cards in your hand and the cards in the river to do magic as described in the section entitled Flow.

Divination – Once per scene, you may draw one card and discard it to gain knowledge from the Cosmos. If it is an Ace-5, the GM gives you some information about the current situation that you would probably rather not know, 6-10 you get to ask the GM 2 questions from the list below, Jack-King you may ask any question at all (not just the listed ones), as long as it is about a single person of the appropriate gender based on the card drawn, and if it’s a joker you may ask any one question of the GM whether it is on the list or not. The answers may be somewhat cryptic, but will always be accurate, and will provide unknown information (ie, the identity of an unknown ally) ahead of known information.

How does the current situation impact the cosmic all?

What can we do to improve the situation?

What individual or group is behind this situation?

What individual or group could best help us?

What individual or group is already our ally?

What individual or group opposes us?

What resources can we draw on to accomplish our goal?

Choose 1 other from Basic advancements to start.

BASIC ADVANCEMENTS

Ask the Deck - Ask any question and then draw a card. If you draw an A-5, the GM will reveal facts you probably wish weren't true. If you draw a 6-10, the GM will give you a cryptic but accurate answer to the question. If you draw a Jack – King, you may also ask one follow-up or clarifying question and expect a clear answer to the follow-up question. If you draw a Joker, you may ask any question and get a clear answer. Discard the card.

Frequent Flier – You are comfortable with the vagaries of divining interstellar routes, and may pilot a vehicle through such routes instantaneously without having to draw the correct cards.

MODERATE ADVANCEMENTS

Prepared – You have foreseen the current chain of events and prepared accordingly. You can choose to have one item, bolthole, contact, or other reasonable contingency ready for dealing with the current situation. If it is small enough, it is on your person. If not, you have ready access to it. This may only be used once per session.

Foreknowledge – You know what it's important to know, and you've done your research ahead of time. Any time you are tested on knowledge that you could reasonably have accessed ahead of time, you gain a +1 to the check.

EXPERT ADVANCEMENTS

Forbid – You have foreseen this chain of events and may act to prevent them from ever happening. You may declare that everything that has happened in the last five minutes did not, in fact, happen at all. You must justify this by explaining how you prevented it, but that can include preparations made well ahead of time for this moment. You may use this ability once per session, and it costs one stress.

TALENTED

“Grabbing it now! Got it! We’re tearing through, and the new hand shines!”

Names: Buffer, Samantha, Slide, Jacinth, Demetrius, Joao, RazrKitten, Dreambot, an odd name, a moniker, a common name.

Pronouns: _____

Look: Punk gear, military garb, party clothing, mercenary garb.

Equipment: A communicator, a holdout pistol, and choose one of each: a set of laser knives or a plasma rifle, a rugged gravcar or a minitank, a small apartment on a space station or a house planetside.

Suggested Attributes: Diamonds 2, Spades 1, Clubs 1, Diamonds 2 Spades 2, or Diamonds 2, Clubs 2

You were good enough. Your tests show it! You had all the proper characteristics. She just didn’t want you. Or maybe she did, and the Meritocracy forced you to get the implants anyway, changing your simple, friendly relationship with the River into a game of metaphysical tug of war, where you could grab great chunks of reality and move them around, but you couldn’t choose which ones you’d get.

Either way, now you can pull from the river and make things happen. You just occasionally don’t like the results.

Talented are all over the Meritocracy, and can be great at a wide range of tasks. They’re rarely leaders because the abruptness and force inherent in their magickal style often translates into their personalities (although there are exceptions, of course), but they make brilliant scientists, gifted engineers, and great warriors.

MOVES

Always taken

Ripping the Flow – You may discard all of the cards in the river and replace them with new draws. When you do this, you must use the resulting cards to create the strongest hand possible with your current hand and cast a spell. If your result is not at least a pair of Jacks, the spell goes wild. It accomplishes what you want. However, it has strange, unexpected side effects, or is magnified to an extreme degree, or is exceptionally magickally loud and attracts attention (for better or worse) at the GM’s discretion.

Spell Use – you may use spells, accessing them with your augments that allow you to draw from the River of Stars. See the section entitled Conjuring for more details.

Choose 1 other from Basic advancements to start.

BASIC ADVANCEMENTS

Drop and Grab – You are able to drop your hand into the discard pile and take a new hand of cards. You can do this once per scene.

Talented Engineer – You are able to use your magic to focus your mind. Take your highest aura card, and if it is a A-10 add +1 to any engineering or science roll. If it is a Jack – King, add +2. If it is a Joker, the roll succeeds automatically, but with potential magickal side effects as determined by the GM.

MODERATE ADVANCEMENTS

Martial Prowess – You may add your score in Diamonds to any weapons check.

Auric Victory – In response to an attack, you may discard one or both cards in your aura and replace it/them. You use these new cards for your aura. If you end up with a pair, the spell reflects back on its creator.

EXPERT ADVANCEMENTS

Drop Everything – You may cause everyone in the game to drop their hands and draw new hands. Additionally, the River is discarded and redrawn. You gain one xp for each person who does this, along with the xp you gain for discarding your hand and the River. However, your reckless use of magic causes unforeseen side effects and if doom occurs as a result of this it is focused on you.

You may use this ability once per session.

SLICER

“Of course, I understand that you wanted to invest in radium futures, but surely you can see my point about the greater advantages in asteroid drilling.”

Names: Augustus, James, Sarah, Ji May, Michi, Amaterasu, George, Julius, Maria, Jamal, Shanda, an ordinary name, a royal name, a pretentious name.

Pronouns: _____

Look: military garb, expensive clothing, fashionable clothing, Pilot’s gear

Equipment: A communicator, a credit line, and choose one of each: a pair of laser swords or monofilament Claymore, a bulletproof luxury gravcar or a private gravcopter, an inner townhouse on a space station or an estate planetside.

Suggested Attributes: Spades 2, Hearts 1, Diamonds 1, or Spades 2, Hearts 2, or Spades 2, Diamonds 2

The Slicer doesn’t so much see the future as respond to it. With the memories of one of the first great Weavers implanted in their brain, they have a good surface comprehension of the Cosmic Deck. However, they lack the depth of nuanced understanding that a true Weaver brings to the table, so they’re unable to engage in true Divination. Instead, their much higher processing speed allows them to see what’s likely to happen in the next minute or so with great clarity. This makes them adept at outmaneuvering people, whether at the negotiating table or on the battlefield.

In the Meritocracy, they are generally the leaders. The charm of those Slicers who focus on their social abilities is unsurpassed. They also make incredible warriors, however, and most of the Meritocracy’s special forces and elite assassins are Slicers, although some are also Talented. In the Grey Zone, slicers are two parts captain, one part fighter, one part negotiator. Some of the Grey Zone’s most dangerous mercenaries are slicers, but so are some of its most beloved and trusted figures.

In the CCA, Slicers are outlawed. They’re considered to be in possession of stolen memories, which are removed from them if they are caught and returned to a major base. At best, that leaves them as half trained Weavers, at worst irretrievably injured.

MOVES

Always Taken

Choices – Because of your awareness of the immediate future you have more options open to you than others. Your hand size is three cards. You can only ever use 2 of those cards at a time, regardless of the situation.

Riding the Flow – You can use the cards in your hand and the cards in the river to do magic as described in the section entitled Flow.

Choose 1 other from Basic advancements to start.

BASIC ADVANCEMENTS

Enhanced Awareness – Your awareness of the future gives you an enhanced awareness of what’s around you. Add a +2 to all checks to notice or investigate a situation, object or individual.

Flying Ace – You can intuit correct interstellar routes using your foresight, and may pilot a vehicle through such routes instantaneously without having to draw the correct cards.

MODERATE ADVANCEMENTS

Foredraw: Draw two extra cards from the deck and put them on top of the table. You may use them as if they were in your hand. When you are done casting the spell, put them back on the deck in any order.

Quick Response – In combat you may respond to your opponent’s action before they make it, giving you a minimum +1 to your attack check (the GM may offer more depending on circumstances) if you are responding by attacking, or a +2 to any defensive maneuver you make in response to their actions.

EXPERT ADVANCEMENTS

Outmaneuver – you may at any point stop time to go back about one minute and change your actions in that minute to reflect your knowledge of what is about to happen. You may use this ability once per session.

OTHER ADVANCEMENTS

When they receive an advancement, the player has several options. They may take an advancement from their playbook, a Cosmic advancement, or an advancement to their group Headquarters.

COSMIC ADVANCEMENTS

Cosmic advancements represent your increasing closeness to the Cosmic All. They are available to all players, not just those who derive their power from the Goddess directly.

BASIC ADVANCEMENTS

Cosmic Shift – You may choose to shuffle the discard pile back into the deck, putting off Doom till a later point. You may do this once per session.

MODERATE ADVANCEMENTS

Cosmic Sight – You may stare into the stars and see any place you’ve been or have seen a picture of. Once per scene, you can look out into the universe. If there is protection against such sight, compare your current hand to the hand of the person or spell protecting it. If your hand is better you see through. If they have the joker, not only do you not see through, but they notice your attempt. If you have the joker, you always succeed, but you may receive information you’d rather not know.

Cosmic Casting – Whether you usually use the Flow or Conjure, this allows you to cast spells that do not fit into the constraints you normally work with. Maybe you need to move a mountain, or transmute an entire space station to gold. Maybe you just want to do something that Conjuring doesn’t have an existing spell for. Either way, you use up to two of the cards in your hand and up to five of the cards in the River to create a spell. The spell’s success depends on how well the cards represent what you’re trying to do, so if you are trying to inspire everyone around you to be loving, a royal flush of hearts would be an incredible hand, while a hand with no hearts at all would likely backfire in some dramatic way. In general, the more the suits and numbers of the cards match your intentions, and of course the better the hand, the more powerful the spell is. If you have a joker in your hand, the spell always succeeds, but if you don’t have other appropriate cards there will be either wild magic effects or other unforeseen consequences at the GM’s discretion.

In general, this kind of spell takes longer to cast than average. The casting takes a full combat action, and it goes off during your next action.

EXPERT ADVANCEMENTS

Cosmic Transfiguration – You change your chart, taking a new one but keeping as many of your moves as makes sense to the fiction. This advancement may be taken multiple times.

HQ ADVANCEMENTS

BASIC ADVANCEMENTS

Mobility – Your Headquarters is now mobile. Either you have changed to a different base of operations, or the one you previously possessed has somehow been rendered mobile. This can mean anything from an enormous hovertank that cruises around the continents of Exaltation to a fully functional FTL starship (although you still need a Slicer or Weaver to pilot it). It can typically move at least over land and sea.

Speed – (Prereq mobility) Your HQ is much faster than an average ship/tank/whatever of its type. It can outrun similar vehicles the majority of the time.

Storage - Your HQ has considerable storage space. If it is a starship, it can carry multiple other small to moderate sized ships. If it is a hovervehicle, it is a massive one that can carry other such vehicles, or medium sized buildings. If it is a land compound, it has many miles of storage space, and could store almost anything. If you have taken Underground, the storage is not detectable with scanning equipment.

Underground – Your base is underground and is undetectable from the surface. Its entrance is hidden in some way, and capacious enough to allow entry to large vehicles. You have a hardened ventilation system and onsite hydroelectric generators. If you have taken Deluxe Accoutrements, your base's entry level is deep, deep beneath the surface and immune to surface attacks, and it sports a hydroponic garden that produces fruits, vegetables and grains year round.

Defenses – Your HQ has a hardened exterior, whether that means a concrete bunker with bulletproof glass or double thick titanium siding on a spacecraft. It also boasts defensive weapons on the inside and near the entrance/hull. They are not long range, and are not efficient for attack, but will help you defend your HQ should it come under attack.

Deluxe Accoutrements - Everything in your HQ is of the highest quality. It is, itself, beautiful, and features everything from the most expensive furnishings to the latest technology. This means that you have the best and latest version of any other Advancement you choose, and sometimes gives you additional benefits.

Staff – Your HQ is fully staffed by a group loyal to your interests. If you have purchased Defenses, this includes a cadre of guards. If you have purchased Offensive Capabilities, this includes a small group of mercenaries. If you have purchased Deluxe Accoutrements, this includes several specialized technicians.

Orbital – You have a base in orbit – a small space station (or a large one if you've taken Storage), a large satellite, a hollowed out asteroid, or similar. You have facilities to dock and repair ships, and if you have taken staff, you may also have an entertainment sector where visiting crew may take their leisure. If you have taken Deluxe Accoutrements, you are the premier destination in a medium wealth system, or one of the best small destinations around Exhaltation (your choice).

MODERATE ADVANCEMENTS

Offensive Capabilities – Your HQ has considerable offensive capabilities, including long range laser, plasma or gunpowder weapons, as well as missiles and an armory filled with personal armor and hand weapons for up to 20 people. If it is mobile, it also has boarding equipment appropriate to the type of craft it is.

Stealth Capacity – Your HQ has an active stealth system that protects it from detection by those not in visual range. If you have the advancement Deluxe Accoutrements, you also have stealth equipment that fools the eye. If you have Offensive Capabilities, your armory includes stealth suits.

Med Clinic – You have a small but fully equipped clinic, with at least one practicing doctor on site. If you have staff, you have a full team of nurses and assistants as well, and can complete tests and other tasks more quickly. If you have Deluxe Accoutrements, you have the latest technology, and at least one researcher who understands it (more if you also have staff).

Moderate Advancements

Offensive Capabilities – Your HQ has considerable offensive capabilities, including long range laser, plasma or gunpowder weapons, as well as missiles and an armory filled with personal armor and hand weapons for up to 20 people. If it is mobile, it also has boarding equipment appropriate to the type of craft it is.

Stealth Capacity – Your HQ has an active stealth system that protects it from detection by those not in visual range. If you have the advancement Deluxe Accoutrements, you also have stealth equipment that fools the eye. If you have Offensive Capabilities, your armory includes stealth suits.

Med Clinic – You have a small but fully equipped clinic, with at least one practicing doctor on site. If you have staff, you have a full team of nurses and assistants as well, and can complete tests and other tasks more quickly. If you have Deluxe Accoutrements, you have the latest technology, and at least one researcher who understands it (more if you also have staff).

EXPERT ADVANCEMENTS

VRsuite – You have an immersive VR room, with additional AR functionality. It is useful both as a tactical tool and an entertainment center. It allows 3d enactments of boarding scenarios and more minute examination of blueprints, among other advantages. If you chose Deluxe Accoutrements, it is capable of responding to your particular needs and interests and has multiple rooms that may be used simultaneously.

AI – You have an AI who runs most of your ships basic functions. Maybe it's a true AI or maybe a brain hooked up to complex life support. Either way, it will defend your HQ independently (assuming you have defenses), manage timetables, and otherwise act as a highly functional member of your crew. If you have staff, the AI is capable of managing them to produce peak efficiency. If you have Deluxe Accoutrements, the AI has a robot body they can inhabit to help on missions or otherwise serve as a member of your crew.

CHARACTER ADVANCEMENT

One of the interesting things about characters in RPGs is watching them grow and change. Although some of that important growth is simply reflected in the fiction, some of it is marked on your charts.

Characters in *The River* gain 1 xp for every card they discard. Some other things may also grant xp, but in general that's where you'll be getting the meat of your advancement. Obviously, an advancement costs more than 1xp, or we'd all be playing demigods with great cosmic powers in the first session. Instead, we have three different tiers of advancements, each costing a different amount of XP. When you have the correct amount of xp for the tier of advancement you want to buy, you may use it to buy any advancement on your chart, any HQ Advancement of the appropriate level, or any Cosmic Advancement of the appropriate level. XP costs are doubled for Talented, whose powers allow them to run through the deck much more quickly than the other charts.

BASIC ADVANCEMENTS

Basic advancements are generally fairly simple improvements to your character's abilities. Your character begins play with one basic advancement from the list on your chart, representing your particular background.

Basic advancements cost 10xp. (20 Talented)

MODERATE ADVANCEMENTS

Moderate advancements are, as one would expect, moderately powerful. Many advancements fall into this category, including the bulk of the Cosmic Advancements.

Moderate advancements cost 20xp (40 Talented)

EXPERT ADVANCEMENTS

Expert advancements are the pinnacle of what your chart can do. The Cosmic version represent the highest possible connection to the Cosmic All, and expert HQ advancements allow truly spectacular additions to your headquarters.

In addition, you may buy a +1 to any attribute (maximum attribute level being 4) for the cost of 1 expert advancement.

Expert advancements cost 40 (80 for Talented)

SETTING

It is a world of magic. Of science. Of great powers that stand helpless against the dark, and small choices that push it back. It is the story of two great empires, but more than that it is a story of the people who make their lives in the Grey Zone, a zone of tense neutrality suspended between their respective holdings like a fly between two fat spiders.

This is a story, most of all, of the Starborn, some of whom were born with incredible powers, some of whom stole them with all the shining speed and strength of technology, and some of whom earned them with study and practice. The Grey Zone doesn't care which you are (although some of its residents do), and the looming threat will rend all of them asunder if they can't find a way to defeat it.

A TALE OF TWO EMPIRES

Before the coming of the Goddess, FTL travel was effectively impossible. It wasn't the problem of creating a drive; that had been done years ago. However, it essentially bent time, causing the object in question to be in all places on the designated route at once. This was a problem because even with the era's vast computer technology, they couldn't compute events like the movements of asteroids and meteorites well enough to guarantee the safety of the object transported. Because of this, there were no empires in space. The majority of systems were governed independently, although there was a loose alliance between a plurality of them, known as the Confederation of Independent Kingdoms.

That all changed with the advent of magic. The Weavers were able, with their precognitive skills, to predict a safe route through space, allowing the drives to be used. Later, Slicers could manage a similar effect with their understanding of the immediate future. Now Slicers and Weavers ply the starways in great ships, often carrying smaller subluminal vessels from place to place. In the two empires, they are most likely working for their respective governments, either transporting citizens and traders from system to system or else flying smaller, military vessels that interact with their targets more... directly.

Because of this, two things occurred.

The Confederation of the Cosmic All (CCA)



First of all, the Confederation of Independent Kingdoms became much more deeply connected, and more systems joined it. Some of its systems engaged in wars of conquest, increasing their reach to two or more systems (the largest Kingdom being The Republic of Lyrica, which encompasses five systems and their associated asteroid fields). Over time, the leaders of those systems became very entangled with the Church of Our Lady of the Stars, and increasingly devout. Today the majority of them have COLS as their official church of record, and the Church's home planet, Silvervale, has three seats on the CCA's ruling council and has veto power over its actions, although they seldom use it. A hundred years ago, the Confederation officially changed its name to the Confederation of the Cosmic All. While not all of its states are theocracies, they're largely held together by a devotion to the church and a mutual mistrust of the Meritocracy.

The kingdoms of the CCA vary in style of leadership and form of government, although the majority of them are essentially feudal, with a King, a Prince, or an Emperor. Of the remaining number, a few are dictatorships or autocracies, some are ruled exclusively by Starborn, and some few are free republics or democracies. There's not much war between them anymore; strong trading partnerships and the threat of the Church's disapproval prevent wars of conquest.

While some kingdoms are very rich, most are more moderately positioned. Many of them, especially the autocracies and feudal monarchies, have a great deal of income inequality, with the poor living in relative squalor while the rich jaunt from star to star on a whim. The Church makes an effort to ameliorate that, putting some of its required tithes into feeding and clothing the poor, and they provide education for those who seek it. However, that education includes indoctrination into their faith, and they look very unkindly on those who use technology to take the magic which they believe is reserved for the faithful. Slicers and Talented do not fare well in the CCA, and if caught are often stripped of their cyberware, at best leaving them without their powers, and at worst doing them irreparable brain damage.

THE MERITOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF SYBLE



Secondly Syble, a particularly powerful, and technologically adept system some distance away, began slowly taking over the systems around it. Because Syble offered both wealth and technological superiority to their members, many systems went willingly. This process accelerated when the first Slicers were created, freeing Syble from dependence on Weavers, who were somewhat rare and also often a bit leery of the technological superpower.

In time, Syble became the Meritocratic Republic of Syble, a socialist state dominated by a cyber-augmented elite composed of those wealthy enough to buy Slicer chips and those smart and capable enough to earn them. To this day, the most gifted students in every Meritocracy School are given Slicer tech upon graduation as a reward for their ability.

Eventually, it became possible to create Talented by identifying people with the correct psycho/emotional profile to wield such power and augmenting them in such a way as to allow them to control it. They too ascended to the ranks of the elite, although to this day they do not figure as largely in the Meritocracy's government because their talents are better suited to fighting or engineering than to ruling.

Life in the Meritocracy is generally pretty good. Citizens have a universal basic income, free education, and state healthcare. Only Talented and Slicers are allowed to run for office on a provincial level (essentially continental level, more or less) or higher, but it's possible for norms, as they're derogatorily called, to achieve positions of relative power within their own states.

However, religion is frowned on, and worship of the Cosmic All is forbidden. Diviners are rare here, and are often clerics who risk their lives to tend to their flock. Their ability to see the future means that they're caught less often than one would expect, but it's still a perilous business. Touched that are discovered are implanted with Talented augments and forced to serve the Meritocracy. If they cannot be convinced, there are other chips you can implant in one's brain that will ensure obedience, if not continued intelligence or sanity.

The Meritocracy's current leader is an incredibly charismatic Slicer named Alys Sinclair. Her political acumen, her exceptional power, and her talent for public speaking has kept her at the forefront of the Meritocracy's sometimes rocky parliamentary system for a decade. She loathes the Church of Our Lady of the Stars, and considers the Goddess herself a fickle, unreliable creature who is best handled through scientific intermediaries.

THE GREY ZONE



The Grey Zone is where it all comes together. That's true both literally and figuratively. It's the only place in the cosmos where you'll find a Touched having lunch with two Slicers and a norm. It's far from paradise, with neither the largely benevolent hand of the Church nor the soothing embrace of the Meritocracy providing shelter from life's challenges.

The people who come to the Grey Zone are rebels, heretics, pioneers and mercenaries. Some want to build a shining city in the wastes, others just want to live another day.

At the heart of the Grey Zone lies the planet Exaltation. It is the only habitable planet in the system of Deviance. Exaltation is ruled by a cadre of powerful Touched and Diviners called the Quantum Circle. The Church considers them heretics because instead of worshiping the Goddess as a being of order and elegant, divine planning, they worship her as a being of chaos. They call her Lady Quantum, and believe that the uncertainty she creates is what keeps the entire universe in motion.

Because its members essentially worship chaos, the Quantum Circle does not impose many laws on Exaltation. Everyone is free to use whatever substances they please, and hedonism is rampant. However, they do restrict the right to kill to themselves, require that all properly recorded deals be honored, and have laws to protect children from exploitation. Breaking any of those restrictions will get you exiled off world, sometimes without a space suit depending on the severity of the offense.

The Quantum Circle requires docking fees of every ship that comes to their numerous active spaceports. That makes the circle rich, and the circle in turn tithes a certain amount of that to the Church of Lady Quantum, which helps people frequently but more or less at random. Because of this, the poor in many of the cities band together in mutual support leagues, pledging to help others if they receive the Lady's boons. This doesn't eliminate income inequality, or the violence and other problems that plague the lives of the poor there, but it does mitigate them to a degree.

As for non-residents, they come to Exaltation for any number of reasons. Some come as tourists, wanting to slum a bit. Some are smugglers, looking to fence some hot cargo. Still others are perfectly legitimate traders, or entertainers looking for a gig, or mercenaries seeking work. They all blend together in the human cocktail that inside the bars and boarding houses of Port Quark, the planet's biggest spaceport.

DUALISM



They are inevitable.

Two terrible (no, beautiful -- no, perfect -- no, murderous -- no, hollow) events, one in the heart of the Confederation of the Cosmic All and one in the center of the Meritocratic Republic of Syble. Simultaneous, unexpected, and inevitable.

The Twins, as their followers call these events, will alter reality as it was once altered, along an opposing vector, and with casual brutality. They will murder the Goddess, destroy Magick, and extirpate both from living memory.

They have not been born yet, these fruitful, hungry voids, yet their influence echoes back through time. Those who come to worship them, to embody them, call themselves Dualists, without qualification, in deliberate mockery of other forms of dualist faith. They are called many other things as well: Voidtouched, Excrucians, Third Wayists, Beloved, Throckmortons, New Agonyclites.

They, the Dualists, are inevitable. They, the Twins, are inevitable. But what comes after?

The closer one is in time or space to one of the two events, the harder it is to "see" by any means, the more it is twists and edits memory. In the Confederation and the Meritocracy, mages can see only the Twin across the galaxy from them. If one moves from one polity to the other, one merely forgets about the previous disaster.

Only you, who live in the Grey Zone between, can see both inevitable singularities. Only you recognize the field of stars in someone's eyes as a sign of Dualism. The Quantum Circle sees, but their own doctrine limits their ability to act.

This is what your characters have come together to fight. To make sure when the inevitable comes, when the cold war between the Confederation and the Meritocracy turns hot, that the victory of the Twins is not inevitable.

NON-PLAYER CHARACTERS

Non-player characters can be "statted" just like the player characters, but on more or less "points" for their attributes. Average folk should be built on 0 to 3 points, 2 being the most common amount. So a hearty computer tech might have Diamonds 1 and Spades 1. Characters meant to face the PCs alone should be built on 5 to 8 points, pending on the number and power level of PCs, with no more than 4 points in a single attribute.

In either case, by default an NPC's maximum Stress starts at 3, plus the NPC's Spades plus their Hearts. This can be adjusted up and down to represent unusually strong or weak characters. Also, instead of creating a bunch of characters, if the PCs are, say, fighting a horde, perhaps stat them as a single person but with a lot of Stress before they're all taken out.

NPC mages use the GM's hand and the River, just like a PC. If there are a lot of NPC mages in a scene, this can get very confusing, so the GM might want to keep this to a minimum, especially since the PCs are the focus of the story, and they'll often be fighting Dualists, who are never spellcasters.

DUALIST NPCS

Dualists are not dark lords wielding laser swords, a cape twirling behind them. They are, for the most part, the most ordinary and non-descript of people. They have those they love, and those that they wish to protect. It's just that, while the reasoning varies, they are willing and *eager* to see magick extinguished. Each Dualist is different, even if they *seem* to be the same. They prefer to move subtly; it doesn't help that the messages from the future give them a preternatural degree of coordination.

This makes it only the more stunning when one blocks a plasma blade with their hand or shrugs off magickal starfire.

When one looks in the eyes of a Dualist, one sees a beautiful field of stars. This is an effect that can be replicated or hidden by technology. However, even if hidden, a PC who has encountered a Dualist before will know, if allowed to stare in a Dualist's eyes for more than a few seconds, that they are dealing with a Dualist, observing the stars nonetheless. Someone using technology to replicate a Dualist's eyes *might* fool a PC, but only if the player wants them to be fooled.

Every Dualist has an Aura, just like a conjurer, which protects them from conjuration magick in the exact same way, using the GM's hand as a basis. However, when magick doesn't work on them, it always manifests as if the conjurer made some sort of mistake, as if they didn't get the energy they needed. This feels very different to them than when facing another conjurer's Aura, which is more like a wall. At the end of any scene where a conjurer had at least one spell successfully thwarted in this way by a Dualist, the conjurer gains 2 XP.

More importantly, the GM, when playing a Dualist, can fuel their more unusual abilities by taking cards from the discard pile and putting them face down on the bottom of the deck in any order. Just as using magick in the moment hastens the Doom that is coming to all mages, when a Dualist calls upon the Twins to help in the moment, it slightly pushes back the time the plans of the Dualists come to fruition. If there are no cards in the discard pile, then the Dualist cannot use any of these abilities.

The GM may place a card from the discard pile onto the bottom of the Cosmic Deck to have a Dualist do one of the following:

- Win a tie during a normal challenge. This does not seem unusual in any way, perhaps like a stroke of luck.

- Negate any circumstantial non-magickal bonuses a PC has to a check opposing the Dualist. Again, this is a non-obvious "power". For example, the Dualist that's being ambushed simply turns out to be more alert than expected, or has been warned somehow.
- Prevent a Flow spell from affecting them or an ally unless a Joker or a face card of the correct gender is involved. The PC whose spell is thwarted gains 1 XP and knows something is wrong, but not what. Even a Flow caster who is very familiar with Dualists will not be sure who thwarted them, except by context.
- Draw a new hand. All PCs get 1 XP.
- If it is remotely possible for the Dualist to have hidden a small object, anything that can be concealed in the hand, in the nearby area, perhaps even before they knew they needed it, the Twins warned them and the Dualist hid that object. The can now lay hands on this thing; it can be really hard to keep Dualists prisoner sometimes. Whenever a Dualist uses this ability, all PCs gain 1 XP.
- Force a PC to take 2 Stress and draw a new hand. This gives the PC 1 XP on top of the XP they get for discarding. When this happens, the PC knows the Dualist did it, that somehow they pushed on their personal flow of magick with some sort of terrible force. What that force feels like is up to the player, but most describe it as a knife made of the purest void, perfectly cold.
- Draw a new River, and, optionally, a new hand as well. If a Dualist does this, the shift in the Cosmic Flow is noticeable by all nearby mages, though the source is not obvious. If the Dualist does this, all PCs gain 3 XP.
- Send a message, of about one sentence in length, to any single Dualist anywhere, or to **all** Dualists within one light second of the Dualist. This message, co-ordinated through time and space via the Twins, cannot be intercepted in any way.
- Shrug off all damage from any single attack (or battle, if resolution is happening at that level). This usually looks pretty unnatural. This is where you see bullets bouncing off the chest of that petty bank clerk that turned out to be a Dualist.
- Give a command to an NPC that is not capable of using magick. If the Dualist can beat the NPC in a Hearts challenge, they will do as asked and forget they were ever given the order in the first place, providing justification for their actions to fit their personality if possible. Dualists can only tell people to *do* something, not how to *feel* or *think* about something. If this ability is used in the presence of the PC, they will know the Dualist is doing it, and that there is something very, very wrong with the Dualist. It is up to the player how this feeling manifests, but most would say they suddenly sense the Dualist has no soul.

Dualists rarely work directly, however. They infiltrate and influence groups, and send those groups after people, like the PCs, that the Twins tell them are a danger.

No one who wields magic can become a Dualist. You cannot call upon the void the Twins represent to power a dark form of magick. That is like calling water "dark gasoline," filling a car's petrol tank with it, and expecting it to run. Dualists have been known to blackmail or manipulate mages into acting against each other, however.

When the PCs take out a Dualist (via Stress or other means) or deal a major blow to their plans (GM discretion), the GM discards the River and draws a new one. The Cosmic Flow has shifted. This can only happen once per scene, no matter how many Dualists / Dualist plans were defeated / thwarted during that scene. When this happens, all PCs get 6 XP.

APPENDIX A: SUMMARIES AND TABLES

You will be playing a mage that lives in the Grey Zone. Because of this, you are in a unique position to see a threat most do not believe in, that of the Dualists. You and the rest of the PCs are dedicated to dealing with that threat.

To create a character, choose a Chart, a name, pronouns, a look, and equipment. Divide 4 points between the four attributes (Spades, Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds). You can take a maximum amount of Stress equal to 3 + Hearts + Diamonds. Stress can be removed with magick or is cleared overnight, so long as you have access to standard first aid technology (medi-gel).

You start with the "Always Taken" Moves from your Chart and one Basic Advancement of your choice.

Link your character to the other characters. Come up with two NPC contacts. Create a HQ together with the other players.

Spades: Air, Gasses, Electricity, Science, Logical Processes, Bladed Weapons, Software, Computing, The Starweb, Speed, Agility

Hearts: Water, Animals, Fluids, Cold, The Humanities and Social Sciences, Emotions, Intuition, Non-Lethal Weapons, Charisma, Manipulation, Social Connection, Graceful Motion, Stealth

Clubs: Fire, Plasma, Heat, The Arts, Inspiration, Gunpowder or Plasma driven Weapons, Creativity

Diamonds: Earth, Plants, Magnetism, Engineering, Physical Objects (not otherwise mentioned), Blunt Weapons, Health, Stamina, Brute Strength

Number Meanings	
Ace - To Imbue or Nourish	8 - To Grow or Persevere
2 - To Mend or Heal	9 - To Gain or Deceive
3 - To Create or Produce	10 - To Complete or Integrate
4 - To Protect or Hide	Jack - A person of other gender
5 - To Change or Attack	Queen - A Woman
6 - To Communicate or Connect	King - A Man
7 - To Learn or Master	Joker - Wild

Level of Effect / Rank	Poker Hand
0	High card
1	One pair
2	Two pair
3	Three of a kind
4	Straight
5	Flush
6	Full house
7	Four of a kind
8	Straight Flush
9	Five of a Kind

You get 1 XP per card you discard, for any reason, unless the rules say otherwise. There are other sources of XP as well. Below are the costs for advancements. The number in parenthesis is for Talented only; they have doubled costs because they are capable of discarding cards at such a rapid rate.

Basic Advancement 10 XP (20 XP)
Moderate Advancement 20 XP (40 XP)
Expert Advancement 40 XP (80 XP)

Advancements can come from your Chart, the Cosmic Advancements, or the HQ Advancements.

For those unfamiliar with poker, this is the list of poker hands, from worst to best. Aces are high for the purpose of ranking poker hands in *The River*. When making a poker hand in *The River*, one is usually choosing among the cards in the Cosmic River and the cards in one's hand to make a five-card hand.

High card, also known as no pair or simply nothing, is a hand that does not fall into any of the other categories below. Each high card hand is ranked first by the rank of its highest-ranking card, then by the rank of its second highest-ranking card, then by the rank of its third highest-ranking card, then by the rank of its fourth highest-ranking card, and finally by the rank of its lowest-ranking card. High card hands that differ by suit alone are of equal rank.

One pair, or simply a pair, is a hand that contains two cards of one rank and three cards of three other ranks (the kickers), such as 4♥ 4♠ K♠ 10♦ 5♠. Each one pair is ranked first by the rank of its pair, then by the rank of its highest-ranking kicker, then by the rank of its second highest-ranking kicker, and finally by the rank of its lowest-ranking kicker. One-pair hands that differ by suit alone, such as 8♠ 8♦ 10♥ 6♣ 5♠ and 8♥ 8♣ 10♣ 6♠ 5♣, are of equal rank.

Two pair is a hand that contains two cards of one rank, two cards of another rank and one card of a third rank (the kicker), such as J♥ J♣ 4♣ 4♠ 9♥. Each two pair is ranked first by the rank of its highest-ranking pair, then by the rank of its lowest-ranking pair, and finally by the rank of its kicker. Two pair hands that differ by suit alone are of equal rank.

Three of a kind is a hand that contains three cards of one rank and two cards of two other ranks (the kickers), such as 2♦ 2♠ 2♣ K♠ 6♥. Each three of a kind is ranked first by the rank of its triplet, then by the rank of its highest-ranking kicker, and finally by the rank of its lowest-ranking kicker. Three of a kind hands that differ by suit alone are of equal rank.

A **straight** is a hand that contains five cards of sequential rank, not all of the same suit, such as 7♣ 6♠ 5♠ 4♥ 3♥. Each straight is ranked by the rank of its highest-ranking card. Straight hands that differ by suit alone are of equal rank.

A **flush** is a hand that contains five cards all of the same suit, not all of sequential rank, such as K♣ 10♣ 7♣ 6♣ 4♣. Each flush is ranked first by the rank of its highest-ranking card, then by the rank of its second highest-ranking card, then by the rank of its third highest-ranking card, then by the rank of its fourth highest-ranking card, and finally by the rank of its lowest-ranking card. Flush hands that differ by suit alone are of equal rank.

A **full house** is a hand that contains three cards of one rank and two cards of another rank, such as 3♣ 3♠ 3♦ 6♣ 6♥. Each full house is ranked first by the rank of its triplet, and then by the rank of its pair. Full house hands that differ by suit alone are of equal rank.

Four of a kind is a hand that contains four cards of one rank and one card of another rank (the kicker), such as 9♣ 9♠ 9♦ 9♥ J♥. Each four of a kind is ranked first by the rank of its quadruplet, and then by the rank of its kicker. Four of a kind hands that differ by suit alone, such as 4♣ 4♠ 4♦ 4♥ 9♣ and 4♣ 4♠ 4♦ 4♥ 9♦, are of equal rank.

A **straight flush** is a hand that contains five cards of sequential rank, all of the same suit, such as Q♥ J♥ 10♥ 9♥ 8♥. It ranks below five of a kind and above four of a kind. Under the Ace-high rules used in *The River*, an ace can rank either high (as in A♥ K♥ Q♥ J♥ 10♥, an ace-high straight flush) or low (as in 5♦ 4♦ 3♦ 2♦ A♦, a five-high straight flush), but cannot simultaneously rank both high and low (so Q♣ K♣ A♣ 2♣ 3♣ is an ace-high flush). Each straight flush is ranked by the rank of its highest-ranking card. Straight flush hands that differ by suit alone, such as 7♦ 6♦ 5♦ 4♦ 3♦ and 7♠ 6♠ 5♠ 4♠ 3♠, are of equal rank.

Five of a kind is a hand that contains five cards of one rank, such as 3♥ 3♦ 3♣ 3♠ Jkr. It is only possible because *The River* uses Jokers as wild cards, as there are only four cards of each rank in the deck. Each five of a kind is ranked by the rank of its quintuplet.

If the GM really needs two hands of the same rank that differ only by suit to have a clear winner, optionally they may use the suit as a final ranking. Simply use the alphabetical ranking of suits used in bridge. This is, from lowest to highest: clubs, diamonds, hearts, and spades.

This section is adapted from the gamer's friend, Wikipedia, and you can go there for more information:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_poker_hands