Trace of Madness

Synopsis: A new sports gambling app offers more danger than merely ruining bank accounts. Users are part of a beta test that is willing to let them bet a little more if willing to sit through a seemingly pointless idle clicker. Soon users become far more committed to the app than to any team, in service of someone trying to achieve sports greatness no matter the cost.

Setting: Any city large enough to host pro baseball.

Mission Briefing: A manager for a minor league baseball team arrived with his team at the park to find an intruder in a poor state of hygiene in the on-deck circle holding up their smartphone as they obsessively traced a complex symbol over & over in the dirt. The person ignored verbal challenges but as the manager waited for security to show up to stop a likely social media challenge, he was surprised when a professionally dressed woman walked into the team dugout past confused players & without a word began to draw over his lineup card.

When security arrived, the intruders ignored them until they were carried off kicking and trying to return to their drawings. A grounds crew person tasked with smoothing out the dirt took a photo of the symbols & posted it to social media, triggering a Delta Green filter set to check for unnatural runes. Agents are called in to find out the origin of the symbol & to suppress the spread.

<u>What's Going On:</u> Tim Bratton is an aging tech CEO (late 50s) with frustrated sports dreams who is using an app to drain users to fuel a second chance at stardom. He was a star in high school but only spent a year in low minor leagues before being cut. While he did well in gambling tech he resented not going pro and pushed his only child Cody to play (his marriage ended in divorce). Watching his son wasn't enough so he sought out fringe doctors to turn back the clock. He found a kindred spirit in wizard/gambling addict Norm Gates who in exchange for a favorable understanding of debts marked Tim's chest with the Brand of Ione, bestowing strength & energy whenever repetitive tracing of a symbol that costs WP & SAN takes place nearby (with number of traces needed increasing as effective distance diminishes).

App usage costs 1 SAN the first week, 5 the next week, then 10 any ongoing weeks. WP cost is 1 first week, 4 next week, then using till they collapse.

Norm has bounced around cults for years gaining favor with his real skills for rejuvenation but burning bridges when funds go missing.

Cody expressed concern at allowing Norm to move into their house, while Tim expressed rage upon hearing Cody was ignoring offers to play professionally in favor of medical school. Despite renewed strength Tim knows no team would sign someone past the half century mark, but the issue was resolved after Norm informed him of a ritual to take his son's likeness, Mask of the Beloved. His SAN, not in a great place to start & reduced by tracing, thought this a fine bargain. "Cody" has been working his way up the minors while Tim's company rolled out a sports betting app where players out of cash can get credit for using their finger to "navigate a cartoon player around a maze" that enthralls them despite the maze never changing. Users don't need to draw the symbol in the app, as long as the app is open drawing it in any medium counts (crumbling SAN may lead users to draw in dirt, blood, etc, not knowing crayon on paper is equally effective). Before too long they forget the app allows gambling or they were meant to go to work or feed the kids today. The symbol has diminishing returns as SAN of users drains,

and they need to draw it more & more & closer to Tim to have effect and for the user to feel the task is complete for the day. This has led to an increase in game attendance although the addicts & team haven't made the connection yet.

The Investigation

If agents visit the two people in hospital one has remnants of sanity left but would love to get a ride to the ballpark and to borrow an agent's phone for just a minute. As for the other, they wouldn't stop tracing the symbol on walls until their nails fell off & fingers bled, so were restrained with blood trickling down their mouth as they trace with their tongue on the roof of their mouth. If the smartphones are examined both have multiple gambling apps installed, but usage data only shows one opened recently. If agents release first patient & give back their phone the person will compulsively lead them towards ballpark, but at continued cost to their SAN.

Agents can install app on their own phones although takes a few weeks for distance to diminish to where they can get an idea where to search, at significant cost to SAN.

Agents can check into the app company but employees know little, although they appreciate being at a company with 100% WFH & a rarely seen boss who prefers email. They think claims of harmful addiction refer to betting on sports & not madness. Tech skilled agents should be able to look at the code of the app or collate social media patterns to identify how addicted users are drawn to the team.

Contacting the team could help provide info, although their publicity team isn't sure why attendance has been climbing but is happy to take credit. They can mention looking forward to having the app when it leaves beta becoming an official part of their Sports Entertainment brand.

As the investigation goes along, users are becoming more addicted and as they lose sanity become less able to maintain a normal life. Agents monitoring the news may see an increase in stories of clueless fans wandering onto the field during games with finger wagging about how addicted people are to their phones these days, with a grim twist as there is a spike in people walking towards the stadium glued to phones & being hit by trains or cars despite adequate signage and crosswalks. As time progresses stories of someone coming home from a business trip to find their half starved kids had been taken away from their spouse without a history of neglect, but the spouse is confused as barely any money seems to have been spent considering the screen usage time in a sports betting app.

If they try to contact head of company will be informed he is travelling and get assurances app abides by local laws. Breaking into his luxury house in secluded community reveals it is in poor condition with takeout containers everywhere, as Tim's sports dreams don't include being home & live in guest Norm doesn't care as long as online poker works. Cody's incapacitated body is in locked basement kept alive but helpless by a spell Norm renews each day. If Cody is killed Tim will revert to his previous appearance, although preventing the spell from being cast is a more humane option. Norm will fight back if attacked but will flee if able.

<u>Confronting Tim</u>

If agents can brick the app or otherwise make changes so the symbol stops being traced, Tim's ill gotten skills will disappear and he'll be kicked off the team, likely seeking an explanation from Norm. Confronting Tim without first disrupting the ritual is more difficult as he's in near peak human condition.

If the symbol on Tim's body is disrupted whether through tissue damage, tattoo ink, or any other method any app addicts are freed from the influence.

Tim is at AAA level of minor league baseball when the scenario starts, but likely to be called up to pros within a few weeks. Trying to get close to Tim while he's still in the minors would be easier as major league stadiums/teams have more security. When he gets called up to pros he'll try to get the app rolled out nationally so he'll have more "fans" on the road, so preventing that should be a priority for agents.

Tim's plan doesn't include being liked by his teammates & if questioned may disclose his odd tattoo or how he doesn't have usual mannerisms for a 19 year old.

Resolution

Failing to stop app from rolling out will lead to hundreds of users wandering/falling onto the field during a playoff game, and the app will be pulled from the store but not before aspiring occultists get the code & begin making copycats. Tim will claim hackers were at work & pivot towards children's tracing games.

If Tim dies with the symbol intact his grave will be a popular meeting spot unless agents do some digging.

Deleting the app permanently or making it unusable should reward SAN, same with rescuing Cody.

Stat Blocks

Tim Bratton, Perhaps Rookie but not Father of the Year

STR 15 CON 15 DEX 15 INT 12 POW 14 CHA 9 HP 15 WP 12 SAN 15

Add 1 to STR/CON/DEX/HP for each week of investigation.

Norm Gates, Wizard of Magic, Not Poker

STR 10 CON 11 DEX 8 INT 13 POW 20 CHA 7 HP 9 WP 12 SAN 35

Spells: Mask of the Beloved, Withering, Brand of Ione, others at keeper's discretion.