

Dimensions Unseen

A Mage: The Awakening Actual Play Story Two

“What do I know of magic? Why, nothing, my masters. Nothing at all. Save that a little magic is a most dangerous thing.” - The Books of Magic



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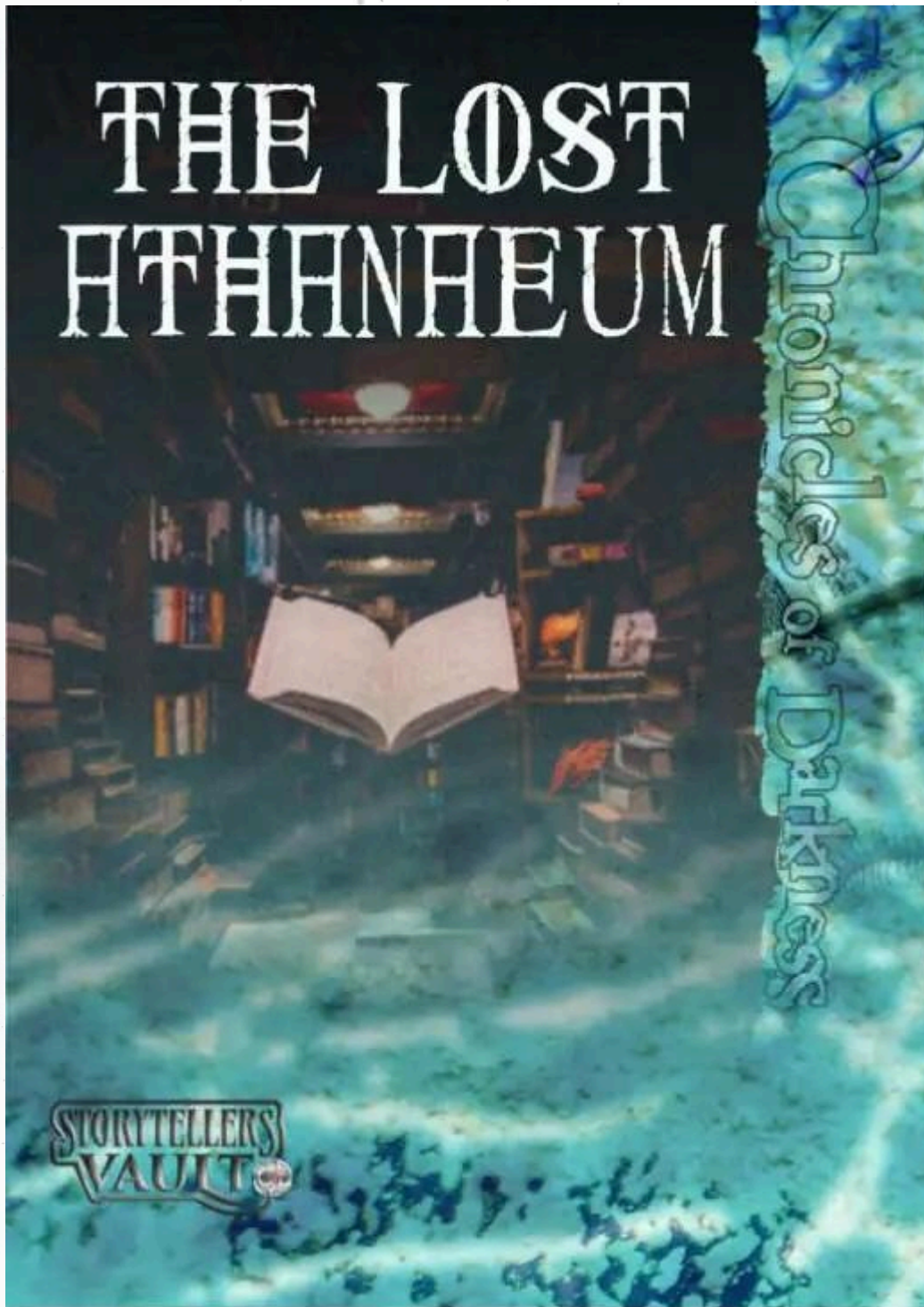
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7: Where There's Smoke

"They exist, not in the spaces we know, but between them. They walk serene and primal, undimensioned and to us unseen." – Anaxagoras

Welcome to Story Two! New sheet, new font, new background.

We join the Last Call cabal, freshly returned from their journey in the Chantry of the Rainbow Serpent. They are back in Sydney, on the top floor of Multuggerah's house in Glenwood manor. They are joined by Jim, Multuggerah's nephew, who has inherited his estate.

They are also joined by an old acquaintance.

*Playlist: **The Abyss***

~~No Face~~ stands in the street, calmly regarding Glenwood house.

It steps forward, towards the gate, then halts.

Shackle swears.

Voidfisher's voice comes through over the phone, "Your *Prime Sight* is blocked? A black hole of magic? That sounds like—"

"It's the Interloper."

"What?"

"It's here. ~~No Face~~ is here."

"Interloper huh? I've been calling it Sin Rostro," Voidfisher says.

This is where the running gag in which everyone has a different name for ~~No Face~~ truly started. Shackle has Interloper, Voidfisher has Sin Rostro. Now I need to come up with more. Bonus points if you can spot where I got 'Sin Rostro' from.

"We can discuss nomenclature later, Void."

"Yeah it means 'Man without a Face'. In spanish. You should run."

"On it."

The rest of the Last Call Cabal have joined Shackle on the balcony and are staring down at the Abyssal entity.

~~No-Face~~ reaches out with its black hand at the air above the gate and stands, still.

Shackle flicks up his **Prime Sight** again and sees the **Forcefield** spell around the grounds begin to buckle.

“It’s eating the wards,” Shackle says. “We need to go”

Jim stares at ~~No-Face~~. Hatred on his face.

“No argument here,” Blackeye agrees.

They are wounded, exhausted, low on mana and willpower. Now is not a good time to fight. Now is not a good time to die.

Shackle turns away and casts **Co-Locate**, chaining the space at the top of Glenwood House to a location he has an intimate connection with: his apartment. He flicks over to **Space Sight** and can see the two locations overlaid on top of one another.

He reaches out and with a nod, taps Blackeye on the shoulder, nudging them through and into his Pymont apartment.

Jim’s eyes go wide as Blackeye vanishes right in front of him.

“Getting us out of here,” Shackle says into the phone, moving to the others.

“Great. Good. Yes. I need to make some calls, urgently.. Make sure you get everyone out of there. Don’t be a hero, etc, etc,” says Voidfisher hanging up.

“Not likely,” Shackle agrees, shoving the phone into his pocket.

He reaches for Dio next, shoving her into the apartment before she can say a word, where she fall onto the sofa.

“Let’s go, kid!” Shackle calls to Chron.

Chron looks back out at ~~No-Face~~, conflicted. “We can take it.”

“We cannot,” Shackle says. “We can’t fight it.”

Chron turns to Shackle, determination on his face. Then fear, for a second. The same fear on Shackle's face.

“Don't be an idiot kid.”

If you recall, Chron now has the Obsession 'Avenge Multuggerah'.

Shackle reaches out and pushes Chron's shoulder, flicking him through the overlapping Space and into his apartment.

Shackle is about to grab Jim when someone screams outside on the street. He glances back out over the balcony. Out on the street, a woman with a pram is staring at ~~No-Face~~, aghast. ~~No-Face~~ meanwhile, mercifully, is focused on the Manor.

With its black hand, it sucks the life right out of the Forces spell warding the house. Shackle feels the spell die, and suddenly a breeze ripples across the house, no longer restrained by the shield.

~~No-Face~~ steps forwards, black hand outreached, reaching over the fence. Green fire sparks over its hand for a moment, and it yanks it back. Then it reaches out again, slowly, and begins to absorb the next ward. The woman with the pram is frozen in shock.

This is the first time Shackle has seen ~~No-Face~~ retreat from something, if even for a moment.

“Jim, we gotta go!” Shackle shouts, fear moving over his face

“That thing killed my uncle—”

“—Yeah, and it's going to kill you next if we don't leave. Now.”

Jim turns for the stairs, and Shackle darts after him, grabbing his collar and yanking him back, all the way through the blended space and into his apartment across Sydney. Jim stumbles backwards and falls onto Shackle's couch beside Dio.

Shackle, alone now, shoots a look at ~~No-Face~~ down on the street below. It is ignoring the Sleeper woman, its focus purely on the house. Shackle is torn, but he knows its only focussed on them. On Mages. He'd only be putting the woman in more danger staying. He stares at ~~No-Face~~, who's black-hole of a face is permanently fixed directly on him.

Shackle steps back into his apartment, and drops the *Co-Locate* spell.

“What the fuck man!” Jim launches up at Shackle, who holds him back with an outstretched arm.

“Sorry, Jim. Guns don’t work on it. Magic either,” Shackle explains, frowning apologetically. “Until we can figure out how to fight back, we have to run.”

Jim looks as though he’s about to argue but takes a breath and steps back. “Where are we?”

“My apartment. Pyrmont,” Shackle explains.

Dio launches to her feet. “Oh shit! Crash!”

“What about him?” Chron asks.

“I called him! Before we went into the Rainbow Serpent Iris! He’s heading straight for Glenwood Manor!” Dio fumbles with her phone, dialling Crash’s number.

“What? What is it?” Crash answers, out of breath

“~~No Face~~ is at Glenwood Manor! It’s there right now!” Dio shouts into the phone.

“We know,” says Crash, and ends the call.

“Oh,” says Dio, looking at her phone.

They all stand in Shackle’s apartment living room for a moment. Catching their breath.

“What now?” Blackeye asks, eventually.

For a beat, no one answers.

“We disperse,” Shackle says. “It’s drawn to magic and mages. So we split up.”

The others nod and begin to grab their things.

“Call if you see anything. And don’t use magic,” Shackle reminds them, as some of them head for his front door and garage steps. “Let’s hope the Arrow can handle it.”

Those of you following the music can switch back to the standard [The Fallen World](#) playlist from here on out.

It is getting late. Dio goes back to her pub - the Sickle - and crashes in her bed. Jim can't return home - so he heads to his aunt's place, which is nearby. Chron - his Bentley still parked in Blacktown - asks if he can tag along, and is treated to a home cooked meal and a soft couch from Jim's aunt. Blackeye - as is their custom - crashes on Shackle's couch again.

And Shackle? Shackle heads to stakeout Chifley Tower. He parks his car and waits. And waits. Watches workers come and go, the office staff leaving for the day and the cleaners arriving in droves, until they too leave, and only the odd security guard wanders back and forth. He watches, and watches, and then the weariness of the day catches up to him, and he falls asleep in his car across the street. And *Dreams*.

He dreams of Chifley Tower. A skyscraper home to Sydney's most elite financial consultancy firms. And the Vampire Prince of Sydney - Dame Helena.

Shackle sits up. His wife is standing outside of the car. She beckons for him to follow, smiling. He exits the car slowly and follows her, moving as though through water. They enter the lobby of the tower and Shackle sees the place bristle with cameras and a suspiciously large number of security guards - more than he'd counted from the exterior.

Shackle follows his wife past them all, to an elevator, which carries them to the Penthouse floor. Outside the lift are men in black suits with weapon-shaped bulges concealed under their jackets. Shackle and his wife continue through large double doors, and pass a trio of intimidating creatures - half-man, half-beast.

They head through another pair of doors, and into a large hall - a vast room, filled with uncounted numbers of dead. They stare at Shackle with lifeless eyes, their bodies atrophied and rotten, their clothes befouled and bloodstained. Past this army of corpses they walk, right to a vast throne of bone, upon which sits a shadowy figure wearing a crown of blood.

And then Shackle's phone rings. Light streams in through his car's windshield. It's morning, and he sits up stiffly in the driver's seat. He checks his phone and the caller ID tells him it's his boss from the police force. He answers it.

Sergeant Evelyn Webb's voice greets him. "Good morning Detective."

"Morning, Sarge."

"Got a case for you, Ward," Evelyn says.

“Wasn’t expecting a call so soon.”

Since his wife was killed, Shackle has been on administrative leave for the last three months. He is due to come back soonish.

“Wouldn’t be bothering you unless I had a good reason.”

Shackle watches the foyer of Chiffley Tower, thinking. “Alright.”

“Opera Board of Directors requested you by name. They want you to investigate the fire.

“What fire?” Shackle asks.

“Jesus, Tanner, you just wake up?” Evelyn asks, “Someone set the Opera House on fire.”

“The - and they asked for me by name?!?”

“That they did, Ward. Get down there.”

Tanner hangs up and rubs his brow. His dream running through his mind.

Across town, Chron calls an uber for himself and Jim after finishing off a hearty breakfast. Time to see what kind of mess they left behind at Glenwood manor. The ride out to Blacktown takes a good half hour, which is spent in uncomfortable, tense silence. As they get closer and closer, the tension grows. Surely ~~No Face~~ wouldn’t hang around, waiting for them - right?

They pull up to the house, which is cordoned off with police tape. Some shit has gone down here. There are multiple scorch marks all along the pavement, as though someone has gone to town with a flamethrower. The gate and door have been smashed and are barely hanging off their hinges. A chalk outline on the street makes it clear that someone died here.

“Fuck,” Jim swears.

“Yeah. I’m sorry man,” Chron says.

They duck under the police tape and cautiously enter the house - which is dead quiet. It is empty.

“It feels...different. Sort of dead.” Jim says.

Chron flicks up his magesight. There’s no active spells anymore. The place has been sucked dry.

“All the wards are bugged,” Chron explains.

“Great.”

“I’m sorry. This thing is well fucked, gov.”

“You’re doing something about it, though. Right? That’s why you went down through the portal?”

“Yeah. We’re looking for a way to return the favour. With interest, like.” Chron tells him.

“Listen, can you do me a favour?”

“Sure thing mate - Chron at ya service!”

“When you figure out how to kill it - make sure you bring me along for the ride. I want to be there. I want to help.”

Chron is hesitant, but sees the same burning Obsession within Jim that he now also shares (courtesy of the Dragon).

“Ok. Sure. I can’t guarantee anything, but. You better *adam and eve* that this thing has killed mages much more powerful than us. But we’ll try, mate.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that.”

They shake, forearm style, and Chron bounces. His Bentley, parked around the corner, is safe. The various spells and enchantments upon it are intact, he notes with pleasure. He slips into the driver’s seat and drives off. He swings past the airfield, noting with a smirk that his stolen helicopter is still there before zooming off.

Dio wakes up, smoke in her nostrils. It is late - the sun is filtering through the blinds of her bedroom. She opens the window, and breathes deep - something somewhere on the horizon is burning. Probably bushfires, she thinks.

She heads downstairs to the bar, and greets Steve who is cleaning up the detritus of last night's patrons. She grabs some breakfast, and thinks.

She needs to make a Hallow. What better place to put one than her pub? Problem is, she has zero idea about how to make Hallows. She scrolls through her phone contacts - what she needs is esoteric information. And who better to ask than the Mysterium? She has the number of a high-ranking Mystagogue from Gearstick - a lady by the name of Buckminster.

Buckminster is the one who opened the Portal at New Atlantis that allowed a number of mages - including Chron, Blackey and the Bentley - to make good their escape.

"Hello, welcome to Nasser Architects - this is Mindy. How may I help you?"

"Hey, this is Dio Lita, calling to get in touch with Buckminster?" Dio says down the phone line.

"I'm sorry, no one by that name works here," Mindy on the other end explains.

"Are you sure? I was told this was her number," Dios asks, pacing back and forth behind the bar.

"This is the office of Ms. Nasser," the assistant replies.

"May I speak to her, then? Tell her it's important."

"I'm sorry, but her schedule is all booked out for today. But I can make an appointment. What was this in regards to?"

"No really, it's important. Tell her Dio called."

"Absolutely m'am - and what was this in relation to?" Mindy asks.

"It's about, it's about the... Mysterium?" Dio mumbles.

"Oh! Ms. Nasser's club! Yes of course, I'll put you through at once. You should have said!"

"Ah, sorry. I honestly thought this was her private number," Dio explains awkwardly.

"No problem at all. Putting you through now."

Dio is new to mage society, and hasn't yet worked out how to contact mages properly. Often there are certain codewords one says to gain access.

“Hello, Dio - I don't believe we've properly met,” Buckminster's voice comes through the phone, with a clipped British accent.

“Hey! Yeah we didn't really get a chance to talk at the Consilium meeting,” Dio says.

“Indeed not. What can I do for you?” Buckminster asks, business-like.

“I wanted to ask you about Hallows.”

“Ah! That is no problem. Hallows are my field of expertise, as it were!” Buckminster's tone shifts immediately at the word ‘Hallow’. “What did you want to know?”

“Well, how do I make one?”

“Ah, that's the trick, isn't it? Most mages will tell you that you need a Master of Prime to make a Hallow, but there are other ways,” Buckminster explains enthusiastically.

“Such as?”

“Well, many Hallows congregate at a confluence of ley lines. One of the best ways to ‘make’ a Hallow is to nudge ley lines so that they intersect.”

“And how does one do that?”

“Well, the easiest way is with the Prime arcanum. Well, I say easy, it's a lot of bloody hard work, but it's the most direct way. Lacking that, you need to influence the Resonance of the ley lines instead.”

“Influence them...how?”

“Hmm. You know I'm not supposed to just hand out information. Do you know much about the Mysterium?”

“Not really, no,” Dio admits.

“Well, information has a price. It needs to be paid. That is the way of things.”

Dio paces awkwardly. “Uh, well I don't really have much money...”

“Ah that’s not an issue. We rarely trade for money - usually something more esoteric. How about this - if you manage to build yourself a Hallow, I will be the first to drink from it. Sound fair?” Buckminster offers.

“Sure!”

“Very well. Ley lines - like Hallows - each possess a Resonance. A ley line out in the bush might have a Resonance of hunters and prey. If you wanted to move it, you might organise a regular hunt nearby that draws the ley line away from its original placement. Or a ley line might have the Resonance of speed - many like that form along Highways. So if you built a bigger, better Highway nearby - the ley line is likely to move.” Buckminster explains.

“Right. So I just need to scout out the ley lines nearby and - sort of, lure them.”

“Exactly right! It can be a lot of work, but if you set it up properly, it sort of takes care of itself. I knew a mage who built a community garden in a built up area that eventually shifted a nature leyline towards his sanctum.”

“Awesome. So, uh how do I see ley lines again?”

“You need the basest understanding of Prime. There is an initiative Prime spell commonly known as *Geomancy*. You do have *some* understanding of the Prime arcanum, yes?”

“Uhh, not really. But my cabal does!”

“Excellent. Then they can help.”

“Great! Thanks so much!”

“Glad to help. I have to say, it’s good to have some distractions in these trying times. I’m a bit surprised you’re working on something like this when....when...” Buckminster trails off.

“We may all be dead soon? Yeah well, no time like the present.”

“Indeed. Well if that’s all?” Buckminster asks.

“Yep! Thanks again - talk soon!” Dio hangs up. Now, she just needs a mage with *Prime Sight*. She calls Blackeye - but they aren’t picking up. So she calls Shackle instead, who refuses her call, and sends her a text:

Can’t talk. Working a case. Opera House on fire.

Dio sniffs the air - definitely something burning in the neighbourhood. The Opera House is a short walk from the Rocks. She puts her shoes on and heads out.

Blackeye, meanwhile, is busy. They have headed to Sydney’s Northern Beaches, to a nondescript terrace house in Naraweena, which is the headquarters and laboratory of The Zoanites of Mu Eta Geminorum. Of course, the sign on the door does not say this - it features a small plaque that simply reads ‘Northern Beaches Marine Chemistry Society’.

And now we get to see what 3 dots in the Mystery Cult merit buys you.

They use their key to unlock the door and let themselves in. As they enter, Blackeye’d Susan hears an argument. She recognises the familiar voices of Mandy Doodlemore - an oceanographer and fourth-level Ephyrite, and Francis Whitby, a chemical engineer and third-level Strobite. Blackeye themselves is also a Strobite, and on the same level within the Mystery Cult as Francis.

“I’m telling you that’s craziness!” Francis voice echoes from the other room.

“It’s not craziness, it’s fact,” Mandy replies calmly.

“I didn’t think it was even capable of ingesting compound materials!”

“Well it would seem that it can,” Mandy replies.

“It’s not - light can’t - photons don’t work that way. A lens this thin couldn’t possibly-”

“I didn’t realise you had a degree in optics as well, Francis. Is there any field you aren’t an expert in?” says Mandy, drily.

“Well I know more about bloody lenses than you do!” Francis retorts, hotly.

“Don’t argue with me, Francis. Argue with the reality of the situation.”

“All I’m saying is there’s got to be more happening here. The light is refracting in an unexpected - ah! Langdon! Get in here, I need backup with this harridan.”

Langdon Forthright is Blackeye’s fake name in the Mystery Cult. They haven’t picked Alternate Identity merit, so they have no formal documentation with it, and it doesn’t hold up to much scrutiny.

Blackeye steps into the room, surveying the scene. Mandy is stood over a table with a microscope and a pair of opera glasses. Francis is reclined on a chair on the other side of the room, arms crossed.

“Just look at what Mandy’s fished out of the tank. Illegally, might I add. At least, it’s not her turn to use it this week,” Francis explains.

“I got permission,” Mandy, replies idly. She gestures to Blackeye. “First, look through the microscope.”

Blackeye does so, and observes some cells under its lens.

“What is that?” Blackeye asks.

“Just an onion sample.” Mandy explains.

“Like in school! Cell walls, all that,” Francis adds, helpfully.

“And now look at this,” Mandy says, gesturing to the opera glasses, and holding them over the petri dish.

Blackeye leans over and looks down.

“Fascinating. They look identical.”

“Yes. This ordinary pair of opera lenses - once purified in the tank - possesses the same lens magnification properties as a full microscope,” Mandy says excitedly.

“Which is impossible,” Francis interjects.

“Interesting, no?” Mandy asks Blackeye.

“Actually, I’ve brought my own specimen,” Blackeye says, producing the siren’s feather, stolen from the Chantry of the Rainbow Serpent, and handing it over to Mandy. Francis stands up and wanders over.

“What - what bird did you get this from?” Mandy asks.

“Ah. Can’t say for sure. I found it on the ground.” Blackeye, answers, deftly avoiding an overt lie.

Mandy places it under the microscope. Then, thinking better of it, places it under the opera glasses instead, magnifying it a thousandfold. Francis gently shoves Mandy aside and leans over.

“Interesting cell structure,” Francis notes.

“Does it have any other ...interesting properties?” Mandy asks.

“I’m not sure. I haven’t properly examined it. I was hoping you two might help.”

“And where did you find it?” Mandy probes.

Blackeye shrugs. “I can’t say. Yet.”

Mandy sucks on her teeth. “Alright, I’ll take a look.”

“As will I!” Francis adds, excited.

“Oh, before I forget. Stephanie wanted to see you. In the lab.” Mandy says.

“What? Now?” Blackeye asks.

“Yes. She’s down there now.”

Blackeye heads down the stairs, leaving the pair to start arguing again.

They arrive at the basement door, which is reinforced iron. They enter their passcode and step into the Lab. The place is covered in equipment and computers, but is dominated by a wide tubular tank filled with water. Inside floats a large jellyfish-like creature, roughly the size of a single bed stood upright. It doesn’t appear to move much, but is gently swaying in a non-existent current within the tank. The Apsogizoa.



Blackeye takes a moment to walk up to it and press their hand against the glass before heading over to Stephanie's office. Again, they hear voices from within before knocking politely on the door.

"Come in," Stephanie's voice comes through the door, a Fourth-level Ephyrite. She is sitting at a desk in front of a laptop on a video call. On the laptop is the face of Aldus Coldbrine, Under Medusian of the The Zoanites of Mu Eta Geminorum and leader of this chapter. Stephanie is his right-hand Ephyrite.

Blackeye's player came up with the whole cult, including the name Aldus Coldbrine which is my absolute favourite. I shall always write it out in full because it's awesome.

"Ah, Langdon! Good to see you!" Aldus Coldbrine greets them cheerily.

“Hello Under Medusian. Hello Stephanie. I was just dropping off a specimen.” Blackeye explains with deference.

“Yes yes, very good,” Aldus Coldbrine waves a hand absently, “we were discussing a matter of some import. I thought we should let you know - we’ve decided to call in an expert from one of the other chapters.”

“What kind of expert?”

“A biologist. An expert in, well I suppose xenobiology is the most accurate term,” Aldus Coldbrine elaborates.

“I still don’t understand what this Mr. Salut is going to bring that our own people can’t provide?” Stephanie asks, clearly displeased.

“I hear you, Stephanie, but Salut’s experience in this area is unparalleled. Besides, our own people have so far had zero success in breeding the Apsogizoa,” Aldus Coldbrine explains.

“I’m not convinced it even *can* be bred!” Stephanie replies.

“Well that’s something Salut can help us find out.”

“Where are they coming from?” Blackeye asks.

“Ah, from one of the other chapters.” Aldus Coldbrine explains, without explaining.

“Have they had any success in breeding other Apsogizoa?”

“Well, I mean, this is the only one of its kind, but that’s no reason not to try,” Aldus Coldbrine says, cheerfully.

“I just don’t like bringing an outsider in,” Stephanie says.

“Be that as it may, Salut is coming. This order came from the Greater Medusian herself. Besides, can you imagine how much more the work would progress if we had more than one specimen? Think of what we could accomplish!” Aldus Coldbrine smiles, dazzlingly.

“When is Mr. Salut coming?” Blackeye asks.

“This Saturday. He’ll be attending our weekly meeting - you’ll get to meet him then.”

“I look forward to it.”

“Well thank you for dropping in Langdon - and keep up the good work!” Aldus Coldbrine dismisses Blackeye, who nods to both the Under Medusian and Stephanie, before retreating through the office door and rejoining Francis & Mandy.

They spend the rest of the day there, studying and experimenting with *Perfected* samples.

Back across the city, Chron is free.

Since the massacre at New Atlantis, he has been lying low. Before that, he was carefully studying the mages of Sydney - the Orders, the politics, how they employed magic. And one thing he could never figure out was - why, with all their power, are mages still working 9 to 5 jobs? Why aren’t they all billionaires?

He’s tired of lying low.

Chron spends the day at an internet cafe, finding out just what he can do. He tugs at the strands of Fate, and wealth begins to trickle in. Some crypto currency trades, some light grifting and a tad of hacking and after a couple of hours the London chav’s e-wallet is flush with cash. He pulls the lot into one of his bank accounts, and withdraws it as cash.

Chron heads down to the local gambling den and puts a quarter of his stash on this horse, a third on that greyhound, an eighth on that footy match - the money flows easily. Almost suspiciously easy, if Chron was the type to question his luck - but that is not what Acanthi tend to do. They accept the ebb and flow of Fate and move on.

Chron rolled well - but not extremely well. I still gave him a homebrew ‘Resources’ Condition - a one-off three dot boost to his Resources. Why was I so generous? For reasons that will become apparent eventually.

Dio is walking towards the Opera House - alongside half of Sydney, it feels like. A big crowd of people are walking down the quay to see it. From this distance she can see that the top of one fin on the Opera House is scorched black - clearly the fire was contained quickly. As she walks with the crowd, she picks up on a feeling in the air - a restlessness. Something itchy. She throws up *Life Sight* and looks around - nothing of note among the mass of humanity around her. She throws up *Spirit Sight* instead and-

In Twilight, the harbour is wreathed in smoke. The Opera House is still on fire - it's totally ablaze. The blaze seems to have a laughing face in the heart of it, dancing and crackling merrily as it consumes a cultural icon.



There are spirits running and fighting all along the harbour. She watches as an empty disembodied corporate Suit runs after a shorts-wearing Tourist spirit with a huge camera and an I <3 Sydney shirt. The Suit crash tackles the Tourist to the ground and starts beating the hell out of it with invisible fists. A sausage roll salesman spirit is ramming their spirit cart into a Hipster spirit with a man-bun who is desperately trying to flip the cart. Above swoops a glittering Gunpowder Phoenix - a living firework - and screeches malevolently. Dio looks up at the Sydney Harbour Bridge and is amazed to find it has grown several dozen extra struts that crisscross all across the harbour, like the legs of a giant metal spider. With a vast groaning of metal one of the strut-legs swing towards the

Opera House and smash into the concrete steps below it, crushing a fighting Rugby spirit. A crazed uber spirit comes driving down the quay boulevard, heading straight for her, and Dio shuts her eyes and switches off *Spirit Sight* just before it makes contact. She's back in the crowd of people, watching the thin trail of smoke still coming from the Opera House in this reality.

I know that technically with only one dot of Spirit you can't peer into Twilight yet, but in my game I've allowed it, which includes being able to speak to them as well. The downside is that they can also speak and interact with her so long as she has the sight up. Why? Cos it makes gameplay run smoother and it's cooler this way.

Dio pulls her phone out and texts Shackle a series of emojis:



Satisfied that she has made herself clear, she powers through the crowd toward the Opera House. An emergency cordon has been set up, with flashing police and fire brigade lights bathing the area in blue and red.

Shackle approaches the same cordon, slowly in his car – the traffic is unbearable. He winces as Dio slides into the passenger seat next to him.

“Did you get my text?” Dio asks, with a grin.

“No. I’m driving. That would be illegal.”

“Well, this is important!” Dio whines, and start rifling through the glove compartment for snacks.

Shackle sighs, checking his phone.

He studies the emojis for a moment while Dio smiles at him expectantly.

“What does this even mean?”

Dio rolls her eyes. “There’s some shit going down with the spirit. Twilight is full of fighting. It’s like a war. The Harbour Bridge is on the move. The Opera House is on fire.”

“No, they extinguished it,” Shackle shakes his head, taking a left.

“Not in the Twilight they didn’t!” Dio says with a wink.

“What does *that* mean?”

“I...don't know,” Dio admits. “So let's find out! Dio and Shackle, on the case! I even brought a police badge.”

Dio pulls out a plastic police badge from a halloween costume.

“That's not going to work,” Shackle takes the badge from her and puts it in the centre cup holder. “Also, a crime.”

For this session, both Shackle and Dio's player had some form of 'do a police investigation' as their Aspirations. I obliged them. It's also worth noting that Dio only has a single dot in Spirit, and so is extremely inexperienced with them. None of the other cabal have any dots in Spirit at all, so they have to rely on Dio's interpretation of events relating to spirits. A running joke we have is that no one really believes her when she claims to be speaking to spirits. Another running gag is Dio communicating purely with emojis, and being utterly incomprehensible. The running gags are starting to pile up.

Shackle flashes his real badge at the grim-faced constable manning the cordon. He glances suspiciously at Dio, but lets the pair drive through into the Opera House carpark.

“Man it's always impossible to find parking here. I should go with you to the opera more often.”

“Alright. Listen, kid,” Shackle explains parking the car. “You can't be here – not really. You don't look the part. I'm going to make you a little less noticeable. Just stick close to me.”

“Sure thing, Detective!”

“Don't talk to anyone–”

“Of course,” Dio winks.

“–or touch anything.”

“You got it,” Dio nods, winking again.

“Don't wander off.”

Dio winks a final time.

Shackle stares at her. Then shakes his head and casts *Incognito Presence* on her.

As Dio slides out of his perception, he watches as the passenger door opens and closes, seemingly by itself. Shackle knows she's there, in theory - it's just hard to remember that. He flicks on *Mind Sight* and is relieved that he can still see her emotional aura.

Shackle gets out and locks his car. "Let's go."

He's not sure if Dio says something in reply. He's pretty sure she did, but it only came out as a half-hearted mumble. He shakes his head again. This is his first time casting this spell. It's not quite what he expected.

He approaches another constable standing guard who directs him up some stairs. He passes through a series of rank-and-file police until he's welcomed by the officer in charge - one Constable Ruben Urbano.

This was near the end of the session and I'd had a few whiskeys, so I picked my favourite name out of a random name generator. It's not as good as Aldus Coldbrine, mind you.

"Detective Constable Ward! Long time no see. I've been told to expect you," Officer Ruben greets Shackle.

Shackle nods back. "Yeah. What have you got for me?"

"Blaze started - as best as we can tell - at the stroke of midnight. It was on the main stage in the concert hall, but it quickly spread to the curtains and technical gear in the upper gantries. Luckily the sprinkler system engaged - and security notified the fire brigade immediately. They were able to keep the blaze under control within the hour, so most of the damage is limited to the concert hall. Lucky, if you ask me."

"Any theories on how it started?" Shackle asks.

"None so far. Probably an accident - lab guys are on it now."

"Anyone I can speak to from management?"

"Sure thing. Ms. Gardner - her office is up that way," Officer Ruben tells him, pointing to a set of stairs and a long hallway.

Shackle heads up more stairs and enters an 'employees only' corridor. Ms. Gardner's office is near the end. He gets the sudden sensation that he's being watched - then remembers that Dio is here, somewhere. Hidden.

"Hate this," he mutters to himself.

He knocks on the office door and is called in.

"Ah, Detective Ward I presume?" Ms. Gardner asks, eyeing Shackle's dishevelled state critically.

We realised later that everyone greeting Shackle as 'Detective Ward' means Dio knows Shackle's actual last name. Is this important? Maybe!

"Uh, yeah. Morning," Shackle smiles awkwardly, uncomfortably aware of Dio's presence somewhere nearby.

"Let me know if I can aid you in your investigation in any way. I want this dealt with quickly and discreetly. We've looked at the footage - there's no evidence of malfeasance here - just an accident, looks like. Electrical or something. Just one of those things," Ms. Gardner explains.

Shackle nods and, pulling a notebook from his inside coat pocket, jots down a few details.

"May I ask - I was told I was specifically requested for this investigation?"

"Yes," Ms. Gardner explains, "One of our board members - may she rest in peace - made it clear a few months ago that you were to be requested on any criminal proceedings here. Said you would handle any problems with great care and discretion."

"Which board member was that?"

"Ms. Rosaleen Norton. The artist - she passed away about a month ago. Also in a fire, curiously. It was in the news. Quite tragic."

"I'm afraid I don't know Rosaleen Norton."

"Perhaps you know her by her artist name? She was called 'Thorn' in the community."

Shackle nods, putting the pieces together. "Oh of course! Yes, I've met her."

“Very well. Shall we proceed to the scene of the accident?”

Thorn was the name of a Consilium Councillor, who along with Multuggerah, Vera Leigh, Amakuni and Wotan accidentally summoned ~~No Face~~ at New Atlantis in Session 0. She was the Thyrsus Councillor, and a member of the Free Council. Her magical tool was a paintbrush. She died quickly.

They head to the concert hall, past more constables and police tape. Ms. Gardner shows Shackle the scorched stage and charred curtains being tended to by a forensic officer who waves at the pair.

“Mr. Lowe, was it?” Shackle waves, recognising the man.

“That’s right. Detective Ward, you’re on this one?” Lowe greets him back.

“So it would seem,” Shackle nods, trying again to rub his headache away through his brow. “This where the blaze started?”

“Definitely. Still haven’t figured out the cause. There’s no trace of any propellants or fuels of any kind. And as far as I can tell, there’s no electronics located under that part of the stage.”

“Keep looking, I guess. Maybe a trapdoor mechanism that sparked?”

“As good a theory as any - if there were one. Which there isn’t.” Lowe trails off staring despondent at the scene.

Shackle wanders up and down the stage, first inspecting the scene as a policeman, then as mage.

He activates *Mind Sight*, noticing with displeasure that Dio is nowhere to be found. He sighs loudly. No other minds present, either. *Space Sight* also yields nothing of interest, beyond revealing a few geometric alcoves and nooks in the ceiling designed to amplify the sound of the stage.

Using up another of his rapidly dwindling supply of mana, Shackle surveys the scene with *Prime Sight*, certain that he will find some evidence of supernal magic. But there is nothing. Nothing at all - no mage has cast any spells here recently.

Shackle sighs and puts his notebook away.

“Detective Ward?” Ms. Gardner asks.

“Hm?” Shackle turns his focus back to Ms Gardner, who has been watching him and waiting.

“What are your conclusions?”

“No visible sign of foul play. But I leave it to Mr. Lowe to determine the cause of the fire - once we have that, we can determine our next steps. Until then, I’ll leave him to it,” Shackle makes his way off the stage and towards the exit. “Good day, m’am.”

“Please call me if you receive any news.”

“I will,” Shackle nods, waving awkwardly to Lowe before ducking out into the hall.

He heads back out into the labyrinthine bowels of the opera house, trying to recall the way to the carpark. As he wanders, he ponders two questions.

The first – if there wasn’t a mundane explanation for the fire, and there wasn’t a supernal explanation - what was the cause? It’s clear he’s missing a piece of this puzzle.

The second – and more pressing – question? Where is Dio?

Dio is wandering the building, going from room to room, looking for Clues. She lost Shackle a while back, and now she’s lost herself, as well. There’s not many people about – looks like the place has been well and truly evacuated. Not that they give her any notice – they don’t even look up as she walks past. But she’s not after people anyway – she’s looking for spirits. It takes her nearly a quarter of an hour to find one – the place is suspiciously deserted. At the back of a storage room filled with music stands she finds a crouched figure, hiding in the back, gently strumming. It looks like a thick-set woman with long golden hair, wearing a silken white gown. Her hair is tightly held in one hand, wrapped expertly around her fist, while the other is nervously strumming the hair. The sound produced is beautiful – a Harp spirit.

“Hello there!” Dio says.

“Oh! Oh! You can see me!” The spirit replies.

“Yes, yes I can! And you can see me too?” Dio asks.

“Well of course I can!” the spirit replies, “—wait, you’re not going to hurt me, are you?”

“No, of course not!”

The harp spirit sags with relief, twanging her hair.

“That’s a relief. I’m not much for fighting.”

“What happened? Why are you hiding?” Dio asks.

“There’s a War on. Someone attacked us last night - set fire to the concert hall. That’s where the Fat Lady usually holds Court. I’m not sure what happened to her - she’s gone. Maybe dead. Maybe captured.”

“Who attacked?”

“Goons of the Iron Lung. They came out of nowhere. It was an ambush. Without the Fat Lady, we had no chance. They killed some of us, drove the rest of us off,” the spirit explains, with a sob.

“What’s the Iron Lung?”

“Big, nasty spirit. You know it. It’s the big thing - the big metal thing. Out there over the water.”

“The Sydney Harbour Bridge?”

“Yeah. Or the Shadow of it, anyways. It’s the boss of the Spirit Court over there.”

“So what will you do now?” Dio asks.

“I’m not sure. Hide here. Hope someone comes back to play some music for me. I’m no fighter.”

“Why don’t you come with me?” Dio offers.

“Is it safe?”

“Yes, very.”

“Will there be music?”

“Oh yes. Every night. Loads of it. And loud,” Dio replies, “I get fined a lot for it.”

“Sounds wonderful!”

“What’s your name?” Dio asks.

The spirit smiles at her softly and rises to follow Dio. “I am Harpette.”

Dio manages to navigate her way back out, back into the carpark where Shackle is waiting, leaning against his car. Dio waves at him, and he blinks at her a few times, then drops the *Incognito Presence* spell.

“It wasn’t a mage who set the fire. Or a human,” Shackle tells her.

“Yeah it was totally a spirit,” Dio reveals. “My new friend told me.”

“Hm. New friend?”

“Hard to explain. There’s a spirit war on, or something. Sydney is going to hell. Let’s get out of here. Place is so empty it gives me the creeps.”

“Sure. I’ve got a lot of paperwork to get through.

“And you owe me a lesson in how to handcuff a perp.”

“That’s not—” Shackle begins to argue, before pausing, “—well I suppose it is a useful skill.”

Shackle drives them off, unaware of Harpette, the spirit, sitting glumly in the backseat.

Meanwhile, in Hyde Park, a figure dressed in a black hoodie waits for it to get dark. Once the sun is down, they set off towards the statue of Captain James Cook. The man who kickstarted the colonisation of Australia. By the time Blackeye is done, the statue of the man who ‘discovered’ Australia is wearing a white KKK hood.

“Here’s to you, Pemuluwy.”

Blackeye had, after all, promised to vandalise the statue in order to enter the Iris that led to Pemulwuy's Chantry. A neat bookend to Story One. Of course, as any Storyteller knows, you always need to end your session on either a cliffhanger, twist or startling revelation. So...

As Shackle drops off Dio at the Sickle his phone buzzes. It's a text from Voidfisher. It simply reads:

Crash is dead.

Sin Rostro got him.

8: Cops and Robbers

“Bank robbery is an initiative of amateurs. True professionals establish a bank.” –Bertolt Brecht

Soundtrack - [The Fallen World](#)

This session starts off a bit slow because I had covid and was running it online. Also, everyone was able to spend XP after having saved up throughout the Chantry of the Rainbow Serpent affair. Their experiences in the Chantry allowed Dio and Blackeye to increase their gnosis, while Chron and Shackle’s encounters with the Sirens allowed them to buy Fate 3 and Mind 3 respectively. Chron also bought 2x dots of Resources and 1x dot in Alternate Identity - he is beginning to lay the foundations for the next stage of his plans.

It is a new day. Blackeye’d Susan wakes up to a phone call. They blearily answer the phone.

“Hi Langdon - just calling to let you know that we’re having trouble getting the latest shipment of Carnations in for you,” comes a familiar voice. It is Blackeye’s flower supplier. “It’ll be another week - some new biosecurity customs holdup, apparently.”

“Have you got anything else?” asks Blackeye, mentally running the calculations on what impact this would have on their flower cart.

“Afraid not - it’s bedlam out here. This new shakeup is going to have me backed up for weeks, I’m afraid.”

“Thank you for letting me know,” says Blackeye, with a frown. They hang up.

Across town, Dio is being served coffee and breakfast by her stalwart employee Steve. He hands her a few envelopes, stamped with the seal of the local council.

“Looks like we’re being fined,” he says, glumly.

“What? Why?” asks Dio, stifling a yawn.

“For being open too late. Says we’re violating some code. Noise complaints.”

“Since when? We’ve always been open til about 3 or so.”

“No idea. Just says that we’ve violated it. Hefty fine, too.”

“Fuck ‘em,” says Dio, downing her coffee. “We stay open, same as always. I’ll make some calls and sort this out.”

Shackle is driving to the Sickle, which is based in the Rocks. There’s a lot to discuss with the cabal, and as he moves through traffic he listens to the radio.

The fire at the Opera House is getting a lot of newstime. There’s also mention of a new covid variant – Sigma – that has emerged in Sydney. This might spell trouble for the Mardi Gras parade scheduled this Saturday. The news turns to sightings of a giant wombat in Kurnell; reports on the stock market rocketing since yesterday, with record gains, and a bank robbery in Paramatta last night with two fatalities.

Is any of this relevant? We’ll see...

Shackle switches off the news, turning his mind to the text from Voidfisher. Another dead mage. Crash of the Adamantine Arrow. The Consilium’s protectors, falling one by one. Is the fire at the Opera House related, he wonders. Dio claimed it was some kind of spirit turf war. He wonders how often this sort of thing happens - spirit tussles bleeding over into the real world. Might explain a lot of unsolved crimes. Or maybe the Consilium used to stop this kind of thing. Before the Interloper rid of them all. He makes a note to ask Voidfisher about it.

Wait. It’s Mardi Gras week. That means...Shackle checks the date on his phone. 3rd March. He uses his hands-free to call Blackeye.

“Hey,” he starts clumsily, “It’s Shackle. Wanted to ask a favour.”

“Sure,” Blackeye replies. “What do you need?”

“Can I organise a flower arrangement?”

“Of course. Where do you want it delivered?”

“I’ll pick it up.”

“Okay. Fair warning, I’ve got some supply issues at the moment.”

“Oh, I mean if you can't –”

“No, but I’m sure I can arrange something,” Blackeye explains. “I’ll let you know when they’re ready.”

“Thanks,” Shackle says.

Blackeye hangs up, and begins calling other flower suppliers to help cover the gap in stock. All of them are experiencing issues due to some sort of logistics breakdown - or bio security transportation law - or some other delay. This is greatly concerning, and somewhat suspicious. They make a note to investigate, but first: Shackle’s arrangement. Between all of their contacts, Blackeye is able to scrape something together. They head to the Sickle.

Chron, meanwhile, arrives last at the pub. He has been busy creating the false identity of Lawrence ‘Lance’ Stroll and signing up for a variety of bank accounts and credit cards to help obfuscate the source of the money he scored yesterday. He finds Dio in the pub with the rest of the cabal, swearing a blue streak.

“\$6,000 for being open too bloody late!” she yells at him, as he walks through the door. “This is fucked!”

Both Dio and Blackeye have temporarily lost a dot of Resources due to unforeseen and highly suspicious complications. Chron meanwhile has temporarily gained Resources. Why? You’ll find out.

Shackle is leaning against the bar, and shrugs. “Sounds like you broke the law.”

“I don’t even know what law this is!” Dio exclaims. “All pubs in the Rocks are open past midnight. It must be new. Can you look into it?”

Shackle sighs. “I need to head into the station to do some paperwork on the Opera House fire, anyway. I can check that the fine is accurate.”

Dio swears again, pouring herself a drink. She and Shackle fill in the other two about the Opera House and the spirit war.

“Sounds like someone else’s barney rubble, dunnit,” says Chron. “Nuffin to do with us.”

“We need to focus on the problem at hand,” Blackeye agrees. “~~No Face~~ It’s going to keep coming for us. We need to do something.”

“It got Crash,” Shackle tells them. “He’s dead.”

A heavy silence falls over the Last Call. Dio is crestfallen.

“He was only there cos I called him,” she says, quietly.

“He knew what he was in for,” says Shackle. “He was a soldier.”

“He was a person! We should have stayed and fought ~~No Face!~~”

“Then we’d also be dead,” says Blackeye, sadly.

“We need more information,” Shackle explains. “Got to be a way to fight it.”

“Well we know where to nick the information. The Mysterium’s Athenaeum. Big library full of secrets. If the information we need exists, it’ll be in there,” Chron says.

“How do you know that?” Dio asks.

“Magic,” Chron answers with a wink.

“Fair,” Dio nods seriously, “Okay, I’ll call Buckminster. Maybe she can let us in.”

“Who’s Buckminster?” asks Blackeye. Dio waves them away, and heads into a corner to call

She goes off into a corner and calls Buckminster’s office again.

“Hello, welcome to Nasser Architects - this is Mindy. How may I help you?”

“Oh, hi Mindy. I need to talk to - uh - it’s me again. From yesterday. Dio. About the Mysterium?”

“Sure thing Ms. Dio. I’ll put you right through!”

“Hello again,” says Buckminster, almost sounding amused. “How’s your Hallow going?”

“Ah, been a bit busy,” says Dio. “Did you know there’s a spirit war going on?”

“No, but I’m not surprised. With so many spirit mages dead it’s no wonder that the spirit courts are being upturned.”

“Yes. About that. ~~No-Face~~. We need a way to kill it.”

“Yes. You’re not the first to call about this. Listen, I would help if I could.”

“But the Athenaeum-”

“Is closed.”

“Can’t you open it?”

“I won’t. Curator Sisyphus closed it just before he died. ~~No-Face~~ is hunting mages. Anyone that goes in there risks attracting it. And we can’t risk it entering the Athenaeum. I shudder to think of the damage it could do if it got in there. Everything we’ve worked so hard for - generations of magical knowledge we’ve collected, destroyed or corrupted if that thing gets in there. I won’t allow it. I’d rather die. So I’m afraid the Athenaeum is closed until the Abyssal Intruder is dealt with. Or until we’re all dead - at which point Mystagogues from out of town will come here and take the Athenaeum into their custody.”

“But the knowledge of how to defeat ~~No-Face~~ is in the Athenaeum!”

“The other Mystagogues and I have searched, and searched. We’ve looked at every profane text about the Abyss we can. There’s nothing on this thing - it’s a complete unknown. So the Athenaeum stays closed. I’m afraid that’s how it has to be.”

“OK. OK. Fair enough. Thanks for letting me know.”

“I understand. These are trying times. I - I’m not really sure what to do with myself, now. Good luck with your Hallow.”

She hang sup.

Dio comes back to the cabal.

“She says the Athenaeum is closed until ~~No-Face~~ is dealt with. And that there’s no information on ~~No-Face~~ in there.”

“Do we believe her?” asks Blackeye, pouring themselves a drink.

“No,” says Chron. “There’s definitely sumfin in there.”

“So we break in?” asks Dio.

“That’s a plan I can get behind,” says Chron. “I’m not sitting around, waiting for that geezer to do me in. I say we go for it. And I might know someone who can give us a hand.”

He goes over to another corner and calls Monstertruck, Free Councilman of the Coffin Dodger biker cabal.

“Chron mate! Still alive?” bellows Monstertruck down the line.

“Just about. Listen. I wanted to ask you about the Mysterium Athenaeum.”

“Ha! I bet I know what you’re planning. Can’t say we haven’t tried breaking in ourselves, over the years. It’s a fortress. We’ve made it as far as the entrance, but no further.”

“That’s not very far.”

“Place is covered in defensive spells, spirits, ghosts - the works. It’s an old one, that place. A few generations of Mystagogues have been working on it. Working hard to keep us all in the dark. Hoarding knowledge. Arrogant fucks.”

“It’s in the Powerhouse Museum, yeah?”

“Yep. Underneath it. In the stacks. They’ve carved out a whole warren of tunnels and spaces down there.”

“So where’s the entrance?”

“In one of the service tunnels near the bottom. There’s a hidden door - hard to see. Impossible to notice unless you know it’s there.”

“OK - that’s good to know. Got any other advice on how to get in?”

“Ha! You should join the Free Council, mate. You’d fit right in. If you want help breaking in, I can rustle up some hands. Not many, mind - only three of us left. But we can cause some mayhem, no problem.”

“Mayhem...might not be what we're after. We want to sneak in and out without being noticed, ideally.”

“Yeah stealth is not really our strong suit, I must admit. We're more, charge the front gates types, you understand.”

“The Mysterium have locked the place down. They're scared ~~No Face~~ will get in there and wreck the place.”

“Well if that's your concern - me and the lads can definitely cause a distraction to help you get in. Or we can let you know if we see ~~No Face~~ and try and lead him away.”

“I appreciate that - I'll let you know if we decide to go for it.”

“No worries. About time someone made a run at that place. I can't believe they're shutting it down while we're out here getting killed. I mean, the one thing those Mysterium fucks were supposed to be good at was knowing things. But here they are, as clueless as the rest of us.”

“Thanks for the intel, mate. I'll let you know if we need a hand.”

“Sure thing. You can repay me by snatching something in there for us. Make it something good, I mean.”

“We'll see how we go.” He hangs up, and returns to the cabal meeting.

“Well, I found out where the entrance of the Athenaeum is. Down in the stacks of the Powerhouse. Monstertruck reckons it's like a fortress - guarded by spells and worse,” Chron tells them.

“Great. So still no plan.” Shackle says.

“Well. We could always try and get some help,” says Dio, toying with her glass.

“Help?” asks Blackeye. “How do you mean?”

“Well...” says Dio, with a mischievous smile. “If we could find a spirit of heisting it could probably get in there and help us out.”

“Where are we going to find a spirit of heists?” asks Chron, eyebrow raised.

Dio makes an Occult rolls, and surprisingly - succeeds at it, with a single dot.

“Well, spirits tend to hang around things that are resonant with their nature,” explains Dio. “So if we want to find a spirit of heisting, we need to find a place - or some people - who are doing heists.”

“Well, we’re planning on doing one... maybe it’s already here?” asks Chron, looking around.

Dio switches on *Spirit Sight*. The only spirit she can see in the Sickle is Harpette, who is sitting dejected in the corner.

“Ah, no - no heist spirits here. One sec.” -Dio wanders over to the sound system and starts playing some classical music. This seems to cheer Harpette up, slightly.

“So we need to find a pack of villains?” asks Chron. “Some bank robbers, or sumfin?”

“Hm,” Shackle starts pacing. “Last night. There *was* a bank robbery in Paramatta.”

“That sounds perf! Let’s go check it out,” Dio jumps up, grabbing her fake police badge, which Shackle quickly puts back on the bar.

Ever since Dio & Shackle interrogated Jim in New Atlantis, Dio has been trying to do more ‘cop things’ - it’s one of her Aspirations. As part of this, she has bought three dots in the Police Tactics merit (which are just martial abilities) as part of that. Dio can now disarm people and, once immobilised, can handcuff ‘em as a free action. How did she learn this? From Shackle? Maybe. But mostly from Youtube.

“This plan seems pretty dubious,” says Blackeye.

I agree. This was NOT how I expected this session to go. But that’s the joy of roleplaying, isn’t it? The following scene I had to mostly improvise wholecloth.

“Hey, trust me,” Dio says with unearned confidence, “this’ll definitely work!”

Chron shrugs and pulls his keys out of his pocket. Going with the flow is what Acanthi do.

“I’ll drive.”

Paramatta is second oldest city in Australia, founded just 10 months after Sydney itself. These days it has been absorbed by Sydney, and is touted as the 'second CBD' of Sydney, and is quickly becoming a major hub of the Western, inland half of the city. Despite this, those who work in the inner city along the coast still look down on Paramatta.

The Bentley zooms across the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Traffic is absolutely flying. Chron is perturbed.

“Sumfin fishy is going on. Bridge is usually chockablock at this time,” says Chron, changing lanes like a racer.

“Oh no,” says Dio. She flicks *Spirit Sight* on, and looks up at the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Yesterday it was a 6-story tall monstrosity, crushing spirits underfoot. Today it looks like a bridge. A regular bridge. She can sense plenty of spiritual energy, but no spirit anymore.

“Weird. I wonder where it went?” Dio says to no one. The cabal ignore her - they have gotten used to such comments.

A half an hour later, the cabal is parked outside a bank in Paramatta. The glass front entrance has been shattered and there is police tape everywhere. Inside, two policemen are inspecting the crime scene, while a forensic officer takes samples.

“Ok, how are we doing this?” asks Dio, clutching her fake badge. “Good cop, bad cop?”

“We are doing nothing. I’m going to go ask some questions,” Shackle gives Dio a look, frowning at the plastic badge he thought he’d left behind at the bar.

“Explain to me how *you’re* going to spot a spirit of heisting, exactly?” Dio asks sarcastically.

Shackle pauses, hand on the door handle. “Hm. Shit.”

Dio grins at him.

“Alright,” Shackle turns to the others, “We’ll do it like Dio and I did at the Opera House. I’ll make you guys unnoticeable. Just don’t break anything. Or touch anything.”

“No worries guv, we’re just gunna have a quick butcher’s,” Chron says, mirroring Dio’s grin.

Shackle ignores their grins and produces his dedicated tool. An engraved whiskey flask his wife got him when he made detective rank. He begins to cast the spell, and passes it

around to the Last Call cabal. They each take a sip, and as they do, fade from all perception.

A cup is a universal yantra for shared spells, after all. Shackle uses his whiskey tool so much that he and the cabal are constantly about 2 drinks deep at any point. This might explain some of their conduct.

To all appearances, Shackle is now alone in the Bentley. He opens the car door, and the three other car doors open simultaneously around him, startling him. Right.

The cabal get out and close the doors behind them, Shackle hoping that no one has noticed. He crosses the road - wondering if his cabal are going to get run over by a car - and approaches the destroyed entrance of the bank. A policeman approaches him.

“Sorry mate you can’t come in here-” the officer stops as Shackle produces his badge.

“Hey,” Shackle explains quickly, “Detective. Day St precinct.”

“Day St, huh. What can we do for you here?”

“Robbery may be related to some others I’ve been investigating,” Shackles lies.

“Wondering if you wouldn’t mind me taking a look around as a professional courtesy.”

“Oh, ahh – sure. I guess that’d be okay,” the officer consents, holding up tape for Shackle to pass under.

Inside, Shackle surveys the scene. There is broken glass everywhere, two body outlines are clearly marked on the floor, and there’s bullet casings on the ground - a gunfight. The glass crunches next to him, but when he looks nobody is there.

“Watch the glass,” he whispers under his breath.

Shackle switches on *Space Sight*, and tries to catch any lingering sympathetic connections that might lead to the killers. After a few moments of studying the blood stains and the surroundings, he concludes that the bank robbers were not here long enough to form a connection to their killers. Only something very strong and intimate can form a connection so quickly - like a murder weapon. Those, he has learned, tend to have strong connections to both the victim and the killer. He casts his eyes around.

“Forensic retrieve any bullets?” he asks the officer.

“Nothing yet. I reckon they’re still in the bodies - but we won’t know for sure until they’ve done a second sweep.”

Shackle takes another look around with *Space Sight*. If there’s a bullet fragment jammed in a wall, he’ll find it. He scans the floors and walls, but finds nothing noteworthy.

“Morgue guys got them packed up quick,” he says.

“Yep,” the officer agrees, “they’re on their way to the Regent already. We’ve got photos though, if you want to have a look.”

The Regent is Sydney’s biggest (and oldest) mortuary, located in Regent St in the CBD. It’s also where Shackle’s Contact, Tilda Jones works. She was the mortician way back in Session 3 who warned Shackle away from Chifley Tower.

“Maybe later,” Shackle says, ignoring the offer. He’s noticed a security camera in the corner, watching them all.

“Did the cameras catch the crime?”

“Yep.”

“Are they still on?”

“The cameras? Sure, I think so.”

Shackle is pretty certain that *Incognito Presence* doesn’t work on cameras.

“Hey, you mind if I take a look at the footage?” Shackle asks.

“Sure thing, Detective. Right this way.”

They head to the back of the bank, right past a big vault door that has been burst off its hinges by what looks to have been an explosion.

“How much did they take?”

“About ten mil.”

They approach the security station. The policeman sits down at the console and looks at the bank of monitors. He's looking directly at a live camera feed showing Dio, Blackeye and Chron wandering around the crime scene, plain as day.

"Son-of-a-" -Policeman. He dashes out into the hallway to chase them away, but can't find them. Shackle takes the opportunity to switch the cameras from live footage to historical data. The beat cop comes back in quickly, looking baffled.

"I - I swear I - " he says, stuttering, when the spell hits him.

Shackle has cast *Read the Depths* on the policeman with his newfound expertise in the Mind arcanum. He reaches into the officer's mind, wrapping chains around the memory of seeing the cabal on the cameras. The officer straightens up, his confusion vanishing in an instant, and he starts to sift through yesterday's footage.

"Here," the officer explains. "Fair warning, you won't believe this."

He plays some footage of the front of the store. It is dark. Then, the glass shatters as multiple bullets break through it. Three figures step through the ruined glass entrance, guns raised. Two of the figures appear normal, but the one in the middle is wearing...

"Is that Ned Kelly?" Shackle asks, eyebrow raised.



Ned Kelly is a famous Australian bush ranger. After a series of increasingly brazen bank robberies, train heists and thefts, the police started closing in on the Kelly gang. In anticipation, Kelly built a bulletproof suit of metal armour in a bushforge. When the coppers came to arrest him, he charged out to do battle. The armour proved to be bulletproof, and the ensuing gunfight lasted fifteen minutes, with Kelly absorbing dozens of bullets before a series of minor wounds in his hands and legs incapacitated the infamous outlaw. He was captured and hung, and his last words were 'Such is life'. His armour is the stuff of legends, and is highly iconic.

The footage shows a figure wearing a full suit of metal armour raise its gun and fires at the security guards. They return fire - one of the assailants is winged - before Kelly and his gang shoot them dead.

“News is going to be all over this one,” says the policeman, grimly.

“Where did they go from there?” Shackle asks.

The officer plays a clip of Ned Kelly entering the back of the bank. He stares at the vault door for a second, raises an empty hand, pointing it like a gun at the door, which explodes in a ball of fire.



“They must have brought some kind of bazooka or something...” the cop suggests, uncertainly.

“Yeah. It’s a weird one.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Did we get any footage of the escape vehicle?” Shackle probes.

“Yep. It’s a van. Here,” the Officer shows a grainy video of a white van driving off. He pauses the image so Shackle can note down the plate.

Shackle nods his thanks.

Back in the entrance, Blackeye’d Susan can taste the death in this place, even before they turn on *Death Sight*. They are not surprised to see a spectral security guard standing there by the entrance, keeping watch.

“Hello,” says Blackeye.

“Oh hello there,” says the ghost, cheerfully. “Welcome to the bank. A teller will be with you shortly.”

“What happened here?” asks Blackeye, softly.

“Just a quiet night,” says the ghost with a frown. “Just a quiet night. Just a quiet night. A quiet night.”

“What’s your name?”

“Antonio. It’s on my nametag,” says the ghost, pointing at his spectral nametag. Right next to it is a bloody bullet hole.

“Did you have any trouble last night?”

“Last night? It was quiet. Although there was - there was - I remember a crash. Glass breaking. Did someone break in?” Antonio looks disturbed, his eyes wide.

“Yes, there was. Did you see who it was?”

“There was - I saw - three of them. With guns. I shot one - I’ve never shot anyone before,” Antonio says, a look of horror crossing his face.

“Did they die?”

“No. No. No - they didn’t react at all. I must have missed,” says Antonio with some relief.

“Then they - they - just a quiet night. Hello there. Welcome to the bank. A teller will be with you shortly.”

“I’m sorry, Antonio. I’m sorry for what they did to you.”

“Did to me? Who did what to me?”

“The bank robbers. They shot you, Antonio. They killed you. You’re dead.”

“I’m dead? Dead? No - no I - it was just a quiet night. I’m not dead.”

“I’m afraid you are. But there’s no need for you to stay here. You can move on, Antonio. There’s nothing left for you here.”

“I’m? No. It’s just a quiet night. Welcome to the bank. A teller will be with you shortly.”

“I’m very sorry,” says Blackeye, gently. They drop *Death Sight*, and the security guard vanishes from their view. They sigh loudly.

Blackeye’d Susan does not have great social stats. Or rather, to be clear, they have one dot in Presence, one dot in Manipulation, and 5 in Composure. They failed a roll to convince Antonio to move on. Luckily, Blackeye will get another chance...

Dio is looking for a spirit of heists. There is only one spirit inside the bank - a red-skinned humanoid with no head but a large maw in its torso. It is currently bent over, lapping up a patch of blood on the floor with a vast tongue. The blood only exists in Twilight - it is a remnant of the murder done here.

“Hello,” says Dio, to the spirit. It ignores her, and continues enthusiastically lapping up the blood, which does not seem to be diminishing.

“Hey! I’m talking to you!” Dio yells, after a moment. A nearby cop looks over at her, then yawns and looks away.

The Blood Spirit looks up at her.

“Got any blood?” it asks, thickly.

“Maybe. Were you here last night?”

“Nononono. Came after the blood came. Delicious blood.”

“Who was here last night? Any other spirits?”

“Need blood. Huuuuuungry. Thirsty. Blood!”

Dio sighs and uses Life magic to grow an eagle talon on her left hand which she uses to slice her right palm. She offers it to the spirit, which begins to lap at the wound with its vast tongue.

“Who was here?”

“Mmmphm. Delicious,” says the Blood Spirit, noisily sucking on the wound. “Cold ones were here. Rivals. They killed two men. Mmmhphh.”

“Cold ones? Were there any spirits?”

“Yes. Mmmpphmh. Maybe. Smelled others, yes. Had come and gone. Mischief.”

The wound in Dio’s palm is starting to sting.

“That’s enough,” she says, pulling her hand back. The creature hisses and leaps at her, biting hard on her arm. She unleashes a Praxis - *Bruise Flesh* - and the creature howls as its red flesh welts and malforms. It cowers away from her. She drops *Spirit Sight* and steps away.

Her hand is still bleeding - she carefully angles it upwards, so that her blood won’t contaminate the crime scene, and casts *Knit* on the wound, which closes up instantly. Dio takes a step back, and flicks *Spirit Sight* back on and sees the Blood Spirit lapping up the blood on the floor again, just as before. She looks around and sniffs the air. She can sense a fading Resonance here - the shadow of the crime the night before. But it feels like something has already drunk from it. A spirit of heists - or something similar - was here last night, drank from the Resonance of the robbery, and moved on.

Chron heads straight to the most important office he can find and boots up the computer. With a cheeky *Lucky Number* he enters a random string of digits and correctly guesses the password. It takes him a few minutes to figure out the banking software - it's very 90s in its interface. He finds a suitably fat bank account, and sets up a transfer to his own. Every instinct in his body is screaming for him to take what he can - but he recognises that there's dangers in being too greedy. He notes that if he transfers more than \$7,000 dollars, he needs a manager's approval. So he wires himself \$6,999. Then he moves that money into another account, then a third. Just in case. He boots the computer back down, pleased with his gains after ten minutes of work.

He saunters into the security room, where Shackle and the police officer are wrapping up. He waves at them, and they ignore him. Chron smiles and waits for them to leave, then carefully erases the footage of themselves entering the bank in the first place, and of him meddling with the computer. As he turns to leave, he starts. Shackle is there, staring at him.

"Can I trust you?" Shackle asks, his *Mind Sight* up.

Chron feels a spell go off, and for a moment, he feels something brush against his mind. Shackle catches impressions from his cabal mate - greed, yes, and pride, and loyalty to those he considers friends - but underneath the bravado and the calculating mind he finds something new, something he hasn't seen before. Fear. Chron is afraid of his past - afraid of his future - afraid of ~~No Face~~.

"Woah mate," says Chron, shaking his head. He takes a step back, and the spell breaks.

"Hey," Shackle says not unkindly, remembering for a second how much younger Chron is. "We're going to get through this, kid. Alright?"

Chron nods, letting his concerns flash across his face for a moment.

"I, uh, deleted our footage," Chron explains, "let's go before they realise, eh copper?"

Shackle nods. Together, the cop and the robber walk back through the bank, glass crunching under their feet, and exit through the front. Shackle waves a thanks to the officer investigating the scene.

The pair climb into the Bentley, and Shackle drops *Incognito Presence*. Blackeye and Dio fade into perception in the backseats.

They exchange notes on their findings.

“So, no heist spirit, then,” Blackeye says.

“It’s moved on somewhere,” Dio laments.

“So this was a bunch of faffin’ around then,” Chron says, coolly.

“Hm,” Shackle stares ahead, thinning. “Not necessarily. Ned Kelly is definitely not your average bank robber.”

“And the Blood Spirit mentioned *Cold Ones*,” Dio adds.

“What’s a cold one?,” Blackeye asks curious, “Like vampires?” No one notices Shackle stiffening in the passenger seat.

“Hang on—” Chron interrupts, casting *Serendipity*, “Let me try something.” The spell settles, and he waits for a sign.

“Shit,” says Dio, patting herself down. “Has anyone seen my phone?”

Chron looks around, and spots a familiar looking pink cell with way too many phone charms lying on the sidewalk. He exits the car and picks it up, his Fate sense tingling. The phone is still unlocked, and a contact is showing on screen - ‘Lamia Pseudonym’.

Readers with good memories will recall that, back in session 3, Dio went to a warehouse rave in Blacktown and hooked up with a vampire called Lamia Pseudonym.

Chron re-enters the Bentley and hands Dio her phone back, and starts the engine up.

“Who’s Lamia Pseudonym?” asks Chron, casually.

“Uh, just a rave buddy I made,” says Dio, equally casually. “Why?”

“Just a hunch,” says Chron. “Maybe give her a call. She might have some red hot tips for us, yeah?”

“OK. I’ll do it later,” says Dio, awkwardly. “She’s usually not awake at this time.”

It is daytime, after all. Vampire don't tend to be available until sundown.

Shackle's player is always on the lookout for vampires to slay, and wondered if this might be suspicious enough for him to start investigating. To which I replied 'Dio's rave buddy sleeping through the day is suspicious?', which he conceded was a fairly good point.

Chron begins to drive everyone home, when one of his burner phone buzzes. It's a voicemail from the airfield he stashed the stolen helicopter at.

“Hey, just letting you know that your helicopter has been picked up. You should have let me know you were part of the Shouzang Corporation! I've sent the bill to the company account, so all good. Thanks for using us!”

*I've been rolling behind the scenes to figure out how long it would take the Crown Casino folks to track down their missing helicopter. Looks like Chron's luck has finally run out. Then again, he still has the helicopter joystick that he dismantled, so the helicopter is always a **Co-Locate** away. But the real question is - have the Crown Casino folks got any way to trace the theft to Chron?*

As Chron drives, he snaps the burner phone in half, throwing it out of the window, off a bridge.

Shackle in the passenger seat stares, eyebrow raised. “What was that about?”

“Wrong number, innit, Gov.”

9: For Want of a Bullet

“Wise men say only fools rush in” -Elvis Presley

Soundtrack – [The Fallen World](#)

Hope you're not getting tired of this playlist, cos it's here to stay. Until the cabal find a new 'Dimension Unseen', that is. We start this session with a bit of fluid downtime. It has now been two days since the cabal returned from the Chantry of the Rainbow Serpent. This is the last bit of quiet anyone gets for some time. Shackle dominates the action for today, and poor Chron only gets two rolls, both of which he fails. He fares much better next session.

Coming back from the crime scene at the bank, Chron drops everyone off at the Sickle. Shackle immediately makes his goodbyes and heads off to the Day st Police Precinct. It is his first time visiting there in three months. He's still technically on leave, but in desperate need of a tedious distraction. Awakening to the inherent tyranny of the universe can do that.

The rest of the cabal are still at the pub. In the background, Steve is gently strumming a guitar, learning how to play a new song. Dio has instituted 'Acoustic Tuesdays' at the pub. This is not because she likes Steve's music – it is horrible – but because Harpette the spirit has taken up residence. The regular spotify playlist club bangers do little for her. She needs something acoustic to feed off. She prefers classical music, of course – not Steve's endless renditions of *Wonderwall* – but at least she's safe at the Sickle. Outside, in the harbour, the Spirit War is still raging.

Blackeye is making calls. All of their flower suppliers have been hit by some kind of logistics delay or obscure biosecurity laws.

“It's almost like someone is coming after my business in the most petty way possible,” they say, glumly.

“You're telling me!” says Dio, with barely restrained fury. “I got a fine for staying open late. Which this place has been doing since, forever! I reckon it must be the Exarchs.”

“Huh. You might be right.”

“Well, sitting around here is not helping anyone. Let me make a call. I know a guy who works at the shipping port, maybe he can explain what's happening with your flowers.”

Dio is using her Professional Training Contact (Bartender) merit for the first time! With one dot in it, she gets two Contacts for free.

We failed to come up with a name or description for her Dockworker Contact, but it's only a matter of time. She still has one Professional Contact left untapped (to be introduced in subsequent sessions). Shackle also a spare Contact up his sleeve from the same merit. The other being Tilda, the Mortician. As a side note, if you're reading this: BUY PROFESSIONAL TRAINING. It is by far the best value for money Merit in Chronicles of Darkness.

“Heyo <<Insert Name>>. How’s it going?” says Dio, speaking to her Dockworker friend.

“DIO! Long time no see!” they yell, over the crash of shipping containers. “Yeah business is going well. Lotta orders. There’s a line of container ships going out as far as the eye can see.”

“Yeah, about that. A mate of mine is having trouble getting some flowers shipped in. What’s the goss on that?”

“Listen, it’s a bit of everything. Flowers – yeah. Video games. I got a container full of Harry Potter books. Another full of some kind of chinese piano. It’s a bit strange, to be honest. Some stuff is passing through at double speed. But there’s a few odd containers that keep getting shunted to the back of the queue.”

“Is it bribes? Do we need to be bribing someone? Is that someone you?” asks Dio, keenly.

“Ha! I wish. No, it’s too widespread. Most cargo is coming through fine – just a few odd cases being held back. Some new law or regulation, I think they said. Foreman makes the list, port authority sets the rules. Oh yeah – CDs. Bunch of CDs and DVDs getting held up, too. Bugger if I know what’s behind it. Makes no sense to me.”

“Me neither.”

“Bureaucrats, I reckon. Listen, I gotta go – we got a about 30,000 tons of oil coming in. Talk to you later! You owe me a beer!”

The line goes dead.

“Well that wasn’t really helpful,” says Dio to Blackeye. “What do video games, flowers, books, pianos and DVDs have in common?”

Blackeye looks at her blankly.

“Is that a riddle?”

Dio shrugs.

Blackeye holds their phone up.

“Looks like a lot of people are complaining about this new lockout law stuff that hit you. Lot of clubs and pubs got fines recently. Here.”

Their phone displays a few errant reddit posts and news articles for Dio’s benefit.

“So it’s not just me. Weird. Well, luckily we got a man on the inside.”

Dio dials Shackle.

“Dio. I’m neck deep in paperwork here,” Shackle answers.

“Listen, did you end up asking about that late night lockout fine I got?” Dio asks, pacing up and down the bar.

“No,” Shackle’s keyboard clacking comes through from the othe end, “haven’t yet. Working on the Opera House fire.”

“I’m hurt, Shackle. Your priorities are all wrong.”

“Hm,” shackle grunts, “I’ll talk to you later.”

Shackle ends the call and goes back to his paperwork. After a minute, he sighs, distracted, and resignedly sets out to find answers to Dio’s fine. He finds a beat cop he recognises, making himself a cup of coffee and asks him.

“Hey, Jonathan, what’s this about a new lockout law?”

“Oh hey, Tanner, Good to have you back, mate.”

“Yeah,” Shackle smiles awkwardly, “Not technically back, but getting a head start on some paperwork.”

The beat cop nods knowingly.

“Anyway, word came down a few days ago – some councillors kicked up a fuss about a law that’s been on the books for a while but hasn’t really been enforced. It’s all a bit technical, but boss said to go and make an effort. We’ll probably crack down for a few weeks then go back to normal – that kind of thing always makes for bad press.”

“Sure,” Shackle nods. “Thanks.”

Shackle heads back to his desk, and calls Dio back.

“Listen kid. Some old law. Just started re-enforcing. Pretty widespread. Probably won’t last too long. Should probably close early for a few months until then. Happy?”

“Not really, no,” Dio grumbles. “Thanks, though.”

Shackle hangs up and looks at his phone sighing.

Dio goes back to pacing through the bar.

“Sounds widespread,” she says to Blackeye.

“Probably not the Exarchs, then,” says Blackeye, drily.

“Probably not. Probably.”

The session here was interrupted by the players theorising wildly about what could be behind the mysterious disruptions to their business. They almost had it figured it out, then kept going and ended up in wacky conspiracy theory territory.

Dio turns to Chron.

“I need some drugs. You got a hookup?”

“Sure,” says Chron, not even looking up from his laptop. “What’s yer poison?”

“I’m easy. What have you got?”

“Give us a minute,” says Chron, pulling out his phone. And another phone. And a third. He sends off a flurry of text messages.

Chron fails his streetwise roll badly here. Don't worry, steps will be taken to remedy his lack of drug hookups in the near future. I also gave him a scolding for only having one dot in Streetwise.

“Sorry mate, looks like I’m hard up for the moment,” says Chron, looking sheepish. “My guy has got half a gram of something called ‘ThreeEye’, but that shit’s well nasty.”

“More logistics issues? How suspicious!” says Dio, in a huff. “I’ll have to go find some the old fashioned way.”

Beginning in the Rocks, she makes her way to every herbal remedy and ganja paraphernalia shop she can find between here and Newtown. One drug-shopping montage later, she is in possession of some marijuana, several popular ‘herbal remedies’, some nitrous oxide and a cup of mescaline. She arrives back at the Sickle at the same time as Jim, who she’s arranged to meet here.

Dio’s Obsession relates to Awakenings, as does the Legacy she wishes to be inducted in. Her own Awakening came in a drug-induced bacchanalian haze in this very club as it burned to the ground. Her Shadowname relates her love of revelry and celebration and her tendencies towards the Maenad. For those of you not well acquainted with Greek mythology, those are the demented female berserker cultists that once worshipped the god Dionysus. She believes – perhaps mistakenly – that the right combination of drugs and revelry can trigger Awakenings. And Jim the Sleepwalker is her test subject.

She pitches this idea to Jim, complete with a description of an ancient greek bacchanalia. Jim is hesitant, at first.

“I have a job, Dio,” he says, calmly. “I can’t just go around taking drugs on a random Tuesday afternoon.”

“Look, I’ve seen your mansion. You can afford to take a day off. And this may well be your last chance to Awaken. I might not be around much longer. ~~No Face~~ is out there, hunting. Maybe this is your one shot.”

“I caught a glimpse of the Watchtower, you know. Saw the angels and the thunder of the Aether. But I couldn’t fight through the storm – didn’t make it to the tower,” says Jim, glumly. “Maybe I’m not so like my uncle after all.”

“Well maybe you weren’t ready back then. But you’re ready now, right? Sydney needs more mages right about now.”

“Sure. OK. What’s in this thing?” asks Jim, indicating the coffee mug filled with swampy liquid Dio has handed him.

“Lots of things. Herbs, mostly. It’ll do you good.”

Jim takes a sip, and makes a face.

“And a lot of mescaline,” says Dio.

Jim starts coughing, until Dio slaps him hard on the back.

“Finish up – we’ve got a few pubs to hit. And don’t you dare spit it out, it cost me most of my pocketmoney to get you that.

With a grimace, Jim finishes the mug and they set off.

They aren’t far gone from the Sickle when the drugs begin to take hold.

“Woah,” says Jim, staring at a stop light. Dio pats him on the shoulder.

“See any angels yet?”

“Not quite.”

They wander the city, visiting pubs, an art gallery, and even, in desperation, a church. Jim’s eyes are dilated and his mind is unmoored from the harsh realities of the Fallen World. Dio watches him closely for signs of enlightenment, but after a few hours she recognises that this has been a failure.

“Well, it was worth a shot,” she says, glumly.

“So what now?” says Jim, swaying slightly.

“We’ll try again another day,” says Dio. “Maybe switch up the dosage. But that’s enough for today. And I’m busy tonight.”

“Cool. Thanks for trying,” says Jim, with a sloppy smile. “And thanks for the drugs.”

“You OK to get home?”

“Probably!” he says, and wanders off to look at a bush. He seems happier than Dio has ever seen him. So that’s something.

There are two main schools of thoughts on Awakening. One, detailed in Signs of Sorcery, suggests that, among other things, Jim needs an Exceptional Success when confronted with the Lie in order to kick off an Awakening. The other school of thought is that NPCs should Awaken whenever the Storyteller feels is most narratively appropriate. Unfortunately for Jim, neither of those happened here.

Back at his desk, Shackle is searching the police database. A van was spotted leaving the Ned Kelly bank robbery in Paramatta last night – he has the licence plate. He immediately gets a hit on the van. Owned by one Riggoberto ‘Riggi’ Millelo, a known felon. If he knows this, the detectives at Paramatta no doubt also know this. A quick call confirms that the police have just raided Mr. Millelo’s apartment, and found it abandoned. He makes note of the man’s face and name, before setting off for the Sickle.

Blackeye is waiting for him, holding the floral bouquet Shackle had ordered.

“Thanks,” shackle takes it awkwardly, “what do I owe you?”

“A bottle of very fine whiskey,” says Blackeye, with a nod.

Shackle agrees, returning the nod.

Blackeye returns to the bar for a drink, leaving Shackle outside.

The detective climbs back into his car, holding the floral arrangement, and thinks hard about someone. A moment later, with a twist of the chains of Space – he is gone.

Shackle now stands instead in a seaside cemetery. A nearby sign identifies it as Evoca Cemetery, a small graveyard in a coastal town a 90 minutes north of Sydney. Tanner walks among the graves with purpose, and arrives at one labelled ‘Imogen Ward’. He gently lays the wreath in front of the grave, and steps back. Underneath his wife’s name is an inscription – a similar one to the engraving on his whiskey flask. It reads:

She Found Light in the Dark Places.

Tanner bends down at the grave and delicately places the flowers.

“Hey Im,” he says.

Wind whistles up over the cliff. Salt and the sound of waves against rock below.

Tanner breathes in the quiet for a moment.

“Sorry it’s been a while,” his mind races to thoughts of the wall of notes in his garage, long nights outside Chifley Tower, attacks in alleyways, and the Interloper, “things have been strange.”

The sea air is cool and he pulls his coat tight.

“Layla’s good. Safe. Still with my sister, like I told you,” he stumbles across the sentence. “She did really well in that writing competition. First place, I think,” he begins to trail off, “I mentioned it last time.”

He brushes a loose leaf off the corner of the headstone. Polished stone against his finger.

“A friend made the flowers, actually,” he can’t help but smile. “Yeah I know. You’d probably laugh at that; me making a new friend.”

“It’s hard. Without you, Im. I miss you.”

For a moment he is almost going to tell her something. But he stops himself.

The wind brushes through the grass. Patches of overgrown grass, dancing in air carried in from the ocean.

“I’m going to make them pay, Im. I promise.”

Tanner gets up, blinking something away, and walks away from the grave.

He casts *Co-Locate*, chaining the cemetery to his car and activates *Space Sight*. He can see the two locations interlocked across one another – and a tangle of sympathetic chains binding everything together. He glances back at the grave one last time, and notices a strong sympathetic chain running from himself to the headstone. There is no connection to the body buried below. No connection to her remains. The woman he loved, the connection they once had must have died when she did.

He turns away and steps through Space back into his car, where he sits for a long time. In silence.

Eventually he starts the engine and drives to Regent Street Morgue. Shackle has a date with a very important bullet.

Reception buzzes him in without a word – he’s here frequently, but not always on business. Tilda Jones is a family friend, after all. He navigates the warren of sterile white hallways until he arrives at the dual swing doors of the mortuary. Tilda is washing her hands when he enters.

“Oh– Hey. You can’t be here, Tan,” she frowns.

“Sorry. Should have called.”

“Yes,” she nods, “But, you really can’t be here. I’ve got someone coming in soon.”

“A date?” Shackle teases, his heart not really in it after his day.

“Don’t be stupid. Business. I’m stretching the rules by having you down here – I don’t want any trouble. Please leave.”

“Sorry Til. It’s important. Here for a security guard,” he winces, checking his notes.

“Antonio Molina. Should have arrived this morning.”

“He’s over there,” she nods impatiently, “but I really can’t let you near him, Tanner. I’ve only just finished examining him.”

“Won’t touch him, Til. Just need a look. He got shot trying to stop some bank robbers – they’re still in the wind.”

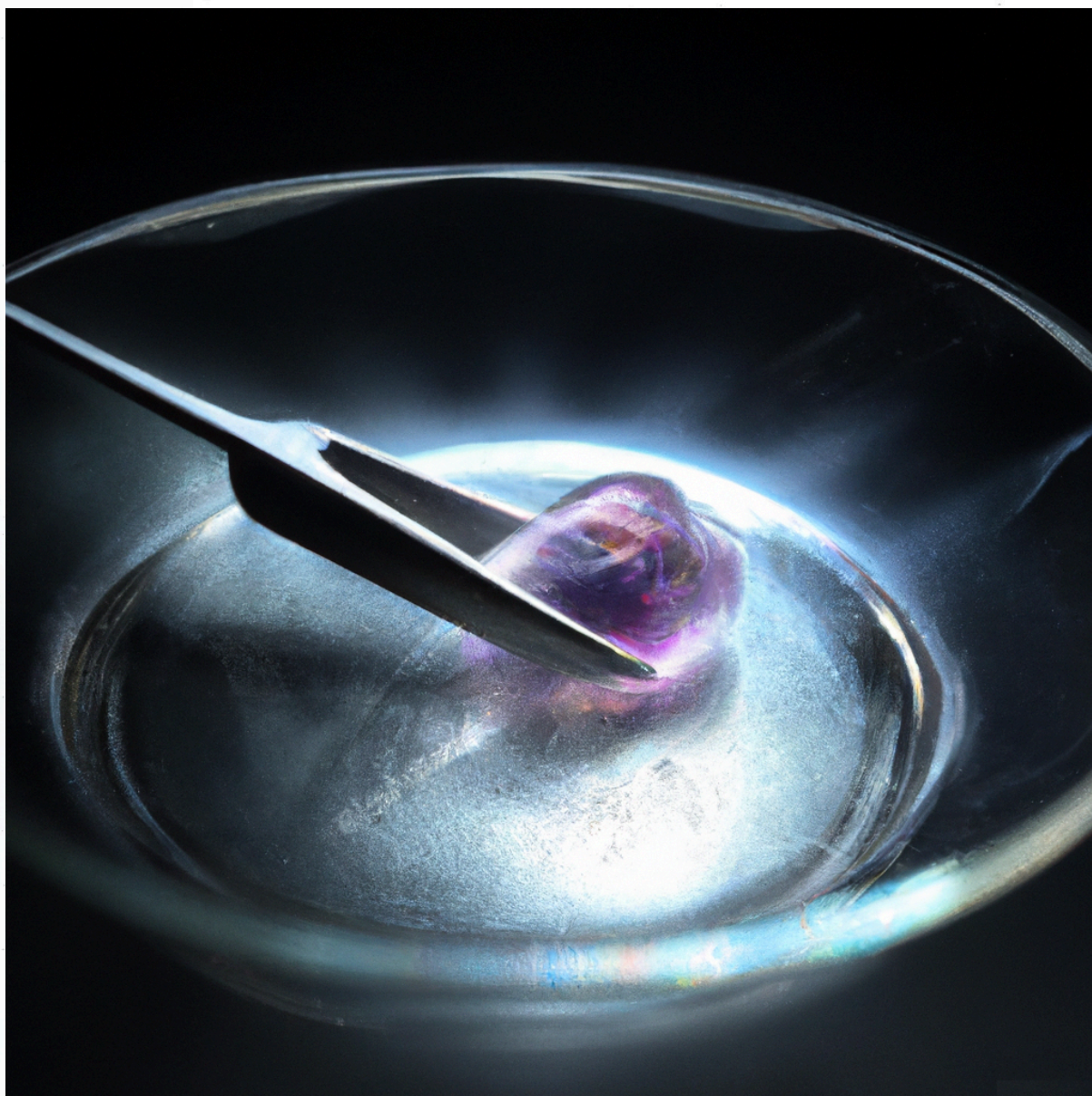
She stares at him. Hands on hips. Not unkindly. “Fine,” she sighs, “but I need you out of here in three minutes.”

“Deal.”

Shackle approaches the body. With *Space Sight* up he can see the sympathetic chains of the body clear as day. The only connection the body has locally is to the blood and bones on nearby instruments – and to a small fragment of something on a petri dish. Shackle leans in. It is a small, crumpled piece of metal. The bullet.

Shackle reaches forward, stops, checking to make sure Tilda is still busy, before reaching forward and running his finger over the sympathetic chains connected to the bullet. Two strong connections. One to the body.

Another to the gun that fired it. He casts *Borrow Threads*, plucking the sympathetic connection from the murder weapon right off the bullet, causing purple light to shimmer down the chain and into the shrapnel for a second under his *Space Sight*. He holds the connection tightly, feeling it in his mind. It's strange – he has just formed a connection directly to a murder weapon. He ponders briefly on the implications this might have on his soul and his psyche. Then again, he only needs to hold it for a few hours or so.



Using the reflective surface of a nearby steel cabinet, he casts *Scry* on the borrowed connection. The reflection on the steel warps, revealing a dark, messy room. Front and centre is a nightstand with a pistol resting atop – this is what his view is centred on. The murder weapon that took the life of Antonio. Off to the side in the gloom is a pale raven haired woman sitting in bed. It looks like she has just awoken – she is in her nightclothes.

The only light in the room is the woman's phone, which she is lazily scrolling through. Shackle notes the time – 6:30 PM. She's slept through the day.

"Notice anything interesting?" says Tilda, surprising him.

He quickly closes the *screaming window* and turns to her.

"No," he smiles awkwardly. "Not really. Would love to know what kind of gun fired it though."

"Not my department. Ballistics will be on their way to collect it soon."

"Sure."

"How are you doing?" She asks, studying him.

"Yeah. Fine."

"Four months today Tan" she says gently.

"Yeah," Shackle nods. "I was up at Evoca today."

"Her grave isn't the one that needs you."

"Meaning?"

"How's Layla?"

"She's good. She won a short story competition at her school."

"First place. Yeah. You told me that last time."

"Oh. Sorry."

"I'm sorry too, Tanner. We all miss Imogen."

"Yeah," he nods uncomfortably.

They stand in silence for a moment.

"Look you've got your important guest coming. I'd better leave."

“Sure, Tan.”

“See you around, Til.”

“You too. Take care.”

Shackle leaves quickly, back to his car, and drives back to the Sickle. He tries not to think about the look of concern on Tilda’s face as he left. Every few minutes he mentally checks the stolen sympathetic link to the gun is still with him.

Dio’s buzzes back at the Sickle. It is Lamia Pseudonym, finally returning her text. The sun has gone down – the vamps have come out to play.

I googled that word you said you were – Thyrsus. Are you a shaman?

I’m more of an Ecstatic, but sure! Dio replies.

Do you do exorcisms? Lamia asks.

I can try, Dio texts back.

My friends are acting strange. I think they’re possessed

What friends? Dio types.

People like me. Can you help them?

I think so

Promise me you won’t hurt them?

Dio looks at the text intently and then types back.

I promise

OK. Please hurry. She replies, before texting Dio an address in Paramatta.

I’ll be over later tonight, got some business to wrap up first Dio adds at the end.

Shackle returns to the Sickle after sundown. He describes what he saw in the *Scrying* window to the cabal. The gun on the dresser. The pale murderess. A sympathetic link that

leads right to her. They decide that answers are warranted, and that this is their best lead on a spirit of heists to aid them in their raid on the Athenaeum.

As one, the cabal head up to Dio's bedroom, a private place from which to launch their strike. Shackle draws his gun, and uses it as a yantra to *Co-Locate* with. Dio grabs her soulhammer.

Shackle looks at her.

"No killing. Alright?" he says, eyeing the sledgehammer.

"No more deaths," says Dio.

They nod in agreement.

This becomes very relevant later.

Shackle casts the *Co-Locate* through the sympathetic connection to the gun with contemptuous ease. But he has been pushing his luck a bit too far. As the spell forms, he realises two things. Firstly, he is now out of mana, and will not be able to *Co-Locate* back easily. And secondly, he has overreached, and Paradox has infected his spell.

With a bang, Shackle, Chron, Dio and half of Dio's room shift into the space at the other end of the spell. An unnatural wind rifles past them, and they are plunged into darkness. As their eyes adjust, they see that they are in a dark room with an aged decor, faded, peeling wallpaper, mostly covered in clothes and debris. Suddenly, the light above them snaps on. Dio looks up, and sees a familiar looking lamp installed in this dingy killer's room.

"Huh. I own the exact same one," she says.

Back in Dio's room, Blackeye is left alone, the wind swirling around them. Space starts to go crazy. Blackeye watches as objects start to teleport between the two rooms – a chair here, half a wardrobe there, several books, a glass of water. Each arrives or leaves with a bang, toppling over and crashing onto the floor noisily.

On the wall, a painting depicting some of Sydney's nightlife half-vanishes, as though torn in two. The missing portion is replaced with half of a punk rock band poster. Dio's bedroom lamp has been replaced with a stained lightbulb and a chain switch. Inside the killer's room, the noise is incredible as the contents of this room and Dio's room continue to teleport back and forth into one another.

I'm of the 'Paradox should be fun when released' school of Storytelling. To that end I incentivise my players by removing the dice penalty for letting Paradox go. And I do my best to think about what would be the most interesting way to screw with things, relative to the amount of paradox incurred.

Back in the dingy murder room, Dio, Shackle, and Chron hear the pounding of footsteps and the door is thrown open by a man with a pistol. Shackle reacts simultaneously, raising his own gun aiming it just away from the man.

“FREEZE! POLICE! Drop the weapon,” he shouts.

He studies the man's face, and realises that it's one Riggoberto 'Riggi' Milello, the perp ID'd as the owner of the getaway van in last night's bank robbery.

“DROP THE FUCKING WEAPON!” screams Riggi, pointing the gun at Shackle.

A bookcase materialises behind Dio with a crash, books sliding to the ground in a cascade.

Riggi's eyes bulge as he witnesses the impossible.

Chron takes the opportunity to cast *Curse of Chronos* at Riggi to slow him down, but the magic fails to catch and sputters out. Space shifts around them again, and with a blink, Shackle vanishes and is replaced by Blackeye.

Blackeye, weaponless and confused, stares down the barrel of Riggi's gun.

Shackle is standing back in Dio's wrecked bedroom, pointing his pistol directly at Steve's head – who has come to check what all the noise is about.

We all love a cliff-hanger ending, don't we? But what is a cliff-hanger ending...without a Marvel movie post-credits scene?

At the same time, unbeknownst to the Last Call Cabal – across town, back at the Regent St. Morgue, Tilda's long-awaited guest is arriving.

It is a tall woman. Dressed in stylish black. No inch of skin showing, she is wearing gloves, a medical facemask, and huge sunglasses that rest underneath a tight blonde wig. She walks past reception without being challenged and sweeps into Tilda's mortuary. Tilda turns to look at her, fear flashing across her face as the figure speaks in a deep voice.

“Take me to the body.”

10: Anarchs of Sydney

“The first lesson a revolutionary must learn is that he is a doomed man.”
— Huey P. Newton

This session is one big fight scene. Buckle up.

Dio, Blackeye and Chron are in an unknown location – the lair of some murderous bank robbers – staring down the barrel of a gangster’s pistol. Behind them, detritus from Dio’s apartment is still teleporting in and out of the room thanks to Shackle’s mistimed *Co-Locate* Paradox. Dio’s bedroom light suddenly vanishes again, replaced by the lightbulb and chain switch, shrouding the room in darkness.

“What the fuck is going on here?” yells Riggi the gangster, lit from behind by a dim hallway light.

Dio, keen to use the police grapple that Shackle taught her, charges the gangster. She grabs him by the arms, intend on twisting the gun out of his grasp. But Riggi shrugs her off with surprising strength, knocking her back. The dark room is lit up with a flash of muzzle fire as he shoots her right in the gut. She staggers back, blood pouring forth from the wound.

Chron casts *Shifting Sands*.

“What the fuck is going on here?” yells Riggi the gangster, lit from behind by a dim hallway light. Dio tenses, about to charge towards him.

Chron casts *Red Light, Green Light*. Time almost seems to slow for him, and he catches a glimpse of the heartbeat of the universe. Chron sees everything in rhythms - the march of time and the confluence of actions and counteractions. When to stand, when to move. Time pulses around him, and as Dio steps forward, he smoothly sticks out his leg and trips her up so she falls sideways. She stumbles into a cabinet, swearing loudly, and disturbs a faded sound system. It roars to life.

Chron’s player suggested this as a great way to kick off a fight scene. So I obliged him, and threw on the [most popular punk rock playlist I could find on Spotify](#). Please listen to it as you read – it perfectly captures the frenetic energy of this fight scene.

Chron looks around, reality beating along to *The Clash*. He absent-mindedly sticks his hand out, and catches a book of Dio’s that has *Co-Located* into the room. Carefully,

deliberately, he takes a step leftward, and then another. Riggi snaps his pistol towards Chron.

“Don’t move!” he yells, eyes wide.

Chron takes another step back, and with perfect timing has stepped into a patch of room that is shifting through Space.

“Please don’t shoot me,” says Steve, standing in Dio’s apartment, on the other side of the rift in Space staring down the barrel of Shackle’s police-issue firearm. Shackle lowers the gun quickly and starts scanning the room for a way to slip back through space to the others.

“What’s going on in here? Where is Ms. Lita?” Steve asks, rattled.

Shackle takes in the devastation in the room. Broken glasses. Toppled shelves. Books and records littering the floor. Posters torn and missing from the walls. Devastation wrought by his Space Paradox.

“She’s stepped out,” he says, barely paying attention to Dio’s barman.

Chron is dragged into existence. Steve’s eyes go wide and for a second he looks as though he’s about to scream. Shackle and Chron trade looks.

Chron nods rapidly and throws his hands up to Steve. “No, no, no, mate. Nothing to see here, eh?” he says placatingly moving towards the bartender and placing a guiding hand on his shoulder as he steers him towards the door leading back downstairs. “Listen, there was a bit of an accident, yeah? Some furniture got tipped over! Yeah? Yeah.”

As Chron guides the barkeep out, he throws *Temporal Summoning* behind him back into the room.

“Everything’s fine, mate. Trust me, Dio’s fine. Here, take a look, gaffer”. He gestures back towards the room, now looking as it always had – no destruction, no teleporting cupboards.

“But, but, I just, uh-” Steve splutters.

“See? Anyways you better get back to the pub. We’ve got everything handled up here, gaffer.”

Steve's eyes are bulging, and he cannot stop stammering, as Chron gently closes the door on him.

After a second of listening to Steve walking back downstairs, he turns back to Shackle.

“Roight –”

Shackle is no longer there.

Chron drops the *Temporal Summoning* and all of the trash and debris of the two intermingled rooms returns with a soft thud.

“Bugger.”

Poor Steve. That Breaking Point roll did NOT go well for him. Never cast magic in front of Sleepers, folks.

Back in the bank robber's lair, Riggi is yelling over the music.

“What the fuck is going on here?” he points his gun at Blackeye, who shrugs.

Dio, still sprawled on the floor, takes the opportunity to strike. She leaps at him like a cat, flying through the air with a hiss. This time she is successful, and with a practised sweep of her arm she whips the gun out of Riggi's hands and flings him to the floor. A moment later she is on top of him and cable-ties his hands. Blackeye watches, impressed.

Police Tactics is a deceptively useful merit. At three dots you get bonuses to disarming opponents and can handcuff immobilised opponents as a reflexive action. Dio has been practising this move alone in her apartment for the last few days. It gets a fair amount of use this session.

As she secures the cable-ties, Riggi vanishes from below her.

Dio swears, getting to her feet just as Shackle is dragged back into space where Chron had been a moment ago.

Shackle immediately raises his gun again and moves to the doorway, peering around the corner.

“We need to get out of this room,” the detective says through gritted teeth, ushering Dio and Blackeye out.

Blackeye steps into the hall, its walls covered in debris, neglect, and graffiti. They are on the top level of some kind of disused apartment block or warehouse or something. At either end of the hallway are staircases leading downwards.

“Where are we?” asks Dio, joining Blackeye in the corridor.

Shackle follows, reading his phone’s map. “Somewhere in Paramatta,” he steps out with them, reading his phone in one hand, and covering them with his pistol in the other.

Dio’s eyes widen, and she checks her own phone. They’re at the address Lamia Pseudonym gave her. Which is where her possessed vampire friends are.

This is much less of a coincidence if you recall that Chron cast Serendipity in order to find the bank robbers and was directed towards Lamia.

Blackeye meanwhile is studying the graffiti on the walls. Most of it new.



The graffiti reads; “DEATH TO THE PRINCE”, “EAT THE RICH”, “ANARCHS FOREVER”, “SUCH IS LIFE”, “DIE CAMMY FUCKS”, “ITS TIME FOR THE PUSH”, and “DIE PRINCE DIE”.

The most eye-catching tag however is a stylised stencil of a Ned Kelly helmet.



As they move down the hallway, Shackle notes the word ‘Prince’ with interest.

Back in Dio’s room, Chron is wondering what to do next when Riggi appears, his hands cable tied. The gangster looks around, astonished, and sees that he is alone with Chron. Riggi grins, and charges at him, knocking both of them to the floor, and shifting them back to the filthy room in Paramatta.

Out in the hallway, Shackle, Dio, and Blackeye hear footsteps charging up the stairs and shouting from below. Their noisy entrance has drawn notice.

They retreat back to the room just as Chron and Riggi arrive. Riggi begins to yell for help and with a dismissive gesture Dio uses *Transform Life* to fuse their mouth shut.

The criminal stares up at them with terror in his eyes.

“What should we do with this cheeky lad?” Chron ask.

Shackle steps forward and roughly drags the captured gangster across the floor to the back of the room. Leaning over them, Shackle draws his police badge and, angling it so its polished surface reflects Riggi’s face, chains it into his spell’s imago and casts *Read the Depths*.

Memories and emotions flood into Shackle’s mind, linking like burning chains to his own consciousness. He sees a dark-haired woman from his vision feeding Riggi blood. Her name is Belle. And she is a vampire.

Shackle understands Riggi thinks of himself as a ghoul, a servant who feeds of the vampire’s blood periodically. Thoughts of Belle’s blood consume Riggi - he craves it, will do anything for it. He works for her, protects her while she sleeps during the day, does odd jobs for her and the other Anarchs. Anarchs. The name of this gang— no. Not a gang. Organisation? Movement. Belle is their leader. They are in a state of cold war with another organisation known as the Camarilla, led by a Vampire Prince. Riggi knows Belle is downstairs. Sitting on a throne of money. She is the one who wears the Ned Kelly mask. Her childe Lamia is also here. As is Garret, her right-hand man. Nova, Fisher, and four other ghouls are also here.

And there are hostages. Humans.

Shackle’s fists clench. They’ve been feeding on them.

Shackle breaks the link from his mind to Riggi’s abruptly, his head whirling with all of this information. His vision is spinning, and he realises he has not breathed in some time. He chokes a ragged breath in. Anarchs, he thinks. Vampire civil war. Hostages.

Some of you may be wondering exactly what game I’m playing here. This is Chronicles of Darkness, after all. Let’s just say that all I know about vampires comes from the Vampire: Bloodlines video game. So I made a decision to use the vamps from Vampire: The Masquerade, not Vampire: The Requiem. Sorry to disappoint, but the list of Chronicles of Darkness books I need to read is way too long already without me having to learn any more splats. I’m not too bothered about trying to port over mechanics or anything - I’m going to be playing this one fast and loose. I’m fairly sure this means I’ll be pissing off fans of both Vampire game lines. But this is a Mage game, after all, so I hope you’ll forgive me...

More gangsters are coming up the stairs, so Blackeye acts. They cast a *Lodestone*, and they cast it large. They want to magnetise every firearm in the building and draw them up to the second story. They reach out and build the imago, but the spell goes awry, and Paradox floods through the magic.

Not only did Blackeye fail, but they scored some Paradox die. And then they opted for a Dramatic Failure here in exchange for a beat. I punished them for that.

The spell fails. No guns are magnetised. Instead, every gun in the building discharges, all at once. The sound is deafening. Riggi's gun blows a hole in the wall next to Chron's head. From below, there are horrified screams. Someone has been shot. Upstairs, there is a blast of heat emanating from Blackeye as the Paradox worms its way through reality.

Two sets of footsteps stomp down the hallway – they have company. Dio casts *Many Faces* on herself and steps out into the hallway looking like Riggi. But still wearing women's clothing.

“Hey guys, it's, uh, me,” Dio says with Riggi's voice.

In the hallway stand two gangsters, a middle-aged asian woman in a leather jacket and a blonde singlet wearing thug. Both are armed with pistols, held at the ready.

“Uh, Riggi? What are you wearing?” the female gangster asks, puzzled.

“I, uh, I caught the intruder,” says Dio, reaching into the room and pulling out Blackeye, who has their hands up.

“Woah. Is it a cop?” asks the male gangster.

“Who sent you!” yells the female gangster, aiming her gun at Blackeye.

Dio sends a pulse of Life magic at the pair, an improvised spell intended to slow their heartbeats and put them to sleep. Her spell takes, slowly.

“There's, uh, more of them in here,” says Dio, buying time. She gestures towards the room they teleported into. Inside, Riggi is laying on the ground, mouth fused shut, and Chron and Shackle lay in wait. Shackle reaches for his pistol, and realises it's not there.

We cut to Dio's apartment, which shows the pistol lying on the bed.

“Hey, I’m coming out. Do you promise on your life not to shoot us?” yells Chron, from inside the room. He casts the spell *Sworn Oaths* on the hallway.

“Sure. Come on out,” says the female gangster, stifling a yawn.

Chron grins as the Oath settles on her, and steps out of the hallway, hands held up. If they shoot him, they are cursed to die. His grin fades a little as he realises this won’t stop him from dying, either.

The gangsters point their guns at him, but don’t shoot.

Dio casts her Life spell again, this time more powerfully. The two are swaying on their feet, and stagger towards Chron.

“What – what the fuck is going on here?” asks the female gangster, as she sees the real Riggi lying on the floor next to the fake Riggi.

“Someone trashed my room is what happened,” says Dio, and plucks the gun from the hands of the male thug just as Chron does the same to the female gangster. They feebly try and fight back before collapsing in a pile on the ground, snoring. Riggi watches, eyes wide. Dio leans over him.

“Take off your clothes,” she says, in his voice. “If you want to live, that is.”

He complies, and she hits him with the same spell. He goes down quickly, joining his fellow gangmembers in a snoring pile on the floor. Dio quickly dresses in his clothes, while Chron picks up Riggi’s own gun.

“Everyone out of that room,” Shackle tells them, dragging the sleeping gangster into the hallway, even as the Paradoxical *Co-Locations* slows.

By now, everyone has gathered up a gangster’s pistol except for Blackeye.

Chron leaves the Sworn Oaths spell up, just in case the gangsters wake up. Luckily for them, they sleep through what comes next, and never get to break their accidentally sworn oaths.

“That was about the noisiest break and enter I’ve ever been involved with,” says Chron.

“Hey I thought it went pretty well,” Dios says with her tone, but Riggi’s voice. The effect is unsettling.

“There’s vampires,” Shackle grimly checks his newfound gun, ignoring their banter. “Downstairs. And hostages. We need to get them out.”

“There’s something fishy going on here,” Dio interjects. “I don’t think it’s just vampires.”

“What makes you say that?” asks Blackeye.

“Just a hunch,” Dio responds, unwilling to explain Lamia Pseudonym to the others.

“So we just charge downstairs, guns blazing? That’s not much of a plan. Which, granted, is kind of my specialty,” Chron jokes in a hushed voice, whipping up a quick *Fool’s Rush In* on the entire party, giving them advantages in unfamiliar situations.

“I’ve got a better idea,” Shackle says with military coldness, chaining *Incognito Presence* on each of the Last Call again.

Paradox, though, infuses his spell once more and with a pained wince, he lets it go just as the cabal begin to fade out of sight. Except for Dio, that is. Weakened by the paradox, the spell unchains before it can cover her as well. The temperature in the hallway drops to sub-zero levels, and a thin layer of frost covers the walls as more paradox suffuses the area.

At this point the party is racking up some serious levels of Paradox – Shackle and Chron especially. They figured it would be better not to absorb it right before a big fight. Which makes things more fun for me.

Shackle casts *Telepathy* on the party.

<<Change of plan. Chron, Blackeye, and I won’t be seen. Dio you’ll have to stay in disguise and...>> Shackle’s telepathic voice stalls for a moment before sighing, <<talk your way through.>>

<<No problem. Acting is but one of my many talents.>> Dio thinks back.

Shackle shakes his head and the cabal move down the stairs.

The place is dilapidated, and as they descend it is clear they are on the second level of an abandoned warehouse. They pass more graffiti on the way down – the anarchist symbols and the Ned Kelly helmet are everywhere.

They enter a large warehouse space lit with fluorescent lights. The first thing they see are five people, cable-tied to chairs. They are pale, and look half-dead. Except for one of them, who is totally dead, a bullet hole is still leaking blood from her chest. Blackeye's heart sinks as they realise this happened when their paradox caused all the guns to discharge at once. His magic has caused the death of an innocent.

There are seven free people in the room, all armed, all wearing punk attire. The most striking is the woman wearing a Ned Kelly helmet, sitting on a dilapidated chair that is resting on a pile of several million dollars of cash. From his brief journey into Riggi's mind, Shackle recognises her as Belle – the very same vampire he *scryed* a few hours earlier. From her throne of money, she holds court, and blazes with presence – it is hard to look away from her. She is currently arguing with a blonde woman, who has two doberman at her side. He recognises her as the vampire Nova. Standing beside the throne is a very large man, standing guard – Garret. Another vampire. Covering the two exits are a pair of guards, pistols in hand – the two remaining ghouls. A vampire in a hoodie is leaning casually against one of the walls, watching proceedings – Fischer. And off to one side is the last vampire, Lamia Pseudonym, the childe of Belle.

Dio bumped into Lamia at a warehouse rave before the adventure in the Chantry of the Rainbow Serpent. They slept together, and exchanged numbers. Last session, Lamia asked Dio for help, claiming her friends were possessed.

Everyone stares at 'Riggi' as he comes down the stairs, seemingly alone. No one can see through the Incognito Presence spell.

"Who are your friends, Riggi?" says Belle, her tone icy. Everyone except for Belle, that is.

"What friends?" says Dio, still trying to play along.

Shackle, feeling exposed, casts *Know Nature* on Belle. Within her he senses a protectiveness – she will defend her gang to the death. He also senses an unbridled savagery – her wrath is terrible to behold. She is a social creature – her leadership qualities are potent indeed. She has a keen mind, yes – but above all she has an iron resolve. Swimming to the top of her thoughts are her goals and aspirations – she wishes to slay the Vampire Prince and Destroy the Camarilla. Newly within her he senses a desire for lawlessness – she will stop at nothing to get what she wants.

In turn, he gleaned her Virtue & Vice (Protective and Wrathful), her Social and Mental stats (12 social, 10 mental) and her Aspirations. She has no Obsessions, since she is not Awakened.

Blackeye meanwhile activates *Death Sight*, and sees what Shackle already knows – Belle, Garret, Nova, Fisher, and Lamia are dead: vampires. The other two henchman have a deathly aura, but are still alive: ghouls. A similar aura surrounds the two doberman: ghoulish dogs?

Blackeye's gaze settles back on Belle, and they casts *Soul Marks* on her. They see the state of her soul laid bare in front of them. The first thing they notice is the soul itself – it is...wrong, somehow. Twisted and snarled - this soul no longer belongs to a human. The second thing they notice is that Belle is currently possessed by another entity - but not a ghost. Blackeye sees no ghost with *Death Sight*. The third thing they notice is that Belle has at some point in the past has drunk the soul of another. They can see the discolouration, like two clashing paints mixed together. Belle's soul is fascinating and grotesque.

Dio flicks on *Spirit Sight*, and immediately spots four spirits hiding in twilight. A spirit that looks exactly like Ned Kelly is positioned just over Belle's shoulder, its fingers sinking into her skull. Behind Nova is a strange-looking spirit that has the appearance of an early 19th century larrikin – broad brim hat, vest, baggy trousers and a pipe sticking out of its mouth. It smiles viciously as its fingers twitch in Nova's skull. Behind Garret a filthy looking swagman leers, his dirty hands gently stroking the vampire's skull. And in the corner, Dio spots a doglike animal lying on the ground, black stripes running down its back. She realises that it's a Thylacine – a Tasmanian Tiger, long since extinct. It yawns lazily as she watches, and seems unconcerned with the events here.

Ned Kelly – Spirit of Rebellion



The Push – Spirit of Disobedience



Ned Kelly is Australia's most famous highwayman.

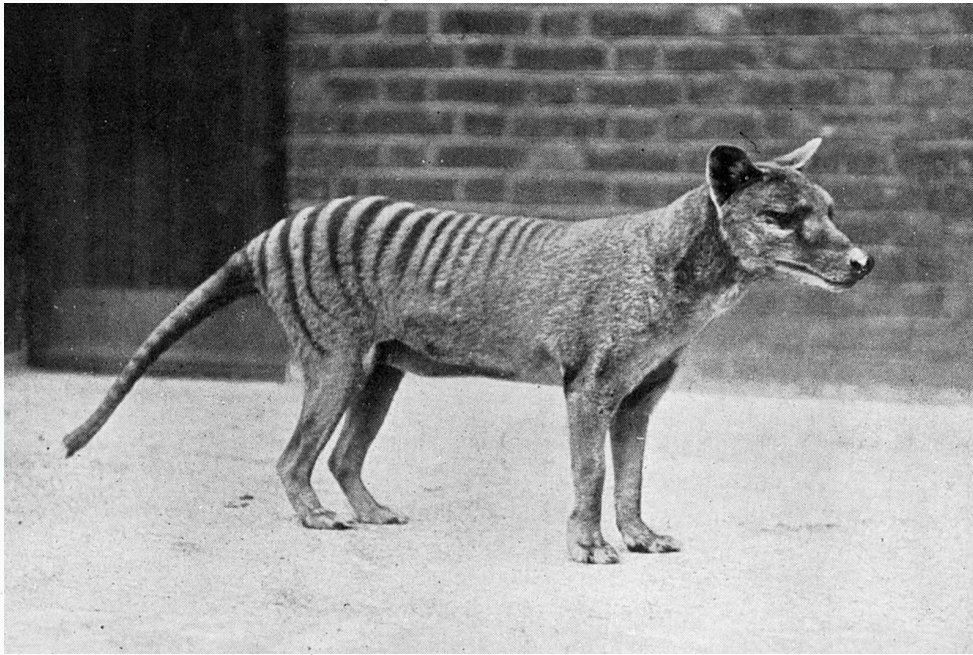
The Push were a notorious larrikin gang in Sydney in the late 19th century.

The Swagman – Spirit of Thievery



Swagmen are a famous part of Australian history – transient labourers and vagabonds. Australia's unofficial national anthem, Waltzing Matilda is about a swagman stealing a lamb and then drowning himself in a pond when the police try and capture him.

The Thylacine – Spirit of ???



The Tasmanian Tiger is an extinct species of marsupial that some say still haunts the Tasmanian wilderness. Many have tried to capture a live specimen, but none have succeeded.

<<Ned Kelly, dog lady and the big guy are possessed by spirits. I bet that's why they robbed the bank.>> Dio says via telepathy.

She casts *Know Spirit* on the Ned Kelly Spirit. With her paltry command of Spirit, she is only able to glean his bane: being hung by a policeman.

Which is how the original Ned Kelly died after his infamous armour-clad gunfight with the police.

<<Shackle. You need to hang Ned Kelly somehow. That's the spirit's bane. That's what will free her.>> Dio tells Shackle.

<<What about the others?>> Shackle asks.

She casts *Know Spirit* on the Push Spirit. It's Bane is bare-knuckle boxing.

<<I've got the doberman lady handled. Just do me a favour - leave the vampire girl one off to the side alone – she's not part of this.>> Dio asks Shackle.

For a moment Shackle is silent before sending a reply back by telepathy.

<<How do you know that?>>

<<Trust me.>>

“You’ve come here to kill me?” Belle tilts their head.

“No,” Dio answers, turning toward Lamia. “You called me and I came, Lamia. Leave now before things get ugly.”

“Kill them! Kill them all!” yells Belle hoarsely, standing up and pointing. Her companions look around, confused.

“Kill Riggi?” asks Garret, frowning.

“That,” Belle points, “is not Riggi.”

Chron, sensing violence, casts *Accelerate* on the cabal.

Dio decides to drop her *Many Faces* spell for dramatic effect and raises her soulhammer defensively.

“INTRUDER!” roars Garret, as he watches her features change.

Behind him, the ghouls raise their pistols. Nova’s drops the ghouhound leashes and the beasts surge forward.

Initiative is rolled! Thanks to Accelerate, all the party go first.

The ghoulhounds rush towards Dio – she is the only target they can sense, after all. Dio casts *Lure* on herself, and the hounds are immediately repelled by her scent. One skids to a halt, terrified and repulsed. The other paces around her in a wide circle, angry, frightened and confused.

Chron has wisely chosen to hang back by the stairs, so he can duck behind the decaying walls for cover. With *Fate Sight* he can see that the Fate of this gang is intertwined. He capitalises on this, and casts a new spell – *Shared Fate*. Their Fates twist and mingle with another. Now they will live and die as one. Icy paradox creeps up the veins in his arms as he casts and he absorbs it, his arms and chest burning as though subjected to great heat, cold, and friction simultaneously. But mostly, he absorbs the Paradox into his pattern.

And gains an Abyssal Condition! Chron now has the Abyssal Imago Condition, making future spellcasting more likely to incur Paradox.

Blackeye has noticed the deathly energies coursing strongly through the vampires, and less strongly through the ghouls. They are creatures of death, and their powers are not unlike those of ghosts and other undead beings. They cast an improvised version of 'Ghost Shield' on the cabal to help blunt the vampire's deathly magics.

Does Ghost Shield work on vampires? Probably!

Shackle stalks purposefully forward, chaining together *Read the Depths*, and wrapping the spell around Belle. He needs to be sure.

Two centuries of memories bind together in rough links and pour into his mind, making him stagger to a standstill.

Shackle watches a young woman steal a bracelet. She is clapped in chains, imprisoned in a ship, carted halfway around the world. She arrives in Australia in a penal colony. A few weeks later, a creature of the night embraces her in the dark. She is now a Brujah, an undead vampire, and her hunger knows no bounds. She learns about the Kindred, the Camarilla, and the new chains of her unlife. More vampires arrive in the new colony, smelling opportunity. Word comes of a second Anarch revolt in Europe – an uprising against the elder vampires said to control the world. One night, Belle overpowers her sire and drinks his blood, committing the sin of diablerie. She kicks off her own revolution, and seizes power in the fledgling city of Sydney.

Shackle sees warfare, murders, revolutions, and the growth of the colony into a nation. Sydney remains a hotspot of vampiric tensions – the Anarchs gain and lose ground to the Camarilla in an endless contest of blood that spans centuries. Shackle watches as Belle drains countless people dry, criminals, innocents, colonists, and worse over the years. Flashes now, more recent - the crowning of a new Prince, the death of several Anarch comrades, the siring of Lamia Pseudonym, and now here: an unquenchable thirst for rebellion.

His mind on fire with two centuries of unlife, bile rises in his throat. The vampire stands before him. A monster. A murderer who has left behind a trail of corpses going back to the First Fleet. He feels a deep, cold rage flow through his veins that washes away all sense of conscious restraint.

He reaches out with his mind and grabs a chain of a Belle's memory. An important one. And he rends and works it with his will. Twisting it into something new. A parting gift, left in the Vampire's mind. A new memory.

The memory of Belle siring Lamia. Now replaced with that of Belle sireing Shackle. She now believes him to be her Childe. Beneath the steel Ned Kelly helmet, her eyes widen.

Shackle is crossing a personal line here. While he's had no compunction throwing Space magic around, today is the first time he's invaded and manipulated the mind of another. Only time will tell if this will prove to be a slippery slope of iniquity.

Belle stands up and does *something*. The cabal feel a supernatural effect happen, but have no idea what it is. Nova activates her own vampiric discipline, and her nails stretch into claws while her mouth elongates into a furry muzzle filled with sharp teeth. Hair begins to sprout all along her visible skin as she assumes a half-beast, half-human shape. She charges at Dio – the only person she can see – and swipes her claws at the Thyrsus, slashing deep into her face and removing a chunk of her nose. Dio grins back at her, blood gushing down her face in alarming quantities

Turn one: Three lethal TO THE FACE! Remember folks, Chronicles of Darkness is a mean place and combat is nasty, brutish and short.

Garret is next up, and activates his own ability. He takes a swipe at Dio that could shatter concrete. But with a burst of her last mana, she activates *Life Armour* and twists away from his bulldozer fist with inhuman reflexes. The two ghoul henchman open fire on her with their pistols, but with Chron's *Accelerate* active she sees the bullets coming long before they hit her and steps aside with a blur.

Dio forgot about mage armour until after she'd already been hit the first time. Her player was a good sport about it, despite the missing bit of nose. At least she still has mana left, unlike Shackle.

Lamia Pseudonym, Childe of Belle and one-time lover of Dio is conflicted. She knows her Sire is not herself and is being manipulated by unseen forces. But something about Dio's warning touches her, and she slips out the side door of the warehouse and vanishes into the night in a shroud of doubt and self-loathing. In time, she will come to regret this decision.

Blackeye eyes the battlefield, their accelerated speed enabling them to watch the proceedings calmly and carefully before deciding how best to act. They raise their hand to cast another spell when something blurs towards them. It is Belle, moving faster than any

human, faster even the speed-enhanced mages. She rushes right towards Blackeye, who realises far too late that she can see through Shackle's invisibility spell. Her fist connects with Blackeye's chest and two ribs immediately break. Blackeye explosively exhales and is flung backwards as though struck by a speeding van.

Who says Time-mages are the only ones who can go superfast? Celerity is a hell of a vampiric discipline, especially when combined with Potence. The look on my player's faces when I explained that, no, they can't go first, even though they have Accelerate on, was priceless. That's five lethal, by the way – the attack went right through Blackeye's defence, the Ghost Shield and then some. Blackeye is now two lethal away from bleeding out, and is taking dice penalties. At least they get a beat for their trouble.

Chron flings *Curse of Chronos* at Belle in a desperate attempt to slow her down, choking down the rising levels of Paradox as he casts. His imago, already infected with Abyss, now blazes with it, and his Pattern is doused in Paradox.

Alongside Abyssal Imago, he now has a new Abyssal condition I ported from 1e – Abyssal Taint. The Abyss infects his body, inspiring revulsion and disgust in others. He gets -2 to all social rolls until he fails a roll or scours it from his body.

Blackeye, coughing up blood, weaves Prime and Death together to *Dispel* Belle's vampiric powers. Her super speed and strength fade away as she moves in slow-mo towards Blackeye'd Susan to finish the job.

Can mages dispel Vampiric Disciplines? If they have Death and Prime, sure, why not. At this point of the night we'd all had a bit of whiskey so my Storyteller rulings got more and more loose. Sue me.

Dio raises her fists like a boxer and squares up against Nova.

“Come on, then!” Dio shouts, casting her rote *Kinetic Blow*.

She sweeps her fist through the air like an angry god. It connects with the side of Nova's head and sends her smashing downwards into the concrete floor. In Twilight, the Spirit of the Push sizzles and cooks as its Bane is invoked. Back on this plane of existence, Garret, Belle, and the two ghouls are felled alongside her – the blow magically striking every one of them through their *Shared Fate* lines. They are all on the ground, wounded and stunned.

This is one nasty combo. Kinetic Blow with the Reach options also incurs the Knocked-down and Stunned tilts, alongside three lethal in damage. With Shared Fate active on all five combatants, they all receive the damage and tilts. The fight is over and we've only reached Round Two. Welcome to Mage: the Awakening.

The vampires and ghouls groan on the ground, their ears ringing with the might of Dio's kinetically enhanced fists.

Shackle moves slowly but assuredly, stepping up to Belle, and ripping the Ned Kelly helmet off her head, and looping his leather belt around her neck and pulling fast. He begins to choke her. He wants her to know her childe is going to kill her.

The ghouls gasp for air as they are similarly choked. The vampires don't breathe and aren't affected, but in Twilight the spirit of Ned Kelly shudders and burns under its Bane. Dio kneels down beside Nova and begins punching her viciously with her bare knuckles, and the spirit of the Push inside her begins to burn and shriek as it suffers its Bane again.

Blackeye picks themselves up and switches on *Death Sight* to try and make sense of what is happening and notices something unusual. A presence is creeping along the wall towards them – something invisible, wreathed in deathly energies of obfuscation. They recall that there were five vampires down here originally – Belle, Garret, Nova, Lamia, and someone wearing a hoodie who seems to have vanished before the fighting even properly began. Blackeye spits out a globule of blood and approaches the invisible figure.

"Hello there," they say.

"Hello," says the Figure. Its voice is soft, but distinctly male.

"I hope you're not planning to hurt me."

"I wouldn't dream of it. I was just heading towards the exit."

Blackeye glances to the side - there's a second exit a few metres away.

"Why should I let you go?" Blackeye asks, preparing another Death spell.

"Well. I can take care of those hounds for you," says the Figure. Ghoulhounds are still fighting against Dio's lure, snarling and whining and frothing at the mouth, but unable to get any closer to her as she continues laying a beat-down on Nova.

"How are you planning on doing that?" asks Blackeye.

“I have a way with animals.”

“OK. Sure. Get out of here.” Blackeye steps aside, suddenly weary. They aren’t feeling too good, right now.

“Thank you,” says the Figure.

He whistles sharply, and the ghoulhounds stop short. He whistles again and they head over to his side, instantly obedient. He wanders over to the exit door – still hidden, and opens it.

“If you ever need anything – just ask for Fisher.”

He steps out into the night, followed by the ghoulhounds, and shuts the door gently behind him.

Shackle, meanwhile, is hanging Belle with his belt, their backs pressed up together and Shackled leaning forward. Lifting Belle off her feet. She struggles against him. Dio’s punches raining down on the other vampire, connected to Belle and the others by Chron’s *Shared Fate* causing bruises to bloom across all the vampires.

Throwing his weight against the belt harder, Shackle chains together *Read the Depths* again, surging into Belle’s mind. He’s not done with her yet and he can get more from her. Information about Vampires. But he overshoots. Beyond her thoughts he catches a glimpse of something else – an alien consciousness, bound to the vampire but different. The spirit of Ned Kelly – a Spirit of Rebellion and a lieutenant in the Court of the Fat Lady.

Shackle receives flashes. The Fat Lady missing. An attack by the Iron Lung Spirit Court, fleeing from the CBD as the Spirit of the Harbour Bridge lays into Ned Kelly’s allies. Retreating here to Paramatta, finding the biggest rebels it can, egging them on to rebel and steal. Belle, leader of the Anarchs stands out - her need for resources to fight her rebellion against the Camarilla is a powerful beacon to him. It slips into her mind, urging her to kidnap some humans and rob banks, growing fat on her rebellion like a bloodsucking tick, it –

– Shackle breaks the connection. It’s too much, too strange, the mind of a spirit. The spell shatters, paradox creeping into his brain synapses, and he drops it like a burning coal. It infects his telepathic link with his cabalmates, and their own secrets are yanked out of their skulls and buzz along the neural link, echoing in the minds of each other.

From Dio, the hunt for an heirloom. Flashes of a large sickle-scythe, held carefully in the hands of a woman Dio once called mother.

From Shackle, great sorrow. A wife, covered in blood, lifeless on his apartment floor.

From Blackeye, a paralysing identity crisis. Sitting on a couch with their now-dead sister, the last anchor to their previous life and the only person that could have vouched that Blackey was who they said they were.

From Chron, waves of uncertainty about his future. A vision of his future self in the Bentley, mowing down one of Chron's friends in cold blood.

The Last Cabal all shake their minds loose of the telepathic link. Now knowing something each of them tried to keep hidden.

The Paradox settles and unnatural fog billows through the warehouse from some unseen place. It floods in from under doorways and through windows, hiding the fevered acts of violence and unshackled secrets.

And so, vampires nearly trounced and cryptic secrets brought mostly into light of day, the curtain closes on this session. Except for one last vision...

Outside, in the brightly lit streets of Paramatta, we see a pale figure stiffly shuffling down the street, heading straight for the Anarch warehouse.

It moves awkwardly and despite the warm weather, wears a bulky coat. Its pale face is one we recognise – it is Antonio, the security guard from the bank robbery.

Last seen in Tilda's tender care on a morgue slab.

Dun dun duuuun!

11: Grave Deeds

"It's no use blaming anyone now." - Ned Kelly

Soundtrack – [The Fallen World](#)

Some pretty horrible things happen this session. Violence, desecration, and worse. Mage is a horror game, after all. Don't say I didn't warn you. On the other hand, this was the first session we used a voice recorder in, so the dialogue gets a lot more detailed. Before I was just doing it from memory.

It is night. A policeman is choking a young-looking raven-haired woman with his leather belt. The policeman is the Warlock Shackle. The woman is neither young, nor is she really choking – her name is Belle, and she is the leader of the Anarch vampires of Sydney. She stopped breathing two centuries ago. Strewn around the filthy floor of the warehouse that is the Anarch's hideout lie Belle's companions: her right-hand man Garret, her loyal enforcer Nova, and their two ghouls. Nova is busy having her face pummelled by the Ecstatic Dio. All five of the Anarch's flinch with each strike. All five of them are clawing at their necks. A spell has been cast on them to bind their fates together, so that any pain or torment inflicted on one, is inflicted on all. Between being choked and pummelled, they are helpless.

Tied to chairs, bound and gagged, four hostages watch the violence with horror.

The reason Shackle is choking Belle and Dio is punching Nova in the face is that both of the victims are host to spirits. Belle is host to the spirit of Ned Kelly, a Spirit of Rebellion, and Nova is host to the spirit of the Push, a Spirit of Disobedience. The former's Bane is being choked by a policeman; the latter's is engaging in bare knuckle brawling.

Dio flicks on *Spirit Sight* and casts *Invoke Bane* on the Push and Ned Kelly. Already writhing and burning in the presence of their Banes, they screech and with a horrible sucking sound, pull their fingers out of Belle and Nova's heads respectively. Unable to face their Banes due to Dio's magic, they flee across the room in Twilight. The Swagman spirit riding Garret – a Spirit of Theft – reluctantly pulls out as well and retreats to join his comrades.

On the ground, the vampire and ghouls writhe in agony. It is a painful thing, to have an entity ripped suddenly from your mind, and the pain is triplefold. Her job done, Dio drops the bruised Nova to the ground. Dio's own face is horribly mangled, her blood dripping onto the comatose vampire below her. Dio casts *Knit* on herself, and her ravaged face rebuilds itself, the missing flesh growing back on her nose. She spits some blood on the floor, satisfied.

"You can stop choking her! The spirit's left," Dio tells Shackle.

He loosens his grip on the leather belt, and all of the ghouls hungrily gulp down air. They still need to breathe, after all. Belle is comatose in his arms, but Shackle doesn't remove the improvised noose.

Dio rounds on the spirits, the only one able to see and hear them.

"Why are you here?" she asks, angrily.

"Who the *fuck* are you to come in here and fuck with *my business*?" yells Ned Kelly back at her.

He has a rough voice, thick with a rural Australian drawl. Dio's companions – and the traumatised hostages – watch as she produces a fake police badge and points it at seemingly nothing.

"I am the law!" yells Dio, somewhat gleefully.

The spirit of Ned Kelly looks at it for a moment.

"You're no copper," he says, at last.

"No, but I see injustice all the same!" says Dio.

"Injustice is you comin' in here kicking me out of my little slice of life here!"

"Get back to the Iron Lung! That's where you belong!"

"They're the ones that kicked us out of our home!"

"So take it back!" yells Dio.

"They killed my friends. They drove us out here. We had no choice, *mate*," says Ned Kelly, venomously.

"So why are you killing my friends?" asks Dio.

"Killing? I didn't kill anyone!" says Ned Kelly, smiling roughly through his helmet. "Well that's not true, I tell a lie. I *did* kill some security guards. But these people - these

Anarchs, I didn't harm 'em. They're doing better than ever before! You seen that cash they got? Before they were just sitting here on their arses, plotting their little vengeance on the big boys in town. They're the same as us. The underdogs. We're in the same position they are. Just need get a lil bit of money, build up a little army. Money makes the world go around, so they say."

"What's happening?" interjects Chron.

He can only hear half of the conversation. Both Dio & Ned ignore him.

"Believe me, if I could I'd go kick the fucken Bridge's teeth in, I would!" explains Ned Kelly, pacing. "But I'm not strong enough. Not yet. I don't care what that fruit in Oxford st says. We're not strong enough. We need time."

"So there IS a resistance building? And you're deserting your own side?" asks Dio, contemptuously. "All you're doing here is bringing down attention on you and yours."

"What attention? No one gives *a shit* about out here," says Ned Kelly, gesturing around himself.

"I give a shit," says Dio.

"And why's that?"

"Because you're hurting people!"

"So?" says Ned Kelly, looking baffled.

"They have every right to be here, more so than yourself! You were forced out of your home, and then you immediately stole someone else's life!"

"What's this stealing? I didn't steal nuffin'. Well, I did steal the money. But I did that for their own good. I'm helping these bloodsuckers. They *need* me."

"Not from their perspective! Not from their loved one's perspective! Or my own."

While they argue Shackle looks down at Belle, comatose in his arms. He drops the *Incognito Presence* spell, and he and his companions fade back into view. Belle stares blearily at his face, unable to concentrate. After a moment of thought, he produces his whiskey flask, and holds it against Belle's head. A few drops of blood dripping down her face and into the flask. For later.

Blood is a potent sympathetic yantra. If Belle somehow escapes, Shackle still has a direct link to her.

"Look, I do what has to be done here," says Ned Kelly with a shrug. "They were just sitting here – do you know how long they were fighting the Camarilla?"

"Eons, I bet," says Dio, drily.

"Yes! Hundreds of years! And they haven't budged *shit* in all that time."

"But it's their fight! It's not yours."

"Three days here, we've done so much for 'em already. Look, we could buy a *tank* with that money. Drive it down George street and blow up Chifley Tower. With my help, I can *win them their war.*"

"Or you could bring down the wrath of their enemies! You're hurting their cause!"

"Bullshit. They're more powerful than they've ever been! Well until you fucking rocked up. You kicked the shit out of them. Seems like you've done more damage to them than I ever did."

"Thanks to you, they're weaker than ever," says Dio, hotly. "You've stolen their fight. You've stolen their freedom. Do you think they'd appreciate that? That they'd welcome you into their realm, their bodies, their minds?"

"Of course they did! Every act of rebellion is an *open door to me*. Belle shines like a beacon to me, calling me. I did *nothing* they wouldn't have done themselves. I just nudged them in the right direction. I took away no one's will. It was a partnership, mate!" says Ned Kelly, pacing back and forth angrily. The Swagman and the Push nod in agreement.

Dio's resolve is starting to shake. She glances over at Belle, comatose. She looks back at the spirit of Ned Kelly, her *Spirit Sight* blazing. His words ring true. Belle wasn't acting like Ned, wasn't speaking like him. Dio realises that she wasn't possessed, not totally – just... influenced. She turns back to Shackle, and realises he still has the belt around Belle's neck.

"Shackle, loosen the belt," says Dio. "I need to talk to Belle. Plus the thing you were actually choking has left her body. And she doesn't need to breathe anyways."

Shackle's grip doesn't loosen, and all eyes turn to him. The warlock shifts his gaze to one of the ghouls – a pale, dishevelled man with black hair. Shackle casts *Dominate Mind* on the ghoul, wrapping a tight chain of will around the thing's mind. Pointedly, he mentally commands it to shoot the other ghoul, a young blond woman in a leather jacket. Still twitching on the ground, the ghoul makes to obey, reaching for his gun. Shackle chokes down the Paradox infesting his spell even as it wracks his body.

Shackle joins Chron in the Abyssal Taint club. -2 to all social rolls until he fails a social roll. Too bad things are about to go pretty far beyond social niceties.

Dio stares at him. She knows he's cast a spell, but doesn't know what. With *Spirit Sight*, she can see the Paradox taint on him – he's covered in dark shadowy bruises, and his neck is a mass of seething bleeding darkness. Dio takes a step back: for a second, Shackle reminds her of ~~No Face~~.

"Shackle," says Chron, breaking the tense silence.

Dio and Shackle break eye contact and look at the young British lad.

"Gov', what are we doing here?" Chron asks. "Are we gonna kill these geezers or what?"

"NO!" Dio moves forward, shocked.

Shackle ignores Dio and stares into Chron's eyes, giving him a look.

Meanwhile, in the back of everyone's mind, a feeling starts to take hold. The urge to rebel against order and decency.

Shackle draws his own gun, gently placing it against Belle's chest. Dio rounds on him.

"Drop it," she says with righteous anger. "It's over."

"Kid," Shackle tells Dio slowly, "these things are monsters."

"The only monster here is you!" Dio yells, staring at the Paradox taint covering the older detective's neck and taking a step towards him.

Shackle cocks his gun slowly, looking Dio in the eyes.

"Enough," Blackeye'd Susan steps forward, casting *Deepen Shadows*.

The dingy warehouse they are in grows even dimmer, until the lightbulbs are totally eclipsed by writhing shadows and everyone is plunged into darkness. A darkness, Blackeye hopes, that will quell the rising tension.

Then Shackle pulls the trigger.

In the dark there is a muted flash of light, and Belle and her companions writhe on the ground as the bullet pierces one and all of them via their linked fate courtesy of Chron. The magical darkness fades as quickly as it arrived, and everyone stares at Shackle holding the smoking gun. Belle twitches, gravely wounded.

At this point, Dio's player flipped a coin. Heads, she'd lean into her police Aspiration, and try and arrest Shackle for his cold-blooded violence. Tails, she'd let the the Spirit of Rebellion influence her, instead.

She got Tails.

Something inside Dio snaps. She realises she's still holding her fake police badge, and crushes it in her fist.

"This cop ain't on your side, mate," Ned Kelly whispers in her ear.

"You're right," she responds.

She came here to exorcise these people, to help free them for a friend. 'No killing, alright?' he had said to her before they stepped through the portal in this place. Rage floods into her, rage and rebellion. This cop is murdering the person she came here to protect. She barely notices the spirit of Ned Kelly behind her, shadowing her every move, but she doesn't care. Dio reaches down and scours her pattern, tearing mana out of her arm, splattering blood onto the floor. The mana sublimates into her soul and she immediately flares her nimbus.

"LET HER GO!" Dio screams with the full force of a hundred thumping speakers. Behind her, the spirit of Ned Kelly mouths the words with her in unison.

Everyone watching is assaulted with a wall of music and colourful lights – a rave of the mind as her nimbus washes over them. The music sounds like Dio's voice, filled with rage. Behind her, the Spirit of Rebellion raises its hands and sends a *Blast* of explosive hate at the policeman, scorching his flesh and throwing him onto the ground.

Blackeye cannot see the spirit of Ned Kelly. But they sure as hell can see the *Blast* of hate strike Shackle. They cast *Soul Marks* on Dio. They see the health of her soul. They can tell that Dio has turned part of her soul out, and is currently holding it in her hands – her soulhammer. Blackeye can see the mutilation on the soul, and winces. Blackeye can see how this mutilation has poisoned Dio, and is causing her to lash out with magic more and more.

Dio still has the Rampant condition from when her Wisdom degenerated after creating her soulstone.

Blackeye also notices that Dio's soul looks very slightly different than it used to. It's not the wound – it's something else. A very subtle change in shape that Blackeye has only ever seen in mages that possess a Legacy.

Dio is not yet in a Legacy, but has unknowingly taken the first step to joining one, in Session 9. More on that, later. Much later – it's hard to find a mentor these days.

Beyond that, Blackeye can see the traces of a foreign entity. Something is – not quite possessing Dio, but is, sort of *Riding* her. Influencing her behaviour. They cannot see it, but conclude it is most likely one of the spirits they have been hunting.

Chron, seeing Dio about to launch herself at Shackle, casts Curse of Chronos on her. She immediately slows down, as though moving through honey. Her face contorts in slow motion, and she shoots Chron a death glare.

There is a bloody gurgle from the mind-controlled ghoul, who has snapped out of the catatonic state he was in after being shot. He's still trying to fulfil the command. With one hand, he tries to keep the blood from gushing out of his neck, with the other, he slowly raises his gun and shakily aims it at his fellow ghoul. He fires, and the recoil slips the gun out of his blood-slick fingers onto the floor. The shot catches the other ghoul in the head, instantly killing her. The dominated ghoul slumps, also dead, as his own shot ends his life through the Fate ties Chron has woven between them all. The three remaining vampires convulse, at death's door.

Dio, moving in slow-motion, casts a Life healing spell on Belle, to try and save her. Belle's body jerks as it tries to heal, her dead lungs heaving and dead heart pumping. But vampires are not alive, and she does not heal.

Shackle is in a world of pain, but ignores it to get up onto one knee and point his gun at Belle's head. Her eyes stare into his, wide and afraid.

"My childe...why?" she asks, still under the delusion that Shackle placed into her mind.

"For *her*," Shackle replies. Pulling the trigger.

All three vampires immediately begin turning to ash as they suffer their Final Death, but Shackle has only eyes for Belle. As she dies, Shackle reaches into her pattern and scours it, tearing mana from her rapidly disintegrating body. He has made her a blood sacrifice, reaping her pattern for mana.

And passes his Act of Hubris roll with only two dice.

Dio charges at him in a berserker's rage, her sledgehammer swinging in slow-mo towards Shackle's face. So distracted is he by the mana flooding into his pattern that he almost notices her too late. He stumbles back and flings a spell at her, one he knows well: *Co-Locate*. He hasn't formed the imago properly, but it's too late. As she crashes into him, she vanishes with a pop of air. He's not sure where she's gone.

For her.

Dio appears in a graveyard by the sea. At her feet is a grave labelled 'Imogen Ward'. This is a name that means nothing to Dio. She howls in frustration at the night sky. Rage pumping in her veins, and a Spirit of Rebellion whispering in her ear, she raises her hammer and brings it down on the headstone in front of her. And then on the one beyond that, and the one beyond that. She is a whirlwind of destruction and vents her fury on the graveyard itself.

Back at the warehouse, Chron approaches Shackle.

"Oi, maybe I missed a meeting," Chron jokes awkwardly, "but why did Dio want to help the blood suckers?"

"Dio's been possessed," Shackle attempts to catch his breath, pain thrumming through his chest. "By a demon. Or a spirit. Or ghost or something. She's not in her right state of mind. She might be dangerous. We might have to – we might have to stop her."

"Where did you send her?" Chron asks, nodding.

"I...I'm not sure. She came at me and I – I'm not sure." Shackle coughs up some blood, and clutches the wound that Dio and Ned Kelly gave him. It is bleeding badly.

"Something was up with her. Something was...*Riding* her," Blackeye agrees, looking just as pale as Shackle, and cradling a wound of their own. "Something was up with her soul – I couldn't really tell what. All I could tell is that it wasn't a ghost."

Shackl looks at them. "Are you saying that wasn't Dio?"

"The Drac's hypnotised the twist and twirl?" Chron asks.

Shackle nods grimly. "Could be."

The detective heads back to Belle's corpse – mostly ash now – and searches it, going through her pockets, but finds only her wallet, keys and phone, which he pockets.

Chron watches him, his fingers twitching. Itching. He cannot sense it, but the Swagman – Spirit of Thievery – is breathing down his neck. His eyes slide over to the throne made out of dollar bills that Belle was sitting on.

"We should get out of here," he says, looking around. "This place is burned – in a number of ways. Coppers will be here soon, most like."

Shackle nods.

"I did you a solid there, with the Drac's innit," Chron begins dancing around the subject. "Done bound their fates together – you go left, I'll go- well you'll also go right and straight and so on. So you're welcome, gov eh?"

"Right," Shackle nods, distracted, "thank you."

"Well it was the only smart play, eh. Wouldn't want any of these bloodsuckers coming after us while we sleep – had to make 'em all brown bread."

Brown Bread is Cockney Rhyming slang for 'Dead'. He uses this slang a lot.

"So, do us a favour, and send me home," says Chron, with a grin. "I'd like to rest – and count my winnings."

He hands Shackle a set of keys to his hostel dorm.

"Yeah. Sure. Get the stuff out of here. Split it up, fairly," Shackle continues, distracted.

He focuses on the hostel key, picking out the sympathetic links to its matching lock, and chains together *Co-Locate*. Chron, grinning, vanishes in a puff of stolen money.

Blackeye approaches the hostages, still bound, their eyes wide and crazed. They have witnessed death and magic, and their minds are at breaking point. Part of Blackeye wants to examine their souls for signs of damage. Better free them first, they think. First, cut the ropes. They pull out their magical tool - a set of garden shears.

There is a knock on one of the exit doors. Shackle freezes, hunched over the skeletonized vampire. Blackeye stands above the hostages, holding the shears. This is not a wholesome-looking scene.

Blackeye flicks on *Death Sight*, and recognises a powerful aura of death on the other side of the door. Shackle, using sensory range, *Scries* on the source of the knocking. He sees a bulky, pale figure in a thick coat standing patiently out front holding a phone. The bulky coat reminds Shackle of police wearing bullet proof vests under their clothing. He studies the face, and with a shock recognises that it is Antonio the dead security guard from the bank robbery. Last seen about an hour ago, lying on a morgue slab.



"Blackeye," Shackle tries to quietly get the Moros' attention. "We need to go. It's Antonio."

"But, the hostages-"

"We need to grab them and go now," Shackle stresses, "It's the dead bodyguard from the bank. We need to get these people out of here."

"Agreed. Can you co-locate them out? I think I can handle Antonio."

"Sure," Shackle starts rifling through Garret's ash-covered pockets, "You take them. I need to grab a few things."

The door opens and Antonio shuffles in, holding a phone. He is unsteady on his feet, and his dead, lifeless eyes stare directly ahead. Blackeye flicks *Death Sight* back on, and sees a lot of things. Antonio is dead – of course. Behind him, hesitantly floating some distance away, is Antonio's ghost, who looks very confused and lost. The phone in Antonio's hand is also a font of deathly energy and – something tugs at the edge of Blackeye's periphery. There's another ghost here. They turn and see something small and pale forming above the dead body of the hostage. A new ghost is being born.

Shackle studies Antonio – he's not acting like the vampires or ghouls he's seen today. He's acting like a corpse that's struggling to walk.

"Blackeye," Shackle asks, warily, "what is this?"

"It's a dead body *and* a ghost," Blackeye explains slowly, "but they're separate."

Antonio takes a step forward and Shackle raises his gun in sync.

"Freeze," Shackle says clearly and steady. "This is Detective Constable T– this is the NSW police."

Shackle's eyes flicker towards Blackeye, having only just caught himself.

He's unwilling to share his Sympathetic Name. Yet. But he's struggling to keep track of his Sleeper and Awoken lives.

"Gladly," a deep, female voice emits from the phone.

Someone is video-calling them, and by the tiny, staticky sound quality they are calling from a long distance away.

Shackle lowers his gun slightly. "Who are we speaking with?"

"I'll introduce myself if you introduce yourself, Officer," the voice says playfully. "Or– sorry, it was Detective Constable, yes?"

The voice speaks in a clipped British accent, dripping sarcasm and ulterior meaning. Shackle hesitates. He's not sure how many ways he might misstep here.

"Blackeye, you called your companion," the phone continues. "Beautiful name. Beautiful. Mine is Sable."

Shackle's hand twitches.

In the Chantry of the Rainbow Serpent, Shackle learned a secret from Thelxiepeia the Siren. He learned the vampire who killed his wife was a necromancer called Sable.

"I'm here by order of the Prince, but... it seems my quarrel with this particular group is no longer relevant."

Shackle looks down at the bodies surrounding him. He takes a deep breath in and nods.

"Hello Sable," he says at last. "You can call me Officer Day. You're the sheriff."

"Yes."

"I'm afraid your jurisdiction isn't recognised here."

"You're right. Not this far out. But the point is moot. You've done my work for me."

There is a pause, and the phone line crackles with a sound not unlike a human being screaming in pain.

"Do I know you, Officer Day?" Sable's voice crackles down the line.

"No," Shackle admits. "Not yet."

"You seem familiar," the voice wonders.

"I'm just some guy."

The phone clicks. The classic default sound of a photo being taken. A photo of Blackeye, standing next to several corpses, and still-tied hostages. And of Shackle next to them.

Realising the play too late, Shackle immediately approaches Antonio, who doesn't react at all, and takes the phone from him. Blackeye recasts *Soul Marks* and stares at the visitor. Antonio's dead body has no soul – nothing at all. It is empty. A mindless shell; a zombie. The ghost hovering behind it looks like the remnants of a soul – faded but distinct. As they examine the zombie and ghost, another thing leaps out at them. The phone the zombie brought in also looks like the remains of a soul. It's like a ghost – but forged into a phone. An iPhone 7, to be precise.

Shackle, meanwhile, tries to *Scry* the person on the other end of the phone, careful to point the camera away from himself and Blackeye. He pulls his whiskey hipflask out and uses the reflection as a yantra for the spell, targeting the voice on the phone. The spell fails, utterly.

In idle moments, Shackle has previously tried to scry very remote locations, testing his abilities, – and he recognises the sensation of the spell failing, the inability for his spell to chain together two vastly separate locations. An immense distance. Like looking up at the moon or stars. This way his spell breaks, it feels further than the solar system, than anything in this universe. The spell fails, because the target is not in this plane of existence.

"Interesting," Shackle says to himself.

"Might you mind not waving the phone around quite so much?" Sable asks. "It is quite disorienting."

"Sable. It's interesting to finally hear your voice," says Shackle, flicking the camera off on the phone so that it stops transmitting image.

"Finally? And here I was thinking we hadn't been acquainted."

"Well, not yet. But word gets around. I-" he is interrupted by another distant scream over the phone line.

"Sable?" Shackle asks, concentrating. "–where are you calling from?"

"Oh, apologies. The reception is terrible down here."

"That's alright," Shackle nods. "I'll be there soon enough."

He's right about that.

"One of our...streetwalkers," Sable's voice rolls the word around in their mouth briefly before spitting it out, "reported being shot by a policeman the other night. Might that have been you...Detective Day?"

This happened in Session 1, when Shackle got jumped outside of Dio's bar.

"Don't know about that," Shackle answers, "but nice to know."

"Of course," Sable's voice flutters down through the phone, "tell me, Officer, why did you kill the Anarchs? I think I know why, but I would sorely like to hear it from you."

"What's an Anarch, Miss Sable?" Shackle ask, innocently, still pouring through the deceased vampires' pockets and ushering Blackeye to continue cleaning the scene.

"Oh," Sable demures, "I think you have some idea."

Shackle nods, "I think you have some idea why I killed them. What's your theory, Sable?"

Sable does something almost similar to laugh. "Well, a group of vampires have been causing a lot of trouble in downtown Paramatta. Which has brought a lot of unwarranted attention down on my kin. There are laws about this sort of thing, you know. Not mortal laws. It's best if you don't allow the sheep to witness our majesty, after all."

"If I hadn't beaten you to them, what would you have done to the Anarchs?"

"I came to parlay. And if they weren't going to atone for breaking the Masquerade, I would have killed them all."

"What would you have done if they had *atoned for their sins*?"

"We...would have installed their leader as Baron in this part of town. And the Anarchs would be forced to kneel to the Camarilla."

"Seems like I did you a favour."

"You did!" Sable chuckles.

"Guess you owe me one."

"Maybe," Sable replies coyly.

"Need other favours?"

"Always."

"Then maybe you want to give me a call sometime."

"I am giving you a call," Sable pronounces each word carefully.

Shackle looks at Blackeye. "What do you need done?"

"The person you killed is— *was* the leader of the Anarchs. But she is a mere pup compared to the real player. There is an Anarch known as Hector – one of the eldest of our kind. His defection from the Camarilla was an insult to our esteemed organisation," Sable explains. "We would see him destroyed."

"Where can I find him?"

"He operates out of Paramatta like the rest of the Anarchs. But that is all we know. He has a number of means of obfuscating his location."

"What will you give me once he's dead?"

"Well I'd offer you money, but somehow I don't think that's going to cut it."

"Depends."

"For the head of Hector. 50 million."

Chron's player, off-screen: "I'm up for that gig!"

"Deal," Shackle agrees coldly, "and I get a meeting. With you."

"I don't meet with...well I'm not quite sure what you are."

"Aren't you curious?"

"Oh I am very curious. But," Sable explains, "you laid to waste to three of the more feared vampires of Sydney. And while I can see that you are not in the greatest of health as a result of it – I am not a fool."

"Trust goes a long way, Sable. Do you want to make that leap?"

"Why don't you tell me what you are, and I won't kill you where you stand. This arrangement is getting, as they say, a bit too hot for my liking."

"Listen," Shackle's negotiation training kicking in, "sure, you can look at what I've just done and make an enemy. Or you can look at what I've accomplished, and make a powerful friend."

"Very well,"

"A *useful* friend, Sable."

"You know we can't allow any witnesses. The four kine behind you – they've seen too much."

"I'll take care of it."

"How will you do that?"

"I'll take care of it," Shackle replies curtly. "Do you second-guess everyone in your employ?"

"Well you haven't exactly signed a contract. If you kill them now, on camera, I'll believe it. But somehow, I don't think a cop will kill four innocent, poor, little bloodbags."

"You don't think a cop will kill when it suits them?"

Blackeye gives Shackle a look. Shackle returns it apologetically.

"Well, I think they might. But I need to see it."

"Killing witnesses is the only way to make sure they don't speak?," Shackle nods and flattens his hand, reassuring Blackeye.

"Among my kind, there are other ways. But I don't think you are of my kind. So I ask again: what are you?" Sable's voice sings curiously, "Are you with the Sabbat?"

"Do you want to know what I am, Sable, or do you want the job done? I take my privacy very seriously."

"Very good. I want the job done first. That will no doubt give me some inclination as to what you are."

Shackle nods. "Give me a time and number to call. There'll be no witnesses. No one will have seen this. It will be taken care of. Then I'll call you back, and you tell me what I need to know. Do we have a deal? Do you want this *thing* dead or not?"

"Very well," Sable agrees, "my number is +666-1985181896."

*This is not a country code or number that exists. Shackle's player: what the fuck is Sable?
What is going on?*

"When should I call?" Shackle notes the number down.

"Midnight," Sable purrs. "Of course."

"I'll call at midnight once the witnesses are taken care of. Then I'll take care of this thing you want dead."

There is a beat as Shackle waits for a response.

"You know," Sable replies eventually, "I've just placed you. Do you have a twin brother?"

"No," Shackle replies quickly. "I get that a lot."

While this exchange is finishing, Blackeye is quietly conversing with Antonio's ghost off to the side. They are trying once again to get him to 'move on'.

"Antonio, do you remember me? I didn't think I'd bump into you here," says Blackeye, calmly.

Antonio stares at them, wide-eyed, amazed that someone can finally see them.

"You – you were at the bank?" Antonio asks, slowly. "Where am I? What am I doing here?"

"It's OK. You're almost done here."

"What does that mean?"

"The more I'm learning about life and death, it makes less and less sense every day," says Blackeye, softly. "But one thing I do know is that a lot of it is about loss."

They gesture at the carnage surrounding them.

"Change is inevitable, and life is loss," says Blackeye, with a weak smile. "Don't you feel like it's time that change accompanied your loss?"

As they speak, they cast a Death spell on the zombie. It begins to decay rapidly, growing paler and frailer. It shrinks slightly as it decays, and the ghost's final anchor loosens its tight grip.

And Blackeye finally succeeds on their persuasion roll despite their abysmal social attributes!

The ghost of Antonio stares at Blackeye'd Susan, and then at his slowly-decaying corpse. He nods, once, and closes his eyes. With *Death Sight*, Blackeye sees the ghost-phone in Shackle's hands swing open like a clam-phone. It swings open, wider and wider, like a black hole, and Blackeye can hear a sound like a rusty gate swinging open. Blackeye watches as the ties binding Antonio to this plane of existence crumble. Under *Death Sight*, Blackeye sees the ghost begins to flicker, wisps of him pulling away into the hungry dark maw that was the phone. It tugs at him, sucking like a vacuum cleaner, and he stretches and distorts as more of his essence is pulled into it. The last thing Blackeye sees of him is his expression – one of horror and wonder – as he is pulled into the ghost-phone, which again snaps shut with a metallic clang.

There is a prolonged silence.

"What the *fuck* just happened," Sable says, furiously.

"What are you talking about? We just made a deal," Shackle answers, nonplussed, "I'll call you at midnight and-"

"No, not you," Sable asks, confused, "The other one."

"The other *what*?" Shackle asks.

"What just happened?" says Sable, a tinge of panic creeping into her voice.

"Listen," Shackle replies, "do we have a deal or not?"

There is a pause.

"Yes, I-" Sable begins to answer, shaken.

"Good. I'll speak with you at midnight." Shackle responds, hanging up the phone and cutting off Sable as he rounds on Blackeye.

"What just happened?" he asks.

"It was important to say goodbye." Blackeye explains innocently.

"What?"

"You remember Antonio. I helped – well, I *think*, I helped his ghost move on."

"That's something you can do?"

"Apparently," Blackeye answers.

The zombie takes a step forward, its face now greenish-white. It holds its hand out, silently demanding the phone back. Shackle takes a step back. It steps towards him.

Shackle shoots Blackeye the same look when it's their turn to get a round of whiskeys at Dio's bar. "You want to take care of this?"

"Let's wait," says Blackeye. "See what it does – but don't give it the phone."

The Zombie stumbles forward, and tries to grab Shackle. With Blackeye's *Ghost Shield* spell still up, it struggles to touch him. Shackle eyes it with disgust, and as it lunges again, he casts *Co-Locate* on it and sends it away. As he does so, he notices two things. One, his spell has been infused with Paradox – a lot of it. The other thing he notices is that, from this angle, he can see into Antonio's coat, which has a C4 explosive vest hidden underneath. A cold wind whips up around them and a swirling grey portal opens up, sending Zombie Antonio away.

"Where did you send it?" Blackeye, asks, curious.

"I – fuck. I'm not sure. He was – he was wearing a C4 vest. We need to get him back–"

At that moment Shackle's phone pings. He pockets Sable's phone, and fetches his own out.

It's a message from Dio.

The message is a picture of a graveyard – a graveyard he knows well. A graveyard in ruins. Gravestones have been smashed, trees have been uprooted, dirt has been scoured.



Dio's player is nothing if not vindictive. The player may know that she just trashed Shackle's wife's graveyard, but Dio did not. She just wanted to let Shackle know what happens when he betrays her trust and sends her away like a naughty child.

Wordlessly, Shackle seizes his connection to Dio and chains his position together with hers using *Co-Locates*.

She is currently sitting in the back of an uber, starting the long journey back to Sydney from Evoca. Shackle appears beside her in a twist of Space.

"What the hell did you do?" Shackle's voice causes the driver to swear and swerve in shock.

Dio blinks, surprised.

"What have you done?!" Shackle shouts.

"Wh- what have *I* done? What have *you* done!" Dio snaps back, "You just murdered five people!"

"Dio," Shackle waves her comment away, "I am not messing around. Do you have any idea what. You. Have. Done."

Dio snarls and shoves him back. Behind her, the Spirit of Ned Kelly stirs, glaring at Shackle with hateful eyes.

"So I smashed a few ancient graves," hisses Dio. "It's not like they care anymore. They're dead."

"You self absorbed, single-minded, selfish, spoiled brat," Shackle shouts.

He grabs her by the collar, and Dio punches him right in the face.

To be honest, I'm surprised it took 11 sessions for one of the Cabal to attack another.

In his hostel, Chron is counting his ill-gotten gains, when a swirling grey portal appears above him. He backs away from it. When nothing sinister bursts forth from the portal, he fetches a 'do not disturb' sign and hangs it on his door and locks it. Then he pokes his head through the portal. And appears in Dio's apartment. Ahead of him, Antonio the zombie is shambling towards the stairs.

Shackle's paradox bound the last four locations he Co-Located to together into one portal: Dio's apartment, the warehouse, Chron's hostel, and Evoca graveyard.

"Who the fuck are you?" asks Chron, stepping through the portal.

Zombie Antonio ignores him.

"What are you doing in Dio's room?" asks Chron, studying the decayed flesh of the zombie with alarm.

Antonio ignores him, and stumbles out of the room. His paranoid senses tingling, Chron chases after the zombie, and grabs him roughly by the shoulder, spinning him around.

Antonio's decayed face leers at him, and he recoils backwards, tugging his coat open. Chron stares at the rows of C4 explosives tied to the zombie's chest.

"Bloody hell!" he whispers, eyes wide.

Time Sight flares on, and he can tell the bomb is not about to blow. He reaches out, and casts *Choose the Thread*, and his choices branch in front of him, like mirror images. Two paths, two possibilities. In one of them, he tries to slip the C4 vest off the zombie, and fumbles it – the zombie fights him off, flicks the detonator and blows them both sky high. The other path involves Chron using his shiv to gently slice the vest off the zombie, disarming him. With no hesitation, Chron picks the latter path. The zombie shambles off down the stairs, then exits into an alleyway and shambles off into the night, leaving Chron holding the C4 vest.

Chron is on a roll! First he steals several bank robbery millions, and now a C4 vest right off someone's back. Makes sense, given that he's being influenced by a the Swagman, a Spirit of Thievery.

Meanwhile, Blackeye, left alone in a warehouse full of dead people and hostages, sighs to themselves. They pick up an empty gatorade bottle – one of many littering the abandoned warehouse – and cast a variant of *Soul Jar* on it. Then, carefully – very carefully – they use it to scoop up the newly formed ghost that was just born of the dead hostage. The fledgling ghost is totally compliant – barely aware – and easily squeezes into the gatorade bottle. Blackeye carefully screws the lid shut, and puts the bottle in their knapsack. Silently, behind them, the Spirit of the Push watches them impassively.

Back in the uber, Dio roars at Shackle and swings at him, cracking him in the face. She feels a Space spell go off, and tries to kick at him, but somehow misses, her foot sliding off impossibly. In the front seat, the uber driver yells at them to cut it the hell out.

"You have no idea what you've done!" Shackle shouts, trying to grab Dio's arms.

She hisses and responds by throwing another punch which slides off Shackle in a twist of Space magic. This only serves to make her madder.

Shackle has thrown up Break Boundary, which lets him slip into cracks and small spaces with ease, niftily avoiding Dio's attacks.

Dio reaches for her soulhammer, sitting beside her in the chair, but there's no room to wield it in the backseat, and it awkwardly scrapes against the window and roof. Shackle tries to grab the weapon from her hand, and Dio uses her recent police training to grab his

wrist instead, and with her other hand, opens the car door. With a tug She yanks him right out of his seat and through the open door.

Which would be much trickier if he didn't have Break Boundary up.

Shackle falls from the car and tumbles onto the gravel roadside with a series of painful grunts. Dio, still in the back of the uber, catches her breath.

"Keep driving, buddy!" she snarls at the uber driver, who is still yelling at her to get out.

Something in her tone makes him think better of kicking her out, and he hits the accelerator. Dio looks out through the back and sees Shackle now standing on the side of the road, rapidly getting smaller. She winds down the window and gives him the middle finger.

Then she feels the space in the backseat of the car warp as Shackle *Co-locates* her out and onto the gravel next to him. She retains the momentum of the car and tumbles roughly down the road, her sledgehammer skittering along the asphalt, gravel showering over her.

Shackle approaches her as she casts a healing spell on herself.

"You're a real piece of work, kid," Shackle shouts, "She had nothing to do with this!"

"Fuck you," Dio spits at Shackle, "Murderer."

Dio stands, life magic wreathed around her, as her hands and knuckles thicken and grow hairy, turning into gorilla fists. She swings wildly at Shackle, smashing him in the ribs and sending him flying.

She springs after him, just as he chains *Ban* together around himself, vanishing from Dio's view.

Dio charges through the distortion in space and flips through to the other side, sprawling on the road again. The *Ban* vanishes as quickly as it came and Shackle re-appears, momentarily disoriented.

Dio takes this moment to cast *Control Gravity* on her sledgehammer, which is lying some distance away on the gravel, intending it to strike Shackle.

The soulhammer falls through the air towards Shackle who deftly bends Space around himself. The hammer bends past him with a whistle, straight at Dio who snatches it out of the air with practised ease.

The two combatants stare at each other. Bloodied and bruised. Shackle's hand going to his wounded ribs. Dio snarling with rage.

Shackle closes his eyes, and exhales. Remembering the kid in front of him. Remembering another kid. Remembering other people who have made mistakes.

"Dio," Shackle begins, his voice as calm as any parent who has lost their temper, "listen to me—"

Dio cuts him off, screaming wordlessly and charging at him with the sledgehammer. Shackle senses a spell go off – *Kinetic Blow* – and realises he is in considerable danger.

Dio leaps at him, sledgehammer held high above her head, and he snaps a chain of *Co-Locate* up in front of her in panic.

Once again he reaches out blindly, realising too late that he has grabbed his oldest, strongest sympathetic connection. The one to his dead wife's grave.

Dio blurs through space, her sledgehammer coursing with kinetic energy, and comes down hard on the gravedirt below her, which explodes in a shower of mud and wooden splinters.

Shackle Steps through the blurred space, frustrated anger and parental patience on his face.

"Dio, I –"

Dio slams into Shackle, her gorilla fists pummeling his wounded torso, as they both fall back into the mud. Rain falling on them in a sad, light, drizzle.

Dio scrabbles for Shackle, who tries to subdue her, grappling her from behind. She struggles against his grip and he tightens it, her breath exploding from her lungs.

As he does, the spirit of Ned Kelly – quietly and carefully *Riding* Dio this entire time – chokes. Its ban of suffocation by policemen simmering painfully as Shackle grapples Dio, her *Invoke Bane* spell still active. With a hiss, the spirit slides out of Dio's mind, and the rebellious fires within her begin to ebb away – back to the usual Dio levels of recklessness.

Dio thrashes against Shackle's grip and snarls. Then breaths. Calming. They both catch their breath. Shackle loosens his grip, and the pair sit up.

After a beat, rain dancing down on them, Dio points at the ruined grave beside them.

There is a crater in the dirt a foot wide, courtesy of Dio's kinetically empowered hammer, which has penetrated down into the coffin below and shattered the wooden lid. Inside the broken coffin below is – nothing.

Empty.

No body. No bones. Just empty silk lining.

Shackle's wife's coffin is empty.

12.1: Midnight Dealings Part I

“Sometimes a deal with the devil. . .”

What ensures is the first half of the thrilling conclusion to Story 2! This one is dialogue heavy and ended up being twice the length of a normal writeup, so we decided to cut it in two. Clearly our new method of recording sessions is paying off, but the downside is it takes me much longer to do these write ups. So please bear with us if the ending of Part 1 is not as satisfying as you are used to.

As always, please throw on the [The Fallen World](#) soundtrack as you read, so you can truly capture the mood of the story.

It is night. Evoca graveyard, some 60 minutes drive north of Sydney. The final resting place of Imogen Ward, the late wife of Shackle. Her grave – and many around it – are trashed; some gravestones are smashed, others cracked, many toppled.

The young Thyrsus Dio decimated the burial grounds after Shackle had murdered the vampires Dio had sworn to save.

The fighting was nasty, brutish, and short. Both Dio and Shackle are bleeding and bruised, sitting next to the empty grave of Imogen, breathing hard. The fight has left them.

Dio picks herself up, covered in dirt and gravel. She casts one of her favoured rites – *Knit* – on the pair of them. Wounds close up, cuts stop bleeding and bruises stop swelling. The pains and aches are replaced by a blissful, numbing coolness. Without looking at Shackle, Dio begins to limp away, her torn up leg improving with each step. She walks on something that crunches beneath her feet – a piece of grave stone. It says ‘Mary Anne Levine, age 9’. Dio pushes aside the rising feeling of guilt inside her.

"Where do you think you're going?" Shackle calls out, tired.

"Home. To my apartment. The one you trashed," Dio spits.

Shackle nods, picking himself up slowly. "Not yet, kid. We need to talk."

"There's alcohol back at mine," says Dio, curtly. "Good for talking," she points at the swirling grey portal that hangs in the air near Imogen's grave. "Does that lead home?"

Last session, Shackle got a Paradox on his Co-Locate that bound his last four Co-Locates together: The Graveyard, Dio's Apartment, Chron's Hostel, and the Vampire Warehouse.

"It does," Shackle admits, "but we need to talk."

For a moment, both of them see a silhouette in the portal – a person. Then the portal winks shut.

"You're a dick," says Dio.

Shackle nods again, concerned. "Yeah, but that wasn't me."

In Dio's apartment, Chron is about to step back through the portal, when he sees a silhouette inside it. He hesitates for a moment, and the portal dissolves.

"Bugger," he says, alone in Dio's trashed apartment, holding a vest of C4 explosives.

Blackeye is still in the warehouse with several corpses and four living hostages. They head back towards the bound hostages to free them, at last, when a shudder runs down their spine. They turn around, and see a silhouette in the portal. A figure steps out of it, and it winks shut behind them.

It is ~~No Face~~.

Back in the graveyard, Dio pulls out her phone and tries to summon an uber. This late, and this far outside of Sydney, there are no takers.

"No one around," she says flatly.

Shackle walks over to a bench and sits down. "Come have a seat, kid."

With a heavy sigh, Dio joins him, opting to sit cross-legged on the ground nearby.

For a moment neither of them say anything. Finally Shackle clears his throat.

"What the hell was this?" Shackle gestures at the carnage around him.

"Why did you kill the people I said we'd help?" Dio spits venomously back.

"Those– Dio, those weren't the people we said we'd help. Those weren't people."

"We were there to help them. They reached out to me."

"Dio, we were there to capture a Heist Spirit so we could rob the Athenaeum. I don't know what story you—"

"A friend of mine reached out, said her friends were possessed. I said we'd help."

"You've been communicating with vampires?" Shackle blinks. "Telling them we were coming?"

"All I know is we weren't there to murder anyone!"

"We weren't there with good intentions from the beginning, Dio" Shackle replies bluntly. "It's a real pretty lie you're telling yourself. I'm not saying I went in there intending to kill anyone, but we knew they were bank robbers when we went in there. Murderers. We knew we were dealing with killers. Obviously it escalated and broke bad, and—"

"We ended up doing inexcusable things," Dio shouts.

Shackle pauses. "What do you think we did, exactly?"

"I was there to get the spirits out of them – at which I succeeded. I freed those people. The spirits were the ones pushing them into robbing the banks and," Dio catches themselves awkwardly, "– other stuff. I freed their souls though, and then you murdered them!"

"Is that why you did this?" Shackle stands pointing at the ruined graves.

"Oh, this?," Dio smirks casually. "This anger was intended for you. It's a good thing I let it loose here instead." says Dio, venomously.

"So you just lost control?"

"That's a bit rich, coming from you. You just murdered five people."

"They weren't people!" Shackle replies.

"And I'm not sure if you're aware, but that asshole over there definitely had a hand in all this," Dio points at the Spirit of Ned Kelly, watching the proceedings with some amusement.

Shackle casts an eye around at the seemingly empty graveyard. "I assume you're talking about spirits?"

"Yes. The poor man's Ned Kelly. He followed me here. He's a Spirit of Rebellion."

Dio is trying to deflect blame onto the spirit of Ned Kelly. Who definitely influenced her behaviour, but didn't directly cause it. But Dio is not very good at explaining Spirit things to the rest of her cabal.

"Listen, Dio. Losing control – I get. I understand. But why – why does what happened back there make you do this?" says Shackle, gesturing at the ruined graves.

"You killed innocents! You may not think of them as that, but as far as we know they didn't kill anyone. That was the spirits–"

"Dio. I looked inside their heads. I saw hundreds of years of a monster's life. I can tell you, they killed people. Innocents. Real people."

"Did you read all of their minds? Every one?"

"No I – there wasn't time, there was a lot of stuff to parse – centuries of unlife. But I saw them killing people." Shackle answers.

"Would it change your mind if you knew that they don't want to necessarily drink blood to survive." Dio argue. "That some of them want to live again?"

"Yeah well we don't all get to live again," Shackle answers bluntly.

His eyes wander to his wife's ruined grave.

For a moment neither of them says anything.

"Listen, we need to figure this out," Shackle sits back down beside Dio. "I'm sorry about losing control back there. I understand what happened here was an accident too, and you lost control as well."

The apology hangs in the air, unreciprocated.

Dio pulls her phone out, and shows the last texts she got from Lamia Pseudonym:

Promise me you won't hurt them.

"You made me into a liar," Dio says simply.

"You made yourself into one when you made promises on behalf of the whole Cabal without letting us in on it," Shackle shakes his head sadly. "Not to mention, who exactly have you been texting about our illegal heist plans?"

"We were invited to that warehouse to get rid of those spirits and you turned it into a massacre! The spirits were the ones causing the real harm!"

"It's impressive how quickly you derailed my apology," Shackle says into the air in front of them. "You've been secretly texting someone about our heist plans and you got invited to a warehouse full of vampires? Why didn't you tell any of us this?"

"First of all," Dio begins to explain, "I didn't say anything to them about the heist. And secondly, I didn't realise my friend's possessed people were the same people as your bank robbers until we arrived and I saw my friend. It sounded like a Spirit problem, so I had intended to deal with them myself – after the heist. Then you killed them."

"I – OK. Let's come back that," Shackle concedes.

He sighs, realising he needs to open up. Shackle points to the nearby ruined grave.

"That is my wife's grave."

Dio blinks. "Oh."

The two mages stare at the devastation surrounding them.

"Why did you teleport me to your wife's grave?!?" Dio shouts.

"I didn't mean to, Dio," Shackle says quietly, bone-tired. "The spell went wrong. It was an accident."

It starts to rain again.

"Listen, I know you didn't know this when you did..." Shackle gestures around, "– all this. I understand that we have something we need to work out here. I understand some spirit was egging you on. And, for what it's worth, even though I disagree with you, I'm sorry that what happened back there may have put you in a difficult position. And I get that this was an accident."

Shackle's apology hangs in the air for the second time. He knows he's not getting anything more from Dio. Not here. Not now.

"That being said," he continues, "if you ever – ever – attack *her* memory again, then I will burn everything you know to the ground."

Shackle stands, calmly, and turns away, leaving the threat hanging in the air.

"And you're gonna help me rebuild all this on the weekends," he says, with a gesture at the devastation.

Dio closes her eyes. Shackle feels a spell go off as the rain intensifies. All around him, the greenery on the graves begins to swell and straighten as Dio's life magic pours into the ruined cemetery, and the garden surrounding it blooms and heals. She wanders over to Imogen's grave and lifts up the fallen stone, putting it back in place. She also notes that the grave is empty – there's no body within. She throws Shackle a quizzical look, but decides now is not the time to pry.

Shackle nods at her work – it's a start. He switches on *Space Sight*, and confirms what he saw last time he was here. His sympathetic connection to this grave is to the memory of his wife – not her dead body. Which is gone.

*"After all, wouldn't you like to know what a necromancer wants with your dead wife?"
-Thelxiepeia the Siren*

Shackle's confused. He's hurt. He's angry. He's sad. He needs to figure out what this means, and he can't do it here. He's already feeling vulnerable enough in front of Dio. He turns back to the young Thyrsus and switches *Mind Sight* on. Dio hasn't apologised – not properly. But in her aura he can see the rage, shame, and guilt she is feeling over her actions. In some ways, it is like looking in a mirror.

The hatchet has been buried – for the moment. There will be more to discuss later, once Shackle and Dio have had time to decompress. Dio is not particularly mature, and is unwilling to apologise for the carnage she has wrought. Shackle on the other hand is mature enough to acknowledge her feelings and apologise, but is also suffering from so much PTSD that he cannot and will not accept that vampires and ghouls deserve to live.

The *Mind Sight* also reveals the presence of other minds. There is one hovering directly above Dio. And beyond her, he sees a further eight minds, scattered throughout the graveyard.

"Dio," Shackle asks slowly, "why are there several minds around you? Are you haunted?"

Dio flicks *Spirit Sight* on. The Spirit of Ned Kelly is chilling behind her, but that's it. Otherwise, the graveyard is empty of spirits. Eerily empty. Dio points towards Ned Kelly.

"I can see this one," she says.

"OK. I think I know what's going on here," Shackle stiffens. "Ghosts."

The invisible minds in the graveyard are gathering around Dio. She can feel the hair on her neck rising up, but cannot see anything.

"I think we should go, now," she says, spooked.

"We're going to go," Shackle agrees, speaking slowly and loudly to the empty air around them while backing up, "and we're going to come back later and fix this."

He bends over to pick up the bouquet of flowers he had left on his wife's grave, now discarded on the side. He straightens the flowers – and notices that there are several new growths shooting out of them – and places them back on the grave, covering the hole Dio made. He is trying to show the ghosts that he is on their side – he is someone who cares for the graveyard. With *Mind Sight* on he can tell that the ghosts are leaving him alone. They only have eyes for Dio.

Both mages feel a supernatural effect go off, and Dio feels an icy coldness drip down her spine. A wave of exhaustion rolls over her. She is tired to the bone, freezing and wet. Her vision starts to blur, and in the rain and darkness she catches a flash of a grisly sight.

A child with his head split open.

A woman with bulging eyes and a noose around her neck.

An elderly couple, withered and shrunken.

A charred figure, burnt to a crisp.

A teenage girl, wearing victorian-era bathers, bloated and bedraggled.

An old man with no throat.

An asian man in catholic priest garb with bruising around his neck.

She sees them for a flash only – surrounding her on all sides.



His *Mind Sight* still active, Shackle watches as the rage, guilt and shame within Dio coalesces into one overriding emotion. Terror.

Without a second thought she bolts out of the graveyard. Shackle backs out, slower, watching the minds follow Dio. They form a line at the edge of the graveyard, and Shackle can feel the hostile energy freezing off them. But they do not pursue beyond the boundary of the graveyard.

"We need Blackeye," Shackle says, concerned. He backs away.

It's time to queue up Playlist: [Abyss](#)

Blackeye, meanwhile, needs their cabal. They are stood over the hostages, who are moaning through their cloth gags. They are holding their dedicated tool ready to shear through the cable ties securing the hostages to their chairs. At the other end of the warehouse stands ~~No Face~~. They are staring at each other, the way a wolf and a deer stare at one another.

~~No Face~~ is wearing its customary black suits, its bright hand shining like blood, its pitch black left hand almost invisible in the gloom. And in place of its face there is only nothing – an impression of where a face should be, a vague silhouette of a head with no discernible features except for the distinct impression *that it is staring right at you.*



~~No Face~~ speaks. Its words do not seem to come from its non-existent mouth, nor do they seem to pass through the air towards Blackeye; they just sear into their head like a burning brand.

"I have witnessed your workss and ack-nnowledged themm."

Its tone is low, its annunciation slightly off, the words sounding for a bit too long.

Blackeye straightens up, the shears held lightly in their hand.

"Yes. And what do you think I should do next?" asks Blackeye, quietly, not moving an inch.

"Con-tinue on the, path you-have already begunnn. According to the termss off the com-pact with your mas-ter, you, will, now be my, pen-ult-imate vic-tim."

"Why are you here?" asks Blackeye.

"I have come; to bring you a gift?"

"What kind of gift is this?"

Blackeye'd Susan feels a pressure on their mind. Something pushing at them, like a grave worm wriggling into a soft plump corpse. Blackeye instinctively activates *Death Sight*, to try and understand what is happening. ~~No Face~~ is tinged with Death – this much is unsurprising, given how many people it has killed.. But its red right hand is absolutely wreathed in Death energies – to Blackeye, it looks like a skeletal hand, covered in dripping red gore.

Blackeye steps back. The pressure on their mind increases, and they understand that ~~No Face~~ is trying to give them profane, abyssal knowledge. Blackeye casts their mind back to the anti-arcanas symbols of the Abyss they learned from those accursed ipads in New Atlantis. Learning those symbols had cost them, but it was a cost Blackeye could bear. They take a deep breath, and succumb to the pressure of the knowledge.

Every door and window in the warehouse bursts open and a hurricane sweeps in, sending debris flying all around Blackeye. The ashes of the vampires are swept away in an instant, a tornado of death and ash. All five hostages, dead or alive, shudder as though having an epileptic fit, struggling against their bonds. The blood on the floor writhes and forms into abyssal symbols, all identical, all alike. This symbol burns into Blackeye's mind – a symbol they recognise the inverted shape of. It is an anti-symbol of Matter, and is

accompanied by gibbered phrases, shuddering movements and profane, broken Atlantean. It is a rote – a befouled rote. It sits in Blackeye’s mind like a sore, and they cannot help but poke at it, as one pokes at an ulcer with one’s tongue. The rote is new, yes – but the spell they recognise. It is a variant of the Matter spell ‘*Crucible*’, which is used to purify materials and tools.

Blackeye looks up, and sees that ~~No Face~~ has vanished. They turn back to the hostages, who are still twitching, blood running in a small stream from their eyes, ears and mouth. Blackeye gently cuts their bonds and rouses them, telling them they are, at last, free.

Clearly there is a bit more going on with Blackeye than has been portrayed so far...

Oh, and you can resume playing the [The Fallen World](#) playlist from here on out.

Chron, meanwhile, is standing in Dio’s wrecked apartment room, holding a C4 explosive vest. He carefully places it on an unstable desk and pulls out his trusty laptop from his backpack, still here amid the carnage.

He begins to research explosive devices. Conventional websites yield little information, so he dives into the darkweb. He buys a bomb defusal guide on Silk Road 2 for a fraction of a bitcoin and skimreads it. He weaves magic into his laptop, into his research and into the C4 vest, and divines that it is not in danger of blowing up any time soon – it is well made. Information on bomb defusal is not particularly reliable – the cables used in the bomb in front of him are none of the colours the guide mentions. He traces the wires back and forth until he is certain he has isolated an import-looking blue one. With some deft time magic, he is able to ascertain that it will absolutely detonate the bomb if it is cut. He fetches some pink sticky-tape from the ruins of Dio’s desk and carefully wraps it around the detonate cable, marking it out. He picks the second most important-looking cable and casts the time spell again. Bingo. He unplugs this red wire carefully, defusing the bomb.

He spends the next fifteen minutes rigging the bomb vest up to one of his burner phones with some spare wire, tape and a Raspberry Pi. Now it will explode if anyone calls the phone. Satisfied, he packs the bomb into his backpack and heads downstairs into the pub proper. It is getting late on a Monday night, so there are only a few hardcore patrons left. Steve is nowhere to be seen, but the single bartender left is more than capable of handling things. Chron orders a pint and turns his mind to the next problem: how to launder 10 million dollars worth of stolen cash.

Blackeye staggers into the pub some time after Chron. They are badly wounded, their mind burning with Abyssal symbols, and they are dead-tired. They sit next to Chron. It is late.

"How you doing, Blackeye?" asks Chron, on his third pint.

"Not great," admits Blackeye.

They order a drink, but receive no response. They look up, to find the barstaff has left for the day, and the other patrons have been kicked out. Chron gets up and pours the drink for Blackeye instead. He is in a good mood - he is the only one to have survived the night unscathed. Indeed, he has come out ahead by quite a bit.

"Sorry I didn't stick around. Had to deal with some cash, and an explosive zombie," explains Chron, cheerfully. "How'd you go on your end? Did you deal with the plods?"

"I let them go," says Blackeye. "They'd been through enough."

"Well that's no good," says Chron with a grimace. "That's letting witnesses loose. Aren't you worried they might finger us? Seeing as the real culprits are now dust and ash?"

"Yes. Yes I am. But I wasn't in much of a state to be doing anything else," explains Blackeye.

They cough up a glob of blood on the bar in front of them.

"You uh, seem a mite poorly, mate."

"Yes. But I'll be fine."

"Oh well. I guess hostages are a problem for another day. Maybe Shackle can pull some strings."

They stare ahead at the bar, and drink silently.

After a moment, Chron speaks again.

"So why do you sell flowers? I know it was your gig before you woke up, but why keep it up now?"

"Well. It's a good question," says Blackeye slowly.

They think for a moment.

"There are experiences I've had. Things I've lived through. And for some reason – I've never been able to explain it – but it's physical, natural beauty that has pulled me through those experiences. Flowers have helped me endure some pretty terrible moments."

"Ah, yes, I get that. Enduring terrible moments through beautiful, natural things? My Bentley does that for me. The ole girl helped me out of some tight jams."

Chron pulls deeply from his pint glass.

"Yep, Your flowers are like my bentley."

"I see," says Blackeye, and coughs again.

There is another awkward silence.

"Well don't take this as an insensitive question, but would your flower cart be for sale?" asks Chron, pouring himself another pint. "You see I've just come into a whole lot of money and I was wondering if you'd be interested in a management position. Perhaps you could open up a chain of carts or something with a significant investment. I've been googling something called 'laundering' you see. The idea is you don't want the old government to know how much you got on ya. So I'm trying to figure out how to make this stolen cash legit. So, you know, with a significant investment we could open up a whole chain of flower carts and-"

"I'm in," Blackeye slurs, and slams their glass down on the table.

"Fantastic!" says Chron, with delight. "Now, I might have anticipated your response and so have a contract ready to go on my laptop right here. If you would just sign here..."

In a flurry of paperwork, emails and contracts, Chron buys 51% of Blackeye's business – Forgotten Flowers. More drinks are consumed in celebration. Even though the money is still, as Chron states, 'in escrow', Blackeye celebrates by buying a full smithing forge online, and opts for next-day delivery to the Sickle.

Chron follows suit, buying a food truck online and setting up a business called 'St. Lawrence's Grille' and filling out a seemingly endless series of forms and applications to set up more shell companies to funnel his cash through.

Chron has just bought another dot in Resources, and has upped his 'Lawrence Stroll' Alternate identity another dot. He's never one to miss out an opportunity.

Up north, Shackle and Dio manage to dial in a cab company to get them to Gosford. They barely manage to catch the last train back to Sydney. As they approach the lights of the big smoke, Dio falls asleep, totally drained. Shackle's weary mind recalls the dire warning by Vera Leigh back at New Atlantis: avoid Sydney trains at all costs due to Seer interference. He eyes every passenger suspiciously, and periodically flicks on *Mage Sight*, but encounters no difficulties. Dio sleeps, unnaturally deeply. They reach Central Station without incident and catch an uber to the Sickle.

Dio clatters through the front door, and eyes the celebrating Blackeye and Chron.

"Where's Steve?" she asks, looking around.

"He hasn't been here all night," says Chron. "Maybe he took a turn after all that palaver upstairs."

"Hmm," she says. "I'd better go check on him."

She calls, but he does not answer. Staving off her exhaustion, she leaves the pub as quickly as she came and heads over to his place, which is within walking distance. Steve is her oldest and most trusted employee, and it is not like him not to stick around until it's time to lockup.

Outside the pub, Shackle is standing under a streetlight. He has business to attend to. In his hand is the strange ghost-phone he liberated from zombie Antonio. As the clock hits midnight, he dials the number that had called previously – the only number stored on the phone. It rings for an uncomfortably long time before it is answered with a horrible screeching noise.

"Yes?" says the voice on the other end. It is Sable: murderer of Shackle's wife, Vampire, Necromancer, and Sheriff of Sydney.

"It's me," Shackle replies.

"Officer Day."

Shackle casts *Scry* on her through the phone, following Sable's voice through Space. The spell unchains weakly, again – Sable is further away than the furthest star he can see twinkling dimly above him. He frowns.

"Have the witnesses been dealt with?" asks Sable.

"It's *being* dealt with."

"Oh really."

"I'm sure someone of your ilk knows these things take time," says Shackle. "Now, should we get down to more serious matters? You asked me to do a favour for you."

"I didn't ask you to do a favour. I asked you to do a job. For which you will receive a very large reward."

"I think it's a pretty reasonable reward, all things considered. But I do want one more thing."

"And what's that?"

"I'd like to meet you."

"That seems premature. We're barely acquainted."

"I like to know who I'm dealing with."

"And you will."

"When?"

"First, the job. I'm offering you an exorbitant amount to do it," Sable says, curtly.

"That's true. Assuming you think I value money," Shackle talks fast before Sable begins asking uncomfortable questions. "This Hector. I have a few questions."

"Shoot."

"The obvious stuff. When, where, what, why. Who is he?"

"He is a very powerful vampire that has been a thorn in the side of the Camarilla for half a century now."

"OK. And why is it that you haven't been able to get to him yourself?"

"He has powerful bodyguards. And has been, as they say, around the block for 800 years or so," Sable explains, "In Kindred society, you don't live that long unless you have many, many tricks up your sleeve."

"Makes sense."

"Of course he may be lying about his age. He might be a mere 200 years old," Sable admits. "In which case I'm sure you'll have no difficulties. As you have already demonstrated."

"Where. Where can I find him?"

"If I knew where to find him, he'd already be dead."

"Any leads?"

"The Anarch stronghold is in-

"Paramatta," Shackle interrupts.

"Yes," says Sable. "I'm fairly certain that he is based there."

"His vulnerabilities?"

"Well," Sable smiles down the line, "his business partner did just die. So I can imagine he might be quite *active* and *upset*. You might not even need to find him. He may find *you*."

"I'm imagining the first person he'd assume killed his business partner is you," Shackle replies. "Don't worry. I'll protect you."

Sable laughs quietly. "Logically, I'd be his first suspect, yes. Of course, if there were any witnesses that survived he might learn the truth. So: did you kill all the vampires there? No one survived to tell Hector who killed his friends?"

Shackle thinks of Lamia. His silence is noted by Sable.

"Interesting," Sable says, amused. "Well I assume the hostages are – or *will be* – taken care of."

"Don't worry about it."

Another crackly scream of pain drowns out the line for a few seconds.

"You have company at the moment?" Shackle asks, concerned.

"I'm always in company, officer," Sable answers, amused.

Around Shackle, outside Dio's bar in the dark of night the lights of a car glean off him and a bottle clatters to the ground nearby down one of the many sandstone alleys of Sydney's Rock's District.

"Hector's bodyguards. Any information about their capabilities?"

Sable ponders the question. "They are about two to three meters tall, mostly made of stone, and like to drink blood. They don't like sunlight. As I'm sure you can imagine, they are quite resistant to *mundane* damage."

"Numbers?"

"We know of at least three. But my agents have never penetrated particularly far into his sanctum."

"Where is his sanctum?"

"We've found several. He moves frequently."

Shackle nods. Weighing his options. "Text me whatever addresses you've managed to find."

"We found one in the 60s, one in the 80s, twice in the 90s, and once about 21 years ago."

"What can you tell me about him. You said he's powerful – if he's as old as he says he is, he's got some tricks. What do you have that's concrete."

"Try not to bleed in his presence," says Sable, drily.

"How badly do you want the job done? I thought you were a professional," asks Shackle, some anger seeping into his voice.

"Well...the truth is I know remarkably little about his capabilities. But I can put you in touch with someone who is more ...familiar with his bloodline."

"In terms of payment, once the job is done, I assume we won't be meeting in person?"

"Well I can send another zombie. And it depends on how you like to be paid. Cash is such a...vulgar way of receiving payment."

"Electronic transfer?"

"This modern age is full of many wonders. Security of funds is one of them... you wouldn't believe how heavy coin used to get, back in the old days."

"Transfer of 50 mil is going to raise some questions with the ATO."

That's the Australian Taxation Office.

"You don't have to worry about that. I have friends in high places."

"Cash in unmarked bills, non sequential will be fine. I want it to be handed over by someone we both trust. No zombies. No civilians."

"These terms are...agreeable. Now, you are not, by chance, a member of the Crown Casino VIP club?" Sable asks.

"That depends," Shackle replies, guarded. "Why?"

"Well if you are not, I'd like to cordially invite you. Money exchanges very easily and without question on the tables of the 74th floor."

"Fine. Send me the details."

"I'll put you in contact with my associate tomorrow night."

"Last question," Shackle replies curtly. "I need to know the Why. You said he's been a thorn in the side of the Camarilla, but there's got to be more. 50 million dollars is a lot of money."

"We've been at war with the Anarchs for centuries now. It's nothing personal," says Sable, and then pauses. "Actually, I take that back. With Hector, it's very personal – for some. Not for me, but for many in my organisation Hector's defection is a slight that cannot be forgiven."

"But not you. You don't mind," Shackle prods, seeing what he finds.

"It is my job to keep this rabble in line. For me? It *is* strictly professional."

"Fine. Where, why, when, that's it. You can let me worry about the how. Which shouldn't be much of a problem, I mean those vampires back there in that warehouse—" Shackle tests, seeing if he can elicit a response from Sable.. "It's interesting how easy your kind breaks."

"My kind? I take it you are not one of us, then?" Sable counters, curiously.

"That's a good question. You'll have to wait and find out. When we meet."

"You intrigue me, Officer Day."

The line goes dead. Shackle considers the ghost-phone for a moment. He knows he's playing a dangerous game, but he knows he's closer than ever to his vengeance.

He pockets the phone and heads into the Sickle to join the rest of the Last Call.

Their night is only just beginning.

12.2: Midnight Dealings Part II

“ . . . is better than no deal at all.” - Lawrence Hill

Soundtrack - [The Fallen World](#)

"We have to talk," Shackle says, sliding into the booth beside Chron, who nods at the detective.

The young brit is sitting alone in a dark corner of The Sickie, Dio's bar hidden away in Sydney's old Rocks district. Its late, and while Dio would usually have the bar open and possibly being managed by Steve her Bartender, tonight it is closed and empty. Only Chron and Shackle in their booth, and Blackeye at the bar.

"Yeah, 'course, 'course," Chron's eyes dart back to the laptop screen open in front of him. "Just a moment . . ."

Shackle has grabbed a clean glass and a bottle from behind the bar – currently unattended, and pours himself a large glass.

"Okay, yep. I'm ready," Chron looks up from his computer, grinning from ear to ear. "Just purchased meself a Slice Pan!"

Shackle looks at the Acanthus.

"A van!" Chron's smile widens, before dropping away seriously. "Well a truck. Food truck innit, coppa."

"You bought a food truck?" Shackle asks.

"Well I've now got a throne of dosh," Chron explains, leaning back proudly, "which is something I've always wanted, mind you. The other thing I've always wanted is a food truck. Which I now also 'ave."

"Ahuh," Shackle nods, taking a deep drink.

"It's turnin' out to be a gradley day," Chron sighs raising his pint to his lips.

"Yeah. We need to talk about the cash you have," Shackle says seriously, "and are spending."

"What cash?" Chron winks.

"Better," Shackle nods. "We just made a huge mess and we need to clean it up. Worse, we didn't even get what we wanted."

"Didn't we?," Chron frowns, "I thought we were just there to get a quick look-see on what those bank tea leaves were up to and then you accidentally tore a hole in Space and things, you know, done escalated from there."

Shackle takes another sip of whisky and looks plainly at Chron, "we wanted a spirit to help us break into the Athenaeum."

"Right," Chron nods absently, "well I can't fucking see spirits. You can't fucking see spirits. Only the pixie can see fucking spirits. So ask her. Maybe she scored one. Maybe they're here, right now."

"Hm," Shackle frowns, "but if she's got one, she may not know it."

"Why wouldn't she know? She can see 'em, right?"

"She had one with her at the," Shackle catches himself before he describes his wife's grave. " – at the place we were teleported to. She didn't seem that aware of what it was doing to her though."

"Yeah," admits Chron, taking another sip of beer. "She did seem to go off the rails a bit there,"

"I did see a mind floating above her."

"To be honest, I'm not even sure how a spirit is going to help us break into the Athenaeum," Chron muses, "I mean it sounds great in principle, yeah, but I'd rather spend the time and energy scoping the place out and planning this heist. Lots of cool things in there, or so I hear."

"Done a lot of heists, have you?" Shackle asks dangerously.

"Small jobs here and there. Nothing in this hemisphere," Chron grins, holding his beer up to cheers.

They sit there, dreaming of the Athenaeum, the thrill of the heist, the treasures within. Shackle pours a few more whiskies, and Chron goes through his self-poured jug of beer. After a while the detective reaches for his wallet to leave some cash. Some part of him –

the part that still resents Dio – is wondering if he should bother paying. She owes him – why should he pay for her beer? Then the police side of him takes over, and he leaves a few note on the counter. He cannot help but feel that something is encouraging him to steal, to break into the Athenaeum.

It's almost like there's a spirit of thievery hanging around, or something.

He flicks on *Mind Sight* – and can see 7 minds in the bar, noting there are only three humans present.

"There's things here," Shackle stands abruptly. "Invisible."

One mind is in the corner. One is hovering above Chron, one is sitting on a bar stool next to Blackeye, and one looks to be almost *inside* Blackeye. Shackle eyes their cabalmate, the Moros, who is looking worse for wear. He tries to cast *Read the Depths* on the invisible entity that is almost on top of Blackeye.

It is difficult to target something he can only partially see, but he manages to reach out telepathically and skim the thoughts of the entity.

<<- please don't kill me please don't kill me ill do anything please don't kill me please->>

Shackle cuts the connection and takes a step back. The voice was young. Feminine. Terrified.

"Hey Blackeye," Shackle asks cautiously, walking up to their cabalmate, "what's going on with you?"

"What?" asks Blackeye, blearily.

"Feeling alright?"

"Well, Shackle, I gotta tell you," says Blackeye. "No. Not really. I'm having a pretty bad time here.

They smile at Shackle, their mouth full of blood. They do not look well. Shackle notices a shiny damp patch of blood on their stomach as well. They are bleeding over the bar.

"Oh– shit," Shackle rushes forward and grabs Blackeye lifting them up off the bar stool. "We gotta get you help. Chron, I'm taking them to the hospital. Now."

The young Acanthus nods, shocked, while Shackle gets Blackeye outside and into his car.

Blackeye passes out in the back seat, clutching the empty gatorade bottle filled with the ghost of the hostage who died.

The reason Dio hasn't healed Blackeye is because she is tired, distracted, emotionally wrung out and very worried about Steve. The reason Blackeye hasn't said anything is because they do not like to impose or ask for help, and also aren't thinking very straight at the moment.

Dio is standing outside an apartment block a few minutes walk from the Sickle. Steve lives here. She has called his number a dozen times, and sent twice as many texts. There is no response. She buzzes his apartment number. After a minute, she hears a tired, female voice answer. Cheryl, Steve's wife.

"Who is this?" says Cheryl. She sounds tired, and annoyed.

"It's Dio," says she. "Cheryl, where's Steve? He vanished from work."

"Yes. He's not feeling very well."

"But he's home? And safe?"

"Yes, Dio."

"Oh thank God for that! What's wrong with him?"

"He won't say what's happened. He won't talk about it. Did something happen at work?"

"No, not that I know about," lies Dio. "That's why I'm here. I came back to the pub and he wasn't there. I thought something had happened to him."

"He said something about a break in?"

"A break in?" says Dio, with feigned surprised. "I wouldn't have thought Steve would be so perturbed by a break in."

"I've never seen him like this before," says Cheryl, worried.

"Cheryl, may I come in?" says Dio, equally worried.

"It's after midnight, Dio. Can we do this tomorrow?"

"Right. OK. Tell him to have the day off. I'd rather like to see Steve all better before he comes back to work."

"Thank you for your concern, Dio."

"I don't know what happened tonight, all I know is it was enough to scare someone important to me. And I intend to find out why."

"Thank you," says Cheryl. "I'll let him know and I'll get him to call you in the morning."

"Perfect," replies Dio. "If he's well enough to come in, great – otherwise tell him to rest. And definitely don't call me in the morning. I'll be asleep."

She leaves. Dio has heard that magic is not good for Sleepers, but has never witnessed this in action before. She is particularly worried that the Paradox has infected Steve somehow. But right now she is exhausted. She breezes back into the Sickle, strides up the stairs and sets up her soulhammer in its ritual place. She meditates, and wreathes the energies of her soul into the apartment around her, turning it into a Demesne. She feels the energies of the Primal Wilds sink into the Sickle, and then collapses into her ruined bed. The mattress is hers, the sheet on top of it looks to be Belle's. She sleeps.

Shackle is driving towards the Royal Prince Albert (R.P.A.), one of Sydney's finest hospitals. In the back seat, Blackeye sits bolt upright. They look at Shackle, wide eyed.

"Did you save me? Where are we? Where are you taking me?" Blackeye voice is strained.

"We're going to the hospital, I'm getting you some help," Shackle answers calmly. "You'll be alright."

"Are you kidnapping me?" asks Blackeye, tremulously.

"No, Blackeye, I-"

"Who's Blackeye?" says Blackeye, wide-eyed.

Shackle risks a glance at Blackeye, frowning. "Do you know who I am?"

"No!" yells Blackeye, from the backseat.

Shackle nods to himself. "Of course not. Do you know who you are?"

"I'm Marian," says Blackeye-Marian.

"Hello Marian," Shackle replies kindly, "my name is Shackle."

"That's – that's not a name. Are you a criminal? You're with THEM, aren't you!"

"No," Shackle takes mental note, "you were in the warehouse. You would remember me, I–"

"I was there! I've been tied to a chair for the last day! Then there were some shouting from upstairs and...and...-"

"I wasn't with the gang. I came to stop them."

"Are you a cop?"

"Yes," Shackle answers, reaching awkwardly for his badge and holding it towards the back-seat.

"Oh thank god," says Blackeye-Marian, relieved. "What...what happened to the others?"

"They've been released. I'm going to touch base with them tomorrow and make sure they're safe."

"Oh, thank you. Thank you..."

Blackeye's eyes roll up into their head as they pass out again.

The street side lights blur past as Shackle drives through the night.

"What the fuck," he swears, biting back exhaustion.

There is no one to reply.

The voice that came from Blackeye's mouth – it sounded different to the way they normally speak. It sounded vaguely – just vaguely – like the thoughts of the invisible entity Shackle briefly mindread at the bar. He flicks *Mind Sight* back up, and sees the mind of an invisible entity slipping back into the gatorade bottle Blackeye is still clutching tightly in their hand.

Shackle nods to himself, tired "that's enough ghosts for today."

He pulls into the ambulance emergency bay of R.P.A. A paramedic rushes over, and sees Blackeye slumped in the back seat.

"What happened here?" they say, sternly.

"They've been roughed up," Shackle explains professionally. "Possible internal bleeding too. Bruising and concussed. They need urgent examination."

The paramedic opens the door and calls to a colleague for support as he tries to pull Blackeye from the car.

"What's his name?"

Shackle catches himself. None of the cabal have shared their real names with each other. "Their name. James. James Tawly."

"Tawley," the paramedic notes.

"I'm a cop," Shackle flips his badge open, "they're a criminal informant. I need you to keep this one quiet."

"Oh!" says the paramedic, their tone changing. "Okay. No problem, officer."

They pull Blackeye onto a stretcher and wheel them into Royal Prince Albert. Shackle follows, and watches as they roll up Blackeye's shirt. He winces at the mass of bruises and blood seeping from their abdomen.

"Couple of broken ribs," says the paramedic.

"Was he in a car accident?" asks the other.

"Fight," Shackle replies, frowning.

"Must have been some fight," whistles the paramedic.

They whisk Blackeye away and seat Shackle in the lobby. He waits an hour before they come back with news.

They show him to Blackeye's room. His cabalmate is lying there, comatose, and the doctor explains that they are stable but may well need surgery to set the broken ribs. Shackle listens in a daze. Eventually the doctor leaves, and the nurses recede. It is well past one in the morning and it has been a hell of a day. Shackle watches Blackeye in the bed, unconscious. He sits next to them, in a chair that gets more and more comfortable by the minute. Watching over his cabalmate protectively, as a heady mixture of guilt and exhaustion thrum throughs his head, finally, he sleeps.

Blackeye dreams of Abyssal anti-symbols in the darkness. And, in the distance, the sound of someone yodelling.

Shackle *Dreams* of rings of gold. A fierce dragon and a mighty hero. And in the distance, the sound of a lady singing opera. In the dream, he comes upon a burning ring of fire. Inside the circle lies his wife, deathly still, on a stone tablet. He reaches for her, but the fire burns him – it is excruciating. He closes his eyes and steps through the flame, which consumes his body. Every nerve in his body screaming in agony. It's been a while since he felt pain like this. He stumbles through and falls. A moment later, a pale hand reaches down. He grasps it, and she pulls him up, and down a dark corridor.

At the end is a closed door, through which light is shining and voices are laughing. Shackle opens the door, and finds himself in a living room. It is night. Blackeye is sitting on a couch, and they look younger, the worry lines on their face that he knows so well are not there. Next to Blackeye on the couch is a man – a man Shackle does not recognise. The two are laughing and drinking – they are very drunk. The man's face dissolves suddenly, leaving only a blank grey wall for a face. Then Shackle wakes.

Shackle takes every opportunity to rest for exactly 4 hours (the minimum required for the Dream merit to function). Since his discovery that Dio has vampire friends, he is more paranoid than ever – so he used his Dream merit to find out if Blackeye knew any vampires, too. The answer I gave him was that Blackeye knew someone inhuman – but they were not a vampire.

Chron drives home in his Bentley, whistling cheerfully. He says hi to his mate Percy at reception and unlocks his bedroom door. Will he count the money tonight, he thinks - or should he wait until he's had a decent night's sleep? He flicks the lightswitch on, and sitting on his pile of money is a teenage girl with red hair, dressed in a school uniform.



"Good evening, Chron," says the schoolgirl.

"Indeed it is, little girl," he replies, caught off guard.

"Have a seat," says the girl. She shuffles sideways on the pile of money, and makes room for him.

"Did you not see the 'do not disturb' sign on the handle?" says Chron, remaining standing.

"Yes, it was good thinking. We don't want anyone to disturb us, after all," says the girl, flirtatiously.

Chron takes a step back, his danger sense flaring. Perhaps this is some ancient teenage vampire, come to avenge her dead friends.

"Who are you, and what can I do for you?" he asks, trying to decide what spell to cast if she jumps him.

"My name is Aurora," says Aurora, with a sweet smile.

Eagle-eyed viewers may remember Gearstick mentioning Aurora of the Free Council back in Session 2. She is the only other Acanthus still alive in the Consilium, and had sent Gearstick to meet the cabal at New Atlantis. Aurora is one of two mages of the Sydney Consilium who was not present at the massacre of New Atlantis, which is why Chron has not yet met her.

"It's a pleasure to put a name to a face," says Chron, relaxing slightly. He sits down on the bed. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"Both business and pleasure," says the girl with a smirk.

"How old are you?" asks Chron, suspiciously.

"That's a very impolite question to ask a lady."

"I grew up in Lewisham – I'm a bit of an impolite chap," explains Chron. "Mind you, it's usually only an impolite question to adults. Asking kids their age is perfectly fine."

"Well, if you want to be technical about it, I've lived for 37 years, but I'm only 18 years old."

"Right. Figures. Well, let's get to the business first. I can't help but notice you're sitting on my pile of money with an air of ownership about you. Which is just giving me slightly off-colour vibes, I must confess. But I'm sure that's just coming from me – not the vibes you're intending to put out. Right?"

"I'm not here to steal your money, Chron. I would never do that," says Aurora, earnestly.

"Sweet. I can tell you're a right good lass, you are. So, I don't mean to be rude, but as you can see I've had a very busy day and I'm a bit tired. Let's not rush into things – shall I order up a bottle of plonk?"

"Please. You know, it's hard getting liquor in this form," says Aurora, with a feigned look of sadness. "For years I had to use a fair ID. Then again, there's always so many people willing to buy me liquor."

"I see. I'm starting to feel like a bit of a sucker here," says Chron, and pulls out his phone. "One mo."

He calls up his mate Percy at the front desk.

"Hey Perce. Listen, if you bring me up a bottle of Dom Perignon, I'll give you a \$200 tip," says Chron.

"Wow. I don't know if – OK. Yep, I'll do it. See you soon!"

Percy is a british ex-pat that Chron has befriended. He mans the front desk of the hostel and also deals drugs on the side. He has a tattoo of London Bridge on his back and is a bit of a muppet. More on him later.

"How enterprising of you," says Aurora. "It's normally impossible to get good booze at this hour."

"I'm sorry, I was told you were an Acanthus – I didn't think many things were impossible for our kind," says Chron, with a wink.

Aurora simply smiles widely in response.

"And apologies for further impolite questions," asks Chron, "but why are you 37 in a teenager's body if you're keen on the booze? Seems like you could have aimed a bit higher and it wouldn't be an issue. I understand if that's a story for another time, but seeing as we're getting to know each other better, my curiosity is getting the better of me."

"Roll of the dice, my love," says Aurora. "I didn't choose this life. I Awoke in 2036 to the Watchtower of the Lunargent Thorn. After I signed my name, I woke up in 2016, and I was back in high school. Let me tell you, I wasn't looking forward to going through the pandemic again. Especially without the ability to buy booze."

Chron feels her cast a spell. A big one.

"If we're casting spells..." says Chron, with a raised eyebrow.

He casts one of his own – *Momentary Flux*. He targets Aurora, trying to divine if she will prove beneficial or harmful to him. The answer he gets is unhelpful – she possesses great potential to help him, as well as great potential to harm him.

"Was that insightful?" asks Aurora, sardonically. "My own spell was just intended to make sure that – Percy, was it? – gets here quickly."

Chron examines her spell with *Time Sight*, and realises she has cast *Red Light Green Light* on the entire hostel, giving everyone perfect timing.

Upstairs, a hostel patron gets Player of the Match in Overwatch. A hallway away, a girl picks up her boyfriends phone just in time to catch a flirtatious message from the girl he's cheating on her with. And Percy, down in the bar, notices that the booze fridge wasn't locked properly and is able to fish out a bottle of Dom Perignon in short order.

"Well it sounds like you're either very good news or very bad news," admits Chron, with a frown.

"Hmm. You sound like my ex-boyfriends."

"Oh really? So do we end up dating, or what? I can't say you're exactly my type, mind."

"Sometimes we end up together, yes," says Aurora, coyly.

"Well I'm clearly on the back foot in this conversation," says Chron, with a shrug. "Do you want to fill me in?"

"Well, what do you want to know?"

"Well, I'd like to know why you're here."

"I'm glad we're finally getting down to it!" exclaims Aurora.

She leans over, and fishes a drawing pad from out of her schoolbag. She flicks it open, and shows Chron a drawing. He recognises it instantly. It's a drawing of his father's pocket watch – Chron's dedicated magical tool. Except that one detail has changed – on the outside of the watch, the drawing shows a death'shead symbol embossed upon the watch. Chron's own watch does not feature a skull – but Chron has seen this exact watch before. It's Chron Legacy's dedicated magical tool. At some point in his future, Chron will presumably get a skull embossed on his own watch.



"Well you are really well informed, aren't you lass?" exclaims Chron with another frown.

"Oh, you have no idea," says Aurora, dryly.

"Roight, so you want this watch?"

"I don't necessarily want *that* one. I just want *one*. There's a couple deathshhead watches around, I understand. You've got one – not now – but you will one day."

"Right."

"And if you can give me your one – great! But I feel like you're not inclined to do so. I mean, it's your dad's watch, right? You're not going to just hand it over."

"Obviously."

"So the future you wouldn't either."

"Not a chance."

Aurora picks up a wad of a thousand dollars and starts to absentmindedly flick through it.

"But as I've said, there are others out there. Tell me, do you know what a Censorum is?"

"Of course I do," says Chron, with a nod. "But just to refresh my memory, could you remind me of the particulars?"

"A Censorum is a vault where they keep all the stuff that isn't really meant for the average mage," explains Aurora. "In the Athenaeum, I mean. The Mysterium horde all the best stuff down there in the Powerhouse Museum."

"I think I see where this is going."

"I thought you might. To be honest, I thought you were going to be in the Athenaeum right now. Or tomorrow. My forecast keeps changing. A couple of days away, let's say. You and your friends move around a lot."

"A couple of days? Bloody hell, I was hoping to do it tomorrow. I've really got to get my mates to pull their head in."

This is a subtle dig from me. I've hinted at the Athenaeum containing powerful and important lore since Session 2, but the party has spent ten sessions focusing on other matters. We'll get there. One day.

"But yes, I was going to go drop by the ole Powerhouse and give it a looksee, see what they've got stashed away in there," says Chron.

"And you'll succeed at breaking in. And when you do, make sure you drop by the Censorum, and grab one of these deathhead watches for me."

"Yeah, right. I'll do you a favour, in return for one later."

"Sounds agreeable."

"Why do you want it?" asks Chron. "What's so special about this watch? I'm told you can be either very helpful or very harmful to me, so I'd like to understand what I'm getting into here."

"You know it's funny, my reading of you was much the same," says Aurora, with a cold smile.

"I like to be reassured. I'm a nervous guy sometimes. So if you could just let me know why I should pick up this little skull-faced timeteller for you, I would very much appreciate it."

"Very well. There are Time mages out there so powerful that the Exarchs have wiped them out of the timeline. Made sure that they never existed in the first place. You're one of them. Or might one day be one. You *were* one once, then you stopped that from happening. And then *that* guy came back and stopped *you* from becoming him – the first one, I mean."

"Cooooool," says Chron, enthusiastically.

"But – where was I? The Exarchs, yeah. They wipe these mages out. They hate competition, you know? But these guys – and gals – are so powerful that they can't be wiped out completely. As long as there is a way back in, they can find it. And when someone does what your mate Shackle has been doing – tearing holes in reality – they can come back. The Abyss is a place where all the things that aren't – that weren't – are. So when someone causes a big enough Paradox, then these mages from timelines that never were can claw their way back."

"I'm following you so far."

"And those special people – every last one of them – have a deathhead watch."

Aurora tears the drawing of the deathhead watch out of her notepad and hands it to Chron. It's scented with her perfume.

"Thank you very much," he says, examining the drawing.

"And that's all I know," says Aurora. "But I think I might learn more if I get a hold of one of those watches. And I – like you – don't want to be erased from reality. And I certainly don't want to crawl through a Paradox hole to come back."

"Right, but aren't you potentially creating a self-fulfilling prophecy here? You get yourself a deathhead watch, and then you get yourself erased?"

"Look, I don't want to talk about time travel because if we start talking about it then we're going to be here all day talking about it, making diagrams with straws," says Aurora flatly.

"Yesss! I fucking love that movie!" exclaims Chron. "OK I'll get that watch for you."

Guess the reference, if you can. Or google it.

"There's only so far ahead you can see with Time magic – only so many possibilities you can sift through – before it's like trying to find a specific drop of water in the ocean," explains Aurora.

"Listen, I'm a little in the dark still, but you can clearly help me out here, so sign me up," says Chron. "I'll get you your little trinket and we can look into this together. First of all, I would like to know why my future self came back and changed our timeline. He's a bit vague on details. So I'd like to make the best of it and avoid making the same mistakes he did. So yes, no problem, I can swipe a watch for you. I've swiped many a watch, in my day."

"Now this is important. Your future self has this watch – one of them. So if you want to avoid the future he's trying to avoid, you'll give the watch to me. Don't look at it, don't touch it, don't open it – definitely don't open it. Put it in a paper bag, and then bring it to me."

Dio's player: "Fuck that. Never do anything an NPC tells you to do. Don't do it, man."

"Yeah, I dunno about-"

"Or you can take it and end up on the same trajectory your future self is on," says Aurora, cutting him off, firmly.

"Nah nah – he changed our trajectory completely already," says Chron.

"Listen. Trust me. Hell, trust yourself. Go ask your future self if you should get one of these watches. He'll say the same thing: stay away. Just...don't mention me when you do."

"Why should I not mention you? My future self has changed our timeline so I don't end up in a bad situation. He's trying to make his - our - life better. This time round."

"Do you really believe that?" says Aurora, with a raised eyebrow.

"I know me. And I wouldn't want to fuck over my past self," says Chron. "It's hard to think of a future scenario in which future me would want to do that."

"Tell me, have you ever gotten really drunk?"

"Absolutely."

"You *know* there's a hangover coming. But you did it anyway. So effectively you've just screwed over a future version of yourself. This is just like that, but in reverse."

"Right, but I don't even know you, and -"

"I know *you*," says Aurora.

"Evidently. All I'm saying is that I have a bit more in common with myself than I do with some teenager from 2036. No offence. You could be an awesome lass, but I just need a bit more to go on. You just show up in my room, you say 'I'm a time mage like you, I know all about you, steal this watch, and don't ask any questions'. And I feel like, if you were a proper Time mage, you'd know that I need a bit more to go on."

"Do you know how many times I've had this conversation with you?" says Aurora, quietly.

Chron flicks on *Time Sight*, and sees that she is currently under the effects of the spell *Shifting Sands* and is indeed from the future. This does not re-assure him in the slightest.

"Well, I have a feeling more than once, actually," he says, suspiciously.

"This is the best outcome for both of us," says Aurora. "I know you don't trust me – and that's fine. Let's just say there are two paths you can take. Your soul – you only have one. You'll only ever have one. Follow my path, and you can learn to trace the thread of time backwards and forwards. It's how I found you here – I followed the money. I watched the bank robbery happen, I followed the money to that tacky warehouse in Paramatta, and then I followed it here. Because I knew it would lead to you. That power can be yours, too. I can teach you. OR you can do what your future self did – and you can go down the road of the deathshad watch. And you can do a Divination right now, and it'll tell you that *that* is the wrong way to go."

There is a knock at the door.

"Lance! Lance! Are you with someone? It says do not disturb!" says Percy, from outside the bedroom door. "Are you with that fit bird from Coogee?"

"Nah, she's with her friends tonight," says Chron. "Take a step back from the door, one sec."

He cracks the door slightly ajar, blocking all view of the schoolgirl and the millions of dollars within his room. He hands Percy four hundred bucks from the pile, and grabs the bottle of Dom Perignon off him.

"MATE! You're the fucken best man!" says Percy, eyes widening at the stack of bills in his hand.

"No you're the fucken best mate!" Chron says back to him, with a wink, and re-enters the room. Aurora is on her phone, looking bored.

Chron fetches some glasses and pops the champagne.

"Well here's to a prosperous future!" says Chron, pouring them glasses.

They raise their glasses to one another, and Chron feels another spell go off. He recognises it as a *Boon*, which settles upon him. She sculls the champagne in one gulp.

"Well, if that's all, I've got times to be," Aurora says, and stands.

"Nice meeting you," says Chron.

"Yes, much nicer than last time," says Aurora.

She grabs the bottle of champagne with a wink, and then goes to leave. She pauses at the door.

"I almost forgot. I have a message for you. When you see Vera Leigh, tell her this, from me: She's a stuck up bitch, and she got what was coming to her."

She leaves.

Vera Leigh was the Acanthus Councillor who was part of the ritual that went wrong at New Atlantis and summoned ~~No-Face~~. She died instantly.

As she goes, Chron cracks the door open and casts *Divination* on her as she walks down the hallway away from him. She throws him a smirk over her shoulder and blows him a kiss before vanishing around a corner. Chron retreats back to the now silent room, sits on the pile of cash and thinks hard about what questions to ask the Universe.

"Will Aurora betray me?" Chron asks of the empty room.

The answer is clear: **NO. SHE IS TOO FOND OF YOU.**

"Will Aurora be revealed to have been behind the massacre at New Atlantis?" asks Chron, after another few moments of hard thinking.

NO, BUT SHE KNEW IT WAS COMING

"Well, that is troubling," he says to himself.

It is the next day.

Someone is banging on Dio's bedroom door.

"Fuck off," Dio groans into her pillow.

The banging continues, more enthusiastically.

"I swear to god...WHAT?" she yells, tangled in the sheets.

"May we come in?" asks a voice from the other side of the door. Dio does not recognise it.

She gets up, throws on a t-shirt, and opens the door. The knocker is a pasty man in his twenties with long red hair, wearing a trenchcoat and a look of disdain on his face. She recognises him as one of the Adamantine Arrow. Behind him is a muscle-bound man covered in tattoos who looks vaguely familiar. He appears to be late-thirties, is wearing a leather vest and is mostly bald, except for a top-knot ponytail that runs down the back of his head.

"Can I help you?" asks Dio, stifling a yawn.

"May we come in?" asks the bald man, eyeing the carnage of the room.

"Let's go downstairs," says Dio. "I need coffee."

They troop downstairs, but not before Dio snags her soulhammer. She directs her guests to sit down, and goes to make herself a coffee. She rounds on the espresso machine, but recalls that Steve is always the one who uses it. She experiments with a few buttons until she is pretty certain it is warming up the water.

She feels a magical effect go off – something unusual – and the water in her coffee machine immediately begins boiling. She turns slowly around to find the redhead smirking at her. She sighs loudly.

"I need you to know something," says Dio, deadpan. "It's been a long couple of days, and I just woke up, so I need you to be forthright about whatever this is. Yesterday I beat the shit out of an ally due to a little understanding – and I'd like to avoid a repeat of that today."

"My name is Orlando," says the bald man with the topknot. "We've met before."

With the name, Dio places them. They led the Arrows at New Atlantis, although at the time they were in female form. Now they are very distinctly male. Dio identifies a variant of the shapeshifting Life spell she's used before – and recognises a fellow Thyrsus.

"I am the Adamant Sage of the Adamantine Arrow," continues Orlando.

"That's a senior position, I take it?" says Dio, and begins grinding coffee.

"Yes. The most senior position," says Orlando, loudly, over the noise. "And this is my new Sentinel, Virgil Firebrand. Also of the Arrows."

"Cool," says Dio, filtering a long black for herself. "Am I making you two coffees as well?"

"No thank you," says Orlando, blandly. "I don't drink coffee this late in the day."

Dio's eyes flick over to the watch hanging above the door. It is 1 PM. It's a tad earlier than the usual time she gets up.

"You know that my previous Sentinel, Crash, is dead?" says Orlando, eyes on Dio.

Dio nods.

"You were the last person he spoke to on the phone, before died," they explain. "You told him to meet you at Multuggerah's sanctum."

"Oh yeah, shit," says Dio. "That explains a lot."

"And when he arrived there, you were not there. There was only ~~No Face~~."

"I tried to warn him, as soon as I knew."

"Which was too late. Did you know ~~No Face~~ was coming?"

"No," says Dio, coldly.

Orlando looks at Virgil, who nods.

"You don't need to read my mind to know that I'm not lying," says Dio, sweetly. "If I was in the mood for lying, I'd...kill you both and lie to your spouses about it."

Dio is not in a good mood, and does not like to be accused of crimes she did not commit. Nor does she approve of unsanctioned, invasive magic in her demesne.

"What were you doing at Glenwood manor?" continues Orlando, ignoring the threat.

"What the fuck are you doing in my Demesne?" asks Dio, getting angrier by the moment.

"My Sentinel is here inquiring about the suspicious death of my cabalmate," says Orlando, coolly.

"Your Sentinel is *here* in my *Demesne* accusing *me* when all I've done is help you pieces of shit."

"Would you like us to leave," says Orlando, deadpan.

"No, stay. No one is verboten here," says Dio, draining a full mug of extremely hot coffee.

She makes another.

"What were you doing at Glenwood Manor?"

"Smoking weed," says Dio, with a cold smile.

Orlando looks at Virgil, who nods.

"Fighting angels."

Virgil nods.

"Whatever the fuck I felt like, really."

"Why did you go there in the first place?" Orlando asks.

"The weather."

Virgil nods again, to Orlando's increased incredulity.

"Bitch, I don't need to lie!"

"Under normal circumstances, I'd offer you more courtesy," says Orlando, looking tired.

"Under normal circumstances, I still wouldn't give a shit. You're in my house, don't forget about it."

Orlando nods, eyes narrowing.

"Crash mentioned a sword. Multuggerah's sword. It belongs to the Arrow."

"Yeah. It's a funny thing, I called the Arrow as soon as I saw the sword. But now you're giving me shit for it, so why would I tell you where it is?"

"Because we're on the hunt for a rogue Scelestus and-"

"You haven't done a great job hunting so far. At this rate you'll both be dead in two weeks."

"Which is two weeks more than you'll have if you don't answer our questions," says Orlando, coldly.

"Oh bitch please, try me. I'm done with threats, fun stuff. Ask me nicely, or get the fuck out. You're asking about the sword? Multuggerah's sword? He's dead. It doesn't belong to him any more."

"So you stole it."

Dio drops her sledgehammer onto the bar with a thump.

"Do you really think I give a shit about swords when I've got one of these?"

Orlando turns to Virgil.

"You said Crash said they had the sword?" asks Orlando, struggling to remain polite.

"Yes," says Virgil, looking uncomfortable. "That's what Crash said."

"I liked Crash," says Dio. "Why don't you tell me what you really want."

"We want to know about the sword," says Orlando, flatly.

"The sword of Multuggerah," says Dio, dramatically. "Which can't even kill."

The sword's bane is taking a life.

"We want to know why you've been breaking into the Sanctum of a Consilium Councillor and stealing equipment," says Orlando, losing patience. "I guess you're right – it's less stealing and more scavenging. After which you lured my best fighter to his death."

"I didn't deceive Crash. Ask your friend."

Virgil nods, scowling. "She's telling the Truth."

"I told Crash everything I knew," says Dio, hotly. "And if it weren't for me -"

"He'd still be alive," finishes Orlando.

"I've saved more lives in this Consilium than you have! Ask your friend if I'm lying!" yells Dio, spitting at Virgil

She's referring to the time she healed Monstertruck.

"He's not reading your mind," explains Orlando, as though explaining to a child. "He's an Obrimos."

"I don't know what that means. I'm a Thyrsus. You know what that means? Nothing! Fuck you and your labels!"

Dio has no dots in Prime, so doesn't really know that Prime can be used to detect lies.

Orlando bares their teeth at Dio and growls.

Dio responds by growing a pair of sharp canines and growling back.

Orlando responds by growing sabertooth fangs and roars back at her, spittle flying over the counter.

May the best Thyrsus win!

The two eye each other as their fangs fade away.

"So you just ran," says Orlando.

"Ran from what," replies Dio, flatly.

"Ran from ~~No Face~~," says Orlando. "And left Crash to die."

"We were wounded and exhausted," said Dio, coldly. "We'd just faced down a dragon, and we had a Sleepwalker with us. We weren't in any state to fight that thing. But if it makes you feel any better, I swear I'll never ask you or your kind for any help, ever again."

"Well that won't be a problem," says Orlando wearily. "There's not much left of us to help. We're all that's left of the Arrow."

"So why are you talking to me?" says Dio. "I've seen what good you are. I respected you. I asked Crash for help. And all I'm getting for it is shit. I don't need you. I'll keep fighting once ~~No Face~~ has sucked the life out of you. So unless you need anything else from me?"

"Well I'd like to know if you're just incompetent or actively malicious," says Orlando. "I know you're a coward, that's for sure."

"So I'm either incompetent or malicious?" asks Dio. "With all due respect you're making it seem like I can only pick one."

Orlando laughs, bitterly. For a moment, Dio catches a glimpse of deep sadness inside them. Here is a general who has lost most of their army.

"Look, I don't know what you've lost," says Dio. "All I know is, we're all losing. And frankly, I do not care for your success so far. Or lack thereof. You can ask me some more questions, or you can leave. Cos all I know is that we're among a group of rapidly

dwindling people, and we're both still standing, which puts us on equal footing, as far as I'm concerned."

"You tried to heal one of my soldiers at New Atlantis, didn't you?" says Orlando, dangerously.

"I healed two mages at New Atlantis," says Dio. "One lived. One died."

"Mine was the one that died," says Orlando. "Her name was Monigan."

"The other was Monstertruck," says Dio.

"Free Council scumbag," says Virgil.

"I thought we were all on the same side?" says Dio, hotly. "And if we're not, why should I help you? Why should I lift a finger?"

"From where I'm standing, your help is worth less than nothing," snarls Orlando back.

"That's funny, because you're the one sitting around here wasting both our time," says Dio.

"On that we agree," says Orlando.

"Then get out of my face and get out of my house, you waste of space!" yells Dio.

Orlando turns to leave. Virgil shoots Dio a hateful glance and follows.

"If we still had a Consilium, I'd be challenging you to a duel right now," says Orlando over their shoulder. "But you're not worth it."

As they reach the door, Dio grimaces and scours her body for mana and a lattice of bloody and bruised flesh erupts on her back, under her shirt. She gestures, and the door slams shut right in Orlando's face with a blast of Forces.

Scouring herself to make a point is starting to become Dio's signature move.

Dio flips her middle finger at Orlando's back.

"Who needs a Consilium anyways," she spits. "I challenge you."

Orlando pauses, their back to Dio. For the first time, Dio realises that Orlando has a *third eye staring out the back of her head*. It is only somewhat hidden by their ponytail.

Orlando is a member of the Daksha legacy. They are mystical hermaphrodites that believe in strength through physical perfection. And tend to be superior about it.

"What are your terms?" asks Orlando.

"I don't need terms," says Dio, recklessly.

"That's not how this works," says Orlando, turning and walking back to the bar.

"OK. How many of you do I need to fight?" asks Dio.

"Just me," says Orlando. "It's a one on one duel."

"Excellent," says Dio.

"You've never fought a duel before, have you?" asks Orlando, with a sigh.

"Bitch, I don't need fancy duels," spits Dio. "*I kill.*"

"Well the civilised thing to do would be the Duel Arcane," says Orlando with a small smile. "But if you just want to fight me, fist-to-fist, we can do that too."

"Well, which is your preference?"

"My preference is to walk out the door and not waste my time."

"You walked into my house and insulted me. So yes, we need to settle this."

"So. Give. Me. Your. Terms," says Orlando, through gritted teeth.

"Fine," says Dio. "If I win, I get your word."

"My word?" says Orlando, eyebrow raised.

"Yes. When I ask for it, you give it," says Dio. "Your word can be trusted, yes?"

"Always. Very well," says Orlando. "And if I win, I get the sword."

"As I said. I do not have the sword, so it is not mine to give," says Dio. "Think of something else."

"Fine. Your assistance," says Orlando. "If I win, I get a favour."

"Great. Let's get straight to the punchline," says Dio, stretching one arm, and then the other. "I've got a lot of aggression I need to work out."

"It's customary to wait a few days, and get your second lined up," says Orlando slowly, as though talking to a toddler.

"My second in line is me," says Dio. "I don't need anyone else."

"I can tell just by looking at you that you are wounded, exhausted and totally out of mana," says Orlando. "I suggest we wait until you have had a chance to rest."

"No," says Dio. "Let's do this here and now."

"Very well," says Orlando, throwing their hands up. "Will you allow my colleague to 'square the circle' and prepare the duelling space? It is customary to call on a neutral third party to oversee the duel proceedings, but you seem very intent on doing this immediately."

"I'm sorry, do you not trust your minion?" says Dio, incredulously.

"Virgil has my full trust," says Orlando. "And as Sentinel, it's his job to oversee duels. I'm just making sure there won't be any question as to the legality of these proceedings."

"There won't be any issues there," says Dio. "We have our witness. All right, Virgil?"

Virgil goes to the pub's entrance and flicks the 'Open' sign to 'Closed', locks the door, and for good measure, jams a chair against the doorknob.

"Don't want any Sleepers to barge in," he explains with a malicious wink. "What time do you open, again?"

"An hour ago," says Dio. Normally, Steve is the one who opens for her. She frowns, remembering his absence last night as well.

Then Virgil walks behind the bar, and picks up a piece of chalk that Steve uses to write specials on a blackboard with. Then he walks around the Sickle, casting a Prime spell. He

walks clockwise, and draws a square on the ground with the chalk. Then he walks counterclockwise, and draws a chalk circle in the same space. Dio feels the spell activate, filling the air with an ethereal, arcane quality. It reminds her of her time in the Chantry of the Rainbow Serpent – a realm of Prime. She stares at the circle-square, and can't quite make out if the circle or the square forms the outer line of the duelling ring.

Orlando steps into the duelling space and Dio follows them in. They take up positions on opposite sides.

Orlando bows, stiffly. Dio bows back.

Virgil holds the chalk between his fingers, and snaps it in half.

He holds out the two pieces, one in either fist.

“Longest piece gets to go first,” he explains.

Dio picks his left hand, Orlando his right.

Virgil reveals the chalk - Orlando's is longer.

“Let the duel commence!”

And that's enough for one session, folks. Unfortunately it will be quite some time until you find out who wins the duel, as we're entering a brief hiatus. Several of the players had overseas trips and various clashes, so the next three sessions are solo-sessions, featuring only one or two characters apiece that take place before/after the duel and don't reveal who won. Apologies for the delay...but let me tell you, the wait will be worth it.