



ROYAL BLOOD

A game of cards

Words

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This project was commissioned by
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2015 surgery fundraiser.

To learn more about Merritt Kopas,
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Inspired by

Unknown Armies (RPG), Last Call (Novel),
Apocalypse World (RPG), Changeling (RPG)

Recommended music

BLVCK CEILING, The Raveonettes, The Kills,
The Dead Weather, The Glitch Mob, Lorn,
Gesaffelstein, HEALTH

HOW THINGS ARE

THEY are the Major Arcana or the ARCANES, the Movers and Shakers, and you're tired of being Moved and Shaken. They can twist reality with a thought and burn through the walls between worlds like fire through old photographs.



WHO YOU ARE



YOU are of Royal Blood or a ROYAL, half-human and half-idea, blessed with the lineage of sorcerer kings and witch-queens, and you argue over the metaphysical scraps that THEY leave behind. Beneath you lays humanity, blunt and dull; above you stand the Major Arcana, dazzling and powerful.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

MAGIC, for the want of a better word; your blood lets you pull a con-job on reality. Like the Arcane, you can tweak the laws of space and time or break them completely. But unlike the Arcane, you are not allowed to, and Fate Herself is watching, always.

WHO SHE IS

FATE HERSELF – the dealer – a green-eyed goddess in tripartite, a woman of warp and weft and infinite wit – the sound of scissors out of sight – your worst friend and your best enemy – she who knows and cannot be known – the scaffold on the howling dark at the centre of the universe.

WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN

One or more of you is going to ASCEND; to dethrone a Major Arcana from their lofty position and take over. Tonight, the city is poised and waiting for your touch. Tonight, you're going to strike before the dawn breaks and take what's yours. Tonight, you are going to change the world, and as it just so happens, every deck of Tarot cards in existence.





Listen, friend: THE TAROT CARDS
HAVEN'T ALWAYS LOOKED LIKE THAT.
The High Priestess only came into being
twenty years ago; before that, she was
The Mother. The Great Beast disappeared
in 1860, right when The Chariot rose to
power as two Royals teamed up and
cast it from heaven. Death killed
The Angel and took her place, forced
her ghost over into Judgement's
territory, turned her into a parasitic thing.
In the city, in the dark places, fragments
of old and broken gods cower and serve
their masters.

Keep listening, friend: this is me, the author, marked by
the eye in the crown. I'll leave notes throughout the book
for you: optional rules, confessions, advice, and so on.



WHAT THIS IS

This is a roleplaying game, or a storytelling game. It is designed to be played in a single sitting, but you can play it multiple times, if you like.

Or: you could play it in two sittings. You can take your time over character creation, you can build a glittering world and dress each scene in finery. You can play for as long as you desire, but if you're rushed for time, I've found that you can finish a game in two to three hours.





There are two kinds of players in this game. There are the **Royals**, or “players,” and there is **Fate Herself**, who is the “gamesmaster.” We are going to use different names than the usual ones because sometimes it is fun to use different names.



All the players will need to share a Tarot deck between them to play the game, so don't use one that you're not okay with other people using. If you understand the meanings of Tarot cards, that is perfect. If you do not, be willing to research the meanings, it'll make the game better. Some tarot decks have the meaning of the minor arcana written on the cards in a single word or phrase: these are good.

I use the Thoth tarot myself, mainly because it has the names of each card (and the meanings of the lesser arcana) printed on my edition. Plus it's occult as all hell, you know?



WHO YOU ARE IN MORE DETAIL

CHARACTER CREATION

You are of Royal Blood, or **A Royal**, and you are blessed with magical abilities thanks to your lineage.



Technically, reader, you're a player, not a Royal. But I'll use the terms interchangeably throughout the text. I know you're clever enough to handle it.



There are four great families, and four positions within each. Depending on which deck you have to hand, you'll have either Princesses or Kings.



Or maybe you'll have some other kind of Royal tucked away in there. Do your best to interpret the cards however you can. I like Princesses, myself. Kings are overdone.

Choose one of the Royals to play tonight. For variety, and to play a character you might not otherwise, consider drawing a Royal at random to play. For cohesion, consider each player taking on the role of a Royal from the same family, and enjoy the thought of the Empire of Wands, say, marching to war.



Despite the implied royal hierarchy, no royal card has dominion over any other by default; power must be earned, and jealously preserved. You might be part of an actual family, or you might not; the blood is strange, and sometimes it sleeps for years, decades, generations, even, until proximity to an Arcane awakes it.



Turn to the Royal on your right, and ask them one of the following questions:

- ‡ What makes you feel jealous towards me?
- ‡ Who have we both loved?
- ‡ What have we worked on together and lost?
- ‡ How did you come to learn my weakness?

Turn to the Royal on your left, and ask them one of the following questions:

- ‡ Why did our last duel go unfinished?
- ‡ Why do you love me so?
- ‡ What have I taken from you?
- ‡ What secret of mine do I wish you didn't know?



THE SILVER AND THE BLOOD



Write down “silver” and “blood” on the top of a scrap of paper. You have two facets to split between these two fields: traits, relationships, skills, equipment or favours owed to you. Silver facets are related to your arcane ancestry: unnatural quirks, uncanny strangeness, and junk magic. Blood facets are part of the real world: physical talents, money, allies and items. You’ ll note that each Royal has six facets listed after their description, you can pick from these, or create your own.

When you attempt to overcome a challenge, you must wager an asset. Failure means that the asset is damaged or lost. Losing all facets drives you into a desperate frenzy, and you invert.

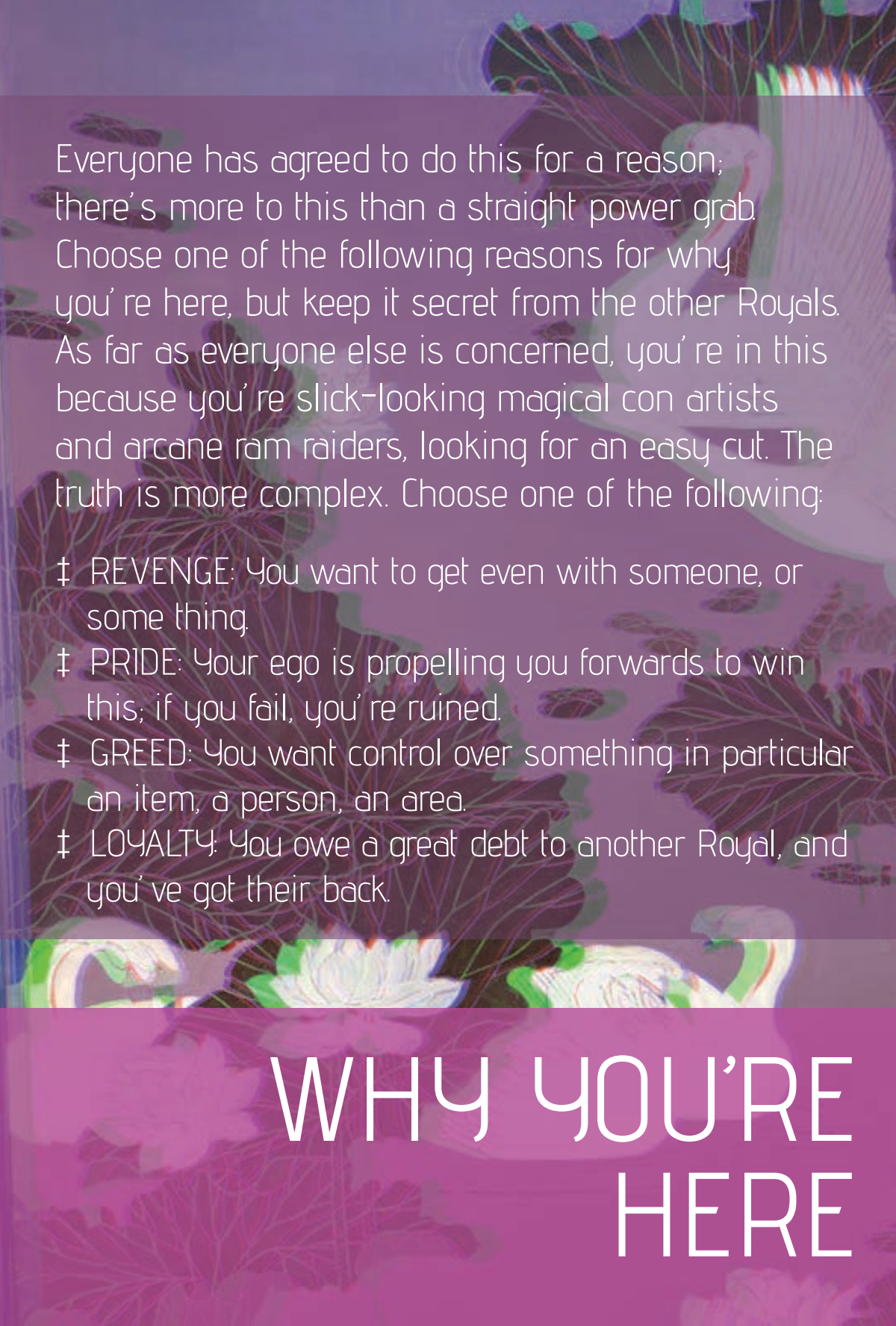
JUNK MAGIC



When a Royal practices magic, they are hijacking the immense power that the Arcane tap into, and unlike their betters, they must use tools to do so. Fetishes, charms, items of power, and relics of historical and cultural weight are all useful; the Royals practice Junk Magic, or Cobblewise, an urban hedge witchery built of necessity, improvisation, grit and luck.

Where an Arcane can simply snap their fingers and move to wherever they wish in their domain, a Royal would resort to sacrificing a bunch of keys, burning maps, focus their mind over a sacred mirror, or dress themselves as a doorman to make the leap. Magical style is up to each practitioner, and no two Royals are alike even those of the same blood so such things tend to shift and warp in response to the world around them.

When you choose your Royal, think about what sort of tools and tricks they use to cast their junk magic spells.



Everyone has agreed to do this for a reason; there's more to this than a straight power grab. Choose one of the following reasons for why you're here, but keep it secret from the other Royals. As far as everyone else is concerned, you're in this because you're slick-looking magical con artists and arcane ram raiders, looking for an easy cut. The truth is more complex. Choose one of the following:

- ‡ REVENGE: You want to get even with someone, or some thing.
- ‡ PRIDE: Your ego is propelling you forwards to win this; if you fail, you're ruined.
- ‡ GREED: You want control over something in particular: an item, a person, an area.
- ‡ LOYALTY: You owe a great debt to another Royal, and you've got their back.

WHY YOU'RE HERE



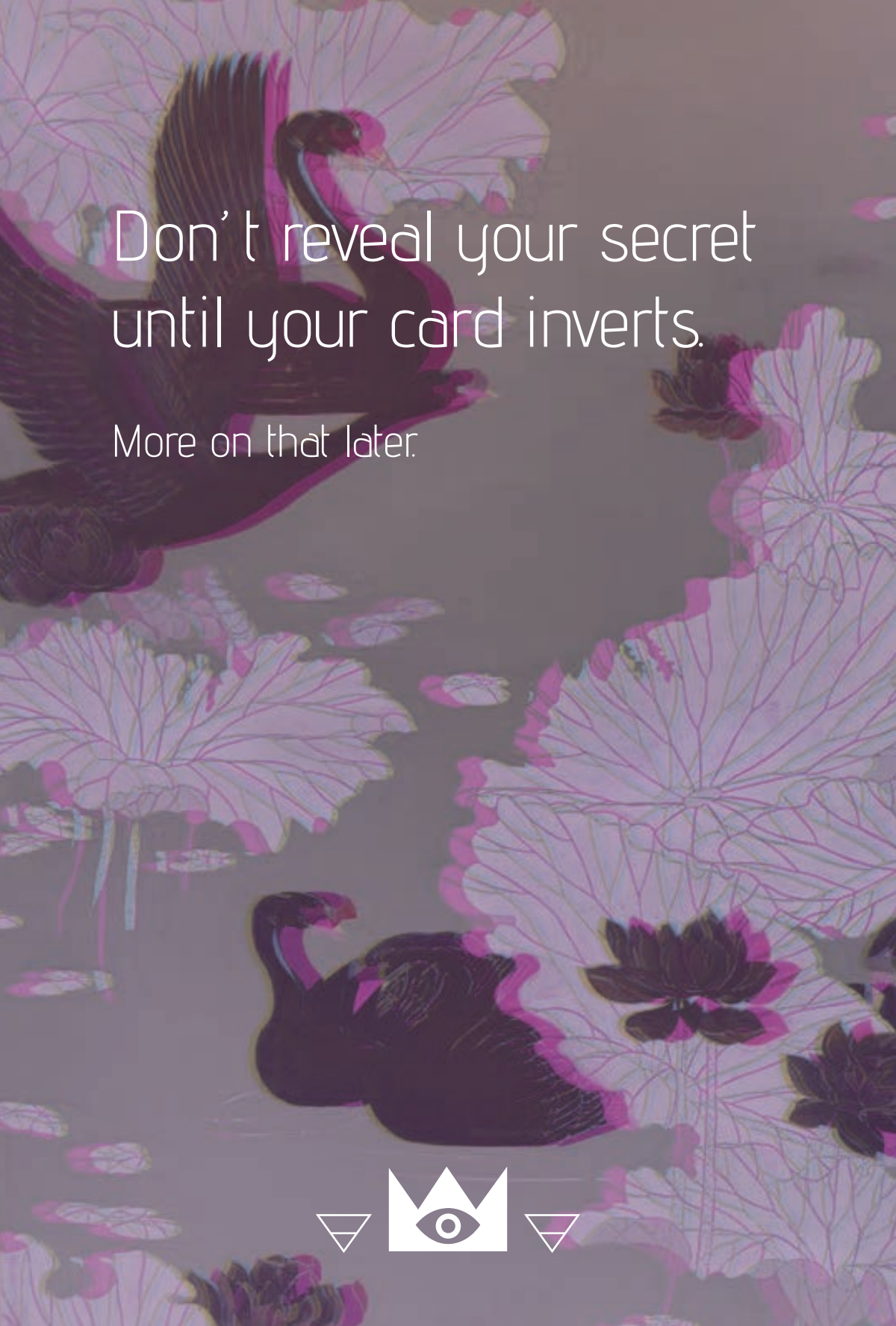
Don't feel that you have to determine what your desire relates to before the game starts. Instead, play with an open mind and wait until a relationship develops with another element in the story. (And! If you want to change your motivation halfway through the evening because an opportunity presents itself, do so! No-one will know.)



As in: you choose revenge, but not against who, or for why. And Fate Herself introduces the Fatale, a beautiful young man, and you're like: I want to be involved with this beautiful young man. So: he broke your heart. Play as though he did. Maybe mention it; if Fate Herself knows what she's doing, she'll roll with it.

Or maybe: you choose greed, and you know it's something other than the prize you're after. So you describe a museum of precious artefacts as part of the Arcane's domain, and you steer play back towards it, and you wait until the time is right to mention that you're desperate to get your hands on the painting that contains a part of their soul because you need it to stay alive.





Don't reveal your secret
until your card inverts.

More on that later.



A stylized illustration of a person lying down, possibly on a bed or a surface. The person's head is on the left, and their body extends towards the right. A bright yellow heart is visible on their chest, and a small red flower is positioned near the heart. The background is a mix of dark and light colors, with a prominent yellow and orange glow emanating from the heart area. The overall style is artistic and somewhat abstract.

A NAME

You'll need a name. Probably not your real name. Maybe you just go by "The Princess" or "The Queen" or what have you, or some grandiose title ("Our Lady of Deep Waters" or "The Lord of Lost Things"), or maybe you use an unusual noun or an adjective as a name ("Quick," "Myriad," "Hearth," etc) or, perhaps, just perhaps, you go by Keith or Lucy or Gareth or some normal, mortal name.



THE ROYAL BLOOD, IN FULL, BY FAMILY



THE EMPIRE OF WANDS

Fire, ENERGY, creation, destruction,
THE SMASH AND GRAB,
the world in the palm of your
hand, towering edifices,
impossible momentum,
something raw and bestial
behind your eyes

THE KING OF WANDS: Wise and thoughtful, patient and powerful, cruel and righteous; the right decision is not the easy one, and they forget that not everyone has the abilities and foresight with which they themselves are blessed.

Choose two of the following facets, or invent your own.

BLOOD

- ‡ Everyone owes me a favour;
- ‡ Physical paragon;
- ‡ Well-dressed & well-mannered.

SILVER

- ‡ Hold my breath and pause time;
- ‡ Bear a mark of unquestionable authority;
- ‡ Inspire them until their heart gives out.

THE QUEEN OF WANDS: A vibrant and powerful leader; a doer, not a thinker; the storm at the eye of the calm; watches their empire grow; chafes against the yoke of command, convinced they alone are right.

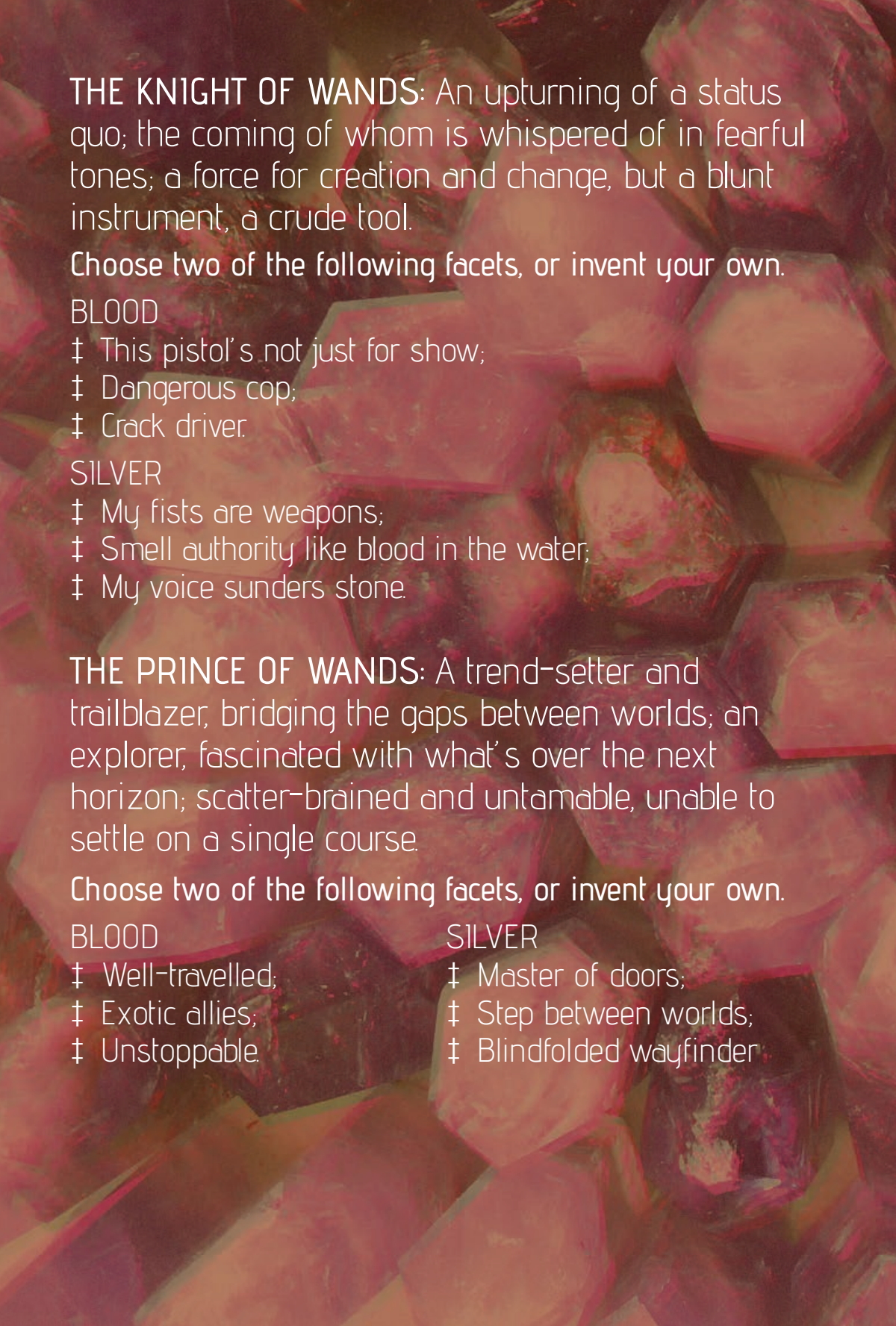
Choose two of the following facets, or invent your own.

BLOOD

- ‡ Zealous employees;
- ‡ Knows someone everywhere;
- ‡ Decisive and cruel.

SILVER

- ‡ They'll follow me anywhere;
- ‡ Convince them I'm their new best friend;
- ‡ Smash problems apart off-screen in a postscript.



THE KNIGHT OF WANDS: An upturning of a status quo; the coming of whom is whispered of in fearful tones; a force for creation and change, but a blunt instrument, a crude tool.

Choose two of the following facets, or invent your own.

BLOOD

- ‡ This pistol's not just for show;
- ‡ Dangerous cop;
- ‡ Crack driver.

SILVER

- ‡ My fists are weapons;
- ‡ Smell authority like blood in the water;
- ‡ My voice sunders stone.

THE PRINCE OF WANDS: A trend-setter and trailblazer, bridging the gaps between worlds; an explorer, fascinated with what's over the next horizon; scatter-brained and untamable, unable to settle on a single course.

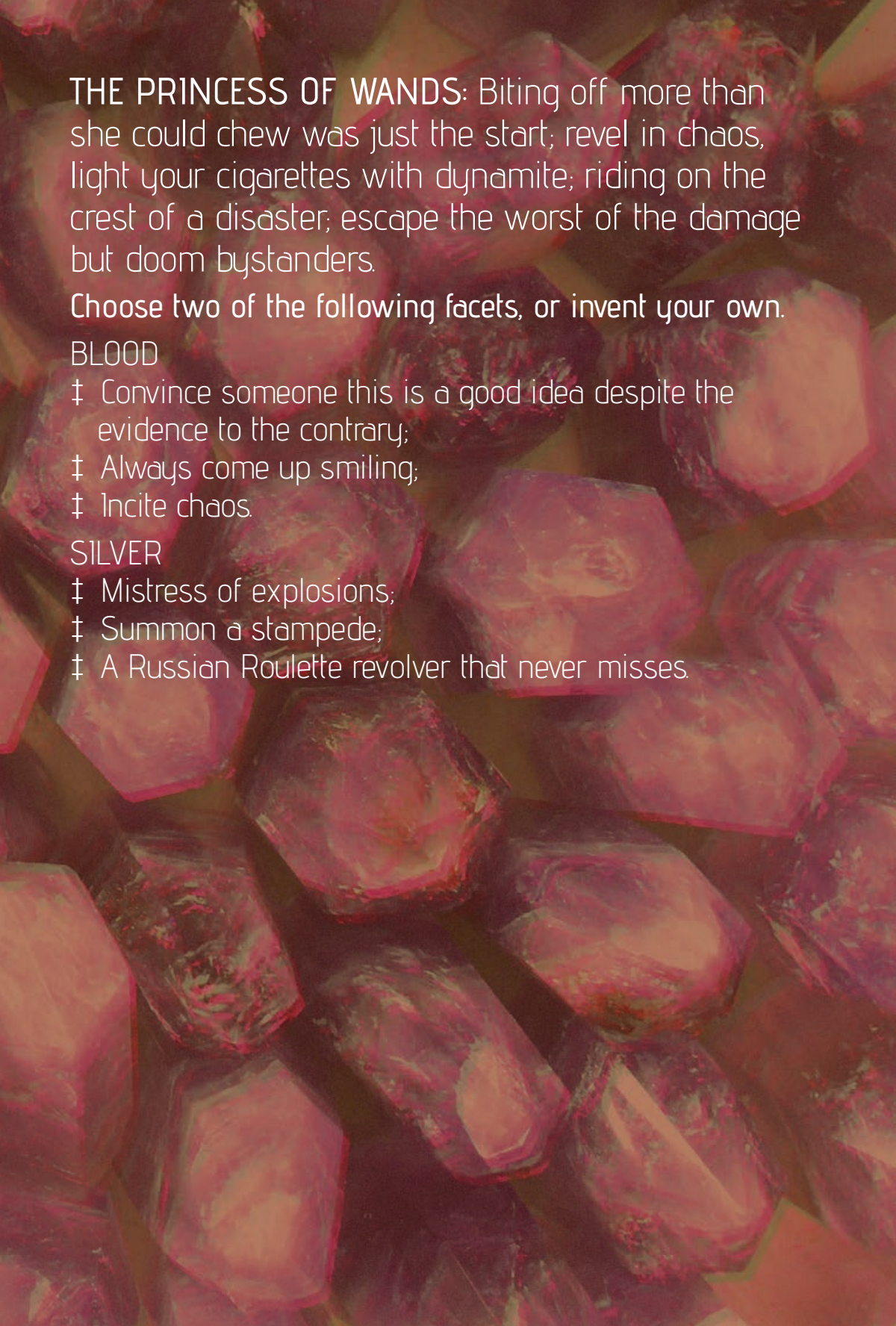
Choose two of the following facets, or invent your own.

BLOOD

- ‡ Well-travelled;
- ‡ Exotic allies;
- ‡ Unstoppable.

SILVER

- ‡ Master of doors;
- ‡ Step between worlds;
- ‡ Blindfolded wayfinder.



THE PRINCESS OF WANDS: Biting off more than she could chew was just the start; revel in chaos, light your cigarettes with dynamite; riding on the crest of a disaster; escape the worst of the damage but doom bystanders.

Choose two of the following facets, or invent your own.

BLOOD

- ‡ Convince someone this is a good idea despite the evidence to the contrary;
- ‡ Always come up smiling;
- ‡ Incite chaos.

SILVER

- ‡ Mistress of explosions;
- ‡ Summon a stampede;
- ‡ A Russian Roulette revolver that never misses.

THE GUILD OF PENTACLES

Earth, stable and inexorable,
throw money at it,
THE BANK JOB, resilience,
always outnumbered
but never outgunned,
a life full of secret plans,
trapdoors, escape routes, solid,
forever, forever

THE KING OF PENTACLES: Leather and steel; the spider at the centre of the city; control, authority, abundance; static, outmaneuvered.

Choose two of the following facets, or invent your own.

BLOOD

- ‡ Inordinately well-off;
- ‡ Planned this all in advance;
- ‡ People are scared to say my name.

SILVER

- ‡ Conjure walls with a whisper;
- ‡ Bind them with a glance;
- ‡ Become an immovable object.

THE QUEEN OF PENTACLES: We're just like family; a leader by blood who just wants the best for their people; nurturing and benevolent, but unwilling to risk what they have to gain more.

Choose two of the following facets, or invent your own.

BLOOD

- ‡ Grass-roots politician;
- ‡ Inspiring leader;
- ‡ I get my hands dirty.

SILVER

- ‡ Fearsome in defence;
- ‡ Create a taskforce out of nothing;
- ‡ Give my followers the strength of the earth.

THE KNIGHT OF PENTACLES: Clockwork and brass; methodical and exact; patient to a fault, forever poised and fornever acting.

Choose two of the following facets, or invent your own.

BLOOD

- ‡ Astute tactician;
- ‡ Everyone owes me money;
- ‡ Head for numbers.

SILVER

- ‡ Speak with machines;
- ‡ Act with perfect timing;
- ‡ Step zen-calm through the chaos.

THE PRINCE OF PENTACLES: New money, the biggest and best; diamonds and pearls and chrome; have it all and have it now; nothing left tomorrow, so burn bright tonight.

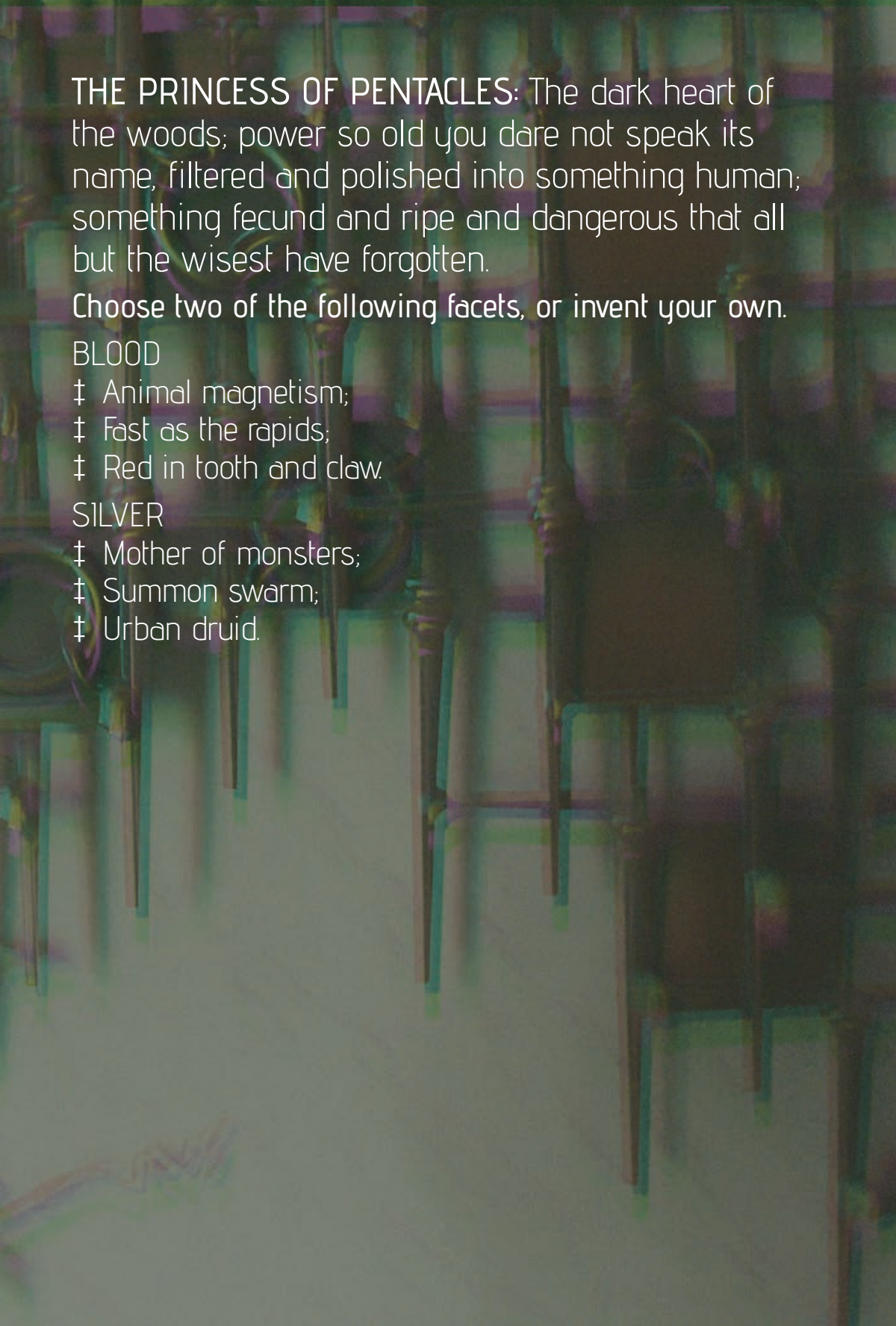
Choose two of the following facets, or invent your own.

BLOOD

- ‡ Impressive wealth;
- ‡ Impeccable presentation;
- ‡ Hangers-on and lackeys.

SILVER

- ‡ The midas touch;
- ‡ A black credit card that can buy people's loyalty;
- ‡ Summon a party.



THE PRINCESS OF PENTACLES: The dark heart of the woods; power so old you dare not speak its name, filtered and polished into something human; something fecund and ripe and dangerous that all but the wisest have forgotten.

Choose two of the following facets, or invent your own.

BLOOD

- ‡ Animal magnetism;
- ‡ Fast as the rapids;
- ‡ Red in tooth and claw.

SILVER

- ‡ Mother of monsters;
- ‡ Summon swarm;
- ‡ Urban druid.

THE COURT OF CUPS

Water, shape and flow,
art and artistry, softness,
occlusion and misdirection,
THE LONG CON,
hips and lips and
whispered sickness,
change eternal unchanging

THE KING OF CUPS: The right word in the right place can move mountains; loved and feared in equal measure; emotion is just another tool; push too hard on the paper mask and you'll find there's nothing underneath.

Choose two of the following facets, or invent your own.

BLOOD

- ‡ Perfect composure;
- ‡ A way with words;
- ‡ Not to be displeased.

SILVER

- ‡ Make watchers unable to turn their faces away;
- ‡ Twist your face into a mask;
- ‡ Take someone's words away.

THE QUEEN OF CUPS: Unflinching; the storm rages but the Queen endures, reforms into a stronger shape; a life of redundancies and alternate plans; her fortress is strong but it has hidden faults, and can crumble if pressure is applied in the right place.

Choose two of the following facets, or invent your own.

BLOOD

- ‡ Social maven;
- ‡ Hidden defences;
- ‡ Rumour-monger.

SILVER

- ‡ Become water;
- ‡ Leave my foes fighting shadows and lies;
- ‡ Repair structures and relationships.

THE KNIGHT OF CUPS: Biting a rose between his teeth; romance and courtly charm, ritual and flattery; sweep you off your feet; jealousy and bitterness when the spotlight finds another.

Choose two of the following facets, or invent your own.

BLOOD

- ‡ Flattery will get me everywhere;
- ‡ Chivalric defence;
- ‡ A lover on every street.

SILVER

- ‡ Make their hearts break;
- ‡ Be the one they're been waiting for;
- ‡ Inspire green-eyed frenzy.

THE PRINCE OF CUPS: A creative wellspring; so many ideas they barely have time to write them down, let alone act on them; everyone's darling; builds castles in the sky, leaving masterworks unfinished.

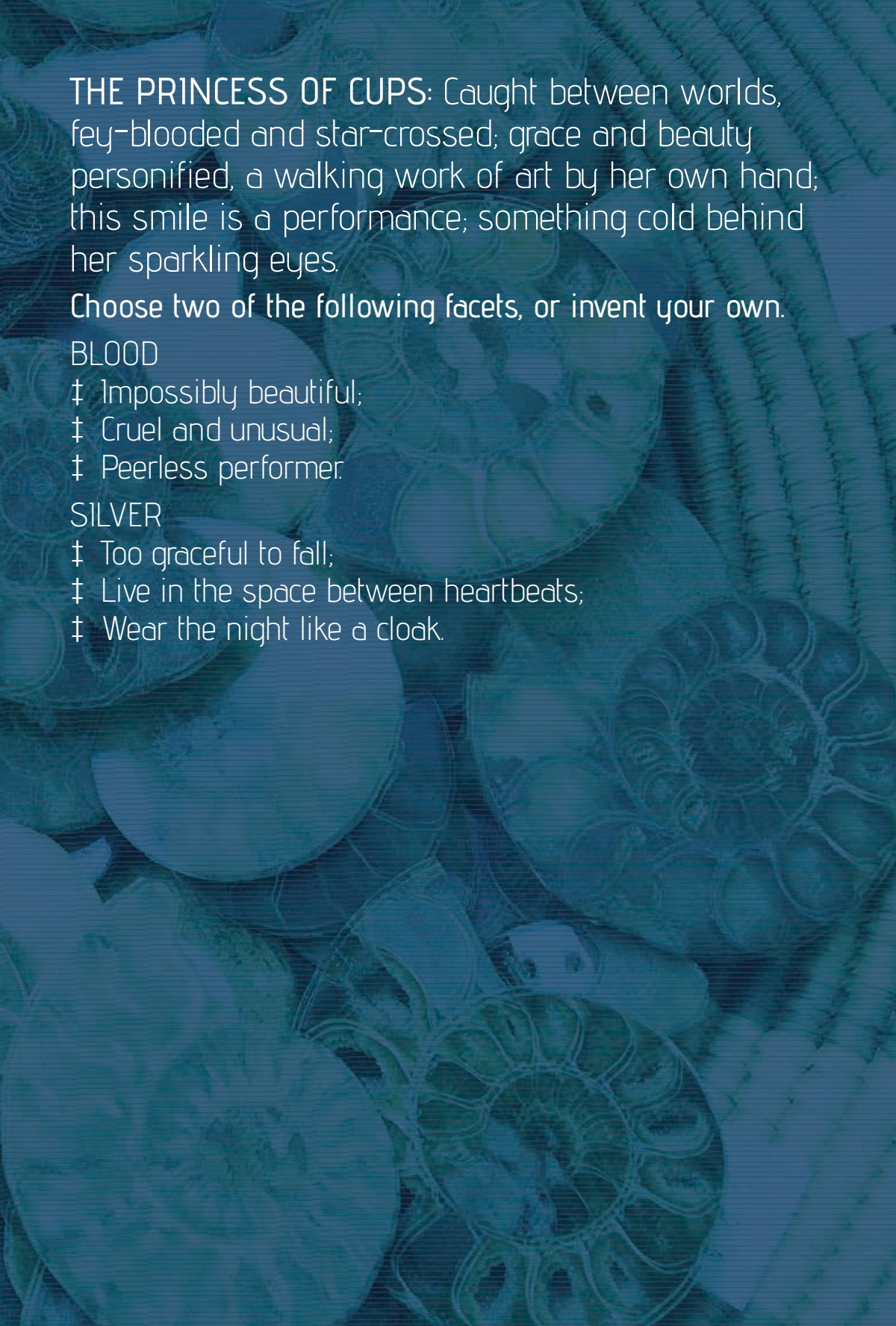
Choose two of the following facets, or invent your own.

BLOOD

- ‡ Popular with the in crowd;
- ‡ Aloof and engaging;
- ‡ Bring out the best in people.

SILVER

- ‡ Manufacture simulacra;
- ‡ Build gauzy worlds of illusion;
- ‡ Trap them in their own obsessions.



THE PRINCESS OF CUPS: Caught between worlds, fey-blooded and star-crossed; grace and beauty personified, a walking work of art by her own hand; this smile is a performance; something cold behind her sparkling eyes.

Choose two of the following facets, or invent your own.

BLOOD

- ‡ Impossibly beautiful;
- ‡ Cruel and unusual;
- ‡ Peerless performer.

SILVER

- ‡ Too graceful to fall;
- ‡ Live in the space between heartbeats;
- ‡ Wear the night like a cloak.

THE HOUSE OF SWORDS

Air, speed and clarity,
wisdom and intelligence,
THE BRAINS OF THE OPERATION,
you have fallen into my trap,
pick your battles and leave
them fighting shadows,
ten steps ahead
and one to the left

THE KING OF SWORDS: This truth is absolute and it makes me strong; focus, determination, selfreliance; this man is an island; every bridge can be burned if betrayals are better than friendship.

Choose two of the following facets, or invent your own.

BLOOD

- ‡ Everyone can be sacrificed;
- ‡ Diamond-edged mind;
- ‡ Hide my true intentions.

SILVER

- ‡ Your duels cannot be refused;
- ‡ Reveal it was a plot all along;
- ‡ Strike like lightning from a clear sky.

THE QUEEN OF SWORDS: Maskcutter, Solomonwise; destroyer of lies, judge lest ye be judged; this place is a machine and you are all parts; the truth hurts, and she has no other option.

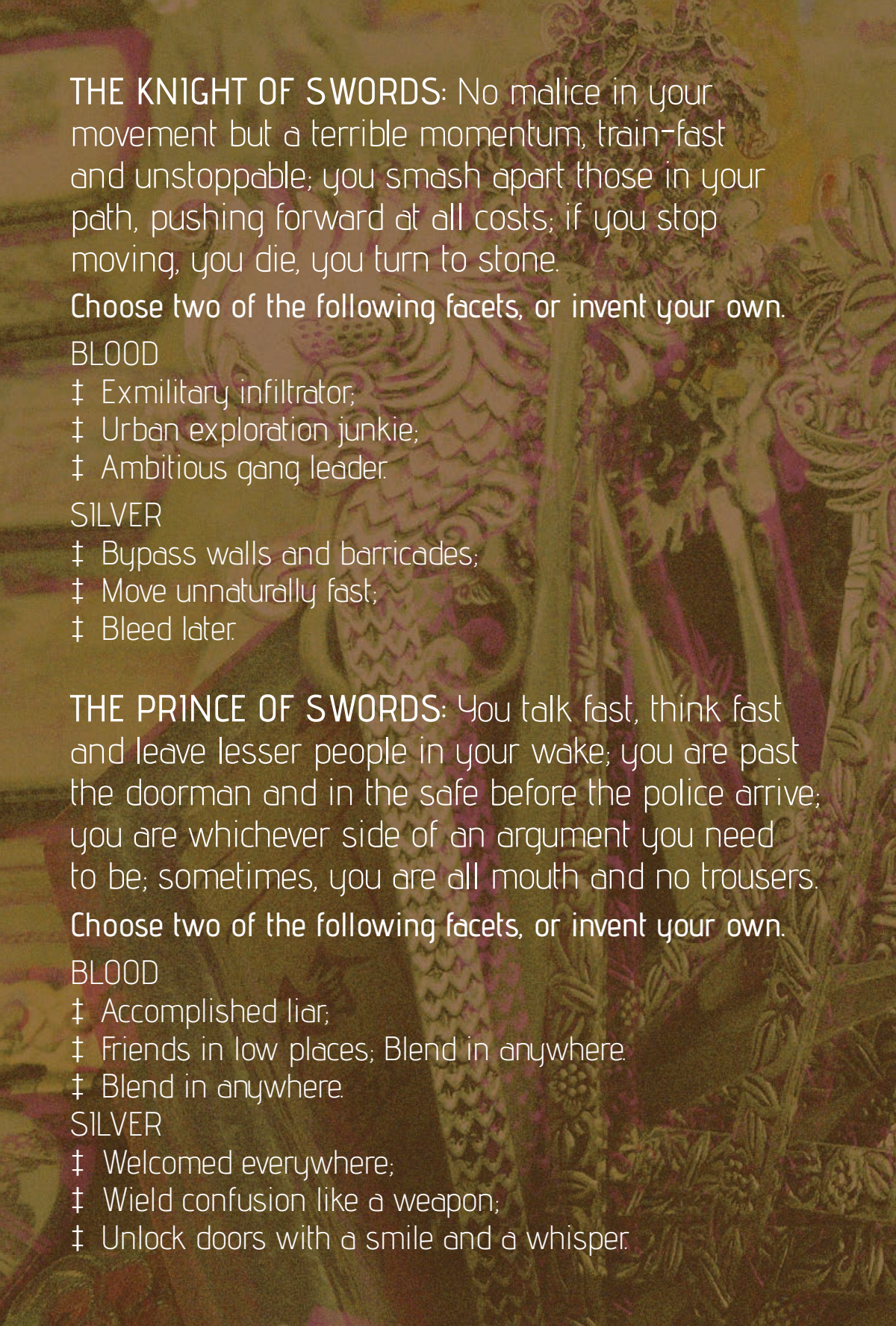
Choose two of the following facets, or invent your own.

BLOOD

- ‡ Uncover lies they didn't know they were making;
- ‡ Hotshot lawyer;
- ‡ Cut through deception and illusion.

SILVER

- ‡ Make something more real than real;
- ‡ Turn lies to poison;
- ‡ Take their mask for yourself.



THE KNIGHT OF SWORDS: No malice in your movement but a terrible momentum, train-fast and unstoppable; you smash apart those in your path, pushing forward at all costs; if you stop moving, you die, you turn to stone.

Choose two of the following facets, or invent your own.

BLOOD

- ‡ Exmilitary infiltrator;
- ‡ Urban exploration junkie;
- ‡ Ambitious gang leader.

SILVER

- ‡ Bypass walls and barricades;
- ‡ Move unnaturally fast;
- ‡ Bleed later.

THE PRINCE OF SWORDS: You talk fast, think fast and leave lesser people in your wake; you are past the doorman and in the safe before the police arrive; you are whichever side of an argument you need to be; sometimes, you are all mouth and no trousers.

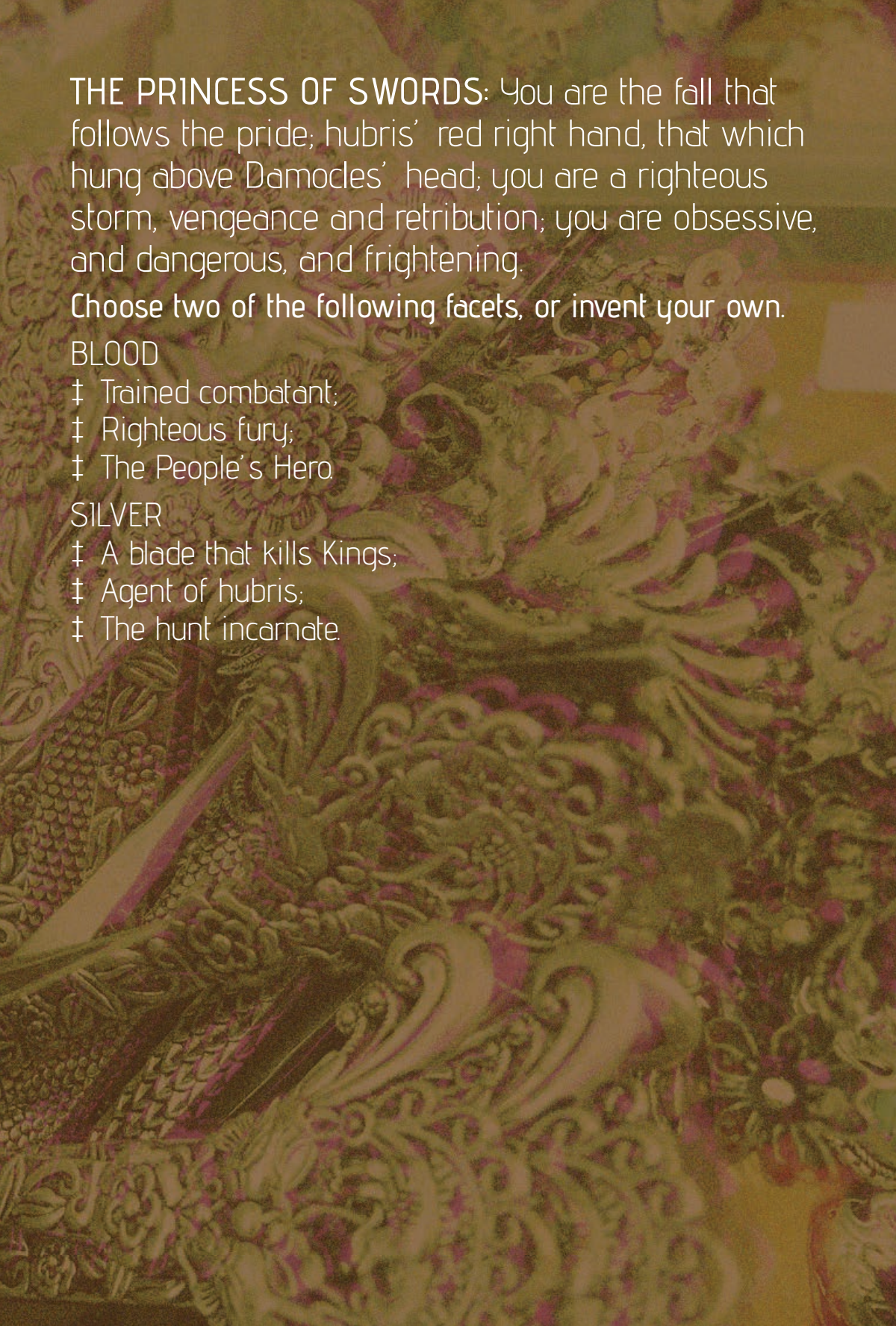
Choose two of the following facets, or invent your own.

BLOOD

- ‡ Accomplished liar;
- ‡ Friends in low places; Blend in anywhere
- ‡ Blend in anywhere

SILVER

- ‡ Welcomed everywhere;
- ‡ Wield confusion like a weapon;
- ‡ Unlock doors with a smile and a whisper.



THE PRINCESS OF SWORDS: You are the fall that follows the pride; hubris' red right hand, that which hung above Damocles' head; you are a righteous storm, vengeance and retribution; you are obsessive, and dangerous, and frightening.

Choose two of the following facets, or invent your own.

BLOOD

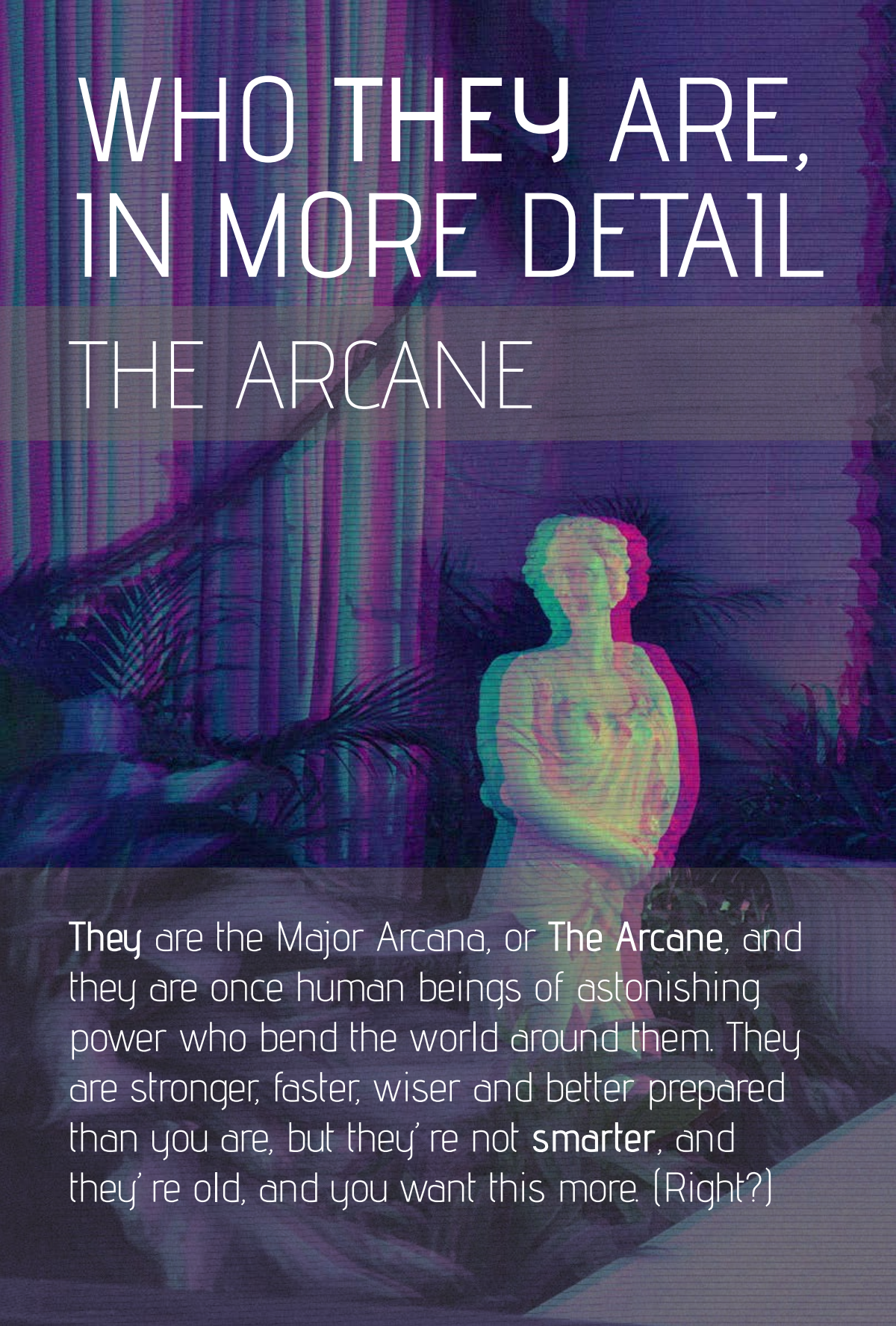
- ‡ Trained combatant;
- ‡ Righteous fury;
- ‡ The People's Hero

SILVER

- ‡ A blade that kills Kings;
- ‡ Agent of hubris;
- ‡ The hunt incarnate

WHO THEY ARE, IN MORE DETAIL

THE ARCANES



They are the Major Arcana, or The Arcane, and they are once human beings of astonishing power who bend the world around them. They are stronger, faster, wiser and better prepared than you are, but they're not **smarter**, and they're old, and you want this more. (Right?)



Where you twist reality and channel the power of your blood, they sit above it; reality is something you wrestle, trick and bluff, dazzle and confuse, maybe even knock senseless and go through its pockets: but it is something they command.

Once they were beings of flesh and blood, just like you, but they ascended and now they are something other, part of something eternal and barely knowable, the window of tarot allowing mortals the chance to look upon them. They are monsters, in the old sense of the word, in that they herald the coming of something terrible. They are more and less than human.

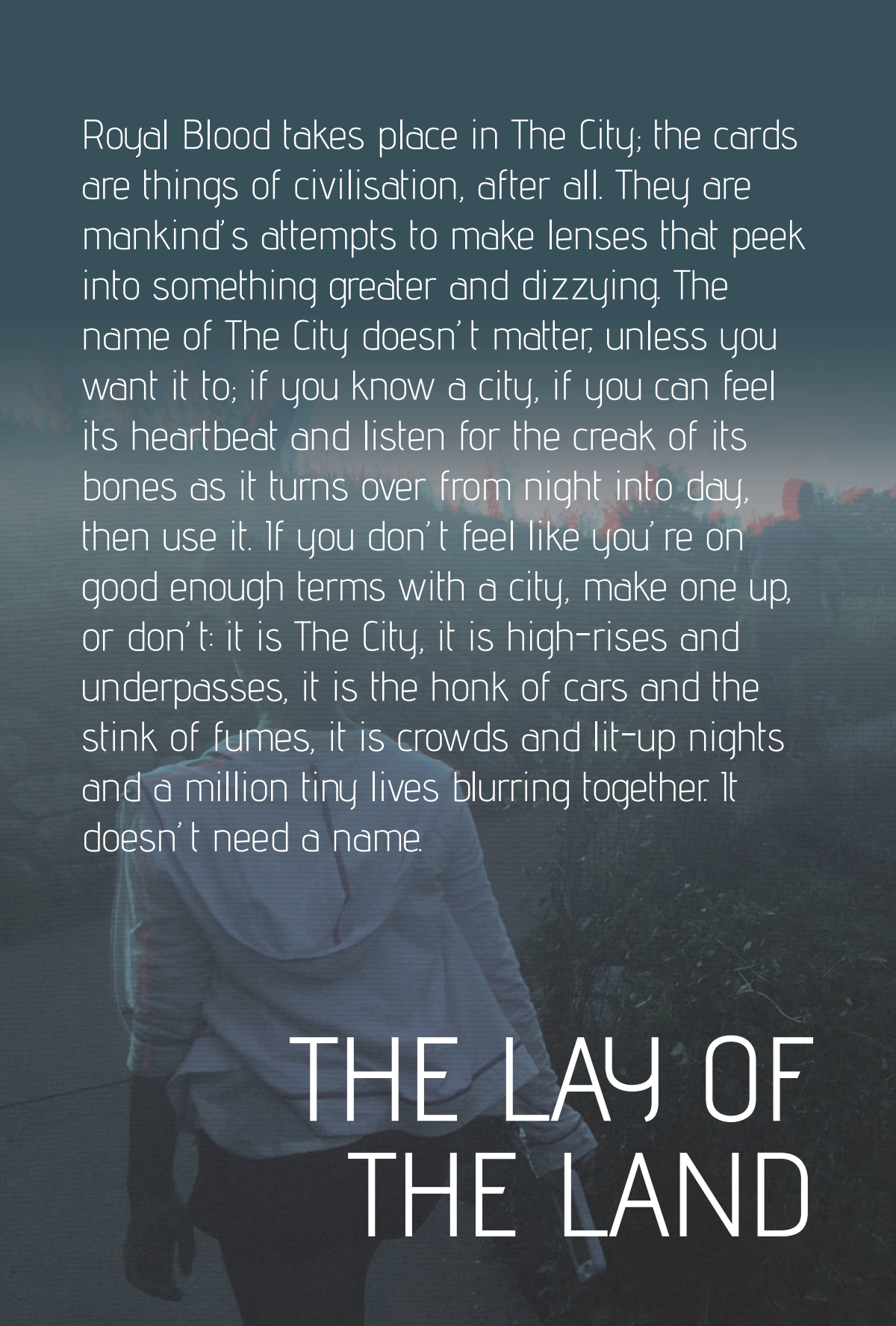


Sometimes they look like a person; other times, an animal, or a group or pair of people; other times, an abstract idea, an object, a breeze; other times, they are a name or a whisper. They appear exactly as they wish to, and change in ways that mortals cannot understand.

Occasionally, they ruthlessly stamp out any Royals they find, all too aware of the risk that letting them live represents. But, more commonly, Royals are simply beneath their notice, or provide a suitable entertainment, or competent staff. It's always nice to have someone around that you can talk to about the difficulties of being possessed by a living concept.





A person wearing a white hoodie is walking away from the camera in a dark, blurry environment. The background is out of focus, showing some greenery and a distant light source. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

Royal Blood takes place in The City; the cards are things of civilisation, after all. They are mankind's attempts to make lenses that peek into something greater and dizzying. The name of The City doesn't matter, unless you want it to; if you know a city, if you can feel its heartbeat and listen for the creak of its bones as it turns over from night into day, then use it. If you don't feel like you're on good enough terms with a city, make one up, or don't: it is The City, it is high-rises and underpasses, it is the honk of cars and the stink of fumes, it is crowds and lit-up nights and a million tiny lives blurring together. It doesn't need a name.

THE LAY OF THE LAND



The Arcane has a domain; a part of The City that they control. Describe, briefly, where they are strongest, and why. This isn't just for Fate Herself to do; all the players should chip in details.

Each Royal has a court; a sawn-off domain, a stub of a thing in comparison; for no matter how hard they strive, they'll never be able to meet the glamour of their betters until they ascend. Each Royal should describe their court.



THE ICONS

Tonight you are going to embark on a heist; a grand plan, a magical con job, in which you are going to rip the essence out of an ageless mystical concept made flesh and consume it, becoming eternal yourselves in turn. Each heist is made up of five icons, and the players gain one icon each, facedown, to use as a twist in case things go wrong.



Five makes for a pretty tight heist. You can up the number of icons if you want to run a longer game, and maybe keep them hidden until after the Mark appears for the first time, to make them a surprise. (Which means that you'll have to stagger the silver coin distribution, below. But it might be worth it.)

THE SPREAD

THE MARK

Fate Herself draws one major arcana – this is the Mark. The Mark has left themselves open to exploit, and tonight you are going to take them for everything they've got. Place the Mark in the centre of the spread, and read aloud their description from the section below.



If you're not feeling the Arcane you draw, redraw, or just pick out out that you like. There's no shame in playing to your strengths.

Go around the table. Each Royal should describe one aspect of the Mark as regards to them – how their abilities exceed their own; how the Mark has wronged or humiliated them; something or someone the Mark has taken from them. Fate Herself should note these down.





What follows is a description of each Arcane; the beautiful and terrible creatures that rule the worlds:



0 – THE FOOL

Impossible to harm; skipping through the chaos as the world crumbles; a traveller, a jester, a joker, a surprise; sex and drugs and rock and roll and no hangovers, never slowing down, leaving breakable people in their wake.

1 – THE MAGUS

Master of intellect, diviner and scientist, cruel and cutting and calculating; the world is made of fallible cogs and gears called people and they can be replaced, improved, removed, destroyed; nothing will stand before The Great Work.



2 – THE HIGH PRIESTESS

Queen of the Occult and hidden knowledge; the reflection in midnight mirrors; the voice in your head; at the heart of a thousand mysteries, cracked safes and bloody knives; she guides, unseen, towards some vast and unknowable plan.

3 – THE EMPRESS

The Earth Mother, ruler of beasts and the forces of nature; a bottled storm; a sleeping wolf; one day soon these cities will crumble and the rightful owners of the planet will rejoice and return.

4 – THE EMPEROR

A stoic commander, a fortress, rigid and inflexible; armies march on his word, and men live and die for him; no quarter, no alternative, absolute.

5 – THE HIEROPHANT

A cult leader; they will lead the populace towards something greater, build something mighty, a modern babel, wash away their sins in blood; everywhere they turn, false prophets and wicked spirits abound.





6 – THE LOVERS

It's Us Against The World, Baby; two spirits as one, moving in terrifying unison; together they are unstoppable; they would cast down the world to ruins if they get to dance among the ashes.

7 – THE CHARIOT

Bound together, they become something more than they were individually; their momentum is impossible, their speed legendary; whatever you want, wherever you need it, whenever it's needed; Fate help those who get in their way.

8 – JUSTICE

One True Way, their sword hanging by their side; they're going to clean up this city, no matter what it takes; cut off the arm to stem the infection, burn the barn to save the village; this law is written in stone.

9 – THE HERMIT

The world is a distraction, and we are all we need; cut communication, cut creation, cut the frenzied froth of civilisation; there is beauty in stillness and retreat, in stability; build walls and shatter allegiances, isolate, isolate.

10 – FORTUNE

The wheel spins, sending the city into chaos; there is always motion, rise and fall, luck and unluck; in the purity of chance there is something more than all of us can ever hope to achieve; nothing lasts forever, and Fortune ensures that.

11 – STRENGTH

The others are weak and so are you, just creatures to be tamed and controlled; there is power in small things; they are the lever long enough that will unseat the world, they are the hand that pushes it.

12 – THE HANGED MAN

Ties and binds, cuffs and prisons, ropes and manacles: these structures keep us safe, these boundaries are more than what they contain; it is the line that makes the shape, not the space inside; through control we can all prosper.



♈ 7 Apr - 14 Apr • ♉ 15 Apr - 23 Apr • ♊ 24 Apr - 22 May • ♋ 23 May - 21 Jun • ♌ 22 Jun - 20 Jul • ♍ 21 Jul - 18 Aug • ♏ 19 Aug - 16 Sep • ♐ 17 Sep - 15 Oct • ♑ 16 Oct - 13 Nov • ♒ 14 Nov - 12 Dec • ♓ 13 Dec - 10 Jan



13 – DEATH

The status quo is kindling for the fire that lets the Gods see us; tear, destroy, smash it all to ruins so we can build something better; without ends there can be no beginnings; she's in the Ending business, and brother, business is good.

14 – ART or TEMPERANCE

Behind the scenes is Art, puppetmaster, puppetmistress, pulling on the strings; the game is rigged from the outset and the players don't know it; a spider at the centre of a web; all roads lead to them; a network of shadows, false fronts and lies, a game played with perfect timing.

15 – THE DEVIL

A creature of cravings satisfied; the Lord of addicts; a thousand leashes round a thousand necks; sex, blind and dumb, a frantic scramble of hands and lips; curator of dark passions.

16 – THE TOWER

Build too high and watch it crumble; bricks, like promises, are made to be broken; the ground falls away beneath your feet; don't stick your neck out, don't take more than you're owed; a bogeyman, behind the scenes, a crow on the horizon.

17 – THE STAR

The brightest, the most brilliant, a constellation; on the front cover of all the magazines, on every red carpet worth being seen on; each night, different and elegant and beautiful clothes; whatever they turn their hand to, they succeed effortlessly and the crowd goes wild.

18 – THE MOON

Illusions, darkness, shadows and unreality; a powerful magician, or a spell too big to stay on the page, or in the mind; this world is paper-thin and nightmares writhe beneath every surface, gasping for air, so why deny them breath; it is only with closed eyes that we can truly see.





19 - THE SUN

Grin so wide your lips crack and bleed; refuse to break, refuse to bend, refuse to let your mask slip, refuse to let your guard down; we are happy together; the light that falls on loveless marriages, on deadend jobs; the only light that remains once love is down to embers.

20 - JUDGEMENT or THE AEON

The world is candle-bright compared to the bonfire of the before, of the after, of the Others who slumber fretful, bound between the darkness of the stars; one thing is for sure, in life - none of us are getting out alive; Death is but a whelp, and The Tower but a sandcastle, and you will see them fall upon their swords.

21 - THE WORLD or THE UNIVERSE

Everywhere, everything, watching from the space between seconds; The World is ubiquitous, universal, foundational, a key brand identity, a flag and an icon, the heartbeat of a place; it will kill the host sooner than give up control.

THE PRIZE



The Mark holds the Prize. The Prize is a manifestation of their power - something that can be taken by Royals and turned to their own ends. Fate Herself should describe the Prize, now. Prizes differ depending on the nature of the Arcane: they might be a symbol, a location, an idea, an item, a beating heart of the city under floorboards, a mirror that tells dark futures, a forest hidden in the space in-between, the skin on their face, their husband, a vault of faerie gold, and so on.

THE BOX

But: the Prize is protected by the Box. The Box is everything that stands between the Royals and their goal; barriers, agents, locale, challenges, and so on. Fate Herself draws five major arcana and lays them down around the Mark. She then consults the list of icons below and describes what the card represents. – perhaps noting it down on a sheet of paper, too.

“Mark,” “Box” and “Prize” are all old-school grifter terms, by the way. If you’re feeling more magical and less gritty, you could call them the “Arcane,” the “Ward” and the “Heart” if the mood takes you.



THE ICONS

0 - THE FOOL | THE WILD CARD

No-one could predict it - a loose cannon, a rogue element - something uncontrollable and unpredictable out of left field - a cat to be thrown amongst pigeons.

1 - THE MAGUS | THE EXPERT

Wise and skilled beyond compare - the only person for the job - invaluable skills hard to bring onside, but necessary for the job to come off - a scientist, an artist, a conman, a living legend.

2 - THE HIGH PRIESTESS | THE INSIDE WOMAN

Hiding in plain sight - someone behind enemy lines, willing to help out for a price - a secret weapon, a dirty trick a dangerous proposition, if uncovered.

3 - THE EMPRESS | THE FATALE

One whisper can bring down empires a master of her own destiny a charmer, a devil, a weaver of words plays hearts like violins who knows just which strings to pluck.

4 - THE EMPEROR | THE MONEY

Everyone, and everything, has their price, and if you can get your hands on the money, every door is open - beg or borrow or steal it - rob a bank to rob a god - owe someone a favour or keep a low profile while they're hunting for your head.

5 - THE HIEROPHANT | THE KEY

Each fortress has a door, and the key can allow access through the thickest walls better than any crowbar - the right thing at the right time - the secret code, the access, guarded and vital.

6 - THE LOVERS | THE RIVALS

Another gang of royals, hungry for power and tilting at the concordance, same as you - potential allies, if you're smart enough, or just people stupid enough to throw at a problem to see what happens.





7 - THE CHARIOT | THE TRAIN

A vehicle - a hot rod - a convoy - an unstoppable object begging to be hijacked - maybe it's transporting the prize, or maybe you just need to crash the train through the walls of the compound to get what you need - a getaway car, keys in the ignition, idling outside the bank.

8 - JUSTICE | THE COPS

A swarm of squad cars - a zealous detective - a night in the drunk tank while the city waits to be taken - a patrol at the wrong time - crooked officers in the pay of the Mark - a shootout, attention, rooftop chases and collateral damage.

9 - THE HERMIT | THE WEAK LINK

Bitter and twisted, away from their peers - an axe to grind - a beautiful betrayal waiting to flower - the chink in the Arcane's armour, aching for pressure to punch through - stab their back and they'll scratch yours.

10 - FORTUNE | THE SEED OF CHAOS

A riot waiting to happen - a tinderbox neighbourhood - a storm in a fake 911 call - a riot of noise to hide your signal.

11 - STRENGTH | THE GUARDIAN

A loyal defender - a trusted champion - a living bastion - the muscle, the goons - can't be bought, can be outwitted, spoiling for a brawl.

12 - THE HANGED MAN | THE BACK DOOR

Secret paths and hidden corridors - crawling through vents and smashing through windows - slipping in undetected - barely guarded, almost wishing for an entrant.

13 - DEATH | THE KILLER

A trained assassin - a zealous maniac - a hunter - someone or something dangerous and out for blood - perversely subtle or terrifyingly loud - the reaper - a one-woman army.





14 - TEMPERANCE | THE UNFAIR ADVANTAGE

You're outmatched but with this you're not outgunned - if you can get your hands on it, you'll have a shot at taking them down - the hidden razor, the brass knuckles, a roll of quarters in your fist - the great leveller.

15 - THE DEVIL | THE FIXER

They can get you what you want for the right price - the right threat - the right favour - the mistress at the centre of a web of want - you don't want to deal with them but you've no choice, and they've got you by the balls.

16 - THE TOWER | THE WALL

A fortress - a tower - a prison - a maze - a labyrinth - something in your way - smash through it - climb over it - find the door - apply pressure and overcome.

17 - THE STAR | THE BOMB

A bundle of dynamite - a stash of C4 - a leaky petrol tank - a gas main, ripe for the taking - an unlicensed rocket launcher - a bud of potential energy begging to blossom into something devastating danger, fire, oil spills - a distraction or a skeleton key or a show of power or a denial.

18 - THE MOON | THE FAKE

A perfect copy, or near as dammit - fairy gold, and once the sun rises, it's gone - a disguise, a ruse spoofed access codes - a forgery that the artist couldn't detect.

19 - THE SUN | THE GOOD PART OF TOWN

Clean streets and watchful eyes - a cop on every corner - cameras scouring the pavement - quick response times and quicker tempers control, authority, play it safe.





20 - JUDGEMENT | THE ENEMY'S ENEMY

You don't like us and we don't like you, but - an ally in all but name - making friends with bad people for good reasons - they've got you over a barrel and at their mercy - maybe a truce is the way forward, followed by a series of swift betrayals.

21 - THE WORLD | THE BAD PART OF TOWN

Grimy tarmac and broken glass - the sort of place the cops don't come if they can help it - gangs and violence and desperate dangerous people - a tinderbox - pray you're hard enough to make it through intact.



SCOUTING THE BOX

Now: Fate Herself gives three silver coins to each Royal. (The ways of The Arcane are strange, though, so these coins may look like ordinary quarters, or bottle caps, or poker chips, or any other type of counter.)

The scouting phase of the heist begins; point to each icon in turn and ask which royals are researching it and how – watching from a distance, collecting information from contacts, sneaking inside in disguise, knowing the right people, or using magic to scry. (Or: maybe they just have history, and this is all shown through flashbacks.) Ask the royals to contribute details that they discover, and place a silver coin on each icon to mark their contribution.





Fate Herself should note down these details, and ask questions of the Royal to flesh out the situation and gain more insight.

Should it seem appropriate, Fate Herself can pair an icon to a different Royal, one that is not sat around the table – draw from the deck of Royals and describe them.

Perhaps: the icon is The Wild Card, and Fate Herself wishes for more detail, so she draws a Royal card and places it nearby. A Wild Card in the form of the Prince of Pentacles (all gold and diamonds, fast cars and narcotics, bluster and boast) is a very different proposition from one in the form of The Princess of Swords (a cold-eyed and clinical killer with the Sword of Damocles at her hip).



When all the silver has been spent, the Box is fully defined. Leave the cards and coins in place: these will represent the power of each icon. Now, con-artists and tricksters all, it is the job of the Royals to take these icons arrayed against them and negate them – or, better still, subvert them for their own gain.

TAKING THE POWER OF AN ARCANE FOR YOUR OWN: A GUIDE





The core of the evening will progress as follows: each Royal will try to solve the problems ahead of them that stand between them and the prize. When a Royal attempts to overcome a problem, It plays out like this:

ONE. The Royal stakes one of their facets on the challenge this is both what they're using to overcome the problem and what they stand to lose if they fail. If multiple Royals are taking part in the same challenge, pick one as leader. If it's not entirely clear who the leader is, play through until someone sticks their neck out.

(Fate Herself can use her discretion to disallow unsuitable facets, but should not punish creative use of strange powers. Making do with the hand you've been dealt is the mark of a Royal, after all.)



TWO. The Royal works with Fate Herself and together they frame a scene around the problem they describe the location, the sights, the smells, the sounds, the players in the piece. The player to their left contributes a sensory detail, too. Then, the player on the Royal's right describes an unforeseen wrinkle in the situation to lend some flavour.

Should the Royal wish to improve their chances of success, they can cross Fate's palm with silver. If they have any silver coins to hand (which they can gain by being exceptionally lucky) then they can bribe Fate Herself before the draw. For each coin the Royal passes to Fate, they draw an additional card in the following step and may choose whichever they wish.

THREE. The Royal describes how their facet helps them attempt to overcome the problem and, with Fate Herself, plays out the scene. Once it's all coming to a head, Fate Herself hands the Royal the deck and tells them how many cards to draw (usually one) and then interprets their result as follows:

If it's a 2, 3, 4, or 5 – **No, and.**

The situation gets out of hand and additional complications arise from the fallout of failure. The facet wagered on the challenge is lost describe how. Have the Royal's strength turn against them.

If it's a 6, 7, 8 or 9 – **Yes, but.**

The Royal succeeds, but not without problems. The facet wagered on the challenge is damaged describe how. Fate Herself discards a coin from the icon; if this is the last coin, the icon is entirely overcome.

If it's a 10, or a court card – **Yes, and.**

Not only does the Royal pull it off, but they manage to get a benefit into the bargain. Fate Herself gives one of the coins from the icon to the Royal; if this is the last coin, the icon is entirely overcome.

If it's an Ace – **Yes, and then some.**

The Royal subverts the obstacle in their path and uses it for their own ends. Once the icon has no more coins on it, then the Royal who played an ace against it takes it as a facet of their own.





Personally, I think Fate Herself should draw all the cards to underline the theme that she's in charge, not the Royals, no matter how powerful they might be. But players like to feel as though they have control, so it'll make for a more pleasant experience if you let them draw their own cards. It's not as though they can cheat, anyway.

If you use a damaged facet as a wager, it is lost if damaged a second time. Lost facets can't be reclaimed - they're gone.



Here's an optional rule: a Royal can go All In with a facet rather than wagering it normally. If a Royal goes all in, they suffer a **No, and** on a result from 2-5 and a **Yes, and** on a higher card. Maybe you want to rule that players can elect to go all in after they've failed a draw - that's fine with me, although I think that the twists provide enough of a re-draw mechanic. It's up to you.

FOUR. If the Royal isn't happy with the result, they can use their twist. Turning over the face-down major arcana they have in front of them, they should look up the meaning of the icon and say how they use it to help get out of trouble. (Royals are encouraged to re-incorporate old details back into the narrative to justify their twist.) Fate Herself then hands them the deck and they may draw two further cards. The Royal uses their highest card to resolve the challenge, and the twist is discarded.

FIVE. Fate Herself describes how the exchange plays out whether the Royal is successful or not and what they gain, or lose, in the process. Other Royals can take part as and when they feel the need. Continue playing and framing scenes, or carrying on the current scene, and drawing cards until the icon has no further coins on it, then move on to the next icon.

Or, you know: be clever about it, flick back and forth between scenes, return to the scene of an earlier failure with new information cut back and forth between two different icons as the Royals split up to cover more ground. Use whatever pace you feel is best for your group



INVERTING CARDS



A Royal can survive as long as they have their facets to fall back on. But – if they lose all of their facets, their card inverts.



I should make this doubly clear you don't actually hang onto your card when you're playing the game – it's shuffled back into the deck. When I talk about inversion, it's more of a “character” thing than an “actual card” thing.

When you lose all your facets, you undergo a soul-searching scene where your real motivations are made known to the rest of the party, for good or ill, and you have one facet left – **yourself**. Make sure everyone is clear as to your true motivation.

Now, everything is turned up to 11; whenever Fate Herself draws to see how you overcome challenges, she draws two cards rather than one. But that's it, for you – there's no coming back from this, not tonight.

If the chance to resolve your hidden desire arises before your card inverts, hint at it but do not take it. Or: discard your facets, invert your card, become your other and run at your destiny full-tilt.

Should you lose your own card,
you yourself are lost -
dead, mad, captured, taken,
disheartened, satisfied with
your lot, perhaps even
succumbed to the promise of
a quiet life and a happy ending.

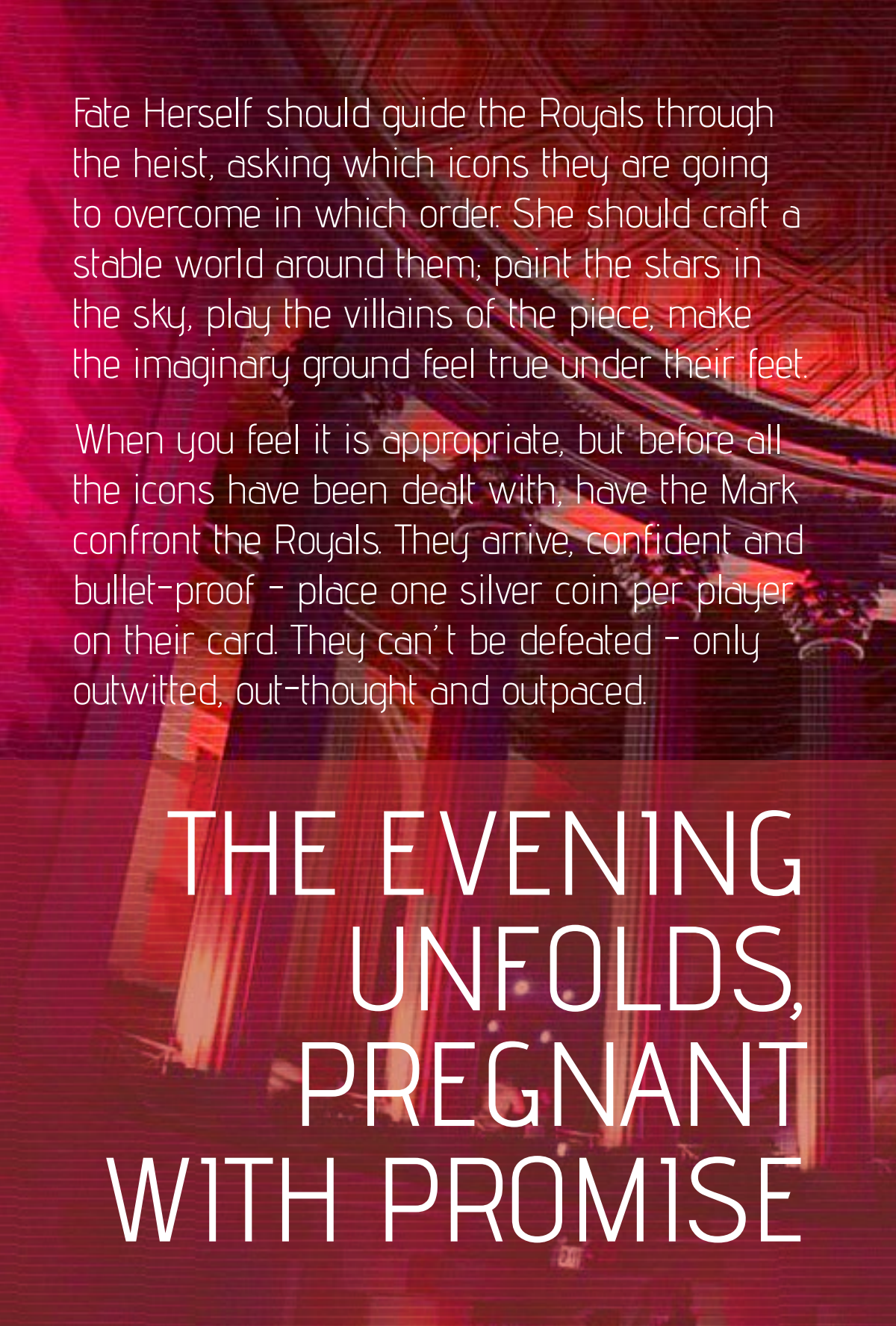
However it is you go out, you deserve a proper ending.
Here's another optional rule: you become a twist for
another player, once you're inverted, and you can
volunteer yourself up to let them re-draw their cards,
but it consumes you. But maybe that's a little self-
sacrificing for your tastes, and you'd rather get out of
this with a back pocket full of loose magic and your
head on your shoulders.



Your character will play no further part in the
events of the evening. Ask Fate Herself if she
has any use for you; you can wear more
masks than your own, and the city is full of
roles to inhabit.







Fate Herself should guide the Royals through the heist, asking which icons they are going to overcome in which order. She should craft a stable world around them; paint the stars in the sky, play the villains of the piece, make the imaginary ground feel true under their feet.

When you feel it is appropriate, but before all the icons have been dealt with, have the Mark confront the Royals. They arrive, confident and bullet-proof – place one silver coin per player on their card. They can't be defeated – only outwitted, out-thought and outpaced.

THE EVENING UNFOLDS, PREGNANT WITH PROMISE



Play through the scene as normal with the exception that the Arcane can never be taken as a facet. This isn't a scene to defeat the Arcane - this is an attempt to get the hell out of there before they take you down.



Maybe the Arcane doesn't rock up kicking in doors and brandishing a sawn-off; it can be a subtle thing, and they never need meet the Royals at all. But when they "confront" the Royals, our heroes are made to feel their power. Agents of the Arcane rush their courts; their assets are frozen; their homes are foreclosed on; their allies murdered; they wander into a trap, caught between enemies. It all depends on the Arcane and the Royals, and they story you and the table are telling together.

Once the scene is resolved, invert the Arcane's card: their dark side (or their darker side) is revealed, and if they seemed cruel and unfeeling before, you've not seen anything yet.



Once all the icons have been defeated (or subverted), the Arcane is open and dawn approaches. Place one coin per Royal on the Arcane's card, and have at them - this is your final battle. Once the final coin is removed, play out one more challenge as the Arcane, dark and desperate, pulls their final trick out of the bag.



You don't have to fight the Arcane, and you probably won't, but when I play games, they end up veering towards action, so I write with that inescapable fact in mind. It doesn't have to be swords at dawn; it could be stealth, poetry contests, the sort of ballroom dancing that determines the fall of empires, tense arguments, or any other form of conflict you can imagine. The Arcane are strange, and their ways are all but unknown to us mortals.



DAWN BREAKS OVER THE CITY, AND THE DEED IS DONE

As the Arcane is overcome, the dawn breaks, and the motley collection of surviving Royals ascend. They form a new card, and each and every tarot deck in the world changes to accommodate it, just as though it had always been this way. Talk with the group to discuss what they remake the Arcane into, and what they use their new power to do. The game is complete.



Or – and this is unlikely they fail, and they are at the Arcane's mercy. Which makes for a sadder ending.

A MULTIVERSE OF POSSIBILITIES

ALTERNATE SETTINGS FOR ROYAL BLOOD

THE BLOODED:

THEY are the full-blood vampires, older than the city, older than the flood, and they rule this place. YOU are the half-blood whelps that they create when they feed and get careless, or over-attached, or spiteful. Tonight, you take the city. You have a handful of supernatural powers at your command shape-shifting, shadow-play, mind-control, impossible speed and while you burn through borrowed blood to use them, you're out to make a killing.

THE FALLEN:

THEY are the new gods of this place, this world, bright and brilliant. YOU are the deposed deities, cast out of heaven for your crimes. But you have taken mortal form, you have flooded meat with your majesty, and you gather the remnants of your power around you your cults, your temples, your wonders and nations and band together to kick in the doors of the divine.

THE GLITTERING:

The Arcane are dead. The Kings and Queens rule this joint, now; THEY are the overlords of Las Vegas, a metaphysical whirlpool of bad luck and worse decisions. YOU are a handful of Jacks, out to push your luck on the Vegas strip. The Arcane were inhuman monsters, but that just makes what the half-human Queen of Hearts is going to do you when she catches you so much worse. You know that she enjoys it.

THE MAGIC:

YOU are the sorcerer kings and witch queens mentioned in the opening paragraphs of this book. THEY are raw magical energy that powers your universe; your hidden masters, your patrons, the power behind your thrones, Faerie Princes and Demon Queens. But you are tired of being under their bootheel, and you bring together a conclave in a shadowed room: tonight, you strike. Your armies march on the gates of hell and dethrone fallen angels.

THE COVEN:

High School can be difficult, but even more so when you're a goth teenager who's made bargains with demons for ungodly power. You get your girlfriends together - the High Witch has been flaunting her power, using you as lackeys and assistants, for too long. Time to put on your extra-black eyeliner and summon up some payback.

THE JOB:

Get rid of all the occult stuff all blood and no silver. You're a crack team of thieves who are going to pull off the biggest heist of their lives, and it just so happens you're going to use Tarot cards to tell the story.