



CHAPTER 3

# KICK IN THE DOOR





# HIT THE GROUND RUNNING

The moment your characters make the decision to stand up to their oppressors – the moment they become *rebels* – is a crucial moment. It's also the first story you will tell together as a group of players, and so deserves special attention.

This chapter is a guided tutorial taking your group of players through their first session of *Voidheart Symphony*. You'll decide the broad strokes of the story you'll be telling, make your rebels, fight your first enemy and steal their power, and finally ground your rebels back in their mundane context.

I'd estimate that it ought to take two to three hours of gameplay, longer if you like to spend a lot of time exploring the characters' personalities and responses to these strange events or fleshing out the details of your city. Once it's done, you'll have gone from nothing to a full crew of rebels ready to take on the castle!

Note: we wrote this game assuming you'd make characters in this collaborative way, instead of arriving at your first session with a completed playbook sheet. This game really wants you to build rebels who exist in a context with each other, after all. Things work a little differently when new rebels join the crew mid-story, thanks to a rebel's retirement or death or a new player joining the group; you can find out what to do in these times on p. 95.

Zero prep is possible, but if you want this to go as smoothly as possible I'd recommend that the Architect player reads the core rules (p. 4) and this chapter before you sit down to play.

## KICK IN THE DOOR OVERVIEW

### BIG PICTURE

**Step 1:** Discuss **expectations** and **desires** for the game.

### THE REBELS

**Step 2:** Each player picks a different rebel **playbook** to use.

**Step 3:** Each player decides their rebel's **particulars**, and writes their character's name on the **relationship map**.

### YOUR TARGET

**Step 4:** Answer your playbook's question about your first **vassal**.

**Step 5:** Decide your **crew covenant**. Answer questions about your relationship with the other rebels, and put those details on the map.

### DIVE INTO DARKNESS

**Step 6:** Your rebels take their first steps into the shadow realm of the castle, face their first obstacles, and find power from within.

**Step 7:** Your rebels find – and fight – the **avatar** at the heart of this realm.

**Step 8:** Draw power from the spoils of victory – or the wounds of defeat.

### BACK TO REALITY

**Step 9:** Build your **hideout** together, and put it on the relationship map.

**Step 10:** Revisit your **particulars**, decide the **role** you play in society, put a **location** important to you on the map, and fill out your starting **stress gauges**.

### BUILD YOUR NETWORK

**Step 11:** Pick a **major covenant** from your playbook's list, and add the associated contact to the map.

**Step 12:** Draw a link from any location or contact to a new contact.

**Step 13:** Form a **major covenant** with any contact on the map. Pick its arcanum, and draw a link between you and them on the map.

### NEXT TIME ON VOIDHEART SYMPHONY

Work through *Growing Shadows* to set up your next target.





## THE BIG PICTURE

### STEP 1: DISCUSS EXPECTATIONS

Before you decide anything else, it's important to define the creative palette your group wants to work with, and understand what everyone is willing to commit to.

**Are you planning one session, a short run, an ongoing campaign?** Make sure you're on the same page about the time commitments.

**Are there any topics and themes that people don't want touched on, or even mentioned?**

*Voidheart Symphony* is a game about people pushing back against those oppressing them and benefiting from their misery. This can easily go very dark, and it's important to respect the comfort of the actual people in your group over the desires of fictional characters. If there's a specific topic you don't want to address in the game, let the others know.

It's helpful to set up an anonymous way to collect *lines* (topics they don't want to even exist in your story) and *veils* (things they don't want to see onscreen). Also, encourage an environment where everyone is empowered to ask that a particular thing not happen or be reversed; formal safety tools like the X Card or Script Change are great for this.

**How do people feel about antagonism between characters?** Will you disagree with each other only briefly, sometimes come to blows, hold long-running grudges, or play it by ear?

**What does your enemy look like?** The Architect's chapter gives a few different ways vassals can be organised – as a conspiracy, as an informal zeitgeist, as feuding factions, etc. The precise details are in their hands, but this is the other players' chance to say if any of those structures don't appeal.

**What does your city look like?** Are you in London, Tokyo, Buenos Aires, a fictional city? Is it the present, the recent past, the near future? What sort of tensions is it under – rich vs. poor, established vs. immigrant, blue collar vs. white collar? There are more questions to go into if you like, on p. 35.

## THE REBELS

### STEP 2: PICK PLAYBOOKS

Everyone except the Architect picks a rebel playbook (p. 49) that fits their basic idea for their character. There's no doubling up – each of you is unique in what you add to the group. As you pick your playbook, read out its blurb to let the group know what its deal is, or summarise it in your own words.

### STEP 3: FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Each rebel should pick their **particulars** from their playbook's list. These are the things an audience would first notice about them, even if there's a deeper truth. Next, draw a **relationship map**: write each rebels' name in a loose circle in the centre of a shared sheet of paper. You'll use this map to track your characters, supporting cast, and key locations, and remind you of the links between them. If you're playing online, I recommend **MIRO** for this.

**Relationship Map Update:** From now on, every instruction to update the map will be called out like this. To get started, write every rebel's name in a loose circle in the center of the map like so:



## MAKING A STAND

The characters have a common enemy – a **vassal** of the castle, a petty tyrant profiting from your suffering and encouraged by otherworldly evil. Each of you came to this point for your own reasons, but together you've decided to strike at the source of their power. By the time we first see your rebels, they've already found the secret door, hidden alley or warped mirror that'll take them inside a nightmare labyrinth shaped by the vassal's mind.

### STEP 4: YOUR FIRST FOE

Each rebel playbook has a question for you to answer about the vassal – something about your history with them, or the steps that brought you to this point. The default order is alphabetical by playbook, from Authority to Watcher, but use what works for you. Go round the table answering these, and fill in any extra details you want covered – for example, the vassal's name.

### STEP 5: FORM A CREW

As your characters prepare to cross this threshold, they make a commitment to each other. Within your character's heart, this commitment becomes their **crew covenant** – the thing they've sworn to provide to the others.

Pick your rebel's crew covenant from the options your playbook offers, and ask the linked question to the group to cement your bonds. When you have time, check p. 106 to see the particular powers your crew covenant grants.

**Relationship Map Update:** Put your first target down on the map. Also draw a line linking you and the rebel who answered your question, and label it with a summary of their answer.





## DIVE INTO DARKNESS

### STEP 6: TRAVEL THE LABYRINTH

As soon as your rebels step across the threshold, they find themselves in an awful otherworld – a **castle-shard**. The landmarks around them are familiar, but warped by the vassal's ravenous drive: a slumlord's shard might be a place of mouldering concrete and demons of twisted rebar, while a cruel prosecutor's shard could be a maze of piled-up bills and indictments haunted by undead cops.

**Architect:** Describe what the rebels see as they enter this otherworld. Give them space to play out their initial interactions with each other.

### THE CASTLE PUSHES BACK

Once the rebels start exploring the shard, describe one of these obstacles:

- A precarious climb up a spire or down a pit.
- Churning, hazardous machinery.
- A vast monster that hasn't noticed the rebels.
- A reinforced gate with inept guards.

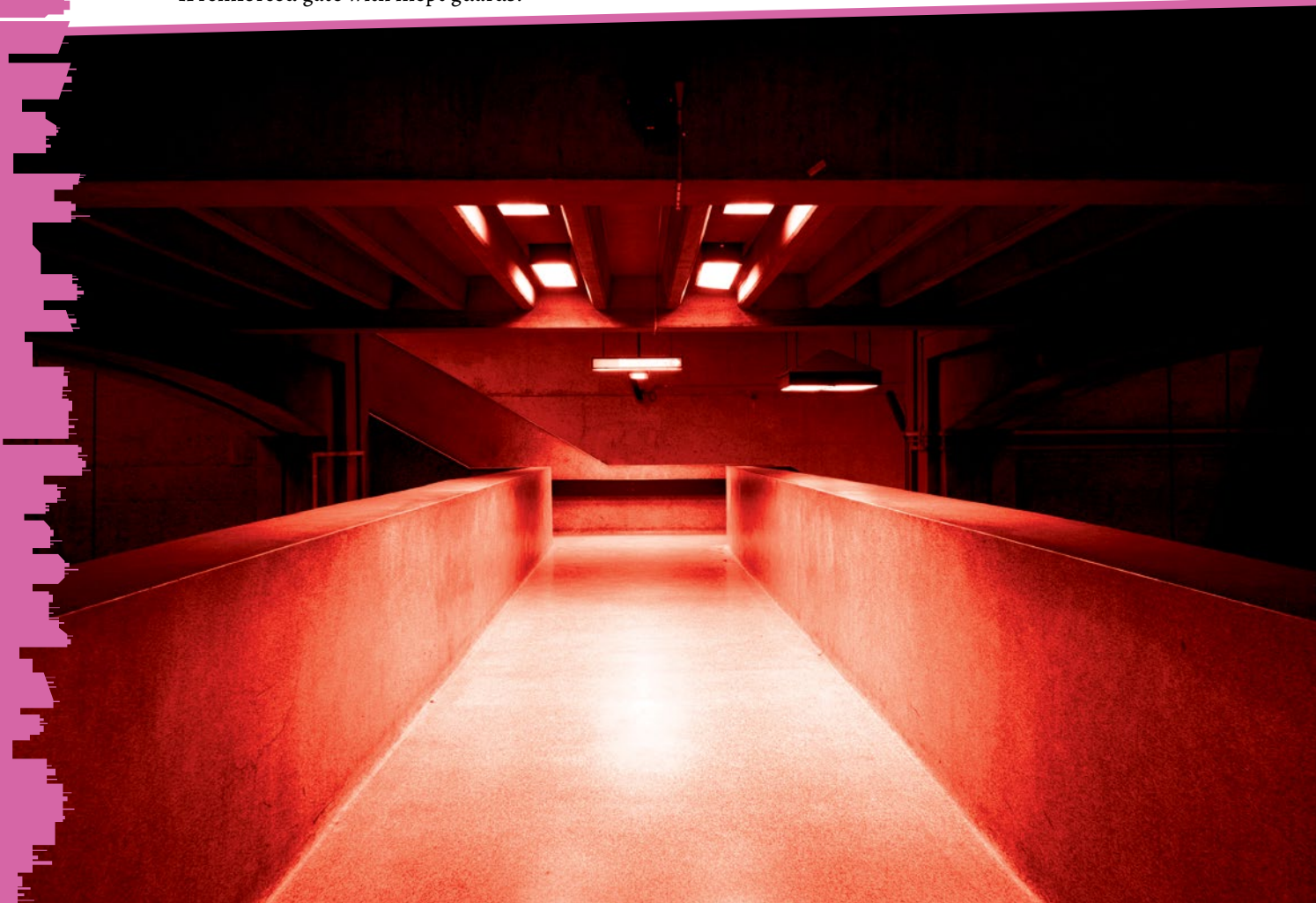
Ask the players which rebel takes action to deal with the action, and ask the volunteer to describe the action they take. Find the Exploration Move (p. 156) that fits that action best, and have the player assign a rating to its **stat**: +1, 0 or -1.

By the time you're done with this delve, each rebel will have two stats rated at +1, one at 0 and one at -1. The stats are detailed on p. 39, but here's a quick list:

- **Swords:** Determination and direct action.
- **Wands:** Speed and creativity.
- **Coins:** Resourcefulness and awareness.
- **Cups:** Empathy and solidarity.

Don't trigger that move – instead, describe how they feel in this moment as all external control falls away and they get to decide for themselves how strong they are, and describe their action's complete success.

As they watch their crewmate's success each other rebel defines themselves in response, picking their ratings for the stat in question.



## STEP 7: FACING THE AVATAR

Your rebels have found their way to the shard's heart. Inside sits the vassal's avatar, the monster holding this rotten place together. Slay the beast, and send the vassal tumbling down.

**Architect:** Pick three of these Qualities to define the avatar, and describe what the rebels see.

Quality title	<b>ARCANE</b>	<b>ARMoured</b>	<b>BESTIAL</b>
Description	<i>They can shapeshift and use supernatural forces.</i>	<i>They have potent defences.</i>	<i>They're aggressive and twisted into an inhuman form.</i>
Reactions the Quality gives you	<i>Lash out with crimson fire. Summon walls of boiling blood.</i>	<i>Send an attacking rebel flying back. Redirect an attack to hit another rebel.</i>	<i>Leap across the arena. Hit with devastating force.</i>
What happens when the quality's broken	<b>Break:</b> Twist into a strange form with increased mobility.	<b>Break:</b> Shed encumbrances and lunge for the closest rebel.	<b>Break:</b> Call in a mob of animals to shelter the avatar.
	<b>COMMANDING</b>	<b>DARK</b>	<b>DRAMATIC</b>
	<i>They have hordes of minions.</i>	<i>They control poison and shadows.</i>	<i>They're devoted to style, grace and acclaim.</i>
	<i>Mob a rebel and isolate them. Put minions between the avatar and the rebels.</i>	<i>Teleport from one shadow to another. Disappear in a cloud of choking poison.</i>	<i>Dazzle a rebel. Travel at impossible angles.</i>
	<b>Break:</b> They pick up the mob's weapons for their own use.	<b>Break:</b> Blind the rebel who struck the darkness away.	<b>Break:</b> Beg for mercy, perhaps as a feint.

Go to Confrontation Moves (p. 159) for the rules governing this fight. Whenever a rebel uses a stat for the first time, everyone assigns themselves a rating as before.

The rebels don't have signature weapons yet, so just treat whatever weapons they improvise as flavour for their actions. Also: remind them that their crew covenant gives them a Castle Move that might help!

## STEP 8: THE AFTERMATH

This battle will have one of two outcomes:

*If the rebels defeat the avatar:* The vassal is out of the picture – fired, arrested, or forced out of the city. As the castle shard's heart shatters, the Void recognises your power – each rebel gains a rank of attunement to the Void, and picks an upgrade from their playbook's Void Advances list.

*If the avatar defeats the rebels:* The vassal completes their plot and moves on to bigger things. As the rebels are cast out of the shard they're saved from death by the nascent will of the World: each rebel gains a rank of attunement to the World, and picks an upgrade from their playbook's World Advances list.

With cosmic recognition of your struggle comes an chance to declare who you really are. Each rebel decides how they're transformed in this moment, gaining each of the following:

A **signature weapon** appears in their hands, a manifestation of their drive to fight the castle. Pick its perk and flaw (p. 44).

You also manifest an item of **gear** from your playbook's list: maybe armour, or a useful tool, or a backup weapon.

Finally, your look transforms into a **castle form** that's closer to your ideal. Pick one option from your playbook's list.

Describe your new appearance; you'll take this form each time you enter a shard from now on.

## BACK TO REALITY

### STEP 9: BUILD A HIDEOUT

As your crew takes their first steps in their new forms, the otherworldly space you're in makes its own transformation – your identity as a crew claiming this place as yours. This is now your **hideout**.

**If you won:** Each rebel describes one fixture in this space that would help them feel empowered, dangerous or free. Those objects manifest now.

**If you lost:** Each rebel describes one fixture in this space that would help them feel secure, cared for or serene. Those objects manifest now.

### STEP 10: BUILD YOUR LIFE

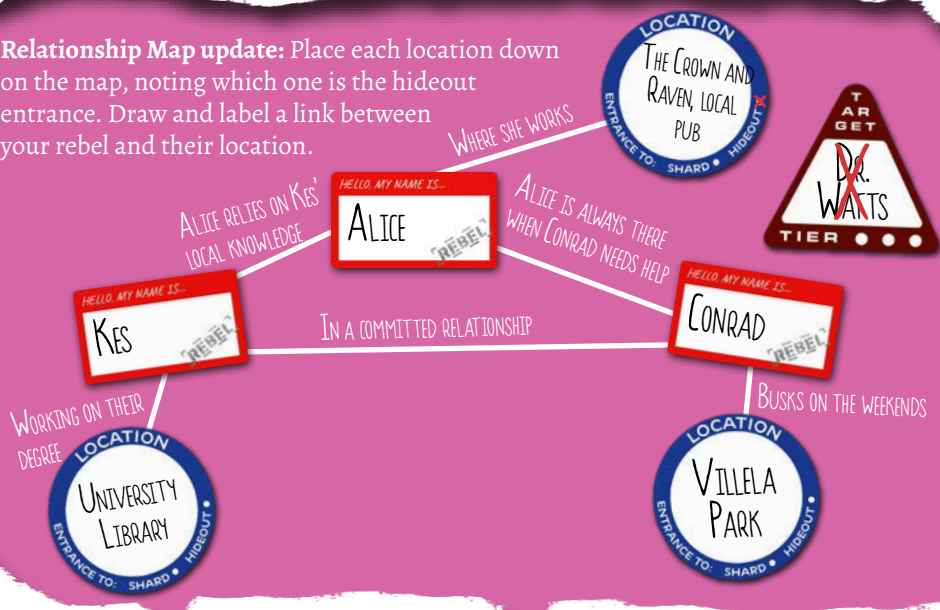
With your first battle done, it's time for each player to look at their rebel's personal life.

**Revisit your Particulars.** Consider whether you want to change anything, and think about what other things might become apparent once your character is back in their mundane context. Markers of religion, experience, ethnicity, disability, identity – anything that helps you flesh them out (see p. 35 for some prompts).

**Decide your Role.** Pick if the castle would see you as a Delinquent, Prodigal, or Traitor (p. 47), and decide on the specific thing you do with your days. Make sure to fill in the first empty box of the Stress Gauge you get a black mark in (see p. 39 for more on black marks).

Your playbook also gives you a prompt for a location important to your rebel. If you're the one who struck down the avatar – or survived the longest – your location also hides an entrance to the hideout.

**Relationship Map update:** Place each location down on the map, noting which one is the hideout entrance. Draw and label a link between your rebel and their location.



### LOCATION IDEAS

A Nightclub • A Cafe • A Bar  
A Boardwalk • A Diner • A Graveyard  
A Train / Bus / Metro Station • An Arcade  
A Public Park • A Library • An Underpass  
A Shopping Mall • A Tenement Block  
A Funfair • An Abandoned Buildin

**Stress Gauges.** These are the issues on your rebel's plate at the start of your game. Each playbook has fixed starting stressors – two gauges will start with two ticks, and the other three gauges will start with three.

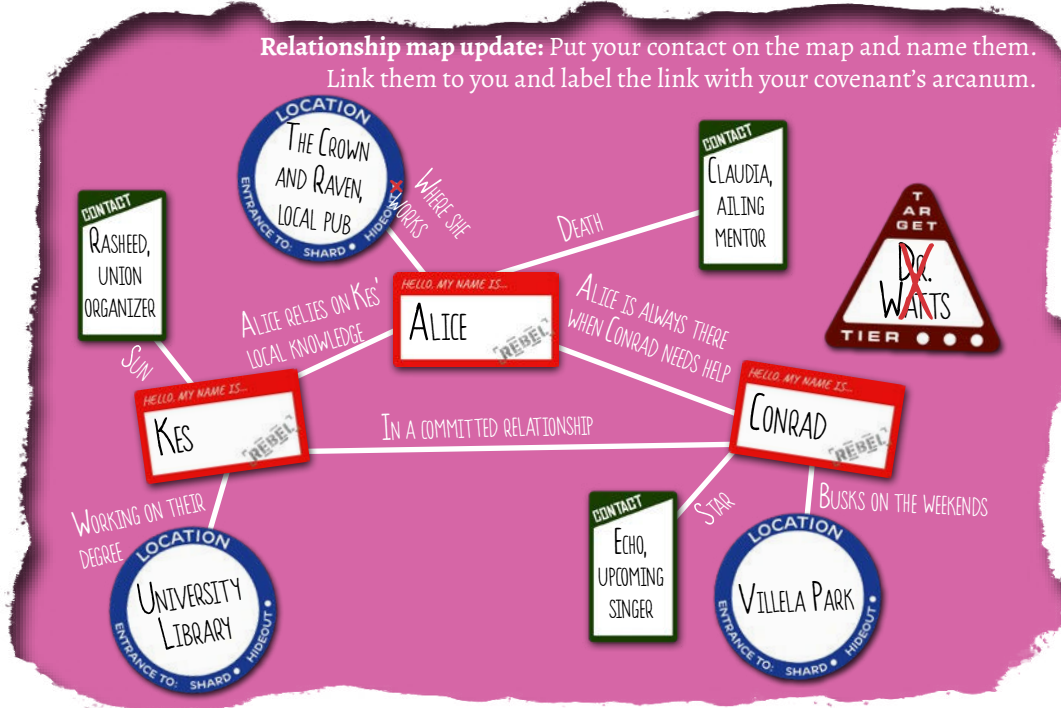
Note that the Black Mark you gained from your Role adds onto these, meaning that you'll end up with [2, 2, 3, 3, 4] or [2, 3, 3, 3, 3] according to your Role category and playbook.



# BUILD YOUR NETWORK

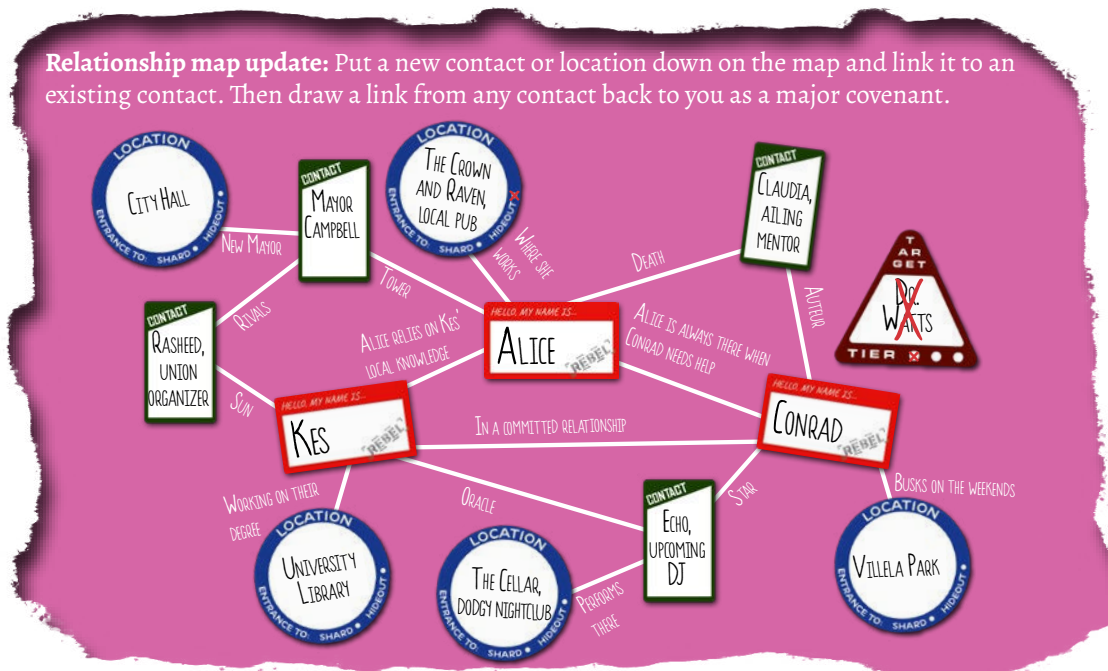
## STEP 11: MAKE A FRIEND

**Pick Contacts.** These Architect-controlled characters may not take up arms in the castle, but they're still a part of your revolution. Each contact linked to you is a significant relationship – a major covenant. Write this Covenant down on your sheet under your crew covenant.



## STEP 12: BUILD A COMMUNITY

**Build a Community.** Complicate the map some more, to ensure that your rebels have a rich social context. Then take one of the contacts on the map and link them back to you as another major covenant, either with one of the remaining arcana on your playbook or one of your own choosing.





## NEXT TIME ON VOIDHEART SYMPHONY...

Make sure you've answered any urgent questions you have about the character's mundane lives. Once you're done, it's time to see what brings them back into contact with the castle.

As a group, answer the questions in *Growing Shadows* (p. 138). These will set up who in your relationship map your next target is hurting, how powerful they are in the city, and how you get confirmation that supernatural powers are at work. Each rebel also rolls *The Grind* (p. 139) to set up the mundane worries in their lives.

The Architect draws a new **Pressure clock** – a six-step tracker marking the vassal's progress hunting down the rebels (p. 140) – and then your Investigation begins. This time they'll need to run through a full Investigation: investigate the vassal, dive into their shard to learn their deepest secret, and disrupt their plans in the city – all while dealing with the challenges of their life in the city.

### This Game is Yours

As a designer, my job is to give you the best rules I could design to hit the play experience I'm aiming for.

But also, as a designer, I have the humility to know that I'm a co-designer with each and every play group – each play group does their own design work actually bringing the game to the table. I write the sheet music, you're the orchestra that stages the performance.

Approaching your game through the lens of a designer can be really empowering, but it can also be nerve-racking. Some players may be there to understand and experience the original designer's intentions, and others may understandably want to just play the game 'out of the box' without any tinkering.

That's how we interact with video and board games, after all.

My goal in writing this game was to make it as functional as possible as-is. That said, don't feel shy about tinkering with the rules to suit your players. The structure of tabletop roleplaying is much more of a mix of freeform social interaction and performance art than those other games. Lean into that freedom as much as you're comfortable with, and know that I as the designer am cheering you on. Test out changes, see what breaks, fail fast and explore new horizons!



## QUESTIONS ABOUT THE CITY

**Who are the most powerful blocs in the city?** *Old money, new money, predatory capital, faith communities, unions, suburban professionals, landlords, reactionary movements, etc.*

- What agenda are they pushing?
- How do they exert their influence on the city's government?

**What are the powerful particularly failing to provide to us?** *Accessible nutrition, affordable housing, reliable employment, social mobility, tolerance and acceptance, liberty and security, social security, disability access, etc.*

- Which groups are especially denied this?
- How do these group intersect with other marginalised groups – and with the privileged groups?

**What brings us together?** *Parades, festivals, holidays, sports events, days of mourning, etc.*

- Who do these public celebrations still exclude?

**Which industries employ most of the people here?** *Manufacturing, farming, mining/drilling, utilities, IT, finance, transport, distribution, tourism, education, research, etc.*

- Which is on the rise? Which is in decline?
- What workers do these industries attract?
- What costs do they force on the community?

**What outside force is threatening everyone here?** *Climate change, austerity, national policy shifts, dying industries, domination by a larger neighbour, etc.*

- Which local groups are agitating for action?
- What are your leaders doing instead of taking action?

## QUESTIONS FOR REBELS

**In what ways are you different from the norm?** *Faith, ethnicity, disability, neurodivergence, sexuality, weight, age, class, education, language, gender expression, etc.*

- Which of these do others ignore or refuse to see?
- Which of these do you hide, if you need to?
- Which of these are impossible for you to hide?
- Which of these do you refuse to hide?

**What compromises have you made in order to survive in this world?** *People you've hurt, evils you've tolerated, quirks you've suppressed, etc.*

- Are there any compromises you're not aware you made?
- What would you be if you didn't have to compromise like this?

**Who's most important to you?** *Partners, dependents, friends, relatives, neighbours, etc.*

- In what ways are they different like you?
- In what ways are they different unlike you?

**Was there a point where your life was harder than this?** *Neglect, deprivation, abuse, illness, stress, police harassment, ...*

- What marks do you still carry from that time?

**How has your background made life easier for you?** *Class, race, caste, health, inherited wealth, connections, etc.*

- Are you conscious of these privileges?
- What obligations are you expected to act on in return?

It's alright to play a character who experiences a form of marginalisation you don't personally deal with, but please:

- Treat that trait with nuance, respect, and empathy.
- Read real people's personal accounts of their relationship with it.
- Remember you'll get some things wrong, and accept critique.