

INTRODUCTION

*Whatever is dreamed of this night, will come to pass.
- William Shakespeare*



THE MIRROR IS CRACKED

Once upon a time, it was all so simple. The world made sense. Your world made sense. There were no big questions lacking answers. You knew what was real. You knew it deep down in your gut. No doubt. No uncertainty. But then something caught your eye. You didn't want to turn to look. You didn't want to see it. A voice in your head screamed, "no, no, no!" but you saw it anyway. A crack. A flaw. In the world. And as you watched, that crack widened, like it could sense that you were watching it. It grew, and spread, and your mind groaned under the pressure and everything became too bright to bear and then everything just flew apart. Your world had been an illusion made of mirrors. And now, it was gone. And a whole new world came rushing at you...

Broken Open Wide

*You made me throw it all away
My morals left to decay
How many you betray
You've taken everything
Terrible lie
My head is filled with disease
My skin is begging you please
I'm on my hands and knees
I want so much to believe
- Nine Inch Nails*

The world is not what it appears to be. Beneath the regularly scheduled rituals of 9-to-5, comfortable suburban life exists a reality entirely unlike what the population has been told to expect. Let us set aside, for one moment, our preconceived notions about the universe. Notions like science having conquered the clockwork tickings of time, energy, matter, and space. Notions like material existence being the bedrock foundation of reality, and that our thoughts, our dreams, our very souls do not exist beyond the context of neuro-chemical reactions in our primitively evolved brains.

Let us set these aside and peel back reality's skin that we had, all this time, mistaken for the entirety of the whole. Now, let us imagine a world where belief has power. Where dreams, thoughts, and possibility are the true underlying energy that shapes and rules the universe. Where nothing is truly certain, where consensual reality is a literal truth, and where the mundane, physical world is merely the lie on the lips and eyelids of those who can't see past it.

Let us imagine it, because this is the real world.

LOST HEROES

This is a world of extremes, chaos, change, and possibilities. It is also a world of jealous, tyrannical control, of paranoia, and of the corrupting nature of power. It is a world for those who lost themselves back before they even knew that they had something to lose. A world where those lost heroes have finally found themselves once again.

The Gifted are those who have left behind the old notion of what is "real" and have discovered what is possible. They live apart from normal society because of what they are. This separation is both for social reasons as well as metaphysical ones – it's hard to relate to someone who can't even comprehend your way of life, especially when they are incapable of experiencing the wondrous and frightening truths about existence that you have taken to heart.

The world of the Gifted is a troubling, even disturbing, one. It is a world of modern, dark fantasy. Many Factions vie for power or safety, while their members seek what is akin to personal enlightenment. This, in a world where suspicion, dirty deals, and covert actions are painted in gritty alleyways with long shadows, pure concepts are made flesh, and realms of belief have their own space and time.

Those That See

Humankind cannot bear very much reality.
- T.S. Eliot

The Gifted are those human beings who have flung away their previous perceptions about the world and come to a place where their will alone can create change. They have learned that belief fuels everything – and this belief is stored within themselves, and can be channeled into powerful feats.

Gifted are later-day shamans in the era of urban decay and international politics. They bridge the realms of common humanity with experiences, power, and visions far beyond mundane grasp.

THIS IS A GAME

Most of you reading this book are already avid role players. This disclaimer is not for you. For the uninitiated: *Factions* is a game. It isn't real. This book is intended for mature readers with open minds. Violence, philosophy, anarchy, and other disturbing topics are explored in these pages. We wash our hands of the possibility that readers might question some very personal views of their own.

What is Role Playing?

Again, most of you don't need to read this. Hell, most of you have already skipped ahead. For the rest of you, role playing is a form of collaborative storytelling. Instead of passively sitting by and having a story unfold in front of you, role playing puts the participants (the Ref and the players) directly in control of what happens. It's like a play, but one without a script. Everyone has their own roles and functions to perform, and the audience (those who are involved) reap the rewards of a tale they themselves are crafting.

Players in a role playing game take on the persona of a single character. They decide what their character says and does – essentially, they are the “writer” for that character's involvement in the story. The Ref is the one who keeps the story together. The Ref is the director, stage manager, lighting coordinator, and set designer all balled up into one. He's the one who comes up with plot ideas, controls the actions of non-player characters (NPCs) of the story, and generally keeps everything running smoothly.

Aspects of each player character are recorded on the character sheet. These aspects are given values so that the Ref can use rules to govern what happens when a character tries to do something and they could fail. For example, Jane is playing the character Star, who wants to pick a lock on a door. There's no guarantee that Star could pull this off, so her character sheet provides the numerical values for dice rolling. The Ref interprets these results so he can describe what happens.

Don't worry - you'll get the hang of it.

No Hate Mail

The *Factions* universe describes a fictional world where groups of supernatural beings have vast influence on society. The United States has become a fascist dictatorship, and player characters are encouraged to become part of a resistance movement that has been labeled an enemy of the state. Real world religions are treated as a form of ritualized magic. Gods (plural) are the product of human belief, and are virtually powerless without their numerous faithful. And so on.

It's a game!

Although a good deal of effort has been taken to treat magic as “realistically” as possible, it is written here in a fictional way. The same is true of various realms of reality and the existence of supernatural conspiracies. This game will not turn you into a real life magician or a member of a government-toppling resistance movement. Such would be like expecting a theater actor playing Hamlet actually becoming a homicidal prince who sees ghosts.

The ideas presented here will offend someone out there. Don't say we didn't warn you.

They are different than most concepts of the supernatural in that they were once just like you and I. They had classes, jobs, and family lives. They had retirement plans and 401K's. But something happened to them – be it a life shattering event, a mystical initiation, a mental breakdown, or something else – that opened a door inside them.

The newly transformed Gifted finds himself at the threshold of a wider, deeper, and more intense life. There are decisions to make and paths to explore. Madness, death, soul-slavery, and worse await the careless Gifted. The prospect of understanding universal Truths, enlightenment, and nigh-godhood beckon.



TERMINOLOGY

The Gifted live an experience apart from normal human society, and, as such, have their own terms, jargon, and slang. Here are some of the most common pieces of language used in Gifted society that might be new to a fresh initiate.

Administration, the: The ruling body of the Order.

Alliance, the: A Sect that seeks freedom and opposes the Order.

Alturists, the: A Faction of intellectuals that guides the sciences of the Order.

Anchor: The metaphysical heart of an Outer Realm.

Astral Being: Generic term for any intelligent form found on the Astral Plane.

Astral Plane: A dimension of conceptualized thought found in Incarna.

Bacchus: A Faction of revelers and artists of the Free Societies.

Blessing: Very powerful reality-bending ability, granted to the Gifted by one of the Elements. Blessings are only granted to those who epitomize the meaning of the Element's Domain.

Blight: A place that has grown metaphysically strange, weak, or dead. The causes of Blights are unknown, and they threaten the notion of a healthy reality.

Caerra: A regional area of Maya that works as a metaphor for the collective subconscious. Caerra can be mapped to larger swaths of Incarnian geography and the peoples found there.

Chaos: One of the two dualistic principles said to make up reality. The opposite of Order.

Church of Purity, the: Faction of the Order that is said to control both the religions of the Christians and the Jews. Generally referred to as the Church.

Circle: An informal group of Gifted, generally numbering between three and seven. Usually a Gifted and his closest friends or professional partners.

Citadel: A type of mystical fortress created by the Gifted, usually to guard an important place in reality. Commonly found at the site of a Vale.

Collective, the: A Faction of cooperative Gifted found in the Free Societies. These are either firmly rooted in a particular area, much like a union chapter, or are dedicated to a cause or lifestyle that takes the entire group from place to place.

Daedalists, the: Technologists and information junkies of the Free Societies. Generally of a radical political or philosophical bent.

Domain: A subsection of higher reality related to a single archetypal concept. There are 32 Domains in reality; 16 belong to the principle of Chaos, and 16 belong to Order.

Dreamer: A type of Other, related to the Gifted, who directly manipulates the beliefs of the mundane through art, music, literature, and film.

Dreamtime: A metaphysical event that functions as a short-lived Vale. Usually during spontaneous events involving large numbers of people, elevated emotional states felt by thousands, or natural catastrophes.

Edger: A mundane person who is not affected by the Shroud, and who can learn to perform Ritual Magic.

Element: A powerful being who belongs to a Domain.

Faction: A notably-sized group of Gifted, usually tied to a geographical area or an over-reaching philosophy, metaphysical belief, or political ideology. About two-thirds of all Gifted belong to a Faction. A Gifted's Faction is a source of support, structure, culture, and safety.

Focus: A generic term for both a Gifted's permanent level of cosmic understanding, and the amounts of expendable belief the Gifted spends in commanding reality. Gifted rarely use this term, but instead use Faction or Circle specific names, both in proper usage and slang.

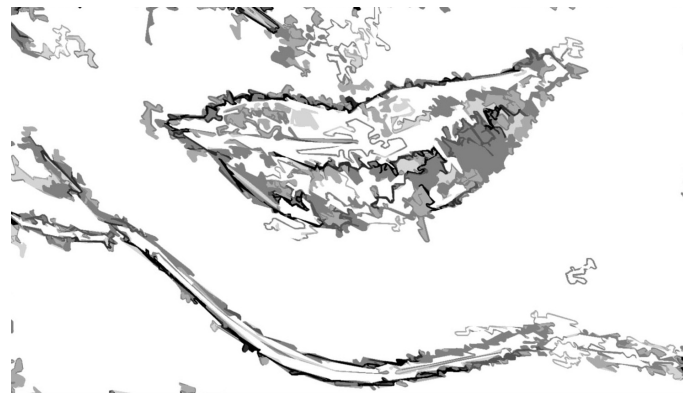
Free Societies, the: A collection of Factions in North America that co-exist on mostly friendly terms.

Gaia Progeny, the: Faction of Gifted who believe in the cohesive consciousness of nature, animals, the environment, and natural forces. Seen by many as "backwards" for their metaphysical views, and for their practical shunning of modern life.

Gifted: A type of being who was once a mundane human, but who now can alter reality at will.

Guiding Name, the: A Faction involved in the proliferation and maintenance of Islam.

Halveyan Society, the: A Free Societies Faction that tries to protect and guide human societies.



Harbingers, the: A wildly radical Faction comprised of deconstructionists, surrealists, and those who seek altered states of being. They exist within the Free Societies. Sometimes referred to as the Harbingers of Truth.

Hidden, the: Ancient Chinese Sect, commonly thought to be behind the secret governing of the Triad societies. Only very rarely encountered in North America.

House Aruithinea: A radical Faction with pagan European roots, they were long thought to be a forgettable culture of Gifted. House Aruithinea embraces a lifestyle of personal freedom and spiritualized existence. This group has recently emerged with powerful allies, some of unknown origins, and is the foundation of the newest Sect, the Alliance.

House of Raeford, the: A Faction belonging to the Order. It is comprised of Ritual practitioners and occultists, and experts on the metaphysical. Gifted within this Faction are among the most powerful and knowledgeable users of Magic in all the world.

Ideologues, the: A Sect of political philosophers behind the Czars, and later the Communists, in Russia. They have recently staged a comeback against incursions of the Order in that country.

Illiesh: A Faction that is considered one of the Outer Societies. Illiesh is a group with origins in Europe, most notably Italy and Sicily, and is the hidden force behind the Gifted families of the Mafia.

Independent Factions: A generic grouping of Factions that are found in North America, but who are not part of any Sect, nor any loose confederation of Factions (like the Free Societies). Some Factions are entirely on their own, and are little more than oversized Circles in one metropolitan area.

IAS: Recently created agency of the American government. It stands for Internal Affairs Security, and is little more than a secret police branch of Homeland Security. The IAS is often compared to the SS, or Gestapo, of 1930's and 40's Germany.

Incarna: The half of reality that encompasses the Material and Astral Planes. See Maya.

Jade Empire, the: An Outer Society Sect of Japan. Sometimes referred to as the Imperial Court of Jade, this Sect is very divided and rarely works in unison. Still, no other Sect or Faction has been able to displace the Jade Empire's hold over influence in Japan.

Jewel: Name for the fearful powers the Elements reserve for their own use. These govern entire swaths of reality, related to the Domain from which the Element is beholden to. For example, a highly-placed Element from the Domain of Destruction could use a Jewel to cause one entire city's people to rise up and wage war on another city. Some believe these Jewels to be in name only, while others believe there is a physical representation to them, as well.

Juice: Slang term for belief-energy, or expendable Focus.

Lacrutians, the: A Faction of the Order that is heavily involved with the military-industrial complex and the manipulation of banking systems.

Mana: Another slang term for belief-energy, almost exclusively used by Free Society Gifted.

Maya: The half of reality that reflects the unconscious, symbolic impressions. See Incarna.

Mirror, the: The metaphysical membrane between Incarna and Maya. This is no physical barrier, but a barrier of perception and consciousness.

Mundane: Meaning a regular human being, or not pertaining to magic, the "supernatural," or higher reality.

Nightmare Storm: A metaphysical event that occurs when too many mundanes incur Shroud effects within a short amount of time, in a given area. During a Nightmare Storm, reality can fragment in ways that are dangerous to conscious beings, especially to elevated-reality beings such as the Gifted.

Normal: Slang for mundane, or a non-Edger or Gifted human being. Also, only pertaining to the material world, in a non-magical or mystical way.

Off the Grid: Away from civilization, or living in such a way as to leave little or no data traces. Methods such as using false identification, cash-only transactions, and working under the table are helpful in doing this. This is most possible far from cities, in the Wastelands.

Order: The opposite of Chaos. A principle that makes up reality, in conjunction with its dualistic opposition.

Order, the: The most powerful Sect in North America, and, through its influence on the United States, in the world. The Order is a very closed, oppressive, and secretive world power. In effect, a hidden dictatorship of Gifted elites. Is directly opposed by the Alliance.

Other: A generic term for any being that is not mundane. The Gifted fall under this category, as do all "supernatural" creatures. When used by the Gifted, this usually refers to sorts of beings other than themselves, such as Vampyres, Dreamers, or Therans.

Outer Realm: One of many countless small worlds unto themselves, found deep in the outskirts of Maya. These are sometimes called "genre universes," as they are collections of different myths and symbols held by humanity. One of the largest is the Pit of Hells, where all of the world's afterlives of torment can be found.

Outer Societies, the: A generalized term used by North American Gifted to refer to Sects and Factions based in different parts of the world. Alternatively, used to describe Factions that Gifted society wants to distance itself from or isolate, such as the hated Palace of Enlightenment.

Paldin: A Faction of Platonic philosopher knights which have Buddhist overtones. Part of the Free Societies. Are generally held in high regard as honorable judges and peacekeepers.

Palace of Enlightenment: Faction of Gifted who seek their own moral compass in their personal quests for metaphysical strength. Their hunger for power, and their approval of destroying others to attain it, have earned this Faction an outlaw status among the Free Societies.

Physical Plane: The material half of Incarna. The Physical Plane shares Incarna with the Astral Plane.

Practitioner: Generic term for anyone who uses Ritual Magic.

Prime Element: One of the thirty-two “crowned” Elements. Prime Elements are the pure, personified powers of higher concepts of reality, such as Creation, Peace, or Knowledge. There are sixteen Prime Elements for the principle of Order, and the same number for Chaos.

Sect: A large, powerful collection of Factions, set toward a common goal and sharing a leadership structure.

Shacti, the: Shadowy Sect that holds power in South America, most notably in Columbia, Brazil, Peru, and parts of Mexico. Most known for its ruthless techniques of coercion, corrupting the government, and involvement in the international drug trade.

Shadow: A local projection of symbols and images in Maya, that reflect the people’s metaphor for the area. Most large cities have a Shadow version in Maya, which resemble the look and feel of the cities. Some have called an area’s Shadow the “collaborative artistic interpretation” that was created by the sum of the area’s inhabitants.

Shoes: Street slang for false identification. Thus, one who forges fake SIN cards is a “shoemaker.”

Shroud, the: Mystical effect that keeps mundanes from noticing or remembering the use of Special Abilities or the results of Magic Rituals. The Shroud only comes into effect if the person in question does not believe in the reality of the magic. By this, a devout Wiccan would not forget witnessing the effects of a powerful Wiccan Ritual, even if that Wiccan was not an Edger.

SIN: The national ID card in the United States, which stands for Single Identification Number. This number references linked databases that record a person’s criminal record, credit history, employment history, purchasing patterns, and travel on public transport or through checkpoint areas. If a person’s “SIN rating” is not good enough, a person can be denied entry or detained in a walled city.

Soldiers of Control: Slang for Terishor, used by Gifted of the Free Societies.

Sphere: A categorical region of Maya that contains many Outer Realms. The Afterworlds Sphere contains Outer Realms relating to purgatories, undead or ghostly worlds, heavens, and hells. There is debate as to whether Spheres actually exist in truth, or are simply a method of thinking about Maya.

Spire: A pathway from a Vale to “higher reality,” into the Domains of the Elements.

Subfaction: A branch or subdivision within a Faction, of which most Factions have several. The specific Subfaction a Gifted claims party to is usually more important than the Faction “umbrella” that the Subfaction falls under, as this is the part of the Faction that the Gifted feels he most “belongs to.”

Tagged: Slang for being kept track of by the government, though not necessarily under surveillance. Sometimes the word “pinged,” from computer jargon, is used. Alternatively, used by the Gifted in Free Societies to mean being noted by the Order.

Terishor: The military arm and intelligence bureau of the Order. If a Gifted meets the Order on unfriendly terms, it is usually members of Terishor.

Theran: A type of Other that is one of the “animal people.” Therans are supernatural races that can reproduce with human beings. Theran races are known to exist for those with aspects based on felines, canines, and reptiles, and some rumored mythical animals, as well.

Underground: Slang for a lifestyle that differs from mainstream society. Because of their separation from mundanes, many Gifted and Edgers feel most comfortable in the “underground,” where the more unusual, exotic, and experimental ways of life are accepted.

Vale: A location that is metaphysically elevated, where a material place bonds with a powerful, collective unconscious reinforcement. Such places hold deep meaning to people. Vales are important to the Gifted as sources of belief, and as gateways between Incarna and Maya. They are also where Spires to Elemental Domains are found.

Vampyre: Rare type of Other that drains life, life-force, psychic energy, or metaphysical essence from others to sustain itself. Also used to describe those creatures who can only survive on a diet of human (or animal) blood.

Vispiri: Pathway found deep in the Caerra, that leads to one of the Outer Realms.

Wastelands: Sections of North America, usually far from civilization, where there is no recognizable government enforcement or authority. Also used to describe some very poor urban areas that have little police presence. In America, most of the Wastelands are found in low population areas of the western central states.

Zeroed: Slang, to mean having lost your identity. A person who is zeroed no longer officially exists, according to the government. Without having an identity (or SIN), the person can’t participate in regular society. Zeroed people, particularly those who are enemies of the state, are often afforded no legal rights and are either imprisoned indefinitely, tortured, or killed without trial.