

A WUSHU GUIDE TO...

WYRD-FU

THE ANCIENT ART
OF THE ARCANÉ



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INTRODUCTION

"Magic" is not a synonym for "mobile artillery."

Forget about range, duration, and area of effect. Forget about dots and spheres. Forget about forgetting spells once their cast. (That bit never did make much sense, anyway.) Magic shouldn't feel like technology. It should be mysterious and fluid. It should feel *magical*, and no spell list or point system is going to deliver that.

Wyrd-Fu gives you the freedom to work your will. It rewards you for describing your spellcasting in lurid detail, which makes it more about the casting than the spell. To make the most of your magic, you'll need to lay down a thick coat of atmosphere: pentagrams, incense, incantations, apparitions, levitating tables, anything that adds authenticity to your spellcraft. In most games, these kinds of details are either lost amidst a sea of effects-obsessed rules or paid lip service with no real benefit for those who go the extra mile.

Wyrd-Fu is all about reveling in the details.

This Wushu Guide offers advice on creating black arts of your own, based on real world models or cut from whole cloth. A little forethought will go a long way towards preparing you for the furious improvisation that Wushu requires. Several ready-to-run traditions are provided, followed by two demystifying Examples of Play.

Once your training is complete, you'll be a maven of mojo!

HOW DO I USE IT?

Astute readers may have noticed that this is a Wushu Guide. It's written as a supplement for Wushu games like Wire-Fu and Pulp-Fu. That's why you'll see occasional references to "Mooks," "Nemeses," and "Chi." Though based largely on the assumption that players will earn dice for describing their spellcasting, the advice and mechanics herein are general enough that they can be applied to any role-playing game.

Urban fantasy has become a genre all its own, with plenty of novels and movies under its umbrella. The following are just the ones that have influenced me the most...

- **The Word & the Void** - An urban fantasy trilogy by Terry Brooks; book one is entitled *Running with the Demon*.
- **Hellblazer** - Christian apocrypha forms the core of this modern occult comic series. See also *Constantine*, the 2005 film starring Keanu Reeves.
- **Witch-Hunter Robin** - An anime series where "witchcraft" is synonymous with "kewl mutant powerz."
- **X-men** - Speaking of mutant powers, both the comics and the movies are packed with usable Wyrd-Fu.
- **Anything by Neil Gaiman** - Yep, anything. He's the master of urban fantasy. See *Mirror Mask*, if you dislike books.

SLINGIN' SPELLS

Before you can work your mojo, you gotta know how your mojo works. Don't worry so much about what your magic can or can't do, focus on how it does what it does. Specifically, you should know where your mojo comes from, which tools you use to direct it, and what kinds of side-effects it brings along for the ride.

What are you invoking?

Do you manipulate the arcane forces that underpin reality, or does power come to you second hand from supernatural beings? The former requires a keen intellect; the latter calls for the social skills of a used car salesman. Are you a gnostic who rebels against reality by sheer force of will, or are you an illusionist who can only alter people's perceptions of reality? Sometimes, less power equals more fun.

What tools do you use?

Do you pray to gods or learn the True Names of spirits? Do you shape mystical forces with runes, talismans, or arcane rituals? Are you a new-ager who surrounds himself with pentacles, candles, incense, and wands? Or would you rather go old school with drums, rattles, masks, bones, and big, big fires? Postmodern types replace all of the above with trance music, laptops, action figures, and corporate logos.

What are the side effects?

Does your spellcasting unleash poltergeist whirlwinds, pretty lights, or other flashy FX? Do you suffer headaches, fatigue, or loss of self-control? Supernatural entities may demand favors in exchange for their services. Newton's third law and the law of conservation may produce backlashes or byproducts that must be managed. Particularly dire forms of magic may siphon energy from surrounding plants and animals, or balance the spell's beneficial effects with equivalent bad luck. No one gets a free ride.

Improvisation is the heart and soul of Wyrd-Fu, but preparation has its place. Shamans should come to the game table with a few familiars or patron spirits in their pocket. Magi need to know their favorite tools, particularly the ones they carry on their person, and maybe one or two signature spells. (Such characters have studied for years to learn hundreds of spells by rote, even if their players are pulling tricks out of their proverbial hats.) Psychics and willworkers must determine the price of their power, whether it's mind-shattering pain, the slow erosion of their morals, or opposition by infernal forces.

MAGIC TRICKS

Details = Dice. That's the only rule you need to run any kind of magic. Yet, here we are, starting off a section on game mechanics. The thing is, spellcasting differs from many other in-game actions, because rituals are often performed long before their effects are felt, and in places far removed from their targets.

Magicians also deal with inhuman intermediaries who may or may not feel invested in their masters' well-being. It's a little more complicated than throwing a punch. The following are just a few ways you can twist Wushu's core mechanic to tackle these challenges.

Rituals, Then & Now

Ritual actions make excellent Details, but it can be difficult to get all those black candles lit in the middle of a gunfight, ya know? Wushu offers you two coping mechanisms. First, you can let players describe their rituals in advance, then hold the dice they earn until the spell's effect comes into play. Conversely, you can let them wait until they need a spell effect, then describe the necessary ritual in the past tense, as if they had performed it in advance! This second option can get old if overused, but it's perfect for Hellblazer-style double bluffs.

Incantations

Fairy tale spellcasting often involves incantations that summarize a spell's terms and conditions, usually in rhyming verse. This works great in Wushu because 1) you have to define each spell as you improvise it and 2) each new term and condition can count as a separate Detail. Defining the intended effect should only take a line or two, so the rest of your dice can come from describing how to break the spell. Traditional favorites include solar eclipses and True Love's Kiss.

Slipping the Leash

Power corrupts, and magi wield ridiculous amounts of power. Under this system, each spellcasting character gets to hold a pool of 6 dice (or however many you want). When they use their magic, they draw their dice out of this pool. Then, they roll whatever dice remain against a Trait related to self-control. If they don't get at least one success, they go a little crazy. The GM can decide what that means, but it's often more entertaining to let players decide how to screw themselves.

Faustian Bargains

The usual method for binding spirits is to trap them in a summoning circle and refuse to release them unless they promise to perform a service for you. Needless to say, spirits hate that shit. When they inevitably try to screw you over, you can treat the conflict as a mook fight or a Nemesis battle.

Mooks - Every time the magician calls upon a bound spirit, they have to devote dice to keeping it under control. If they don't get at least one success on those dice, the spirit does something bad or (if your GM is the forgiving sort) flees back to the hell pit from whence it came.

Nemeses - Powerful spirits should have Traits and Chi of their own. In this case, you should resolve their struggle against oppression as you would any other conflict. Note that losing Chi in the normal course of a game will make PCs more vulnerable to demonic back-stabbing. This means they may not be able to count on their more powerful spirits when the chips are down, but that's the price of dealing with demons.

ARCANÉ ARTS

It's always good to start with the classics. (We'll get to more obscure and original fare in a bit.) Just about anything from film, fiction, or folklore should fit into one of these categories. They're not meant to be an exhaustive accounting of the world's magical traditions, just some broad generalizations to get you barking up the right trees.

Animism

Simply put, this is the belief that invisible spirits inhabit everything in nature, and that humans can control the material world by communicating with these spirits. Details come from making deals and sacrifices, allowing spirits to creatively (mis)interpret instructions, and describing the methods through which you communicate. Examples include most pagan and pantheistic religions, ancestor worship, and demonology.

Low Magic

Like Produces Like. The Law of Sympathy states that we can influence people and objects in the world by manipulating symbols that are linked to those people and objects. Low magi earn dice by coming up with creative sympathetic links (dolls, photographs, religious icons, masks), homeopathic links (hair or nail clippings, personal possessions, names), and ritual actions (nailing something down to paralyze it, burning it to cause injury, putting it in a safe to provide protection).

Numerology

Any number of mystical traditions based on the mathematical relationships between numbers or other symbols. Kaballah, the Pythagorean mystery cults, and the magic of the Cthulhu Mythos are excellent examples. Details come from knowing the True Names of spirits or gods, divining information by interpreting randomly occurring numbers or decoding holy texts, constructing objects or symbols with strange angles, and adorning amulets or talismans with special combinations of numbers or letters. The various names of God are popular.

Hermeticism

In the late 1800's, Victorians picked up bits of arcane lore from Egypt, India, China, and the Middle East, then stirred them all together in a big jug. From Aleister Crowley to the Rosicrucian Order, all of these wand-waving, ritual magicians can be called "Hermeticists." They combine alchemy, astrology, and theurgy (trafficking with spirits) into complex, almost scientific belief systems. Do your research, because your Details will need to sound like the footnotes from a Ph. D. thesis (or maybe the rantings of a conspiracy nut).

Gnostic Crap

If you absolutely *must* do your willworking without any interesting accouterments, at least employ an interesting cosmology like that of the Gnostics or Buddhists. The former believed that God and the angels ("archons") were degenerate beings bent on keeping mankind's divine spark confined to the

flesh. Buddhists seek to escape the cycle of reincarnation by severing their ties to the material world and ascending to Nirvana. In both cases, creeping closer to enlightenment often comes with kewl powerz.

Psi

Psychic abilities are rarely portrayed as magic, but they're definitely wyrd. The big three are telepathy (sensing or altering the thoughts of others), clairvoyance (the proverbial sixth sense), and telekinesis (mind over matter). Pyrokinesis, psychomancy, precognition, and astral projection are popular niche abilities. Bearing such awesome power is never easy. Pain, fatigue, and loss of self-control are common side-effects.

Affinities

When all else fails, go the superhero route. Affinities are Traits that give a character a supernatural connection to some specific force, substance, or phenomenon. Magnetism, love, ice, insects, blood... the subject of the affinity can be damn near anything. Through this connection, the magus can sense, control, alter, create, and/or destroy anything related to their Affinity. It's an easy way to model mutants, gods, and mad scientists alike.

Now, on to the more interesting fare...

HOODOO

Invokes: The Law of Sympathy - "Like produces like."

Tools: Sympathetic links, mojo bags, herbs, & curios.

Side FX: Few. Hoodoo is a subtle form of magic.

Hoodoo doctors are pragmatists in the extreme. They've combined central African folk magic with elements of Native American herbalism, Vodoun, and Protestant Christianity to create a unique form of low magic with an emphasis on personal power. Though they revere certain Vodoun Loa and many kinds of spirits, they're far more concerned with finding quick-and-dirty, supernatural solutions to common, every day problems.

Their most famous tool is the infamous "voodoo doll." It creates a sympathetic link to a specific person simply by resembling them, literally or symbolically. Extra power (and extra dice) can be gained by incorporating some of the target's personal items, bits of hair, or a photograph. Anything that resembles, or was once a part of, the target will strengthen the sympathetic link.

Then, it's just a matter of doing to the doll what you want to happen to the target. This can be metaphorical (placing it under a stone to slow it down, performing a funeral to make it sick) or quite literal (lighting it on fire, stabbing needles in its eyes, breaking its limbs, and so forth).

However, the most common hoodoo tool is the mojo bag. These African fetishes are small, cloth bags that contain objects that are symbolic of some desired effect. Protection spells often contain salt. Luck spells might contain pennies, a folded up Ace of Spades, a rabbit's foot, etc. They can be hung in a home or near a doorway, but most are carried on your person. Harmful mojo bags are usually hidden in the victim's home or buried under a place they're known to walk. There are strong taboos against touching another person's mojo bag, as this can dispel its magic, so they are commonly concealed beneath clothing and worn against the skin.

Crossroads are very important. Burying or abandoning things at a crossroads is a part of many hoodoo spells and is considered a safe way to dispose of ritual implements. When an actual crossroad is not available, hoodoo doctors can make do with a drawing of two crossed lines inside a circle. When discretion is needed, they substitute the cross for a "five spot:" four equidistant dots (where the lines would meet the circle) with a fifth dot in the center (where the lines would cross).

Footprint magic is another hoodoo mainstay. Every footprint carries a sympathetic link to the person who made it. The dust from a footprint can be used in dolls, mojo bags, and other spells. Scratching crosses or other symbols on someone's footprint is a good way to put a hex on them. This is why most hoodooists use floor sweeping and washing rituals to cleanse their homes on a daily basis.

Beyond that, just play fast and loose with the Law of Sympathy. Dress up action figures to represent your enemies.

Use hotwheels to run cars off the road. Hold a handful of gravel over a lighter to engulf the street it came from in flames. Chip a piece off a cement wall and crush it to create an instant escape route. Use maps for divination or to trap your victims in an endless, Moebius crossroad.

It's important to decide ahead of time exactly how powerful you want your hoodoo to be. If you want to stay true to the source material, you should play it subtle and limit hoodoo to effects that can be dismissed as coincidence or hallucination. On the other hand, there's no denying the inherent fun in crushing an enemy's skull with just your thumb. Be sure to talk it over with the rest of the group before you get to the gaming table.

Similarly, you probably don't want to let this stuff work for just anyone, as every sketch artist would become a deadly assassin. It would be reasonable to say that all hoodooists need a natural "knack" for magic, or must have been "touched by the other side" in some way. Many two-faced men, as they are also called, claim to hear spirits in their heads. Maybe you just have to be a little bit crazy.

NON-EUCLIDEAN GEOMANCY

Invokes: Strange angles and Qi flows.

Tools: Geomantic compass, acupuncture needles.

Side FX: Space-time distortions, madness.

Traditional geomancers and acupuncturists are on the right track, but their perspective is sorely limited. Qi is the substance of creation! How could it be bound into the familiar dimensions of space and time? No, Qi also flows through the invisible dimensions of reality, ones both beyond and below the range of the natural senses. To understand it, to control it, you must become something unnatural.

The true geomancer's first and most important tool is a geomantic compass, one with additional rings that reveal extra-dimensional vectors. Through such a device, the Qi flows will tell a geomancer many things: who has visited a location, where lost objects can be found, when magic is being used, the best place to put a sofa, and just about anything else. There are pocket-sized models, but they're for amateurs. Full-sized versions can stretch 2-3 feet in diameter and may need to be carried like a backpack.

In time, true geomancers gain an intuitive sense for how Qi flows through and around them. They begin to see the crucial points in space and time where this flow can be altered, blocked, or amplified. With only a needle or a precision strike at just the right angle, a skilled geomancer can cause pain,

paralysis, blindness, or sleep. They can shatter stone or bend steel. Qi is life, but even inanimate objects are sensitive to its ebb and flow.

The masters learn to alter space itself. They move at unnatural angles, appear and disappear at will. They can stretch and fold the fabric of space to redirect attacks, or change a bullet's frame of reference so that it seems to hover in midair. Gravity has no dominion over them and no prison can contain them. (In other words, this is a blank check for all your favorite wire-fu stunts.)

However, geomancers are not masters of all creation. There are rules even they must obey. Since their magic is all about strange angles, curves confound them. Summoning circles and rooms with rounded corners are sure protection against a geomancer's magic, but even the slightest angle will render such defenses useless. They cannot hide the shadows of their warping, for even the uninitiated can sense the *wrongness* of a location where a true geomancer has stepped sideways or warped space.

They must also contend with dangers that do not hound lesser men. The mind recoils from comprehension of the unnatural, so true geomancers erode their sanity every time to peer into higher dimensions. (Slipping the Leash might be a good mechanic to use.) Such realms are inhabited by alien forms of life that are inimical to our own... and who do not look kindly upon trespassers in their domains.

VIRTUAL ANIMISM

Invokes: Nature spirits of the urban jungle.

Tools: Internet, text message, T.V., radio, etc.

Side FX: Malfunctions & poltergeist crap.

Animists believe that everything in nature has an animating spirit. Historically, that has meant plants, animals, rocks, lakes, forests, and even the wind, but what if the same thinking applied to cars, elevators, skyscrapers, sewers, freeways, and radio broadcasts? Virtual animists trade favors and influence with beings who dwell on the other side of the computer screen, ride the airwaves, and prowl the power grid. They are the shamans of the street.

Where traditionalists use masks, drums, and psychedelic drugs to contact the spirit world, Virtual Animists use text messages and email. They stare at television static and see the future. Hardcore TV freaks will sit in front of a dozen tubes, all tuned to different stations, and wait for the cacophony to speak to them. It's popular to make your cellphone a familiar, so it can relay quick text messages to other spirits. Hacker types and urban taggers will recruit spirit allies from an entire network or neighborhood, so someone's always got their back.

However, spirits rarely work for free. They have needs, just as people do, and human beings are in a unique position to fulfill many of them. Most simply want their homes protected; they ask shamans to white wash graffiti, fix plumbing, upgrade

hardware, and generally do the repairman gig. They have enemies whose homes they'd like to see vandalized, hacked, or set on fire. Simple offerings are also common, anything from burning a quart of motor oil to microwaving an AOL installation disk. Even your loyal cellphone may demand to never be set on silent or taken outside its coverage area.

GMs should allow players to earn dice in advance by role-playing through these obligations. As per the Held Dice mechanic in Wire-Fu, players could save these dice and add them to related rolls later on, even if it puts them over the normal pool limit. Neglecting one's obligations can also be a source of dice, if the player is willing to describe their spirit allies abandoning them at inconvenient moments. Obviously, this means that their magic fails them, but the dice thus earned can still be applied towards resolving the scene. A detail is a detail.

If you're willing to make these sacrifices, trafficking with spirits is a quick path to power. Unfortunately, it is also a treacherous path fraught with hidden dangers. Spirits are capricious by nature and few have a solid grasp on how the human world works. They misinterpret instructions, taking some things too literally and other things too figuratively. (The less trustworthy ones do it on purpose. They think it's funny.) The result is a lot of unintentional side-effects: power outages, mechanical failures, spontaneous combustion, levitating furniture, and so forth.

Not all spirits are created equal, Great Spirits least of all. Each of a city's major infrastructures is the domain of a Great Spirit: water, power, roads, telecommunications, etc. They are

as kings among the other spirits; their authority is absolute, for they are all-knowing (within their sphere of influence) and can unmake lesser spirits at will. Animists who devote themselves to a Great Spirit gain immense power, but their loyalty must be unwavering. The slightest hint of betrayal could leave a shaman powerless, dead, or hollowed out for use as a soulless meat puppet called a "skinwalker."

WYRD-FU IN ACTION

THE TWO-FACED MAN

The summer of 1928 is not going well for Hotfoot Jackson. He's embroiled in a turf war with a bunch of bootleggers who want him to pay protection money. They'd have better luck extorting money from the fish in the sea. Unfortunately, such logistical considerations rarely stop mobsters from resorting to violence. They'll probably just rub him out as an example to others.

Now, mundane violence is nothing a top notch hoodooist can't handle, but there are plenty of other root workers and occultist in the Big Easy. Thus, Hotfoot is being particularly meticulous in sweeping up his shop at the end of the day, to make sure he doesn't leave any footprints behind. He's just getting ready to sweep the last pile of dirt into his dustpan when a strange-looking, Asian fellow comes to his door.

Jackson points to the "Closed" sign, but the stranger vanishes into thin air! (1) The hoodooist's patented "One Eye

Open" mojo bag / raises the hair on his neck moments before the Geomancer strikes! / (It contains the "eye in the pyramid" logo from a dollar bill, / the powdered ears of a rabbit, / and a policeman's whistle.) / Hotfoot dodges backwards just as... (6)

The Geomancer materializes in the corner of the ceiling / and dives towards his target with a flying kick! / His feet barely brush the floor / as he delivers a series of savage spin kicks / that drive Hotfoot across the room. (6)

The GM started this fight off with the Geomancer's vanishing act, but Hotfoot's player worked himself up to 6 dice before the Nemesis' attack. Hotfoot goes defensive; he splits his dice into 4 Yin and 2 Yang, then rolls them against his "Hoodoo You Do (5)" Trait. He gets 3 Yin successes and 1 Yang success.

The GM goes the opposite route, allocating 4 dice to attack and 2 to defense. He rolls against the Geomancer's "Eldritch Ninja (4)" Trait and gets lucky on those Yang dice: 4 successes. Hotfoot takes a hit and has to cash in 1 of his 3 Chi. The GM also scores the 1 Yin success he needs, so the Geomancer gets through the round without a scratch.

Hotfoot stumbles back and falls ass-first into an empty barrel. (1) The Geomancer changes direction so fast that he seems to bounce off empty air, / flips upside-down to stand on the ceiling, / and quickly retreats into the shadows. / A few moment's later, Hotfoot's hatchet sails out of the darkness and buries itself in the side of the barrel! (4)

The two-faced man pulls his trusty revolver from an ankle

holster / and sends six bullets speeding into the space from which the hatchet had come. / "Can't you read the sign?! We're closed!!!" he screams over the gunshots. (4) Space seems to stretch out until the bullets slow to a crawl, / then fall out of the air like raindrops. (6) "Oh shit," Hotfoot whispers to himself / and throws his empty gun at the elusive assassin. (6)

The player knows how Non-Euclidean Geomancy works, even if Hotfoot doesn't, so he earns that first die by "accidentally" hiding inside a curved barrel. The GM's hatchet trick is intended to create a right angle his magic can act upon, but he ran out of dice before he could use it. That will have to wait until next round. To make sure he gets there, the GM chooses a conservative 3/3 split. This time, his actions involve more magic than martial arts, so he rolls against the Geomancer's "Strange Angles (5)" Trait; he gets 2 successes of each type.

The player decides to go on the offensive with a 1/5 split, counting on his Chi to keep him alive. There was no hoodoo in his description, so he rolls against Hotfoot's "Rough & Tumble (4)" Trait. He gets no Yin successes, but 4 of his Yang dice are hits. Hotfoot cashes in his last 2 Chi, but manages to cut the Geomancer's Chi down to 1.

The Geomancer blinks into the space right in front of Hotfoot / and delivers a precision strike to the point where the hatchet blade meets the barrel. / It explodes in a cloud of splinters! (3) Jackson bum rushes his assailant / and tears out a bit of his hair. (2) The Geomancer knife-hands him in the

armpit, / blocking the chi flow to his left arm. / It goes slack at his side. (6) Jackson snags a rusty nail from a shelf on his way down to the floor, / then rolls over to that unswept pile of dirt / and drives the nail into a footprint the Geomancer left during one of his spin kicks. / Magic pins the assassin's foot to the floor! (6)

Hotfoot's player needs to tread carefully, so he opts for another 4/2 defensive split and rolls against his Hoodoo Trait. The GM repeats his previous 3/3 split. This time, Hotfoot puts up a mighty wall of Yin with 3 successes, but scores only 1 hit. The GM can't get enough Yang successes to do any damage, but he does get the 1 Yin success he needs to stay in the fight. No one gets the upper hand, this round.

The two-faced man scrambles to his feet on the other side of the room, / plucks a cloth hoodoo doll off the shelf, / and stuffs the Geomancer's hair through a slit in its back. (3) Once he realizes that yanking on his leg with both hands makes him look like an idiot, / the Geomancer crosses his arms at a strange angle and pushes them towards the nail in his footprint. / An invisible wave of Chi slices through the floorboards, scattering his footprint and breaking the spell. / He closes on his victim like a striking snake! (4) Hotfoot just smiles / and presses the hoodoo doll against a five-spot on the wall. / Magic surges through the sympathetic link! (6)

Everyone thinks this would make an excellent climax to the fight, so the GM rolls with only 4 dice. He splits them 1/3,

scoring 3 hits and no defense. The player takes a 2/4 split and rolls a failure in each set. That lets him block 1 hit, which brings him down to -2 Chi. His 3 Yang dice blast the Nemesis' last Chi, which brings him to -2 as well. Since ties go to the hero, Hotfoot gets the Coup de Grace...

A little pressure flattens the doll and crushes the Geomancer's rib cage. His body drops to the floor in a sickeningly soft heap. Hotfoot notes with irritation that the assassin's death has not restored sensation to his arm. Looks like he'll be asking the acupuncturist down the street for a favor.

THE SKINWALKER

Analog's mentor was a maverick of the invisible world. He walked the line between warring spirits... until he made a desperate deal with the Great Spirit of the Mains. He lost his soul and gained a mission: hunt down every mortal who has ever trespassed against the city's water system. Analog won't let the Great Spirit use her mentor like that, not even if it means destroying his body to save his soul.

First, she has to find him. She turns on her vintage, Motorola television / and tunes the antenna to a dead channel. / "Swift and all-seeing spirits of the airwaves, / it is I who shut down the pirate station that once trespassed on your territory. / Now, I need your help: Show me my mentor's destination." (5)

Analog's player is acting without opposition, so all she needs is one success. She earns one die for describing her divining tool, one for a ritual action (tuning it to static), two for sweet-talking the spirits (flattering them and reminding them of a past favor), and one more for actually asking the question. She rolls them all against her "Techno-Shaman (5)" Trait and gets 4 successes. The GM decides to answer her question and give her a few bits of additional info.

As she stares into the static, an image of the city begins to emerge. It zooms in on an apartment building north of downtown, then in through a window on the fifth floor to reveal a forty-something, balding man in the middle of unclogging his sink. The sound resolves itself into a year-old news story about city workers breaking a sewer line. A crime worthy of the death sentence, to be sure.

Analog thanks the spirits, plucks her cell phone from its charger, and flies out the door. On the northbound bus, she negotiates with the apartment's spirits via text message. [skinwalker coming. need U 2 help stop.] (1)

Her cellphone familiar ushers the message into the astral. The response comes back in moments: [NO WAY].

They're playing hard ball. [life or death. what U want?] (2)

This time, it takes several, anxious minutes. [NEW WIRES. WHOLE BLDG.]

Analog spares herself a moment to mourn her bank balance. Rewiring an entire apartment building will take some serious scratch. / [U got it. wait 4 my signal.] / She gets from the

bus to the elevator in a heartbeat. On the way up, she scrapes a political campaign sticker off the wall and gives the elevator a friendly pat. (5) She may need to count on it for a quick getaway.

The skinwalker will have control of the building's pipes, so Analog is securing the loyalty of the electrical system. That's more her thing, anyway. All of these preparations are meant to pay off in the future, so the GM tells Analog's player to put those 5 dice off to the side and hold them for later. She'll need 'em.

The man's door is locked, but dead bolt spirits can be surprisingly cooperative. Analog lets herself in. The man protests, at high volume, but good negotiators know how to convey the seriousness of any situation. "A man is coming here to kill you, and I don't know if I can stop him. You have to get out of here right..."

The door explodes off its hinges and plows through the living room table! A man in rumpled overalls raises an accusing finger from what remains of the doorway. "This is not your concern," he says in a voice as deep as a well. "It is above you, beyond you. Leave now."

"I'm not gonna let you do this, you soul stealing sonofabitch." / Analog draws her Glock and taps the barrel twice with her index finger, signaling its spirit to wound, not kill. / She closes her eyes and fires half a dozen rounds. (3) The skinwalker pulls a lead pipe from behind his back / and knocks the bullets out of the air. / Her mentor's dead eyes roll back in his head / as he commands dozens of jagged, metal pipes to

tear through the walls! (4) Fortunately, Analog's new pals got her back. Electrical wires snake out and wrap around the pipes, dragging them off target. (4)

This isn't the stunt Analog had in mind when she made her deal with the electrical spirits, so she says they do this one on their own initiative. However, the player does decide to draw one die out of the Held pool, just to be safe. She goes with a defensive split of 3 Yin and 2 Yang, rolls against "Techno-Shaman (5)," and they all come up successes!

The GM takes 3 Yang dice and keeps one for defense. Rolling against the skinwalker's "Affinity: Plumbing (5)" Trait, he gets 2 Yang successes and 1 Yin success. That's not enough to overcome Analog's defenses and only enough to block one of her Yang dice. The GM cashes in 1 of the skinwalker's 5 Chi and considers it a momentary loss of tactical advantage.

The skinwalker growls and walks towards them through the tangle of plumbing and wires. / Fresh blood glints off the surface of his lead pipe. (2) Analog hits SEND and the spirits get their signal. / The lights shut off with a resonate thud and all the other electronics fall silent. / A transformer outside explodes as the power for an entire city block rushes into the fuse box behind Analog... / and blasts across the apartment like cannon fire! (4)

The lightning bolt strikes the skinwalker square in the chest! / He's thrown backwards through the door and slams into the opposite wall. / The current surges through him and into the building, grounding out five floors below. / His overalls catch fire

around the edge of the charred entrance wound, but his body can only twitch in impotent response. (6)

Analog grabs her reluctant charge and they run to the elevator. / It's waiting for them, doors open and lights on. (6)

That was Analog's big moment, so she's going to throw the rest of her Held dice into the pool. That gives her a total of 10 dice, which she splits into 4 Yin and 6 Yang. They come up as 2 Yin successes and a whopping 5 Yang successes.

The GM earned most of his dice by describing the skinwalker's injuries, but that's no reason to go on the defensive! He rolls 2 Yin and 4 Yang against his "Souless Assassin (4)" Trait and counts on his Chi to keep him in the fight. Only 1 of the Yin dice is a success, so he goes from 4 Chi to zero. He's still breathing, but barely. He gets luckier with his Yang dice, nabbing 3 successes; Analog has the Yin to block all but one. She takes her 2 remaining Chi and heads for the hills!

Of course, the elevator's lights don't stay on for long. With the power grid burned out, the lift spirit can only disengage its winch and let gravity take it to the lobby. / Four floors whiz past the still-open door before the emergency breaks engage and the elevator lurches to a stop. (2)

Analog and the plumber are outside in a blink, but the skinwalker ain't done yet. The sound of breaking glass floats down to them from high above. / They look up in time to see the skinwalker plummet past the second floor and slam into the sidewalk right behind them! / Cracks spread out from the point

of impact like the threads of a spider's web. / Her mentor looks up at them with a predatory grin. (4)

Analog looks right and left down the dimly-lit street before dragging the plumber across the median. / They stand there as the skinwalker charges... and gets plastered by the 8:15 bus! / We flash back to Analog's ride to the apartment. In between text messages, she scrawls a note on her bus ticket: / "Tell your pals I may need some help. Life or death. I'll owe you one." (6)

Her mentor's body lies, broken and bloody, at the front of the bus. "Help me, Ana," he pleads. / "You're the only one who ever cared." (6)

Playing on her sympathies is a pretty soulless move, so the GM rolls that last bit of psychological manipulation into the rest of his "Soulless Assassin (4)" stunt. He knows the end is nigh, so he keeps one die for defense and rolls the rest Yang. He scores 4 hits, but no defense.

Analog's player came up with a pretty good flashback finale. She got one die for the ritual tool (the bus ticket) and one or promising the buses a favor. She still has 2 Chi, so she decides to go with a 4/2 offensive split. She nabs 1 Yin success and cashes in her remaining Chi, which takes her to -1. However, she also rolls 2 Yang successes, which reduce her mentor to -2. She wins the right to a Coup de Grace...

"I guess you know me pretty well," she says as she raises her gun and taps it once on the barrel. She puts two shots in his head. "Rest in peace."