

# Magebane

By: Grant Graves

## I. Rediscovery

In the opening paragraph of his most famous short story, *'The Call of Cthulu'*, Howard Phillips Lovecraft wrote:

*"The most merciful thing in the world I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We drift on a placid island, amidst black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should journey far. The sciences, each straining in their own directions, have hitherto harmed us little. But the eventual piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad at the revelation, or flee from the deadly light, into the peace and safety of a new Dark Age."*

That time has come. Dr. "Jules" O'Brein pieced it together, dissociated knowledge that is, in a manner that altered the world literally overnight. In one of his many obscure memoirs, *'Natural Correlation of Energies and the State of Reality'*, O'Brein explains at length the ideology that changed the world.

*"Made ignorant by the veil of faulty logic, I had not noticed the similarities and patterns produced in chaos theory through the reactions of physical laws to natural stimulus. How genetics and the simple, but elusive 'eights' that haunt the silicon ideas of the machines that bless our modern world correlate to one another, and how all these things fit seamlessly together."*

*It was that night in my tent, while visiting Dr. Bashjin at his excavation in the barren Sahara wilderness, he presented to me a set of hieroglyphs printed in blood on ancient papyrus. It was the most significant find the camp had made. He was proud of it and figured the ancient cuneiform for fifth century BC.*

*He'd taught me, in my younger years, to read hieroglyphics and I had trouble discerning through the faint light and faded blood print, but then it hit me. They knew. They'd known, but since then it had been lost. It all came together for me, in searing logic, that night in the tent.*

*The Cosmos is a living globular of energy. Essences compose its personality and translate to us. Through our primal beings we share in the energy, consuming the signatures, it affecting us as we it, each personification of the other. Event and spatiality share a likeness with cause and effect that is much different than is obvious.*

*Many things uncovered, locked within our minds, now released. The fact that time is an instrument by man that the Cosmos cares little for. It does not measure in time, but rather event, and does not care to place them in chronological reference.*

*It is hard to put into words the understanding by which we exist. The ideas brought before me shatter reality into renewal and tatter sanity giving it new feel.*

*Cooperation of energy lends to one another, affecting the other through transmogrification. Thoughts and ideas span the planes. Our reactions feed the Cosmos. In return it feeds us back. It is a well-oiled machine of energy, infinite in its complexity. But as we are sentient, so is it, that is the energy; there is a God."*

Dr. O'Brien, in his piecing together of dissociated knowledge, was able to pull from the Cosmos something that had co-existed, as a tool for man, for eons gone by, but had since been forgotten, as man became more "civilized". He pulled from the nature of reality, the art of Flecting; that is to bend reality slightly. Magic as it was called in ancient times.

But as with all great discoveries or in this case, rediscovery the media butchered it, and pop culture assimilated it into its own serving the slabs to the masses.

"Back off bitch, before I immolate your ass," Incubus pointed at Slagfist, his index and middle finger extended forward, thumb back, and hand cocked sideways, as to emulate a gun. His fingers began to glow. Incubus was seventeen. A tall thick-built African-American man with freckled, light brown skin, a gold front tooth, and thick wild dreadlocks.

Slagfist raised his hands slowly and easily, chanting something under his breath in Chinese. The hermetic mage's hands began to glow like fiery embers.

"You sure you want to die up in here today?" Incubus asked, his fingers now glowing brightly in warning. Two others joined him dressed in hooded robes. "Urban Druids mess you up." Slagfist backed away slowly then disappeared behind a row of lockers.

"Punk bitch," Incubus turned to the others. "Yo, you get that formula for invisibility last night?" Incubus inquired with an urban drawl. "Nope," the thin Latino on the left replied. "Damn! What about levitate?" "Nope," the reply. "Damn! What'd you do last night bitch?" "I couldn't get on the net G, little sister surfing on Aristotle or something. Tired to get her off, but moms busted me in mouth for yelling at her. Little bitch lucky I don't bust a cap in her ass, or polymorph her into a frog or somethin'," came the explanation.

"True that Phade," Incubus stacked gang signs. "Yo, check it," the robed Latino was of medium build. Dark brown eyes and a crooked smile cloaked by a thin moustache. He known on the street as Phaderus, Phade by friends. He continued smiling sinisterly from beneath his hood, "you know that magazine rack down at the music store? Well, right next to Guitar Player was this month's issue of Pop-Magik. Came out yesterday. I lifted a copy. It's got a formula for armor in it." "Magicroft's Armor?" "Some new variant. Lets you change the color of the armor, even put symbols on it." "Damn," the reply.

"I meditated last night to focus my chi, entered the mode and Flecting it. Check it out." He shed his robe. Underneath it a pale green plate armor decorated with a large, ancient Gaelic rune on the chest that served as the gang symbol for the Urban Druids. "Skinned it last night. What do you think?" "Damn," the reply from the other two. "You got to teach me that Flect."

“Hey,” Incubus continued, “did you lift a copy of Shock Reality?” “Hell no!” came the reply. Phaderus was an advent reader of Pop-Magik. The two magazines vied for dominance of the pop mage niche. Each had its own devoted readers. “I got to get a copy,” Incubus clenched his teeth tight in exclaimed excitement, “They got a piece on manipulating the metallurgy signature. I want to do a temporary gat that shoots energy.”

“Big deal,” Phaderus replied, “Metallurgy, photosynthesis, and force signatures.” Phaderus was the genius of the clan, capable of flecting impressive feats. He was arguably one of the best, but was getting bored. The only true challenge left for him was the time signature. “Delve metallurgy, link it to weaponsmithing, then...” Incubus interrupted, “One thing genius, I don’t know how to find the metallurgy signature.”

The bell rang for first period. “Where’s Hermes?” the Latino asked. “Probably still in bed, but I got five bucks that says he beats the bell,” Incubus replied. Nobody cared to take the bet. They filed into the school.

In the years that followed the re-discovery of magic, affectionately dubbed Flecting by the media, new philosophies and religions erupted overnight. The streets had created its own use for it. For the most part, the masses didn’t care to stir reality’s flexible laws, but when pop culture explored it through fashion and music it became the newest fad.

Liberal teachings of an interpersonal sensitive society made it easier for the youth to acquire the sensitivities involved with Flecting to the point that simplified verbal and somatic gestures were all that were needed for the newest generation to bend reality beyond its intended stress point. Some of the more eclectic didn’t require the gestures, only mere concentration to flect.

Just as the complexities of computers had baffled the previous generation, creating a gap between them and their progeny so did Flecting today.

Zealots called it witchcraft or devil worship. But in actuality, it was nothing more than concentrating on the energies found commonplace in the universe, then bending them to the will of the wielder. For example, there are many energy signatures that exist for the creation of things. The easiest to tap, however, is the one for photosynthesis.

People have created clothes, food, and even weapons with it. The only problem is, no one has mastered the signature to the point of being able to make the object permanent. The longest recorded photosynthetic tap was used to create a pencil that remained materialized for three days.

Phaderus had achieved this and was obsessed with creating something, anything that would be permanent. He knew the secret lay somewhere in time and how the Cosmos viewed time. But somehow, something in the corner of his mind told him that nothing was really permanent.

Some new age reality hackers have even managed to materialize homework using the photosynthesis signature melded with the free-floating facets of logic of the given subject, only to be caught the

next day when the signature faded, reverting to its original form.

## II. The Challenge

“Punk ass bitch. Diss me out in public. Threatened to immolate my ass right there in front of school,” Slagfist confessed to Priest, Grimslut’s leader.

Priest sat at an old wooden desk. A thin Caucasian with long brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. Tendrils of missed hair hung down over his long face. Cold blue eyes stared into Slagfist’s soul.

Grimslut were new age street followers of Hecate. To them she was a symbol of fertility and death. They considered her a decadent jenni, thus dubbing themselves Grimslut in her name. She was their religion and they prayed to her in masses nightly. On the equinox and solstice they often sacrificed rival gang members to her in return for blessings.

At this time, their greatest rivals, of the school’s dozen pop-mage gangs, were the Urban Druids. Both gangs were small. Grimslut had six members, the Urban Druids only five. It was always more dangerous to threaten a member of a smaller gang, as the disrespect spread instantly through the ranks, spurring immediate retribution.

The nights were just as deadly as they were a generation before, but only now instead of lead bullets, they used ethereal ones.

“Threatened to immolate you, huh?” Priest confirmed tugging at his goatee, “That’s alright. We’ll get them after school. Ryan,” he commanded, “Go send an invite. If they want to tangle, we’ll settle this shit today.”

After first period, the Grimslut known as Ryan found Hermes in the hall. Hermes was turning toward a stairwell to the ground floor when he felt the presence of someone beckoning him. He halted.

Ryan approached, decked out in runic tattoos. T-shirt, denim jeans, and combat boots his signature black. Lanky and strutting he stared dead on through hollow, sunken eyes at Hermes, a clean-cut athletic boy. Ryan’s façade was dreadful. He looked diseased, and probably was. His personal study in flecting focused on a fascination with death. Ryan was a necromancer. These gothic rejects were the bane of the pop magic industry. They were usually angry and misunderstood youths, bent on nihilism and anarchy.

“What’s up maggot feast?” Ryan inquired with bizarre enthusiasm accented with a psychotic grin. A skinny finger came up and stroked Hermes’ face. He smacked it away. Hermes stared angrily into the hollow eyes. They may have at one time been blue, but now were a dull gray. Messing with the wrong signatures always had ramifications.

“Such pretty healthy skin Hermes. I wonder what it’ll look like dried out and stretched across my wall?” Ryan leaned against an old, institutional green radiator. “You won’t share your flects for speed, since

it's your namesake, but I shall know it soon, when I sear it from your soulless corpse."

"Name the place," Hermes snapped back now up in Ryan's face, backing him against the wall. A sign on the wall above him read, 'The use of flecting is prohibited on campus grounds.' "This afternoon, in the lot behind the school," Ryan replied, slipping out and around Hermes. Hermes watched as he walked away. "Ryan?" Ryan stopped. Hermes threw some punches shadowboxing, "Ever been hit twelve times in a second?" he asked boosting the speed of his punches until his arms were nothing more than two blurs.

Ryan smirked grimly, then faded into wraith form, a barely corporeal apparition, walking through those who would not move out of his way. Those he came in contact with jerked with a sudden chill.

Hermes watched until he was sure Ryan was gone. If there was any person in the school he feared, it was the tall, lanky sophomore. But he hid the fear well, at least he thought.

He went on to class, looking for his partners along the way. He saw Grendel and Phaderus. "What's up?" Phaderus asked. "Run in with Ryan. They want to fight this afternoon, after school, in the lot." "Great," Phaderus replied, "we'll be there. Hey, we're going to get high. Want to come?" "Nah, got to be in physics today. I need to learn some new signatures," the reply.

### III. Daisy Premise Nightmare

Phaderus and Grendel sat on a concrete flowerbed in between two rows of lockers outside near the lunch area. Grendel lurched over, tying a hiking boot. The hulk was an expert in animal affinity, his personal niche in the pop mage culture. He'd delved felines, mastering their affinities last summer while school was out. He could summon the claws of great cats, grow fur and fangs, heighten his senses of hearing and sight, and was even capable of invoking the silent walk as well as feats of cat-like agility.

He was only fifteen. He'd just started birds and was hoping to learn the secret of flight before midterms. He was a talented reality hacker, for a six-foot-three brute.

Everybody had a niche they devoted themselves to, everyone but Phaderus. Phaderus was a true genius from the wrong side of the tracks. Half the flects he knew, he'd created himself, or altered someone else's. He could delve into the deepest layers of the fabric of reality, and pull from it whatever he desired.

"You know, those Grimsluts," he'd started a rant. He always started a rant with 'You know'. "They're mooks. They worship this Hecate like she was some goddess or something. Don't they realize that they're merely worshipping an energy signature? It's not even sentient. Well, at least fully sentient. It's probably just the signature for the essence of anger, or dumbassness," he giggled. So did Grendel. He continued, "It probably merely shares a loose connection with the fate signature,

and I guess in some way smiles on them, but in no way is it fully sentient. They're so ancient Greece with that shit."

"How do you know?" Grendel inquired. "Cause man, only the true sentience is the Cosmos." "We're sentient," the reply. "Well, not like that," Phaderus reiterated. "Maybe she isn't either; just a level above us." "Shut up!" Phaderus demanded realizing his faulty premise, "Who gives a shit anyway? I thought we were getting high." Grendel shrugged and relaxed, closing his eyes. Phaderus followed suit.

Each used a different incantation for getting high, depending on the flavor of euphoria. "Man, I haven't mastered this shit yet," Phaderus confessed, "so it takes me a couple hours to come down." One hand up, the other down, his pinkies and thumbs pointed outward. He touched them together, pinky to thumb. Said something in Gaelic and pulled them away from one another horizontally, flipping their positions. He touched his left pinky and thumb together. They began to glow with a pale green hue. He inhaled the luminescence and reality faded away. He could see the signatures clearly, bleeding from the walls. Light took on a new likeness as joyous vertigo overwhelmed him. "What are you on?" Grendel asked, "Daisy Premise," the reply. "And you?" "Tokyo Light Show Renewal." "I hate that one."

"Mister Stephenson!" a voice startled them. They jumped in unison. It was Mr. Swansbeck, Phaderus' Calculus teacher. The frail mid-fifties man stood over them staring through thin, gold-framed glasses. Phaderus' body was growing numb. Mr. Swansbeck's tie was ruining his favorite part of the Daisy Premise high. "Are you on something?" His shrill voice, cutting through infinity, really ruining the buzz.

"Reality," come the reply. "Is that one of your new devil worshipping tricks? I think you two better come with me." He motioned with his finger. Grendel rose and lunged. Large claws rested millimeters from Swansbeck's throat. He moved his face toward Swansbeck's. It turned into that of a tiger. He licked Swansbeck's nose with a barbed tongue, skinning it. The man cupped his hand over his nose and backed away quickly. "What's the matter Swansbeck, you like cats don't you?" came a gravelly inhuman voice, then a smile flashing fangs. Swansbeck disappeared into the building, hand still over his nose. Phaderus and Grendel laughed.

"Hey, I'm going to go get some food. It's almost lunchtime." "Cool," the reply, "catch you fourth period." Grendel went through a different set of doors, toward the cafeteria.

Phaderus relaxed there, enjoying the buzz. Then he felt a cold tap on his shoulder. A chill spread quickly over his body and he was paralyzed. "Phaderus," came a sinister voice from behind. A hand grabbed his throat pulling him backward over the concrete flowerbed. It was Ryan. Ryan slammed him against the lockers. "You're the ace in the hole for the Urban Druids. So, we can't have you fighting this afternoon, now can we." Phaderus was frozen, partly from paralysis, partly from fear. He couldn't get anything off without the ability to

move or speak, not to mention the inability to concentrate due to Daisy Premise.

"I want you to meet some friends of mine," Ryan continued. "I borrowed them from the old section of school. The biology department." Three skeletons, still baring the hooks in their heads where they'd hung for years on rollaway racks rounded the lockers and approached.

A single tear rolled down Phaderus' face, part fear, and part frustration, knowing what was imminent at the mercy of the necromancer. Ryan licked the tear away, "Now, now. You know that will do no good." He smiled evilly and turned to the skeletons, "Kill him," he commanded and walked away.

\* \* \*

She sat at a table, with three other students, in her biology class. She was a pretty, well-kept girl, with a thin, athletic figure. She may have been prettier but she kept her face concealed behind some cheap, dime store, pop-magic flect that made her appear as the frowning face of tragedy, with the tear drop coming out the wrong eye.

The Lady Jester they called her and she was Incubus' girl. She'd gotten her namesake from Phaderus. On her last birthday, he'd gotten her a jester's cap and taught her how to flect the face she wanted.

Her body was adorned with ancient Gaelic runes, symbols of the Urban Druids. The Gaelic word for woman half flashing from under the edge of her black T-shirt. The tattoos weren't real, more illusions, just as her face.

She'd always had trouble settling in with new people. She was an outcast, previously with a mild stutter. The Urban Druids were her family and friends now, but still her flects were solely built around the confused girl that wanted to fit in. Besides the face and tattoos, there was Karmic Glamour, a flect that altered her aura, making others like her. That was basically the sum of her abilities, save the Gat flect Phaderus had taught her for protection.

Then he walked in, Ryan. "You're late Mr. Edmonds," Coach Lebowski scolded, halting his lecture on Gregor. "Sorry teach, business," he took a seat next to Lady Jester. Coach Lebowski continued.

He sat there a minute staring at her as she listened to the lecture. She tried to ignore him, but couldn't, and he knew it. "Why don't you just quit it Christine?" he finally whispered. She ignored him. "You know what's going to happen this afternoon." Still she ignored him.

They'd lived two blocks from each other their whole lives and were playmates when they were kids. He was the first boy she'd kissed. That was a long time ago, but he'd never gotten over it, and somehow thought it was his duty to warn her.

"You know," he continued, "I won't hurt you. I could never lay a hand on you, however..." A bony hand suddenly rested on her shoulder. She jumped looking behind her. It was the class's skeleton.

"Mr. Edmonds," Coach Lebowski interrupted, "is there a problem?" "No sir," the reply, the skeleton's hand fell limp, "just missed that last part there." "I said, 'that most of Gregor's botanical experiments were done at the monastery.'" Lebowski continued.

Still she ignored Ryan. Maybe he was right she thought to herself. She'd put up with a lot of stuff out of Incubus. She was his faithful toy and he really didn't treat her like she deserved. Phaderus' smile invaded. But the attention was good, even though it required occasional group sex.

She'd endured a lot, but was she ready for this? Could she place her life on the line for him? She really didn't know any other flects, save the few Phaderus taught her. Not anything like these guys knew. And this afternoon, they'd dazzle in deadly competition of ethereal wonder. The sights would be beautiful, and several would die.

His smile never left her mind. He was the only one of the guys that always greeted her with a smile. He'd taught her everything she knew about flecting, even how to protect herself.

He was larger than life to her, with his blazing intellect, stunning charm, and that handsome, boyish smile garnished with a thin moustache. But it could never be. When Incubus was finished with her, that would be that and she'd lose contact with the rest of the guys.

She turned, staring into hollow, gray eyes. "Phaderus," she said, "he'll kick your ass and you know it." She knew that the two gang's aces would square off against each other this afternoon. She knew that Phaderus could beat Ryan easily, and she knew he knew it also. "Maybe," the reply, behind the most evil smile she'd ever witnessed in her life. She knew he was hiding something. She didn't need a flect for that. "Maybe he could've," Ryan added.

Lady Jester jumped from her seat and took off out the door, leaving her things. "Miss Andrews," Coach Lebowski prompted, "where are you going? Miss Andrews?" She was already gone.

\* \* \*

The mindless, bone animates approached Phaderus slowly. Then they jumped him. Wired flange fists tore into him, as he stood there helpless, each blow scraping and cutting. He fell to the ground, knocked down from the assault. They kicked and punched mercilessly, with one goal, to fulfill their master's order to kill him.

Pain came on in mild flashes. Luckily Daisy Premise was in full swing and he was numb. Only the heaviest of blows found their ways through the euphoria. But somewhere in his mind the trauma was building and he would surely be beat to death soon. His mind was clear enough for him to realize that death would come as either bleeding to death, or he'd have to wait until the Daisy Premise wore off and the build up of pain would lash him so severely that his brain would shut his system down.

It appeared as though that were already happening, Daisy Premise or not. He could feel

consciousness slip away as his body bobbed helplessly from the blows of Ryan's animates. He saw a heavy, white and orange, clawed hand from somewhere beyond the bone. Then there was darkness.

## IV. Retribution

"Phaderus," he heard his name called. It faded. "Phade," it bade again, sternly. Something tugged at him. The numbness of Daisy Premise had faded, and he hurt like hell. The more it tugged, the more he hurt. "Phaderus," said a feminine voice that rang with fear and concern.

A blast of blurred light filled his vision as pain overwhelmed him. The clearer his vision, the more intense the pain. Then she faded in, the frowning mask of tragedy, a golden ball from her hat covering the wrong-sided teardrop. "Lady Jester," he managed faintly.

He could see beyond the illusion of the mask and knew she was looking at him the same way he was at her. What he hadn't seen was the tears of fear she silently wept behind the illusion. "Oh, Phaderus, you're alive," she put a small, soft hand on his chest. He started to reach for her; then he noticed them, the thick, wild dreadlocks.

"Damn Phade, they messed you up," Incubus said, a gold tooth grin and dark shades coming into picture, distorting the beauty of Lady Jester. Phaderus pushed her hand away, playing off the brief moment of contact as it burned its way into his memory. He tried to get up but the pain kept him down. "Ryan," he said. "Yeah," Incubus looked around at the area strewn with shattered bone and three heaps of bent wire. "Grendel saved your ass." Grendel's head came into view from above. "Lucky for you," he said, "I left my wallet at home and came back out here to bum a couple bucks off of you."

Phaderus grunted as they helped him up. "So what now?" Hermes asked. Phaderus hadn't noticed him standing there. "I'll tell you what now," Incubus' voice grew cold, "They took a shot at our ace, now we take a shot at theirs." "When?" Hermes asked. "Break," the reply, "he always spends breaks by himself. We'll get his ass then. Phaderus, you got any ideas?" Plans were always left to Phaderus.

They skipped fifth period, waiting for the second break between fifth and sixth, to make their preparations. "Alright," Phaderus said, "This is how it's going to go down. Ryan has Physics last period. He'll be coming from English. The other Grimsluts are on the other side of the school last period, so he'll be alone. He should be over there," he pointed toward an awning-covered walkway between two entrances of separate campus buildings. "That's where he hangs out on break between classes."

"So what's the plan?" Incubus asked. "We're going to smoke his ass using Gat," the reply. "That's a nice idea, appealing and all, but won't it make too much noise?" Incubus inquired. "Normally, yes," Phaderus

smiled, "but we're going to silence it." "How?" everyone asked in unison. "We're going to enter the Mode and patch it with the silence signature."

When pop-mages wanted to learn a new flect, or alter an existing one, they have to enter the Mode, the crossover construct between the raw signatures of reality and the final product we view through the Mask.

Phaderus and Incubus were to be the gunmen in the hit. They sat down to the side of the hidden walkway, behind a row of lockers. Lady Jester lit a cigarette and walked over toward a trashcan to act as lookout. Hermes took one end of the lockers, Grendel the other.

The two gunmen sat relaxing Indian-style. Phaderus reached out toward Incubus. They clasped hands and drifted into the Mode. The brick walls, the concrete on which they sat, even the other on which they looked faded, seemingly replaced by flows of energy that represented each. Energy flittered and swirled off every object, barely retaining its corporeal form. Even the rays of sunshine had energy licking off their surfaces.

Phaderus reached deeper. He felt a tug. Instantly he started seeing the patterns. Mathematics and form flowed from everything. Here he would begin. He waved his hand and a field of energy traced behind it, slowly fading. He reached slightly out of view to his left. With his peripheral vision he could see that his hand stretched into infinity. Yet before him he could see where it sat. He searched for a signature.

A flash invaded his thoughts, ballistics. He delved into it. The physics of parabolas, impact angles, and muzzle velocity becoming clear. He unraveled it, pulled it aside and sat it to the right.

He emerged from the idea and searched for patterns of logic. He needed something, 'Energy,' he realized. He flowed with physics toward thermodynamics, pulling ethereal from other quasi-substances, he sat it beside ballistics. The signature lines wove to and from then intertwined with one another, 'Play nice,' he told them.

He searched further, he knew he'd found senses when his body was overwhelmed sensation. He pulled apart hearing and reached for the other end. He went deaf. 'Exactly what I needed,' he thought to himself.

He absorbed the ideologies of nega-sensation, and pulled apart the fundamentals of statistics. As he ripped into it, he could see what he needed to complete the flect. He pulled it. Separating idea and fact, he stretched probability, silence, thermodynamics, and ballistics, recombining them, reshaping the philosophies and functions of reality. All facets of the flect intertwined seamlessly.

He exploded from the Mode, then fed instructions to Incubus on how to make the flect. Incubus had troubles finding the probability signature Phaderus used, but with precise directions eventually found it. Then Incubus erupted from the Mode with a jolt.

"You think it works?" he asked Phaderus. Phaderus pointed at the lockers, his index and middle finger extended forward, thumb back, hand cocked sideways, as to emulate a gun. His fingers began to glow.

He looked at Incubus, then released the charge of ethereal energy. It slammed into a locker, melting the thin metal, leaving a two-inch smoking hole. Save a mild pop when it struck the locker, it made no sound. "Yeah, I'd say we've got it." Phaderus had never failed a flect.

They didn't have much time left before break, Phaderus reentered the mode to teach Incubus how to build the flect for Ignore, one that would cause people not to look at them during the crime. If someone in the area did look in that direction, the person's mind would wander and her brain would never register what she'd seen.

Three minutes before break, Incubus finally asked him, "Hey, can they trace us?" "No," Phaderus replied, dispelling the most ignorant rumor he'd ever heard. He hated the trace myth. It was propaganda designed to keep people who used flects honest. "Are you sure?" Incubus needed reassurance.

"Yes, they can't trace it to us. It doesn't work like that. For example, anger is a natural essence. It's signature lays somewhere out there intertwined with thousands of others forming reality. There is one signature for it. It doesn't fragment itself and share itself with our sentience, but we are linked to it. We go to it, not the other way around. That is how we are all linked together," Phaderus explained. He continued, "Police can trace what reality signatures are used in a crime, but since we share a common link with most of them, they have no way of knowing who accessed the signature. Uncovering us will take good old-fashioned detective work."

"They know we're at war with Grimslut," Grendel added. "Yeah," Phaderus replied, "so are a half a dozen other gangs." "What about this afternoon?" he reasoned. "What about it?" Phaderus replied, "You can't see the lot from the school. Nobody lives near it. Those who might be passing through know to keep their mouths shut."

Ryan walked out the double doors onto the awning-covered walkway. The Urban Druids watched him from a distance. He didn't notice them. He touched a flower in one of the brick flowerbeds. Instantly it wilted, then dried up, turning brown. He smiled. Phaderus couldn't remember if he'd ever seen him smile before. If he had, he'd have to think back to grade school. A time before click association became important.

There it was. He remembered hanging out with Ryan for a while in fifth grade. The blare of warm, solar innocence and gentle breeze of infinite possibility beat down on broken asphalt as they traded video games and collectible cards. The familiar excitement of waiting to get home to try out the newest game title or introduce a new card to the rest of the collection washed over him. A similar breeze blew now. It had brought back the memory, but not those times. They were far away now, in an era before girls, before status. Ryan's smile was straight and back then healthy. And now he would die.

The bell rang. Students burst out the doors with no teachers in sight. Some kept moving while others sat or stood and talked. Phaderus and Incubus waded through the static trying not to look suspicious.

When they reached the last row of lockers, Phaderus looked at Incubus. "Are you ready?" Incubus

tried to read the expression on Phaderus' face, looking for a way out, but there was neither.

"Fifteen seconds on the Ignore flect. That's as long as I can hold it," Phaderus cautioned. Incubus had never killed anyone before, only beat people up. He thought his earlier inquiries on the cops finding out would disrupt any plans, but Phaderus had all the answers. Incubus was the leader, and he had to be crazier than all the rest. "Hey," he finally said. "What?" Phaderus snapped fixing to start the Ignore flect. "Are you sure this will work?" "Incubus, no one will be any the wiser," he said flatly, in a tone that let Incubus know he was tired of reassuring him rather than just reassuring him again.

"Hey," Phaderus said, "Don't be scared man. It'll be all right. Now, we got to do this before he moves on." "Shit, scared?" Incubus paused, breaking eye contact and looking away. "Man, I ain't no bitch," he tried to reassure him. He didn't. Phaderus smirked. "Ready, then?" he asked. "Yeah, bitch. I'm ready," the reply.

They rounded the last set of lockers. Ryan stood just beyond the corner of the building, just beyond most peoples' views. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. Phaderus spoke something in Gaelic, then raised his hand level with his head, palm open and fingers together. It was the Ignore flect.

Ryan noticed them about three seconds to late. Small spheres of ethereal slammed into him at nearly four hundred feet per second, because of their soft nega-material, the spheres shattered on impact rather than blasting their ways through his body.

They reached deeply, melting through flesh and exploding muscle in chunks. Charred gore glowing in faint green littered the concrete. Ryan collapsed six smoking holes in his chest of varying depths, one in the right shoulder, and two in the right leg.

## V. Magebane

Phaderus worked with the others the rest of the afternoon in an old building in the abandoned lot near the school. They all expected police sirens at any minute, but none. "So where are the cops?" Incubus asked pacing. "Got me," the reply. Incubus paced more. "You really should be getting ready for the fight," Phaderus suggested.

Grendel sat in the corner concentrating. "Here they come," he said calmly. "The cops?" asked Lady Jester. "No," the reply, "Grimslut." They all looked at him. "I can smell them," he added.

They looked out the window. The whole gang emerged from a thin tree line and started across the rough asphalt toward the building. Slagfist stood next to Priest. Another of the Grimsluts, Venger, a tall thick boy, about the size of Grendel carried Ryan's body, the others in the background. Akumakaze, a thin Japanese boy that specialized in flect heightened martial arts and Brash, a slipstream psycho-punk with little talent and patience who constantly adorned bizarre hair-dos and even stranger clothing.

The Urban Druids filed out of the building, donning their hooded robes. They spread out astern before Grimslut. Grimslut stopped short, still quite a way off.

“Which of you did this to our brother?” asked Priest, his blue eyes full of rage. The wind blew the loose strands of his ponytail wildly. “Hecate weeps and is angered at her loss.” Phaderus stepped forward. “You dumbasses. Don’t you get it? There is no Hecate. You’re worshiping a natural signature of reality, not a sentience. Don’t you understand that the...” “Silence!” Priest demanded. “Which of you are responsible for the death of our brother?” he asked again. “You marked our ace, so we marked yours,” Incubus replied.

Grimslut spread out astern to match the Urban Druids. One at a time, each of them took turns taking a step forward and performed a ceremonial kata to initiate the fight. The Urban Druids gathered round in a group. “Why don’t we just go ahead and kick the shit out of these guys?” Grendel asked. “No. This is good,” Phaderus said, looking in their direction, “they’re just showing us the tricks to look out for.”

Akumakaze was up first. He threw kicks and punches that were surrounded by light blue flames. Then came Venger. A swirl of the light blue anime-like flames spun around his body, then heaved in a wave over his head crashing down to create a translucent, ethereal full body armor that donned clawed hands. “He’s been practicing,” Phaderus said. “Hermes, you take Akumakaze. Grendel, you’ve got Venger,” Incubus said. “Of course, I’ll take Priest and Phaderus...” Phaderus interrupted, “I’ve got my own plans, but you guys will have to cover for me. Give me two minutes and watch their katas. Then stall a little longer if you have too.” “Why?” asked Incubus, “What have you got in mind?” “A new flect I’ve been working on. I call it Magebane.” “What’s it do?” Incubus sounded interested. “Shuts down their powers, only I’m going to try to splice the time signature in to make it permanent,” the reply. “Sounds good, but you’ve been working with time for a year now and ain’t got it to do shit. I don’t think now is the time to be messing with it,” Incubus retorted. “Trust me,” Phaderus smiled behind the thin moustache, “I’ve got it under control. Just cover for me.”

They huddled in front of Phaderus as he entered the Mode. He delved heavily into the fundamentals of reality and their relations to physics. He poured passed signatures and scanned others quickly gathering what he’d need for the flect.

It was Slagfist’s turn. He took a step forward and started a bizarre kata that outdid the others’. Flames of red came on, covering his hands. He blew flames, from his mouth, up into the air. He pulled his hands level, arms outstretched, palms toward the sky. He pulled his arms forward and laced his fingers tight. Grendel saw a smile from behind the translucent flames.

“Man, what’s up with all these fire tricks. I thought he was a hermetic. Shouldn’t he be boiling potions, making LSD or something?” Grendel asked Incubus.

Incubus glanced at Grendel from behind dark shades, then back to Slagfist, “Well Grendel, why don’t you go tell him you’re worried he’s hurting his rep?”

Slagfist pounded the ground and it quaked. The asphalt near him started to melt. A giant hand of ethereal flame burst from the ground, then another near it. Finally, something crawled from the center of the Earth, melting the asphalt.

It was a being, completely composed of hellish fire towering nearly twenty feet tall, a fire elemental. The heat was immense. Everyone backed away from it. Slagfist pointed toward the Urban Druids. The creature turned toward them. Then back to Slagfist. Then it incinerated every member of Grimslut before they could even gasp, leaving less than ash of all of them.

Then it turned toward the Urban Druids moving slowly. Simultaneously, they all shook Phaderus. “Phaderus, wake up!” They screamed their voices barely audible under the roar of the flames. “Wake up!” Incubus got in Phaderus’ face. Their noses touched. “Phaderus! Wake the fuck up!” he pled, his voice desperate and shaky with fear. His sunglasses started to melt.

Time, he saw it there and felt its idea. Cycles of truth and function, and birth and death became clearer as he played with it.

“I’ve felt you before, here in the Mode,” he talked to something out there in infinity. “I’ve never said anything to you though. Are you what we worship, what we perceive as God? Are you God? If you are who I think you are, if you really are real, I need you to help me. Help me to put together that which I have not found before. Give me the piece of time I need to save us from our enemies.”

He presented time, then saw something. He tilted his head at an angle and peered. A different premise blasted its way into his mind. The more he thought about it the quicker it faded, so he left it alone, and went to work. He focused on the other, and it came together seamlessly. He’d done it. He’d mastered the time signature. He looked up to say thanks and saw, somewhere closer to corporeal logic, between the strings for physics and concept, enormous waves of heat much greater than the sun. “What the hell?” he asked and burst from the Mode back into the tangible.

A pulse of energy erupted from his pores, disfiguring reality as the ripple washed over everything. Everyone near Phaderus was slammed to the ground, writhing in pain. As the ripples passed through them, their flects faded and the fire elemental dispersed.

They lay there a moment in silence. Phaderus sat up first. “I did it. I mastered the time signature.” “Al right,” replied Incubus trying not to move.

Lady Jester took on her normal persona. She was much more beautiful than the others remembered. “Lady Jester,” Phaderus looked at her the same way as he had when she comforted him after Ryan’s attack. “Your flect... the mask...” he was at a loss for words. She gave him the same look, but this time was unable to hide it. “You saved us Phade,” she hugged him and smiled.

Grendel and Hermes tried to help Incubus up. He shooed them away. They collapsed drained. "Damn, I'm tired," Phaderus said. "Phade, walk her home." Incubus requested, "I think I'm going to just lay here for a couple of days." Grendel and Hermes didn't move either.

Phaderus walked her home. They stopped behind a grocery store to rest. Their legs hang off a tall concrete wall. He tried to create a rose for her. But nothing happened. "We lost it, didn't we?" she finally asked. "I guess so." "Forever?" she asked. "I don't know," the reply. She reached over and kissed him. He kissed her back then he turned his head uneasy with the whole situation. "Thanks," she said. "For what?" he asked.

"Saving me," she leaned her shoulder into his. "I was saving me too." "That's not what I meant," she wasn't referring to him saving everyone from the fire elemental, but rather from the pop-magic culture. She knew that without the flects, the gang would fall apart, and wouldn't have to run with the other gangs anymore. "I know," he said.

He was tired of the niche also, and had been for a while. The time signature was the only thing that kept him interested. But now he had that too.

She jumped off the wall, her beautiful hair blowing in the afternoon wind. The feeling washed over him again. That familiar excitement that Ryan's smile prompted earlier. He shivered from nerves, even though it was warm out. She started on her way.

"Lady Jester," he called to her. She turned. The way the light hit her brought on the wind a renewed innocence. He had his arms locked supporting his body as he slumped. He shivered more, now noticeable as his arms almost gave away. "Christine," she corrected, "Call me Christine."

"Can I call you later tonight?" he asked. "Yeah," she bit at her lip as she smiled, "I'd like that." She locked her fingers behind her back and stretched them, turned and started away.

"Christine," he said, jumping off the wall. "Yeah?" she spun to meet his lips. He kissed her. She kissed him back.