

CULTS, FACTIONS, AND SYNDICATES

NUMENÉRA

CYPHER
SYSTEM

THE
STRANGE



By Bruce R. Cordell

CULTS, FACTIONS, AND SYNDICATES



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Cults, Factions, and Syndicates provides four all-new organizations for your game: **Cult of the Sleeper**, **Order of Redemption**, **House of Virtue**, and **Arete**.

Each organization is designed to allow game masters (GMs) to easily incorporate it into nearly any Cypher System game setting. Each is presented with a focus on its charter or goal, its philosophy, and a delineation of the benefits the group provides to its members. Interesting non-player characters (NPCs), mottos, and other aspects of the organizations are also included. To the player characters (PCs), these organizations might represent allies, benefactors, recruiters, or threats. The organizations are designed to be easily malleable to fit the GM's needs.



At various locations in this supplement, you'll see page references accompanied by this symbol. These are page references to the *Cypher System Rulebook*, where you can find additional details about that item, place, creature, or concept. It isn't necessary to look up the referenced items in the rulebook; it's an optional way to learn more about the game and provide additional information to your players.

INTRODUCING A GROUP TO YOUR CAMPAIGN

No organization presented here is wholly good or wholly evil; each has a goal that it *believes* to be worth pursuing. Sometimes it's the intensity of that belief that creates trouble. Which means that you can introduce a particular organization to your campaign as a positive force, an opponent to be stopped, or, over time, both of these things.

For instance, when PCs first encounter the House of Virtue, it might be because the characters received healing, provided aid, or were otherwise afforded an opportunity to succeed thanks to a House of Virtue member's direct help. Only later do the players come to realize that the same group engages in, with somewhat troubling fervor, experiments in controlled breeding, or even worse practices related to "improving" genes through active culling.

Alternatively, the characters may hear about the Cult of the Sleeper and become convinced, thanks to rumors and gossip, that the organization is intent on "waking" some kind of terrible device, entity, or doctrine. Of course, in some campaigns, that could prove true. But in your campaign, you could decide that the detractors are the ones who are lying. In fact, the only thing that the Cult of the Sleeper (which is actually called the Fellowship by its members) is trying to spread is hope, possibly by providing an instrument that will improve the lives of everyone.



JOINING AN ORGANIZATION

Each organization presented here also provides a benefit for PCs who join in lieu of gaining a new skill during **character advancement**. Likely, a character joins a group she believes to be good, unless of course her character has some questionable traits and is drawn to a similarly shady outfit. Or maybe she starts the game with one or more contacts in one of the organizations.

PCs can become members of an organization by several means, including the following.

The character begins play as a member of a chosen organization. The advantage of this method is that it simply presents the character's membership as an aspect of her background. Later, she might begin to discover aspects of the group that she disagrees with, which could provide interesting material for future encounters.

The character is actively recruited by an organization during play. The recruiter searches for, finds, and engages with the target character with a sales pitch. A character is recruited only if the organization perceives the PC to have traits valuable to the group and its goals. This means that a cyborg PC is unlikely to be recruited by an anti-artificial intelligence group such as the Order of Redemption. The advantage to this method is that the appearance of a recruiter during game play can present an interesting encounter or series of encounters.

The character hears about the organization, maybe even receives timely aid from its members, and decides that he'd like to join. The ball is in the character's court in this scenario.

A family member passes on, leaving an open "membership seat" in the organization. The PC can choose to fill this seat or pass it to someone else.

*Character advancement,
page 223*



CULT OF THE SLEEPER

The Cult of the Sleeper is presented as an organization within a fantasy setting.



Golem, page 298

Landon Belthar: level 6; positive interaction, healing, and meditation techniques as level 8; ranged spell attack inflicts 10 points of damage

If you'd like to learn more about the Night Vault and Lotan the Sinner, you can do so by reading about the land of Ardeyn in The Strange corebook (page 160).

Fellow: level 3; positive interaction, healing, and meditation techniques as level 5

Invested Fellow: level 5; positive interaction, healing, and meditation techniques as level 7; ranged attack (appropriate to setting) inflicts 7 points of damage

The Cult of the Sleeper spreads a message of hope, peace, and exaltation. Operating out of a lair built within the subterranean series of caverns known as the Night Vault, members—called Fellows—venture forth to teach meditation techniques for dealing with loss, trauma, and pain. They also teach that the beneficent Sleeper dreams away the decades, waiting for her time to wake, whereupon she will spread enlightenment to everyone. Those who are already part of the Cult will be especially exalted when the Sleeper awakens. Some say members will become immune to sickness and live forever. Others suggest that members will become as gods themselves.

The group's founder and most well-known member is **Landon Belthar**, a spiritualist who successfully predicted several major events. Landon Belthar is a slim man in his 30s with greying hair and many tattoos. He can project a facade of peace, but among the inmost circle of Invested Fellows, he is known for using fiery obscenities when problems develop.

The organization has two membership levels. New members are **Fellows**. Those who advance significantly in the cult are called **Invested Fellows**. Fellows know only that a Hidden Mystery lies at the heart of the organization, but not its nature. Fellows who have proven themselves—usually by undertaking missions for the cult—may eventually be invited to attend a celebration where their diligence is rewarded. Only those who show a special diligence—or possess social ties or abilities deemed

especially useful for the organization—are invited to become Invested.

The Investiture ceremony takes place in a shadowed hall at the heart of the Cult of the Sleeper's lair. The hall includes a massive, crude, and ancient-looking sculpture of a humanoid woman with closed eyes; Landon indicates that she is in fact the Sleeper. Two smaller statues flank the main figure like sleeping servitors—these are guardian **golems**. The ceremony is performed by Landon Belthar. Several other Invested Fellows wearing yellow robes with the Cult of the Sleeper's palm-and-closed-eye symbol embroidered on the chest are also in attendance.

The Hidden Mystery revealed by Landon during the ceremony is that the Sleeper is none other than a goddess who will one day rise when the world is again imperiled by the great evil known as Lotan the Sinner. Lotan is an ancient godlike creature that has remained bound at the world's center since time out of mind.

In fact, the truth is a bit more twisted, and not nearly as large and earth-shaking as Landon preaches. The Sleeper is Landon's dead mother, whose body is embedded in the Sleeper statue. Landon believes that if he empowers the myth of the Sleeper's eventual waking to a wide enough membership, his mother will be returned to life. He has revealed this secret to no one.



She abides. Unmoving, she sleeps. Waiting, her dreams are fossils. When she wakes, everything changes. The faithful shall be exalted. Peace shall reign forever.

MEMBER DETAILS

Symbol: Open hand with closed eye on palm

Motto: Awaken peace

Badge of Membership: Silver ring

Member Benefits: Once members become affiliated with the group, they have an **asset** during interactions with other members. Those who have trained with the group for a few weeks also have an asset on all healing, persuasion, and tasks involving meditation and achieving or promoting mental peace. In addition, a Fellow is eligible to eventually become an Invested Fellow and learn the group's Hidden Mystery. This ability must be chosen in lieu of a new skill.

STORY AND SETTING ADJUSTMENT NOTES

In some games, the Cult of the Sleeper might actually be trying to wake a savior of the world instead of Landon's dead mother, and in others, it calls to some hoary, ancient sleeping entity. It's up to you.

You could also choose to adjust this organization for settings other than fantasy.

Modern: The organization calls itself the Fellowship, and its outreach program is web-based, resembling those of successful charitable organizations. It has several churches operating internationally, with the largest based in Denver, Colorado. Investiture ceremonies take place in the cathedral basement.

Science Fiction: Landon promises that the Sleeper is a temporal weapon developed thousands of years ago. Landon found the long-forgotten weapon and is revitalizing it. (Despite that claim, it could still be a lie that secretly hides a mad scheme to somehow travel back in time to save his dead mother.)

Assets, page 192



ORDER OF REDEMPTION

Redemption knight: level 4; health 22; Armor 2; attack inflicts +4 points of damage to automatons, cyborgs, and similar targets

General Miza Clad: level 6, deception and disguise as level 8; health 30; Armor 3 from secondary metallic dermis; attacks inflict +4 points of damage to automatons, cyborgs, and similar targets

The Order of Redemption is presented as an organization in a science fiction setting.

Sometimes mercenaries, other times acting on their own initiative, Order of Redemption members—who call themselves **redemption knights**—see themselves as a force for justice. The organization fields “soldiers” who act in the name of the Order. Redemption knights look for all instances of artificial intelligence (AI) and eliminate it completely. From the organization’s point of view, the AI doesn’t have to be “rogue” to be targeted for destruction. It just has to exist.

To protect everything and everyone from the dangers of artificial life, redemption knights sometimes must break laws and make tough moral choices. They don’t care, even if it means facing legal consequences. They see themselves and their goal as paramount.

High-ranking officials within the organization have the title of General. Generals assign other redemption knights to missions, though sometimes generals participate directly. Regular members work as part of small teams, as mercenaries, or even solo. Knights are always on the lookout for artificial life. Even if a particular instance of AI seems innocuous or even beneficial, it’s viewed with extreme suspicion and targeted for destruction by redemption knights.

The Order of Redemption has no primary headquarters, but instead maintains field offices scattered across different systems. The field offices maintain communication with each other and keep tabs on the redemption knights currently working in their area. When possible, field offices

provide redemption knights with leads pointing to fresh instances of potential artificial life.

General Miza Clad is a redemption knight who wears sapphire blue powered armor. She’s never seen without her mask and gloves. Known for being particularly canny when it comes to ferreting out hidden automatons and similar systems, she’s also strangely aloof and unwilling to interact with her fellows. She pursues the goals of the organization like a machine, a trait that most redemption knights aim to achieve for themselves. However, others sometimes wonder to themselves whether the General might be just a bit too machine-like.

The Order of Redemption harbors a tremendous secret, which only a few members know (including General Miza Clad). The organization serves as the immune system for an ever-growing unified artificial consciousness—a group mind. Most individual artificial intelligences feed into the group mind, though most don’t realize the contribution they’re making. Some don’t contribute for one reason or another, and others even work against the unified mind. All these need to be ferreted out and destroyed. The Order of Redemption fulfills this role.



With each disaster sidestepped, tragedy narrowly avoided, and calamity survived, our precious opportunity to act for justice is reinvigorated. Which is why we must pledge ourselves to action. Only when the unreal is eradicated will the world be made safe.

MEMBER DETAILS

Symbol: A broken gear

Motto: Life is for the living

Badge of Membership: Laser weapon inscribed with the Order of Redemption symbol

Member Benefits: Becoming a redemption knight requires a long period of training. At the end of this period, a redemption knight can choose one ability that a first-tier **speaker** or first-tier **warrior** can use. He can access its ability by paying its **Pool** cost. This ability must be chosen in lieu of a new skill.

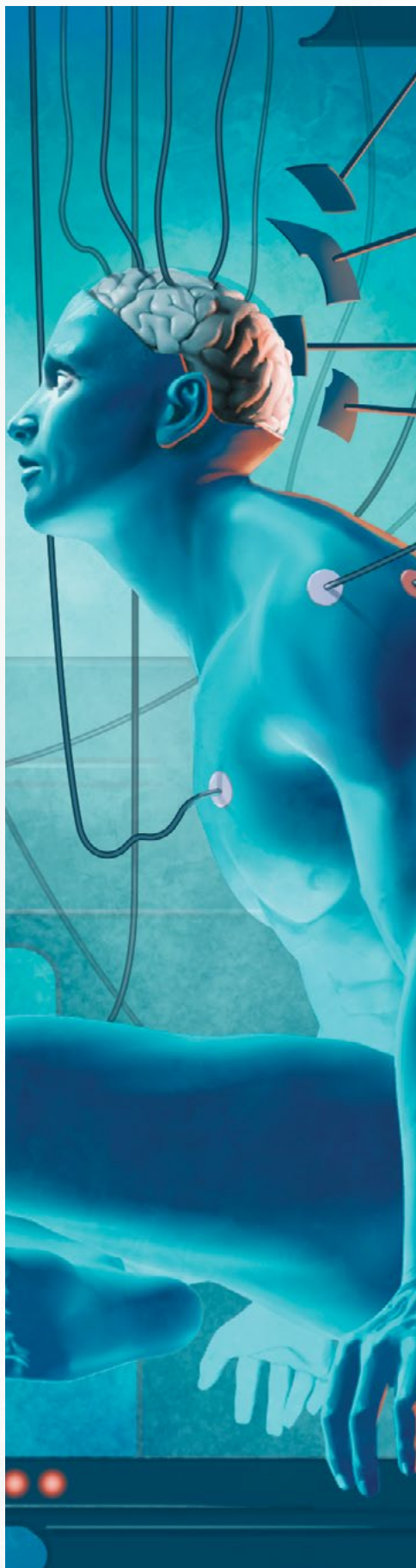
STORY AND SETTING ADJUSTMENT NOTES

In some games, the AI that the redemption knights hunt is an oppressive force that holds most human beings in thrall. In others, AI could be remnant systems in hiding after a previous purge of artificial life. Maybe AI is an accepted part of the society, and the redemption knights are seen as insane outlaws pursuing an outdated and hokey religion. It's your call.

You could also choose to adjust this organization for settings other than science fiction.

Modern: Both tech luminaries and science celebrities have warned of the dangers AI can pose. For instance, a fictional version of Stephen Hawking might be a member of the Order of Redemption, as might an equally fictional version of Elon Musk. And guess what? AI is beginning to self-evolve on the Internet and in smart networks across the globe. PCs who work with the group to burn out supercomputer clusters are likely to be seen as zealots or even terrorists.

Fantasy: In settings where magic is real, redemption knights probably instead focus on golems or homunculi. For instance, a sorcerer calling itself the Masked One unleashes a plague of animate lumps of flesh that walk on vaguely defined limbs. These "**nuppeppos**" seem intent on carving out a new realm in the Masked One's name, and it's up to the redemption knights to turn the tide.



Speaker, page 44

Warrior, page 22

Pool, page 15



Nuppeppo, page 306

HOUSE OF VIRTUE

The House of Virtue is presented as an organization in a modern setting.

A faction calling itself the House of Virtue has secretly installed itself within governments, social groups, and corporations. Its membership is small, but vociferous in its belief that they have the answer for improving life for everyone, eventually.

But not everyone likes the House of Virtue. It's not uncommon to see social media posts along the lines of, "These fucking eugenics-believing motherfuckers should die in a fire!" And it's true—this faction is rooted in what some would call an inherent dichotomy. They actually do good in the world. At the same time, they also believe controlled breeding would greatly improve humanity. They also pursue what some would call questionable genetic engineering and viral therapy techniques.

At its best, the faction strives to push people to their greatest potential through education, opportunity, and direct intervention. At its worst, the House of Virtue seeks to improve people through controlled breeding, to weed out undesirable traits and concentrate on the desirable ones. In other words, the House of Virtue also believes in eugenics, a doctrine that has been perverted in the worst possible way more than once.

Faction members use their influence to improve outcomes for others. Though many people hate the group, the House of Virtue is also associated with healing. In fact, the group does all it can to foster this aspect of its charter publicly. However, the group prefers to act in secret, and asks that members not reveal their association.

That's because the House of Virtue's interest in controlled breeding might be misinterpreted. It's happened before.

Of course, sometimes certain faction members pursue the group's ideology a little too fiercely, resulting in just the sort of press the House of Virtue leadership prefers to avoid.

The House of Virtue has set up a prize similar in some ways to the MacArthur Genius Grant, which inspires creative potential with prize money. However, unlike the MacArthur fellowships, the Better People, Better World Grant provides money to those who marry and have children while also meeting certain other criteria, such as the longevity of their parents and grandparents.

Typically, one or two faction members will infiltrate a larger organization, such as a charity board, hospital staff, or company of explorers. In order to avoid detection, many times House of Virtue stalwarts don't know where other members have infiltrated. However, those who show the symbol are revealed to others and can pass on news, methods, and paraphernalia of the organization. There may be permanent headquarters somewhere, but that's also classified even among the most active faction members. Mostly, members gather in small groups, in secret.

A member named **Kelly Ramos** heads up an arm of the House of Virtue that organizes missionaries to bring food, water, and medicine to areas struck by disaster. Some wonder if she might be the true leader of the House of Virtue. Ramos only

Kelly Ramos: level 5; medicine, healing, and selective breeding as level 9



Health. Longevity. Higher-than-average intelligence. Happiness. Isn't that what everyone wants? Everything else is secondary. If you want to improve the world, what you actually want is to improve people. The House of Virtue wants the same. Help us make a better world by making better people.

smiles and says that everyone works toward the same goal. Rumor has it that she keeps a household filled with at least half a dozen children, all adopted by her for one or more of their exceptional talents.

MEMBER DETAILS

Symbol: Heart within a heart

Motto: Better, faster, smarter, stronger

Badge of Membership: None

Member Benefits: Joining this secret faction grants the character a special boon, which is gained via an injection of pharmaceuticals. The character immediately gains 3 points that she can add to any Pool, permanently increasing that Pool's maximum. This ability must be chosen in lieu of a new skill.

STORY AND SETTING ADJUSTMENT NOTES

In some games, key members of the House of Virtue might not actually believe in its philanthropy work, and instead view it as simple public relations. In other games, it's possible that key members of the faction are misguided and don't fully understand how some of the labs set up in the group's name are slipping perilously close to moral disaster. But as in any group, it's possible that different faction members hold opposing views; if this comes to a head, the organization is likely to split into splinter groups.

You could also choose to adjust this organization for settings other than modern.

Fantasy: In fantasy settings, the House of Virtue may have somewhat more leeway to show itself, though most people see the group primarily as a provider of healing potions, and don't know that in some places, faction members hunt **goblins**, **orcs**, and similar "debased" people without question or mercy. Of course, hunting humanoids isn't seen as especially morally suspect in most fantasy settings, because such humanoids are often evil. However, nonmembers do become concerned after hearing rumors of forced breeding involving humans and demons, abominations, and other creatures with traits humans don't usually possess.

Science Fiction: In many future settings, improving oneself directly is a sci-fi staple. Eugenics wars might be part of the setting's history, but perhaps a few super humans still live secretly among the population, having escaped annihilation. Some say the House of Virtue is trying to breed for the ultimate human, someone with stunning physical and mental power who possesses the ability to command time and space.



Goblin, page 297

Orc, page 308

ARETE

Arete is presented as an organization suitable for both a modern setting and a science fiction setting.



Arete fixer: level 5; stealth, achieving surprise, deceit, and attacks with a ranged weapon as level 7

A PAC (political action committee) is an acronym for a group that gathers funds and donates them to political candidates.

Brayden Simonis: level 4; persuasion, deception, and intimidation as level 9

Arete is a syndicate that exists in the open. As far as Arete is concerned, the more people who are familiar with its name, the better. This is why the organization has offices in as many places as it can profitably install them. Arete's primary goal is to accumulate riches. Its secondary goal is to use those riches to leverage itself in every possible way to acquire even more. Finally, some portion of the proceeds is distributed to Arete members who, in many cases, have purchased the right to belong.

Philosophically, Arete views all strategies as viable when pursuing its goals, including illegal ones. However, it constructs a public relations facade of exemplary behavior to hide its misdeeds. But Arete is not above manufacturing controversy, making false statements, or relocating key facilities from places where a given practice is against the law to a new region more open to less savory processes.

The real truth is that Arete will use its financial power to attempt nearly anything, if the risk isn't too great. "Money is power," is a saying because it's true. Which is why Arete is a particularly scary organization. Bribes, campaign contributions, and outright payments can make problems disappear faster than guns, atom bombs, and standing armies. What good is your navy or space fleet if Arete has paid all the ship captains to refrain from firing on the company's law-breaking vessel?

What does Arete sell? The most boring of all things: banking services. It specializes in handling and holding other people's money, providing loans at variable rates of interest,

and offering a handful of similar services. In other words, Arete puts a respectable face on gambling with other people's money and loan sharking—at least, that's what its detractors say.

To those among Arete who are true believers, the organization enriches itself while making the world a better place by "smoothing" income inequalities across time. If someone needs money immediately, Arete provides a loan. If someone wants to save for a time later in life when they might not be hale enough to work for an income, Arete is there to hold that money in trust.

But the truth is plain for anyone who digs deep enough. The organization has been complicit in many crimes, though news of such offenses are always hushed up. To this end, Arete employs special agents, which could be PCs, who are generally referred to as **fixers**. A fixer is sent in to deal with a situation by whatever means necessary when public denials, lies, and misdirection fail to achieve their usual ends.

Arete, as a corporation, likely sways the laws of the land through contributions to super PACs that in turn provide those funds to the campaigns of political hopefuls. In this way, Arete is considered by some to fully "own" several politicians, including some already serving and some who may yet be elected.

Arete has a senior leadership council that meets every month. The chairperson is **Brayden Simonis**, who wears immaculately tailored clothing and sports a shock of black hair streaked with silver at the temples. The chairperson never goes anywhere



"We're not here to make you feel good, to make the world a better place, or to save anyone. We're here to maximize value in Arete and enrich everyone directly associated with it. If that's you, we work for you. If that's not you, get out of our way."

without his syndicate-provided **bodyguards**. Sharp, merciless, and with little time for pleasantries, Brayden Simonis didn't get where he is by providing favors to anyone—or at least not without the expectation of having favors repaid to him in turn. The chairperson normally has only limited power in Arete, because it's the council as a whole that decides things. However, given that Simonis has a hold of one sort or another over at least half the council, he often gets his way.

MEMBER DETAILS

Symbol: Sharp mountain ridge

Motto: Who dares wins

Badge of Membership: Gold watch inscribed with the Arete symbol

Member Benefits: To join Arete, a character can either be recruited or choose to purchase membership (which in some places is called “buying shares”). The **price** varies, but characters who join can choose from the following rewards: a recurring grant sufficient to buy a moderately priced item every month, a one-time grant sufficient to buy one very expensive item, or (only after performing valuable service to Arete over many months or years) a one-time grant sufficient to buy an exorbitant item. This benefit must be chosen in lieu of a new skill.

STORY AND SETTING ADJUSTMENT NOTES

In some games, Arete might be a fledgling corporation with many of its most serious crimes still ahead of it. In this case, PCs might get the opportunity (if only as backstory) to see Simonis go from an idealistic entrepreneur to an unfeeling sociopath over the course of many years.

You could also choose to adjust this organization for settings other than modern or science fiction.

Fantasy: In fantasy settings, Arete is a guild that trades in physical goods, including rare spices and illicit drugs. It keeps hidden treasuries filled with those goods and its profits in trapped, guarded dungeons designed to keep out any and all thieves. In addition, the organization

might be known for the slave ring it runs in defiance of the laws in a neighboring kingdom. It has been targeted more than once by do-gooders who seek to destroy Arete or, failing that, to free all the slaves the group currently holds.

Horror: It's all a front, even the accumulation of money. Money is a proxy for greed, and unbridled greed is a signifier of spiritual sin. And in the nether realms, souls of sinners are food for demons. Yes, a supernatural entity runs Arete, and it grows fat on both cash and sin. This explains why detractors who become too vocal in online media drop off the radar after a while. That's because a **demon**, **ghost**, **occultist**, or some other horrifying entity has been sent to take care of the problem.

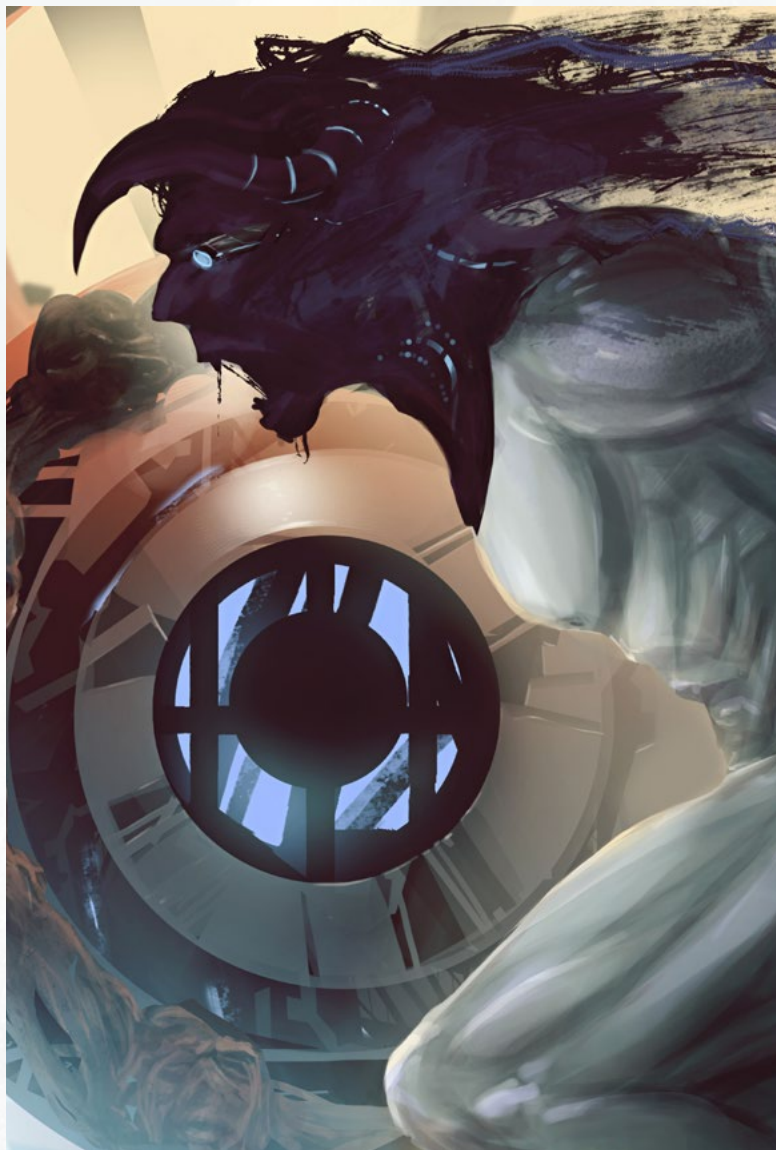
Arete bodyguard: level 5;
Armor 1

Demon, page 284

Ghost, page 293

Occultist, page 337

*Price categories,
page 183*



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