

# The Masquers Guild

## Dwelling Among the Shapers



The metaphor that won't go away when I think about this Guild is that of the Russian nesting dolls. You know the ones I'm talking about, the ones that you pop open to find a smaller one inside, then another one and another and so on. The organization around here works like that, with circles inside circles inside circles all the way up to the Guildmasters. Even the geography of your typical Masquer headquarters is laid out in kind of the same way.

For starters, there are two levels to every Masquer complex. What even the most trusted clients see is the Guildhouse, which is kind of the hiring house for contract work. This is where you go if you're good friends with an Idunn too talented to work at the average Stygian salon, or a Warsmith whose work isn't for casual hire. And don't think they'll let you into or even admit that a Guildhouse exists unless they're sure you won't tell. Thrust me, they've got ways to check your sincerity, and lots of ways to enforce their secrecy. It's no easy getting in here.

The Guildhouse, by the by, is also where the Masquers do most of their dealings with members of other Guilds. This is where they bring out apprentices for a session with a Pardoner or hire on to a Sandman troupe. This inter-Guild trades is fairly brisk, and it accounts for most of the Guildhouse dealings.

But further into the maze is what they call the Masque, where Guild members without other arrangements live. This is where Guild apprentices get trained, too. I haven't seen much of the Guildhouse since my initiation rite. I almost feel like I'm in some Byzantine boarding school where your most feared teacher might, just might, live in the room right above your ceiling.

That's two nesting dolls. There might be more somewhere back in there, but I haven't seen any hint as to what they might be.

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## Attitude

The most important caveat I can think of regarding the Masquers is this: Expect anything and everything. Sure, they've got bullyboys in their ranks who are about as subtle as chainsaws to the head. They've also recruited wraiths whose machinations do the Deathlords proud. The worst part is, the two kinds are interchangeable. Yes, the gossipy Idunn you frequent today can be the semi-Spectre thug you meet tomorrow.

But there's an amiability to most of them that you'd never expect from their reputation. I think it has to do with their (quite respectable) business ethics. You know how the Usurers have this tendency to look at everybody as if they were a potential resource? That's close to the Masquer attitude. The difference is that the Masquers see you as a potential customer, and are therefore far more agreeable. For the most part, that is. I've seen what happens to those who irk the Guild, and believe me, it's the sort of thing that Sandmen who play muse to the Gigers and Dalis of the world would love to use.

Most of the Guild members are really polite and nice to each other, at least back in the Masque. They're pretty sociable with their clients, too. That's a great word for the Masquers, actually. Sociable. Even if they really aren't interested in how your day went, they're polite enough to fake it and good enough to put you at ease.

But still, I get frightened sometimes in my room after hours, just before I try to catch up on my Slumber. They say there's somebody here who papers the walls of his cell with Skinmasks, and he wants to have the place completely decorated with them before the turn of the millennium. Can you think of how many it might take? And the most horrible thing is that he might be my teacher. He might be the pleasant young guy down the hall who wants to be a Warsmith. She might even be that timid little apprentice two rooms over who half-smiles at me every time I pass her in the hall. I learned you can't take a Masquer at face value really early on; I wish I knew which ones are the real self-satisfied, honest wraiths and which ones are lying out of habit.

## Recruitment

So who joins the Masquers? If you've seen what the really good Shapers charge, your first guess might be that the naturally greedy try to sign up. Nope. Don't get me wrong, the Twisters like to make a good solid profit as much as anybody else, but the money-minded are far better off with the Usurers. (Yes, I know – I'll talk about them later.)

My best guess (and this is based very loosely on my experiences – not all Masquers are the loquacious sort) is that Masquers recruit heavily from people who have a strong sense of who they are, and who don't base that on who they seemed to be in life. I'm not talking about those "I was fat in the flesh but am a god in the plasm" types. You can get your ideal Corpus after an expensive visit to a Masquer; you don't have to join the Guild to become beautiful. No, I'm talking about the people who had a self-image

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miles away from what everybody else saw. Maybe they were reclusive and weak back when they were alive, but now they're strong and dynamic. Sure, that'd make sense. But I've also run into the type who was drop-dead gorgeous in life, but who takes on unassuming forms now because they got tired of all the attention. (Or so they said...yeah, I know Masquers don't always tell the whole truth.)

But it's bizarre how Guild life affects them. Until that absolute need for human contact gets hold of you, you almost forget about the Skinlands entirely. Not all Masquers care about the living, you know. There's nothing Moliate can do to the Quick, so if the Quick have no real impact on the Guild, there's not much point in hanging around them except to use them as a source of Pathos. And our friends the Usurers will supply Pathos to us at discount prices...I imagine there are probably a bunch of domems somewhere in this Guild. It's creepy how few Masquers miss living friends or relatives. I guess for a lot of them, the unlife is a step up.

There's a real mood of practicality and purpose in these halls. I'd expected some kind of artists' commune, with everyone all caught up in their fantasies of what they can see, do or become. But the Masquers never forget who they are and they base that self-perception on their Shadowlands existence. I guess we need an ironclad sense of personal identity with all the changing around we do. Old joke: What do you call an indecisive Masquer?

A Doppelganger. Har har.

## Internal Strata

The Guild's internal organization is more understood than carefully explained. I know, that's not very helpful. Well, the basic layers of novice, apprentice, journeyman and master are present. I think that's a holdover from the earliest times, and my teacher says that these levels exist in most "Guilds. (Who'd know better, right?) You're a novice when the Guild admits to you its existence as an organization and agrees to train you (just after you pass your background check, naturally.) You become an apprentice after you learn the basic arts of Moliate and undergo your initiation. That's where I was six months back.

The Masquers initiation rite is very quick and simple, comparatively speaking. You begin with a circle of gray robed Masquers. You're then brought into the center of the circle naked and wait. One of the Masquers, usually the highest ranking in the group, approaches and plunges his fingers into your corpus and begins reworking it (the shock of it doesn't even give you time to scream). Then the next two highest-ranking Guild members approach and begin reworking you into a frighteningly twisted form of yourself, by this time very few people are still standing. Then, finally, the remainders of the group approach (usually half trained apprentices) and begin to work until you are unrecognizable as a person. The group then steps back and waits. You're given five minutes to restore yourself to original form. If you succeed, you're given a gray robe and welcomed as an apprentice to the Guild of the Masquers, if you fail you're gently resculpted by the three Masters and returned to training.

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Don't ask me what the dividing line between an apprentice and a journeyman is, though. I don't know, and I'm a journeyman. I train a little more in some of the other Arcanoi (which really weirds me out, even considering that I'm only learning a basic art or two), and I'm quite a bit better at sculpting plasm, but this time there wasn't any rite or anything like that. Master L\_\_\_\_ came to my door one afternoon, handed me a tiny soulsteel badge, and that was it. Congratulations, and good luck on your continuing studies. (Oh, and don't give me any crap about the sexist title. I kind of like it – it sounds all archaic and everything. Besides, the alternative's "journeywraith" or "journeyer." Really elegant.)

I suppose you become a master when your talent's just too impressive for you to be called anything else. I've studied under at least three, and they're really good. Impossible to describe, though. Just like a really fantastic painting. Sure, you could spew out that art-school pabulum about "underlying metaphors" and "abstract sensuality," but what I've seen taught me something about art. There are the people who stand around and talk about it, trying to make themselves look good. Then there are the people who *make* it, because they just *have* to – because it sticks inside them and they have to get it out *somehow*. That's what a master Masquer is. The Guild sees through phonies pretty quickly.

There are various textures to the ranks, too, and I'm not too clear on how to describe them. Some journeymen around here get treated better than some of the masters. I can recognize them and act appropriately, but I'm not sure what the criteria are.

The people at the top are the Guildmasters. I think they organize into Councils, ones that keep sporadically changing their names. Or maybe the Silver Soul Council has a different collection of Guildmasters than the Ephemera Circle. It could be like cabinet posts or senate committees or something like that. As is, I think there are about seven Guildmasters. Visible ones, at any rate. It's a wonder anything gets done around here – how do you know who outranks whom without a program? Not that the illustrations would be accurate for more than about eight minutes, anyway...

## Art or Prostitution

I ranted a bit about art and Moliate a little while back. It's pretty much common belief (outside the Guild) that the Masquers are prostitutes, doing all their work on commission. Not like the Chanteurs or Sandmen, they say.

Some Masquers get really touchy if you start bringing that up, too. I know, real artists aren't supposed to care about money, but the Shapers have an eye for profit. This is something of a dichotomy among the Guild, but so far the "we do damn fine art and get paid as a bonus" camp has the most followers.

I guess you could say that the Guild is run by enlightened self-interest more than from the desire to make a statement. It seems to be the logical way for us to do things, on account of Charons' Edict of Breaking. Maybe there are other reasons, too. After all, since its formation, this Guild's had a tradition of unabashed sneakiness.

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# The Guild's Allies

Warning: I really can't say for sure who the Masquers consider to be their best "friends" among Guilds. All I have to work with are the people who my fellow journeymen and I can visit. That said, it's fairly common knowledge that the Masquers and Usurers are frequently in bed with each other (a figure of speech, for the most part). The nature of this alliance seems to stem from both Guilds' taste for businesslike, practical solutions to sticky problems. It also means your average Usurer has some nastily sculpted enforcers to call on, and your average Masquer has plenty of Pathos to work with. Just what you wanted to hear, right?

Of the others, the Proctors seem to get along fairly well with us. There seems to be a three-guild cabal between us, the Proctors and the Haunters; the resulting "Apparition Squads" (my name, not theirs) can pretty much evict the Quick from any house in nothing flat. The Masquers also have a bit of an "artists' understanding" with the Sandmen and Chanteurs. I can say that I've personally never seen a Sandman troupe without a Masquer on its payroll. So if you intend to move in on the Masquers in any given area, expect at least a little hindrance from these Guilds. On the other hands, the Solicitors and Monitors don't seem to care for the Masquers much. Not that I'd recommend hiring one of those green-eyed pushers anyway, but there you have it.

# The Endgame

Okay, I know there's none question you wanted me to answer. What are the Masquers up to, and how are they going to achieve their ultimate goal?

Your guess is as good as mine.

Oh, I've heard rumors, mind you. Some say that Charon himself will return triumphant to Stygia; only it'll be some really powerful Fetch. Once the plan's been deemed foolproof, they'll put it in motion and suddenly have control of Stygia through "Charon." And if the Deathlords don't like it, well, nobody in Stygia's so safe that it's impossible for her to disappear.

Another group says that the takeover of Stygia's already begun, as impersonators gradually replace more and more Hierarchs. This seems a little silly to me, considering the sheer number of well-trained Masquers you'd need to pull off this coup, but considering how high up your average conspiracy theory goes...Some people even say there's a secret alliance between the Mnemoi and the Masquers. I get chills just thinking about it. If there were wraiths out there who could look just like you, and have access to any and all of your memories...Brrr. Thankfully, I can say this is so much bunk. You mention the word "Mnemos" to a Masquer and you're likely to get a long, baleful glare. Accuse a Masquer of being a Mnemos and you're even more likely to wind up a sofa

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cushion for a Spook. They very much dislike being compared to the long-scattered Mnemoi, and their infamous sense of humor evaporates like a dewdrop in Nhudri's forge when someone is gauche enough in casual conversation to connect to two Guilds.

The Guild's reasoning is simple enough: Each apprentice is taught first and foremost that the Mnemoi and the Masquers were rivals in the field of information brokering. Sure enough, the competition for oboli, Pathos and other fees quickly grew quite intense. The memory-miners soon developed a habit of undermining Masquer activity, and learned to delight in unmasking Moliated spies and assassins. Naturally, this incensed the Masquers to no end, and what was once a cool professional rivalry erupted into a furious secret war. But the war had a happy outcome, Masquer historians always happily proclaim. The Masquers Guildmasters, in a beautiful show of politicking and intrigue, subtly (and untraceable) advised Charon of the Mnemoi's upper-level corruption. When the Emperor investigated, what he found enraged him. He broke the Guild, cast its head into the Sunless Sea, and exiled the Mnemoi to the shadowy corners of the Underworld. To this day, the Mnemoi seek revenge, but the well-entrenched Masquers are able to play defensively enough that almost all attempts at retribution have come to naught.

#### **(ONLY THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF LORE KNOW THIS)**

*In this, the Masquers are lying.*

*Although there was once a rivalry between the Masquers and the Mnemoi, the two Guilds eventually struck a truce. Essentially, the Mnemoi agreed not to pry into Masquer affairs, and vice versa. The two Guilds never became all that close, but when Charon smashed the memory-readers, the Shapers took in some refugees. In return for being hidden by the self-proclaimed paragons of espionage, the rogue Mnemoi began instructing some of the Masquers in the arts of Mnemosynis.*

*This arrangement has proven incredibly beneficial to both sides. A few Mnemoi are currently able to exist safely (well, mostly safely) in the heart of Stygia and the greater Necropoli, and take advantage of the added opportunities of city life. And armed with even low-level arts of Mnemosynis, the Masquers are able to practice more and more elaborate and realistic deceptions. The Fetches alone have prospered immensely since the Mnemoi's fall.*

*It goes without saying that this is one of the greatest secrets of the Masquers' Guild. Any wraith even suspected of learning the truth is in quite a bit of trouble from the Shapers and any Mnemoi they protect. In fact, perhaps not a twentieth of the Masquers know of their Guilds Mnemoi connection. It is on a strictly need-to-know basis – and no wraith not directly loyal to either Guild needs to know. Best not to dwell on the fate of those who actually came close to uncovering this secret...*

*(In fact, some Masquers in the know wonder if Charon in fact destroyed the head of the Mnemoi all those years ago – or a clever facsimile. Naturally, the implications of such a complex and cunning subterfuge are quite disturbing, and none of the aforementioned Masquers care to dwell on the thought for long.)*

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Now what I think is that we're trying to get some sort of political leg up on all the other Guilds. The Guilds are more organized and far larger than any other would-be Renegade or Heretic groups, and besides, so many of these people enjoy the shadowy cloak-and-dagger trades that I can't imagine them wanting to go public once more. Nope, the real power to be made can be found on the backstreets, and the best way to go about getting it is the sneaky way. And if you haven't gotten the point yet, sneakiness is this Guild's stock in trade. Sure, we fit very nicely into Deadlands society, and we have little enough to complain about. But an edge is an edge, and everybody knows you can use every advantage you get these days.

## Of Contracts

Masquers try their best to be honest in their dealings, and they expect as much from their clients. More to the point, they don't expect their clients to be naturally honest, and therein lays the long tradition of contracts. This is a practice some say the Masquers borrowed from the Usurers' Guild.

Simply put, a Masquer will rarely undertake any dangerous or potentially shady employment unless she has a written guarantee of payment. The contracts are drawn up by Guild elders, usually according to specific templates. Some haggling over terms is acceptable, although a pushy employer may irritate the Masquers so much that they flat-out refuse to do business with them. (In some cases, this becomes very hazardous to would-be employers. The Masquer assassin you offend may proceed to inform your intended target of the plot almost lay against her – and mention your name!)

Breaking a contract with a Masquer is considered to be very bad form. On the other hand, if a Masquer is unable to fulfill her end of the bargain, she will generally keep part of the fee and do her best to hide any suspicious evidence. However, a partial job is better than no job at all, and if a Shaper deliberately breaks a contract, he may well be taken into the hidden rooms of the Masque and never heard from again. Employers who renege on their half of an agreement may be blacklisted, Harrowed or worse. Those who hire a Masquer only to give her over to her target (a favored Hierarchy tactic) are the most reviled. These betrayers earn the worst Guild punishments: Those whom the guild catches often spend the rest of their afterlives as doormats, torches or worse.

## On Patience

The Masquer who feels herself slighted is a dangerous enemy. If an entire local branch of the Guild is offended, the results are far worse. In many cases, the best an enemy can do is to lay low until the Masquers forget about him and move on to other business. However, this is not a proven method of dodging Masquer attentions, as the example of Inspector Elisha of Richmond attests.

It is unknown exactly how Elisha infuriated the local Masquers; perhaps it had something to do with his intolerance of art and crackdown on residing artists. He most

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assuredly sent at least one Guild member to the soulforges during one of his persecutory crusades, but there was no immediate response to this insult. In fact, it was almost 30 years before the Masquers struck back.

A Grim Legion patrol learned the whereabouts of a local incendiary Heretic cult, one with a decidedly political streak to its nature. The Patrol managed to storm its headquarters, capturing all the Heretics within. As they scoured the premises, they discovered to their surprise a cell – one in which the Inspector was locked, pale and infirm for lack of Pathos. The Inspector immediately cried out that the Heretics had planted a Masquer look-alike in his position, and that they were only keeping him around to drain his mind with Mnemosynis. He maintained this story even when it was brought before the Marshal, who determined he was telling the truth. Entirely too many of his facts were accurate, and too much of his story made sense. The Marshall led a squad in to arrest the false Inspector, who proclaimed his authenticity up to the point that he was placed on the anvil. Elisha was restored to his post, and resumed business as usual. Two months later, the reinstated Elisha vanished without a trace.

## Callings

Only a fool tries to be everything to everyone. The Guilds arose because there was a need for specialization, and like all guilds the Masquers have further diversified within their ranks. If admitted into the Stygian Guildhouse itself, a customer could likely find at least four Masquers who have concentrated on any of the particular arts of Moliate

Hereafter follow some of the more widely recognized Masquers specialist groups. Many can be hired without going through the Guild (the Idunn and Warsmiths in particular), but others carefully check their client's reputations before arranging a meeting. After all, one of the Masquers' mottoes is that you can never be too careful.

## Arrangers

*You've made an enemy of a very powerful person. It'll cost double my usual fee, and half up front. However, I can guarantee he'll get the message.*

The most notorious of the Masquers, Arrangers do just what they claim to – arrange things. Harrowings, disappearances, sudden Moliations into Barghest form: These are the province of the Masquers' equivalent of assassins. Sadly, Stygia has proven to be a fertile hiring ground for the Arrangers, as the twists and turns of politics often create a market for their services.

A Typical contract with an Arranger can be for a simple Harrowing, the equivalent of a very serious warning. The Arranger will simply exhaust her target's corpus, pitching him into the Tempest. Far more expensive are contracts that require a wraith to vanish permanently. These victims often wind up as Moliated pieces of

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furniture or as tapestries, or perhaps as Barghest stock. Some enterprising Arrangers will sell off the victims Pathos or Corpus to the Usurers before utterly disposing of him.

Obviously, these Masquers tend to be experts at disguise and infiltration. Cheaper thugs are available, the sort who ambush their target in Shadowlands alleys, but these brutes seldom have Guild sanction.

## Fetches

*Gentlemen, I have the information you requested. However, I am adding a stipulation to the contract; if you act on this data the Marshal's charming and kind wife is to remain unmolested. Please, do not cross me on this.*

Just as in the living world, there are certain Underworld factions who are willing to pay dearly to have an inside agent in any given Underworld organization. The Fetches, each one carefully trained in the arts of impersonation, fulfill this need admirably. Given enough time, a good Fetch is capable of not only appearing as the spitting image of an Anacreon, but even of holding friendly conversations with the Anacreon's closest confidants. Some say this is because the Fetch Masters have close ties with the Mnemoides, and can barter in memories. The price for hiring a Fetch is said to be obscenely high, but considering the level of talent such work requires, such a steep cost is a fair wage.

Fetches are very closely monitored by the Guild. Although they are highly esteemed, the thought of one turning Doppelganger is entirely too frightening. Consequently, in any given Masque, the Fetches have first claim to the services of the finest Pardoners – and none dare argue with this arrangement.

## Helldivers

*The kids are always the creepiest. Who'd hurt a child so much in life that they turn Spectre when they die? Poor little devils, the best thing you can do for them is be quick.*

Suicidal? Mad? Who can tell? One thing is sure, there's nothing more frightening than the Masquers who try to best the Doppelgangers at their own game. Specially trained in Argos by sympathetic Harbingers, the Helldivers try to pull Oblivion's teeth by diving in its mouth, dressed as its children. They Moliate themselves to resemble Spectres, infiltrate Spectre society and quietly weed out whoever seems the most dangerous.

It's a profitable venture, as Helldivers receive top bounty for their kills, but the personal cost is frightening. Naturally, only a few can both master the necessary skills and survive more than a few jaunts without going mad. The most successful Helldivers know not only Moliate and Argos, but also have learned the arts of Castigate and Usury. Some say that the Helldivers in fact accept members from both the Harbingers' and

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Pardoners' Guilds as well, but since so few are available in the Shadowlands at any given time, nobody has yet questioned one to full satisfaction.

## Idunn

*Darling, everyone wants to be Marilyn Monroe. Why don't you relax and trust me? These days, exotic is everything. And I've got a face in mind that wouldn't do for just anyone, but I think you might be just the right one to wear it.*

Specialists in beauty of all forms and to all tastes, the Idunn cater to the desires of those who want to be more than they were. For every wraith who wants horrible blades for hands, there are three who want to look like famous actresses. Obviously, not just any Masquer makes a good Idunn. Apprentices must show a real taste for aesthetics (not fashion) to even merit training from a Guild journeyman. Competition is often fierce among the Idunn, and the resulting rivalries make for excellent work. Many wraiths visit their favored Idunn every month or so, and the work of some of these Masquers is a true status symbol.

Just as in the living world, beauticians are gossips. The Idunn have therefore become choice sources for rumors and dirt. Locals often take advantage of the talkative Idunn to spread slander or bolster their own reputations; either way, the Idunn avoid the blame, since they only deal in "secondhand" information. As a result, they are highly valued by the Guild for the wealth they bring back – both in oboli and rumors.

## Warsmiths

*If you like the serrations, that's fine. I'd recommend having them on the outer cutting surface, though. That way, you can rip through someone with a backhand when you feel nasty, but your draw cuts on the inside will be as fast as you need them to be.*

The martial counterparts to the Idunn, the Warsmiths specialize in arming wraiths for self-defense and in mauling shock troopers into war machines. Although most accept individual contracts, some are employed full time by the Hierarchy to manufacture Barghest and the like. Warsmiths are more likely than the Idunn to mass-produce work without customizing it to their style. Still, many are renowned for their works durability and unique flourishes.

The talented Warsmith will never lack for clients, as Renegades, Heretic and Hierarch alike pay top obolus for his talents. However, his social life often suffers, as the call of his business prevents him from wandering about the Shadowlands, mingling with both dead and living. Many a Warsmith has spent years without harvesting Pathos from the living, instead subsiding on the dull stuff offered as payment. In addition, the grim nature of his work tends to strip him of the usual Masquer cheeriness, further inhibiting his chances of attending the latest Sandman performance or Chanteurs Ball. However, not that many notice the difference...

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# History

My esteemed fellows, now we arrive at one of the two great traitors of Guild history. The Masquers have ever been the lords and ladies of deceit and broken trust. I will strive to set personal feeling aside as I pen this chapter, and I beg forgiveness for any rancorous comments that I may let slip.

And here are the personal prejudices we've all been attempting. A note to all – The writer one, Emanno Maecenas, was apparently involved in the giant miscalculation called the Guilds Revolt. Agreed. Charon wasn't exactly on top of the whole situation at the time, but some people should just learn to accept that it was a bad idea and to get the hell on with their afterlives. Read on, O best beloved, and learn what the rest of the world knows about us – and the stuff that we had to write in ourselves.

## Before the Guilds

Despite the foam-specked ravings of the Artificers and their claim to the position of Eldest Guild, the list of Arcanoi that predate Inhabit is long indeed. The first wraiths to instinctively sense that their Corpora were malleable, and to devote the time studying how to change their forms to something more enjoyable – these were the predecessors of the Masquers. Perhaps the most ancient and twisted Nephwracks are the wraiths who first developed the art of Moliate. It is not for me to say.

For myself, I name the most ancient Arcanoi as Lifeweb, Castigate, Embody, Moliate, Outrage and Argos. All others would seem to require a certain amount of luxury time to develop. Ah, but I digress.

He sure does, doesn't he?

Read the "bastards of Oblivion" commentary however you want. However, I figure we can trace our pedigree back to the first Ferrymen, and even farther. Think about it. Their Great Oath mentions defending against the agents of Oblivion, and we all know which Arcanos is the most reliable weapon against other wraiths. Yes, we knew how to Moliate a long time before Mr. Nhudri arrived and started doling out the secrets of soulforging. It whoOws, doesn't it?

## The Stygian Golden Age

We can pinpoint proto-Masquer activity that went on during the first centuries of the city of Stygia more easily than that of the other embryonic Guilds. True, Nhudri's apprentices and their soulforging were the most prominent example of Arcanos use, but think on the torches that lit Charon's domain. Certain wraiths refined the arts of Moliate during this period, tuning their

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talents on the hapless thralls given to them. Even today, Hierarchs boast of their antiquated fabrics and gewgaws, soulshaped in the heyday of the Republic and then the Empire. Only rarely is an “artist’s” name of the period mentioned; the Masquers would not command such prestige until later. They simply rode the currents of fashion and politicking like waterbugs on a pond, sating petty ambitions where possible and keeping to their place when necessary.

This is one of the parts that he actually gets mostly right. Early Moliate experts found out that they were well enough in demand to make a living at soulshaping and they did so. They also comprised a lot of the soldiery at the time after all, the arts of Rending weren’t incredibly common and straightforward Spectre attacks still occurred back then. So there you saw the first division of labor, some wraiths went military, while other devoted themselves entirely to art and Corpus modification. Theoretically, there were also the first professional assassins and spies back then too, but nobody (not even us) can prove anything.

### **The Sculpted Palace**

In the year of 976, as Western historians record it, the first true Guild came into being. The Artificers sculpted themselves an empire out of soulsteel; although Charon sat on the throne, the Artificers pointed to Nhudri’s teachings as the backbone of Stygian society. None know when the Masquers first met, nor who their earliest masters were. However, rumor tells us that one of the earliest Anonymae gathered a circle of the most sagacious and talented Soulshapers to her. Promising to reveal Moliate arts long forgotten, she quickly earned the loyalty of many Stygian Masquers. Shortly thereafter, an emissary from the Guild of Masquers arrived in Charon’s court, pledging the services of his guild to Stygian society. Their newfound organization proved most beneficial to the fledgling associations, as it became easier and easier to potential clients to find talented Soulshapers for whatever task they required.

Well, actually, The Masquers’ Guild formation wasn’t quite like that. The little cabals of tradewraiths, sort of like the family trades of the Skinlands, had already formed. Moliate had been practiced for a long time, you know. These gatherings became a bit like local monopolies and quickly turned into a Guild. You see, we’re mostly social creatures, and we’ve been compared to water before, right? The mini-clique of Masquers was like dewdrops on a leaf, and the Artificers were the sudden weight at the center. Of course, the dew runs together, it’s our nature.

And wham, suddenly there we were, a guild. Most of us took to it pretty readily. After all, there’s nothing quite so satisfying as respect. I’m sure you know what I’m talking about; you want your signature to be as respected as Iona’s someday, right?

Well, there were plenty of little details that required the newborn Guild’s attention. Trappings became very important very quickly. I’m told that few Guilds could rival us for all the fun little trinkets and procedures we produced. Some of these trappings have survived to the modern days – we obviously need our Initiation Rite, and the division of labor helps simplify business matters. Of course some of the other little traditions faded in and out, depending on the fashion of the time. The titles are a good

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example of this; we used them until they got dull and then we changed them. Don't worry, the logic will seem sounder once you're a member of the Guild for a while and you sop up some of our attitude.

By the way, I hear the Artificers, Pardoners and Monitors are taking their Guild rituals more seriously than ever these days? A musing, yes?

## The First Years

The Masquers settled into their newly found social niche with gusto. Their new acceptance into Stygian society suited them well, and soon they fell to dabbling in the politics of the day. One might compare the fledgling Guild to a debutante at her first gathering of truly important individuals: excited, curious and eager to please. Once they settled on an internal structure (some say they did so with extreme squabbling and even quiet violence), they chose to present a pleasant face to the rest of the Underworld. Although they showed great respect for rank and privilege, their good graces were extended to all who could pay for their services.

It was soon discovered that the Masquers would provide far more than cosmetic or military alterations – if the price were right. The Guild soon became a brokerage house of various “services,” information-gathering and assassination among them. Many a local Necropolis came to know the tyranny that would one day be known as “organized crime” – and in many cases, this oppression was overseen by Hierarchy officials who had the local branch of Masquers firmly in their pockets.

One can extrapolate that the Masquers were settling into a comfortable role, and a taste of wealth heightened their appetite for more. No longer satisfied with their share of the Underworld's wealth, they grew ever more avaricious, accepting any and all contracts that promised them heavy payment in Pathos or the coin of the realm. The Mnemoi (then in the role of trusted policemen) began to turn their eyes more and more toward the Masquers, meaning to trim the excessively corrupt from the Guild. The Masquers reacted badly to this sudden scrutiny, and a great antipathy grew between both Guilds, one that exists to this day.

Oh, for Charon's...

Why do we hate the Mnemoi? All right, I won't name any names, but I will say that there were some other reasons than the one Emanno mentions. Besides, they're a singularly unlovely Guild with a singularly unlovely Arcanos. Ask around; see if anybody else will invite a Mnemos to tea. Betcha they won't.

Our problem with the Mnemoi started around this time and just plain got worse as the years went by. This went hand in hand with our (well-deserved) antipathy toward the Solicitors. Never mind the whys and wherefores, just be aware that putting a Masquer, a Solicitor and a Mnemos in a room together is like putting three cats together in a wet sack. When the lesser three Guilds were banished – well, you had to see our celebratory banquet to believe it.

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## 1096 – 1354: The War of the Guilds

The War of the Guilds, some say, was the war with 1001 reasons. Jealousy, The Artificers claim, and with the Masquers, jealousy may well have been the spur. Vanity forbade them from calling the other Guilds equal, in particular the proud Artificers who claimed pride of place before all. The Masquers made war like ferrets would, biting from behind in whatever alley suited them. Ultimately, though, it proved for naught. Since none could trust the Masquers (who could wear the face of friend or foe), all were to some extent against them. The final blow came when Niccarai, their spokesman, vanished abruptly after one too many speeches against the “Artificer yoke.” His replacement was all too happy to sign the Compact of the Guilds.

Sure she was. Niccarai was a hothead and a troublemaker, and most folk who remember him talk about his shadow like it was a personality trait. Coincidence? Hey, I’m just annotating Emanno here. Think what you like.

The war was actually pretty good for business. One of Emanno’s more blatant omissions is that every damn Guild (Monitors included) hired Masquers to do their dirty work at some time or another. War’s hell, so you might as well sweeten the crucible with some profit. Unfortunately, the mess settled down with The Artificers still squatting on top of the ziggurat. And we couldn’t do spit about it at the time.

### Between Struggles

Once the Guilds had properly settled their grievances (through means fair and foul), most set about the business of rebuilding. The Masquers retreated into the darkened recesses of their Guildhouses and there licked their wounds. The concord they reached was simple enough: To thrive, one must play by the rules.

The next two centuries saw the Masquers’ Guild on its best behavior. As the fever of the Renaissance swept the Skinlands, the resulting flood of emotion colored Stygia. Art became more in demand as did fine entertainment. It was an excellent time for the Sandmen and Chanteurs, and a fine time to be a Masquer Corps artist. The most talented Shapers enjoyed heavy demand for their artistry, particularly from the flourishing Oneiric Theatres. Of course, there was still ample coin to be made from providing the darker services, and so political figures would tend to banish as their rivals grew wealthy and could afford the best.

## 1598: The Great Betrayal

My most esteemed comrades, I am sure I need not gloss heavily on the details of the Breaking. And yet I must speak on it once more, for this guild played a role more prominent than any other in the events that led to all Guilds becoming outlaw and anathema.

ON the sixth day of April 1598, the Artificers rallied all the other guilds behind them to replace the increasingly tyrannous rule of Charon and his Deathlords. At the Guilds’ disposal

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were the arts of every Arcanos known to wraithkind. The arms that the Artificers produced matched even the darksteel weapons of the Hierarchy.

At the time of the final struggle, the Masquers marched with the other Guilds to the battlefield, but were nowhere to be found as the dust settled and the chains snapped around the Guildmaster's necks. Despite the plasmic armor and armaments, the Masquers retreated before the forces of the Hierarchy. As they left, so too did other Guilds; the Usurers, Harbingers, and Oracles had all abandoned the revolt within hours of the Masquers' defection. One can only speculate on the cause of such precision. A popular theory holds that the Masquers had replaced key figures in each of the other three Guilds. With the impetus of some form of bribe from Charon, they reduced our strength by more than on-fourth in one quick slash.

Overstated as usual. He makes it sound like the rebelling guilds were actually the superior force. Well, we were really almost evenly matched. It was one of those "Too close to call" fights. I doubt that the absence of only one Guild (even if it was us) would have made that much of a difference – well, maybe it did and maybe it didn't.

But Emano's right on this one. We left and the Usurers left with us. We all knew messing with the Hierarchy was bad for business, right? And it wasn't like Charon was going to destroy everybody who knew Moliate – or even who might've known Moliate. So we called no joy and got out. And for all the others' spewing of insults about how useless we Masquers can be, how far did the revolution get without us?

## Secrecy and Rebuilding

And so the Guilds were no more, thanks entirely to the desertion of the Masquers and their Usurer bedmates. Oh, to be sure, the Guilds survived, but glory was ours no longer. The times to come would be marked by the struggle of honest apprentices, journeymen and masters to conduct their business in secret. Although I have no proof, I am sure the Masquers flourished in such a treacherous environment.

Since only a few of their Guild fell in battle or were summarily punished by Charon, they had few losses to replace. Some reports tell that the executed Masquer plotters were in fact the deadwood or enemies of the Guild made to look like the traitorous Guild heads. Again, I have no evidence, but such a proverbial slaying of two birds would surely be accepted a masterstroke by any less-than-honest Guildmasters.

No Comment

As we can see by tracing the history of our own Guild, the years following the Breaking were difficult ones indeed. Those wraiths managing to flourish did so by utilizing their utmost ingenuity and cunning. The Masquers, being what they are, undoubtedly did well for themselves. In fact, they sometimes helped other Guilds' members assimilate themselves into the new underground. As we can gather from our own experiences, the Shapers insinuated many

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covert operations into the other Guilds at this time. Thankfully, all such moles have by now been uncovered and removed.

It is, of course, impossible for outsiders to trace Masquer growth in the time after the Breaking, but there was no significant lack of business in Moliata in the following centuries. Thralls were formed into Barghests with all due speed, and Hierarchs had no apparent difficulty in hiring cutthroats to dispense of other rivals for them. I assume that they were actually among the healthiest of the recuperating Guilds. If their connections to the Usurers were as strong as in previous years, they certainly had access to impressive resources. Link this to the ability to “acquire” whatever they needed by posing as Hierarchy officials, and little remains to conjecture.

One is compelled to wonder just what plans were drawn up when the Masquers realized their current strength. Those wraiths with any forethought would have no doubt taken steps to capitalize on their advantage, as now they had the resources to pursue an even more ambitious goal. Perhaps, my fellows, you now realize the reasons for my concern. Upon what prize would the Masquers have set their eyes?

Again, no comment.

## **The Fiercest of Wars**

The Masquers made themselves known during the Great Wars, when oceans of newly slain souls beat against the shores of the Underworld. Spectres and maelstroms battered the Necropoli and Stygia itself. And so the Deathlords cried out a summons “that all wraiths with more than casual knowledge of Moliata join with the Legions.” Those who responded were pressed into heavy service, arming Legionnaires and deforming hapless Thralls into Barghests. Others were conscripted into frontline duty, set to guarding the portals of the cities against Spectre attacks. For once, it would appear that the arts of Martialry proved more a curse than a blessing.

As expected, however, this service was not overly prolonged. As the First World War ended and the maelstroms abated, the conscripted Masquers began to trickle away one by one. Those who were allowed to leave; those held under duress would often simply vanish without a trace. The shapers who remained were the ones who had managed to collect payment for their services, and those who desired continued employment. Their talents were rigorously tested within the Second World War began.

What, I wonder, did the Guild who ignores the Skinlands think of the Second World War? Surely they were unprepared for the waves of the slaughtered, the new arrivals who had been subjected to every atrocity imaginable. I wonder if they even had time to think about it at all. As Charon readied for war with the Jade Kingdom and the Spectres came boiling up to feast on the newly slain, the need for wraithly weaponry was greater than ever. Just as the soulforges glowed as never before, so did the Soulshapers throw themselves into their arts with a heretofore-unseen sense of industry. Their very survival depended upon it, for if Oblivion triumphed, where were the Masquers to hide?

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You want to know what we thought, Emanno? We started wondering if maybe Oblivion wasn't born from the souls of people at their most human. Once the Monitors, Puppeteers and Proctors started spreading the news of what the quick were doing to each other, some of us actually postulated that maybe we wraiths are already one step toward Transcendence. Take it from someone who has seen more Spectres up close than he can count. Spectres used to be human. Some of them don't seem to have been altered by the change.

He's right on one thing though. We didn't have much time to worry about the physical world. Some of our members were hired into private armies for desperate Anacreons, making the shared workload damn daunting. Every Warsmith we had was working night and day, and every warrior in our guild was pretty much standing 23-hour watches up until the time of the Fifth Maelstrom. And if your slack ass had been sitting somewhere in my Necropolis, Emanno, you can bet your Pardoner money that you'd have been standing watch with us. On the end of a leash maybe.

### The Fifth Maelstrom

No Guild was spared when the Fifth Great Maelstrom ravaged the Shadowlands and Stygia. I remember very little of the politics of the hour; every wraith did whatever he could to avoid being torn from shelter and devoured by Oblivion. Those who could fought the Spectres; those who couldn't simply hid.

Relief came only when Gorool and Charon vanished into the Sunless Sea arm in arm. Many refused to believe the news of the Emperor's loss, and carried on as if Charon would return on the morrow. The Guilds were frantic with activity, scurrying to collect what survivors they could and fighting for that first fragile toehold on the new Stygian political scene.

The Masquers had actually suffered heavier losses than most Guilds, and the aftermath of the war was a time of healing for them. Fortunate, many claim. Had they been at full strength, these shapechanging turncoats could well have infiltrated the Hierarchy's weakened ranks and closed an iron gauntlet around the Anacreons. However, the damage they sustained from defending their homes made such a thing impossible. The irony here is that they lost their chance to gain an edge over the other Guilds (and indeed the Deathlords themselves) as a result of stoically fighting against Oblivion. One hopes that they have not learned further lessons of treachery from this; as we know all too well relying on Masquers is a chancy proposition at best.

I actually I kind of liked Charon. As egomaniacs go, mind you, he wasn't bad. He never singled us out among the Guilds to blatantly harass, which is more than I can say for many of our esteemed peers. Sure, he was a Tyrant, but at least he was a benevolent Tyrant. If it weren't for the organization he brought to the Lands of the Dead, we'd have all been sucked into the bottom of the Labyrinth long ago.

Many of my friends feel the same way, which might have something to do with why we Masquers have never been as anti-Hierarchy as a lot of the other Guilds. Fence-straddlers we may be, but we aren't totally unscrupulous, no matter what our Monitor friend claims. Charon's missed by a lot of us Masquers. He may not have always been a good ruler, but he was always a great wraith.

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And who's to say we didn't subtly take over Stygia back then? As long as you're being paranoid, I mean...

## The Modern Era

As I stated in the introduction to this work, we are all but certain that the 13 Guilds still exist. However, our information on the workings of the Masquers Guild of today remains sketchy at best. Although it is still easy enough to hire a skilled Soulshaper when circumstance requires, the customer is never permitted to enter the Guild proper. Despite their claims of businesslike camaraderie, the Masquers continue their traditions of secrecy and deceit, often going so far as to spread blatant misinformation on their and other Guilds' affairs. I have never had need to call on one of their trained assassins, but I have no doubt that this practice of Harrowing (or worse) for hire is still profitable for the Guild. So long as there are Barghests to create or fops to beautify, I regret to say that the Masquers will continue.

It is interesting to note that as the physical world surges ever faster into the future, the Masquers remain rooted in the past. Many of the Guild are increasingly ignoring the changes in the Skinlands, concerning themselves as always with the Shadowlands politics and business.

If not for the utility of their Arcanos, one wonders how well these wraiths would have adapted. Their much-touted claims of versatility seem to hold little water when one speaks of the physical world. Some say that the Masquers are not content solely to keep up with their Stygian affairs, and that they seek influence among the Quick. We can safely discount these rumors as the babblings of fools in awe of a Guild whose time has long passed. I would still advise caution when dealing with a possible Masquer, however – shortsighted and arrogant as they may be, they have always been, and shall for some time continue to be, dangerous.

Ah, the modern days. I don't suppose I have to say much here. Techno shock may be turning the Artificers on their head and the decline of Western Civilization is getting the Proctors all knotted up, but its business as usual in Stygia.

Sure, Oblivion is looking a lot hungrier these days, and that's bad. But hey, at least we get paid a bundle to arm the citizenry against Spectre attacks. The Deathlords are getting really twitchy on those thrones of theirs, which makes for a lucrative – if dangerous – chance to get involved in politics. Like my instructor always used to say, no crisis is so horrible that you can't take a deep breath (so to speak), look around and find some kind of opportunity waiting for you.

These are rough times we're in, but you'll be all right if you're clever. And you're reading this book, which means we've let you play with us. I guess you're pretty clever, then. And if you keep up the good work, just maybe you'll get a look at parts of the Guild you haven't yet dreamed existed. Hey, the only place to go is higher up and farther in, right? Good luck – and don't embarrass us.

Oh, and for God's sake, don't listen to those rumors about Charon resurfacing, I think I know the idiot responsible for all those "Elvis sightings," and he'll get his. If Charon had really returned, we'd now. We're the Masquers, after all; who better to sift through some fantastic rumor? Trust me, if the Grim Reaper himself returns, you apprentices will be the first to know. Why? Because we like you.

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