

<1>Dark Astoria

To enter Dark Astoria is to enter a world where the laws of the City of Heroes rarely apply, where evil is ascendant, where the dead walk the streets seeking souls to consume. Crumbling magics hold a dark, ancient god barely in check, the undead chaos symptoms of the dread power bound deep beneath the city. As the god's bonds loosen, its influence spreads like a fell shadow, raising the dead to cause havoc and horror. But to understand Dark Astoria, one must look into the depths of history. . .

<2>History

<3>Carthago Delenda Est!

The Phoenicians were an early culture of the Levant (modern-day Lebanon and Syria). Originally known as the Canaanites, they are better-known as Phoenicians, after their magnificent purple dyes. Expert maritime traders, they founded many colonies along the shores of the Mediterranean. But where the Canaanites went, their dark, tyrannical gods followed with them, scented with the pall of human sacrifice.

While the Phoenician city-states struggled for dominance in Mediterranean trade, to the north a new power gained strength. These people, the Romans, soon clashed with Carthage. Two wars later, an uneasy peace was reached at the cost of Carthage's far-flung empire. It did not last, however, for Rome was not her own mistress.

For generations, secret spirits offered advice and power to Rome's leaders, and sought no reward but the increased power of Rome. The Romans called them the Orbis Spinae, but the name found only in dark, forbidden texts was Oranbegans.

The Cult of the Orbis Spinae thought themselves to be servants of powerful — but secret — gods. No gods these, but merely ghostly wizards from Oranbega, sent to observe the old world. During their explorations they encountered the nascent Romans, and chose to help them conquer the world. The lost city would never be found by mortal men — so long as Rome ruled the world and Oranbega ruled Rome.

Though well-hidden, Oranbega was still vulnerable to attack, a weakness Oranbegan researchers labored to overcome. After centuries, researchers discovered a new technique of creating magical barriers, that could render the entire city invulnerable. Only one problem remained - it required no less a power source than a god. The Oranbegans needed a divine being strong enough to power the wards, but weak enough to capture. In the Gods of Carthage they found the perfect candidates: deities ancient in power, but weakened by war.

The Oranbegans chose the Roman consul Cato the Elder as their tool, instructing him to put an end to Carthage for all time. Carthage, beset by raiders, had partially rearmed in violation of the peace treaty – a minor, but understandable, breach. It was to be their downfall — Cato used the violation to justify a new war. In 146 BC, Scipio Aemilianus

Africanus destroyed Carthage. The great port was sacked, its harbor burned, its people enslaved, its ruins razed, and its lands sown with salt. <i>Delenda est Carthago!</i>

Though many of the Phoenician gods had fallen, enough remained for the Oranbegans to implement their plan. They chose Mot, god of death and sterility, reasoning that even if the others possessed the strength to interfere, they would lack the desire. Mighty spells bound the full power of Mot within the last of his idols; that done, a Roman legion was sent over the western sea, to carry the idol to a far distant land and there, bury it.

Though the legion prayed to Neptune, it was the Oranbegans who guided the legion across the uncharted Atlantic, to the shores of a strange land, and deep below the earth into the Oranbegan caves. There, the legionnaires placed the idol and the dread spirit trapped within into the Oranbegans' trap, binding the ancient death-god to the wizards' will. Few of the legionnaires escaped the terrible energies released in the doing.

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What happened to the Romans?

The soldiers who survived the sea crossing, natives, and Oranbegan spells divided. One group tried to found a new Rome; the other sought to return home.

The first group failed and disappeared into the native population. Of the second, a single legionnaire succeeded, after a twenty-year odyssey. There, he told his story. The tale has been lost; most historians discount the occasional reference to it as mere myth. Finding an intact copy could reveal a great deal about the cause of Dark Astoria's present-day nightmare.

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<3>Haunted Astoria - Founding to the 20th Century

Centuries passed and European colonists settled the region. As the settlement grew, its inhabitants began to fear a particular set of caves to the northeast. Terrible tales of witchcraft, hauntings and dark beings surrounded the area the settlers named Astoria. Few dared venture there, even by daylight. Puritan exorcist Cotton Mather led an expedition into the caves to root out its evil; he alone returned, and never spoke of what he had seen.

Astoria attracted few settlers – mostly individuals of a macabre and morbid bent. The few who broke ground there spoke of witch-lights and terrible, fiery shapes within the woods. Poe immortalized the area in the short story "By Twilight Astoria", and H.P. Lovecraft set several stories there.

In 1929, a pair of amateur ghost hunters named Samuel and Theodore Raimi ventured into Astoria's woods, bearing the latest scientific equipment and a motion-picture camera to film their findings. The brothers were never seen again, but the camera and its film

were recovered. (Recently, MAGI released portions of the film to independent filmmakers working with the University of Massachusetts.)

In 1932, Astoria Park, designed by wealthy Paragon City architect Thomas Romero, opened its gates to the dead of Paragon City. Romero claimed that the sprawling tombs and mausoleums would ‘bring life to a dying community’. Romero’s words proved darkly ironic - the architect was found brutally murdered in his suite, his body partially consumed. Romero’s business partner, Erasmus Moth, died a year later, and Moth's estate successfully sued to have the cemetery renamed in his honor.

Notorious Mayor Samuel “Spanky” Rabinowitz is also associated with Astoria. Strangely, despite his corruption, Paragon City prospered under his guidance. Some theorize that Rabinowitz possessed a mystical power, others that he sold his soul in exchange for the city's well-being. After his death in 1949, a number of relics were found in a secret compartment in his private office. The relics included a map of Astoria, where he often met with kingpin Nathaniel Frost.

Following Rabinowitz’s death in 1949, Dark Astoria fell once again into disrepute. Even heroes rarely ventured into the blighted neighborhood, leaving only a few of those mystically inclined. A revitalization of Astoria began in late 2000, but was cut short by a terrible tragedy. . .

<3>And the Earth Shall Give Up Its Dead: Mot and the Banished Pantheon

On the night of May 23, 2002, Astoria was plunged into permanent twilight as a thick, clammy fog filled the streets. Authorities, puzzled by the bizarre phenomenon, urged residents to stay in their homes and wait out the attack. The residents, used to strange occurrences, agreed. Astoria had survived hauntings, rampaging demons and would-be wizards; it would survive this.

Beneath the city, the Oranbegans worked desperately to restore the wards binding Mot, wards nearly shattered by the dimensional ruptures caused by the Rikti portals. Mot began to stir; weakened by the passage of centuries, the Circle of Thorns could do little more than wait. . . and hope that nothing disturbed the sleeping god.

Attracted by the mystic energies released by the destruction of Mot’s bindings, the shamans of the Banished Pantheon gathered in Astoria. Their unsubtle explorations into this new source of power further weakened the wards, and he awoke. In a matter of days, Mot’s energies raised the dead and consumed the living, leaving only hollow shells and empty ghosts.

The plague of undead came at the worst possible time; few heroes could be spared from the war effort, and the need to blockade Astoria strained an infrastructure already at the breaking point. By its end, the desperate battle claimed the lives of nearly one hundred Paragon City police and National Guardsman, as well as the dozen mystic heroes who fought beside them. The area was sealed off, and declared a Hazard Zone by the city.

Though only partially awake, Mot had some small idea of what had happened to him. His undead minions captured a power-stealing shaman, whom he sacrificed to learn of the shaman's masters. When the Shaman's soul was drawn into the Banished Pantheon's dimensional exile, a tendril of Mot followed.

There, Mot observed the Pantheon. Though Mot had not existed when the Pantheon had been in power, he knew of these ancient Evils. Now, trapped by sorcery in a strange time and beset by the godslayers' minions, Mot offered an alliance.

Mot made his case to the Banished Pantheon - though he was weak and trapped, he could become a powerful ally instead of a poor meal. If they taught him their secrets, he would power their Shamans and help the Pantheon return to the physical world. The Pantheon tentatively agreed. Each plots to betray the other, although neither has the strength to do so. . . for now.

Mot's growing strength is but one of a number of worries for the Oranbegans. For now, they do their utmost to contain Mot and investigate the Banished Pantheon. As always, the ancient spectral sorcerers create intricate schemes, but whether they have time for their schemes to contain Mot again is in question.

Unknown to either the Circle of Thorns or the Banished Pantheon, a new faction has taken an interest in Dark Astoria: the Tsoo. Through their ancestors' connection to the spirit world, the Tsoo have glimpsed the hellish netherworld of the Banished Pantheon's exile — the dimension to which Mot could potentially escape. For now, the Tsoo remain silent, bound by pride and their code of silence. . . but the day looms when they must confront the Circle of Thorns and the Banished Pantheon. It is doubtful that Tub Ci's men can defeat these forces of darkness. . . at least, not *alone*.

<2>Neighborhoods

<3>Romero Heights

The confluence of several Ley Lines, here Thomas Romero made his home. Rumors in some mystic circles indicate that Thomas Romero may have known more of the truth of Dark Astoria than he admitted to. . . rumors given weight by Romero's death at the hands of some unknown *thing*. Even the Circle of Thorns, quite numerous here, yield the streets to hordes of undead below.

<3>Barca Plaza

The Tsoo, unusually, can be found here, investigating the Banished Pantheon on Tub Ci's orders. The minions of the Pantheon patrol the streets in force, and in places they have begun to dig, removing concrete, brick, and asphalt in a search for. . . something. The Tsoo and heroes both may pray silently that the shamans and their undead minions do not find whatever they seek beneath the streets. . .

<3>St. Elegius Medical Center

The city has reactivated St. Elegius Hospital in an effort to reclaim Dark Astoria. Unbeknownst to the city officials, a cult dedicated to Hermes Trismegistus has taken up residence in the hospital, plying its trade in the healing arts and seeking a way to defeat Mot. The priest-physicians of the cult ensure that the wounded are made whole of heart as well as body; when possible, they offer subtle advice about the evils that rove the night. For now, the cult remains hidden from the Circle of Thorns and Banished Pantheon, who would surely destroy the mystic healers.

Despite the cult's best efforts, St. Elegius is known among the medical community of the city as a nexus of bizarre happenings. Ghostly patients roam its halls, strange fluids drip from the ceilings of the lowest floors, and heroes may be called to help suppress an outbreak of undead in the morgue. Despite the terror that haunts the shadows, the hospital's personnel maintain good cheer - far better to light a candle than curse the darkness.

<3>Toffet Terrace

Once Astoria's commercial center, the shops of Toffet Terrace now lie empty, their dusty windows reflecting only horror. Few might remember a plaque, dedicated in 1953 by Vambrace of the Freedom Phalanx, pledging the Phalanx's aid in restoring the neighborhood and driving the supernatural evils from its streets. Now, if ever, are heroes needed to uphold Vambrace's pledge..

<3>Raimi Arcade

Named after brothers Theodore and Samuel Raimi, ghost-hunters who disappeared in the nearby woods, the Arcade is the site of occasional skirmishes between the Tsou and the Banished Pantheon. A nickelodeon theatre is rumored to exist somewhere in the Arcade — a venue that shows only the fall of Astoria into night, and run by the damned.

<3>Didos View

Once called home by Mayor Rabinowitz, Didos View is in a wretched state. The Mayor's former residence lies abandoned; the dead haunt its corridors. Didos View is another site of the Pantheon's curious excavations. Abandoned and wrecked vehicles litter the roadway. Some heroes have reported hearing music emanating from them; a ghostly dirge for a cursed place.

<3>Moth Cemetery

Here the evil of the Banished Pantheon is ascendant. The undead swarm over once-proud monuments, and the very earth churns and heaves as if to expel yet more ravaging corpses to collect living souls for the Pantheon's dark masters to consume.

Moth Cemetery is well known among those of a mystic bent in Paragon City - several members of the Midnight Squad are (or were) buried here, and the so-called 'House of Usher' in the cemetery's center is a nexus of powerful Ley Lines. In the northwest part of the cemetery, the Midnight Squad prevented the opening of a mystic rift in the 1930s, though energy still leaks from the wards.

Heroes should be extremely cautious exploring Moth Cemetery - hordes of shambling corpses haunt its mausoleums and yawning graves, guards for the powerful shamans of the Pantheon that also lurk here. Worst of all is the creature called Adamastor, a massive walking abomination that roams Moth Cemetery in the service of the Pantheon. Few heroes have seen Adamastor. Fewer still have battled Adamastor and lived.

<2>Adventure Seeds

<3>The Informant

The magical energies around Paragon City are on the rise, and the tempo of the Banished Pantheon's excavations rises to a crescendo. Something terrible is about to happen, and a member of the Tsoo risks everything to warn the heroes.

<3>All Heroes Must Be Eaten

With Mot's power supplementing their own, the Banished Pantheon decide to break the security gates of Dark Astoria. The heroes are the only ones within range to respond. . . can they stop the wall of undead threatening to escape Dark Astoria? And what allowed the Pantheon to launch a coordinated assault?

<3>The Tell-Tale Tentacle

Heroes of a mystic bent or otherwise active in Dark Astoria are approached by a curiously self-aware spirit. The ghost speaks in cryptic utterances, hinting towards a coming battle between the Circle of Thorns and the Banished Pantheon. As the heroes gain the spirit's trust, he claims that the Pantheon have finally recovered an occultist capable of leading them in the conquest of Paragon City! But when the spirit's identity is revealed as pulp horror writer Howard Phillips Lovecraft, can the heroes trust his word? Is Lovecraft working with the Circle of Thorns? And what of the resurrected high priest, Edgar Allen Poe? Will the heroes survive a battle between the titans of horror?

<i>“Beware, heroes. . . beware the beating of his hideous heart!”<i>