

Game name: **Year King**

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Blurb Text:

Our lives had gotten pretty rough. For some of us it was just the unhappy grind of daily life. For others things had been worse. So that night a year ago, when someone broke the mood by joking that what we needed was a Year King, we all agreed.

*Harvest rituals have been around since there's been harvests. Harvest sacrifices, too. Legend tells of a people who would appoint a king for a year - they would give him everything he asked, and at the end of a year he would be slain, sacrificed, given back to the fields, to ensure a rich harvest for the people.*

So that's what happened. We gave Theo a wreath to wear and a crown for his head. We made up a little ritual to anoint him. We laid on him our woes, our cares, and our troubles. We named him our King for the year, and said he would be responsible for our future happiness, after. Then we laughed about it and went off for a drink.

For Theo the year since then has been amazing. Fame, and luck, and success like he had only dreamed. For the rest of us it has been a year in limbo, a year of nothing, a year of watching...

Now it's a year later. Midwinter has come again. We've all been thinking about the promise we made, whether it might have somehow been real, and what do we do about it.

Will we kill our Year King?

(With thanks to Mary Renault's *The King Must Die*)

This is a game of sadness and loss, for five dear friends facing a terrible choice.

### **The Phenomenonline Games Rating System.**

What's the game again? A game about sadness and loss; five friends facing an impossible decision

Seriousness? Very

Genre/Setting: Modern day

Movie Rating If this were a movie, it would be rated: M

System: Systemless

GM Style: One GM, as a gentle guide, who will give the players space to engage with the game.

Number of players: 5

Previously run at Pheno 2015 (Tryptich)

# Drew

## *Friend and lover*

### How I know the other PCs

**Theo** was always my best friend growing up. I had the ideas, he got people to go along. Or he talked us both out of trouble after.

I've had a crush on his sister **Tina** as long as I can remember. For a while in high school I hung at Theo's place as much for an excuse to be around Tina. Which was pretty creepy of me, looking back.

Met **Jane** and **Sapphire** in this weird little art/lit/history course we all did, which by the end mostly consisted of the four of us reading and discussing odd cults and creepy religious practices. That's where we all heard about this Year King idea.

### Where I was: a dreamer, dreaming

That course got me started reading all the mystical stuff I could find, from traditions all over the world, old, new or ancient. Some things it's hard to imagine how people could ever have believed. Other times I could picture being that priest, that worshipper, or that sacrifice. Now I think back on it and wonder if they were all that certain about what they believed, or if they were just as lost as we are.

Sapphire and I shared a lot of the same interest. She took it much more personally, though. I think it filled a gap where she could never fully trust people. Sapphire strikes me as someone who's had a pretty rough go of it, friends wise, and rituals and magic and all that deeper meanings stuff would have been reassuring, dependable and safe. She's actually really good value, but she won't believe it if you tell her.

For the same reason, I don't think Sapphire's looked as much as I have into the darker side of some of these beliefs. All the nasty things people would do to each other, or that would happen to them. Great reading, great stuff for lyrics, but not nearly so nice now I'm considering it.

At uni Theo and I formed a half-assed band. I wrote most of the original stuff, Theo mostly flashed his smile and sweet talked people. Honestly that probably contributed as much as all my sweat and hard work. Since uni we've played some gigs, put up some videos online, but nothing took off. I've been working whatever jobs I can but it's not really making ends meet.

I started dating Tina when she was home on leave. She would fit time for me in between army service and her camping and hiking trips, but I didn't mind, not really. Even when she went off to war.

Then Tina came home crippled. Not just her legs, but like something inside had died. Was dying. I said I'd give her a reason to live. Which made her laugh at least. We moved in together not long after, that's been about eighteen months now. I love having her around, I know I'm making a difference, though it's exhausting working full time then coming home and looking after everything. I'd love to see her walk

again, being trapped in the house with me is killing her, but at the same time I'm afraid she'll be out the door on an adventure as soon as she can.

### So we made Theo our Year King...

One year ago, we made Theo the Year King. I told Theo his job was to make our music a success. Next thing I know he's gone and re-recorded one of my songs, and it somehow made the net go crazy.

### The turn of seasons

Now Theo's doing all these shows and gigs, playing my songs, but somehow my name never seems to come up. Except maybe in a vague thank you or dedication. He can be a real jerk sometimes. And here I am still plodding along, struggling to keep up with the bills Tina's DVA money doesn't cover.

It feels like every time we hear about Theo doing well something else goes wrong. A job gets cancelled, Tina's benefits get cut, the wheelchair or the ramp I built or something else in the house breaks down, and we can never afford proper repairs.

I don't know what I want this weekend. The music's famous, but no one knows it's mine. And that popularity could fade away as easily as it's come. In my more cynical moments I keep thinking that all changes if Theo dies now, at the height of his popularity, I'm a made man. I own half his best songs, plus there's all the old stuff I've got recorded. I could pay off my debts and we'd never need to worry.

What does it mean if the magic stuff is real, though. How to find that out? For months I've been racking my brains for a way we can get out of it, or do part of it, or make sure it's real it without... going through with it, at the end. Nothing I can think of would be safe, or certain. Even... if we do it we might not find out right away. One thing's very clear from all the stories I've read - messing with this stuff and then trying to slide out of it... that does not go well.

Then again, if it works, Tina walks. I'll be back to only seeing her in between adventures, and how long before she meets some hot European climber? That'd break my heart. Is it better to stick with what I've got. What I know?

# Jane

## *Lonely artist*

*Art has always been my peace, my escape, my refuge. Without it I can feel myself losing control. If I can't get it back I don't know how I'll survive.*

### How I know the other PCs

Met **Theo, Drew** and **Sapphire** in this weird little art/lit/history course we all did, which by the end mostly consisted of the four of us reading and discussing odd cults and creepy religious practices. If I'd known the content I wouldn't have signed up. I've always been really bad at ghost stories. I used to be pretty superstitious. I still can't watch horror movies without getting nightmares. But oddly it kinda helped, knowing a bit about the people and times around the ideas. Anyway, that's where we all heard about this Year King idea.

I fell hard for Theo, but never worked up the nerve to tell him.

Met **Tina** when the boys brought her to one of the big parties we used to hold out at my family's old property an hour up into the Brindabellas. Been close to Tina since she dragged me and Sapphire off on a camping trip years back. Sapphire convinced us to do a dawn ritual on this sacred site up in the mountains, and then she nearly came off the cliffside on the climb back down. I'll never forget scrambling across to her, helping her hang on until Tina could climb back to bring her a new rope. Sapphire thinks it happened cos we angered the ancestors. I always thought that was silly. Back then.

### Where I was: holding together, holding on.

The five of us really worked as friends. Hanging out when we can, staying in touch even when Sapphire went off to Europe and Tina to Afghanistan. It was me as much as anyone keeping us together.

I know my art's good, but I've only ever sold a couple pieces. I've been working odd jobs around art galleries and stuff while I'm trying for a break, but work isn't as steady as it could be, and I'm getting badly in debt.

### So we made Theo our Year King...

A year ago I took part in that jokey little ritual to make Theo the Year King. I told him he needs to find a buyer for my work. I wanted to say something more personal, but I chickened out.

### Spring

A while later I arranged my own little ritual with a late night and some good wine to finally put the moves on Theo. I brought Sapphire along for dutch courage, and to make sure I didn't chicken out, and 'cos I'm a complete idiot. I was still steeling my nerves when bloody Sapphire and bloody Theo started bloody snogging, didn't they. I bailed, horrified. Those two are still dating.

I don't know what Sapph was thinking. She had to know why I brought her. She has to know I'm into him. Did she think she was *invited*?

I don't even know what I think of Theo anymore. I've tried to just avoid thinking about him because it's too upsetting. Guess I'm running out of time to avoid that.

### Summer

Since the crowning ritual I haven't been able to do any work I'm happy with. Technically it's ok but there's no feeling in it. Except when I've been really upset or angry, when I find I've doodled dark, violent images that leave me sick to my stomach, and I can't sleep or eat properly for days after.

I had to quit gallery work a little after. It was too painful to be around when I can't draw or paint anything myself. Work has been really hard to find, since. The bills are getting worse. And every time I get bad news I hear about something great that's happened for Theo.

### Autumn

A while back I found myself painting an image of him as a sacrifice. So powerful and affecting I painted it over at once. Even the blacked out canvas was upsetting just being there. I had to cut it up and burn the thing before I could settle down.

I tell myself none of this is real. It can't be. I almost can't believe we're acting like it is. I've tried to tell myself it's just stress that has me blocked, and stress that explains the dark imagery I'm connecting to, that the art I love will come back in time. But the nightmares are back, and the world feels dark and unsafe, and I can't help worrying what if. What if.

### Now

I'm scared. Scared of what my friends and I are doing, what we might be caught up in. I wish I could just run away from it all, but I'm even more scared of what they might decide to do without me. And I'm terrified I might never do art again.

# Sapphire

*Seeker. Explorer. Believer. Priestess?*

*There's a connection between all things. Animals, people, trees, the Earth herself. Past and Future. Seen and Unseen. Life and Death.*

*I wish I could see that connection. Sometimes I have, on the edge of sleep or the depths of ritual. I wish I could see it more. Feel its warmth. Keep it with me through the day. I wish I was connected too.*

## How I know the other PCs

I met **Theo**, **Drew** and **Jane** in this weird little art/lit/history course we all did, which by the end mostly consisted of the four of us reading and discussing odd cults and creepy religious practices. That's where we all heard about this Year King idea.

I met **Tina** at a party out on Jane's family's property.

## Where I was - looking for connections, and playing games

I like to think the best of people, as a rule. Despite most of the evidence. Despite how it usually ends up, I know there's good deep down inside everyone, and I like to think that the right safety and encouragement will let them find it under all the pride and hurt and fear they wear to get through their "normal" life.

Jane and I have been friends from the day we met, and we've been tight since a hike Tina took us on back in that first year. I led them through a dawn welcoming and blessing in a traditional ceremony site high on one of the mountains. Which was stupid and disrespectful of me. I didn't know the place, I didn't know its spirits, but I called on them for gifts anyway, offering nothing in return. Their answer was quick. On a tricky bit of the climb back down I felt a sudden chill, and the rock turned in my hand and came away, and I slipped. I don't know how I grabbed on but I did, and I clung there and prayed until Jane and then Tina could come to help.

I promised I'd never make that mistake again. That I'd respect and honour all the places and the traditions I encountered. And I have. After uni I took a gap year, which turned into three, and I traveled. Meeting, learning, sharing and praying with peoples from here to Asia, Europe and America. Always something new to learn, but it all connects back to the one understanding. And somehow, I always felt that little bit outside of it.

So a year ago I ended up back in Canberra, so much more than I was but still missing something, reconnecting with my old uni friends mostly out of habit. Except for Tina being in the wheelchair, they were all just where I'd left them, and for the first time it kinda felt like I *fit*. It wasn't home when I left, but it felt like home when I got back.

## So we made Theo our Year King...

Then, the Year King. When we did what we did and said what we said. I don't remember whose idea it was, or who was keen on it. If I'd been sober I probably wouldn't have gone along at all, but it seemed like it should have been fairly harmless and meaningless. At the time it seemed like it was.

## Spring

One night, late, Jane showed up with a bottle of wine, a bunch of embarrassed giggling and significant looks. She talked me into going round to Theo's place to pay our "respects". I could only assume she'd come up with the idea as a bit of fun, and really I wasn't averse. They're both alright, as far as that goes. Oddly, though, before things had even started to warm up, Jane got cold feet and left.

Theo and I have been dating since. It's been really sweet, when he's around. But recently I've been worried that it's so good because he's just stringing me along. He also started getting famous and successful. At first off his music but then just for anything, and nothing. I started getting worried.

## Summer

Odd significant patterns started showing up. Some of the others noticed them too, but they haven't put it together. They have bad luck when Theo has good luck, but they think it's just coincidence.

Jane hasn't talked to me much. Don't know why. I don't really think she's talking to anyone much and she's normally the one reaching out to people. Someone needs to talk to her. Might have to be me, but I've never been very good at it, and this year I've really lost my touch for reading people.

## Autumn

I thought with Theo and the others we had something. We've known each other a good while. We've all looked after each other when it was rough. And now with this Mystery that we're all in it's like I can almost *feel* the bond between us. I'm sure they could too if they'd let themselves.

But recently I've thought Theo is playing me. Something in his eyes, in his manner. I can't help feeling that he's realised I don't have that deeper connection, not really. That he knows how alone I am. Normally I'd split long before I got this close with anyone I couldn't completely trust, but I need to see this Year King thing through to the end. I need to see what's really there.

If Theo is stringing me along as some big joke...

## Now

At this point it's pretty clear that something happened with our Year King game. I don't know what or how, but something took our words as promise and has been fulfilling its end of the bargain. Our side comes due tonight.

What if there's a worse cause for this, like Theo's been messing with something and not telling? Or Drew has, or both? Drew knows almost as much about magick as I do, and he's never taken it quite seriously, but I don't think he'd be stupid enough to do this on purpose.

If only I knew I could trust Jane, or Tina. Are they in on the joke? I didn't think either of them would be part of something as cruel as this. But now I'm wondering. If I ask them straight out would they tell me the truth? Could I tell if they didn't?

If Theo is taking this seriously, we have decisions to make and a ritual to do. If he's not. If he really just thinks it's a joke we could all be in trouble, unless I can convince the others. This is bigger than a simple mountaintop greeting-the-dawn. Theo made the deal and has enjoyed the rewards. I *know* that comes with a price.



# Theo

## *The Year King*

*A year ago, my life changed, opened up. Now I can feel it closing in again.  
This was the best year of my life, but looking back it wasn't all that special.*

*I'm looking for a reason to live. Or a reason not to.*

### How I know the other PCs

My big sister **Tina**, always looked out for me. Joined the army, was wounded in Afghanistan. She's Athena really, just like I was named Theseus. But we never told anyone and swore our parents to silence. I don't think even Drew knows.

Best Friend **Drew**, been together since we were kids. We're in a "band" together. He's Tina's boyfriend, and now her carer. They're sweet together, but he gets this worried look when she isn't going to see it, when he thinks no-one's looking.

Met **Jane** and **Sapphire** in this weird little art/lit/history course I did with Drew, which by the end mostly consisted of the four of us reading and discussing odd cults and creepy religious practices. That's where we all heard about this Year King idea.

### Where I was: part time musician with best friend Drew, about to give up.

- I was a few years out of uni. Working whatever jobs I could get. Trying not to give up on my music. Drew and I had played a few "gigs" and posted a few videos but got no interest.

### My friends made me their "Year King"

After a party last year, at midwinter. The big thing I remember was when Tina told me she needs to walk again, it scared me how intense she was. She's normally so in control.

The next morning I woke with my head full of strange, rich music. I grabbed my guitar and webcam to get it down as well as I could. Threw in some lyrics Drew had come up with cos they kind of fit. Posted it to tell Drew to check it out. Someone linked it. It took off. Big time.

### Spring

Everything I post since then has been bigger - songs, stories and rants, videos silly or serious. I've been on the news and the morning shows and to all the celebrity parties.

It's been like that since. Things just work out. I'll get an idea, or rework one of our old songs, and people will love it. I'll suggest something and people will go along. My friends played up to it too, for a while. Mostly just letting me pick where to eat or what shows to see, but sometimes...

Sapphire and Jane showed up at my place late one night, shortly after the whole thing started. They'd brought grapes and wine with them. Said something about giving the king his due. Whatever, they were cute and tipsy. It was only polite to catch up. I think it was mostly Sapphire's idea, though. Jane was a bit uncomfortable from the start, and bailed when it got serious.

## Summer

Sapphire and I have been together since, when I'm in town. I've been busy with shows, parties and the like, and she doesn't like to be too tied down. But when we're together, it's pretty spectacular.

Jane's pulled back into her shell a bit after that. I've meant to talk to her about it, tell her no hard feelings, but I haven't really had a chance. I hope she's doing ok. I'm not even sure she's still doing art, which is a shame. She's really good.

They've all been a bit distant really. Nothing particular, just.. it hasn't been comfortable being around. I've missed them so badly, and how it used to be.

## Autumn

Since the year's been getting cooler, it's all been closing in. Invites and events are slowing down. Weirdly, there's not one thing booked or offered after tonight, at all.

I keep finding myself thinking about what's it all for, what difference have I made, or can I make? Last night a TV ad asked, "If you died tomorrow, what would they say about you at your funeral?"

Do I want to live forever? I think about the way grandpa died. He was a hero, once, in the war. But there's nothing left of that, not for as long as I've known him. Wheezing and coughing and hobbling about. I hated going to stay with them, always having to be quiet so he wasn't disturbed. The whole house full of silence and dust. I know I don't want to end up like that.

Tina used to talk to me about sacrifice, about heroes. People who really made a difference, and what it cost. I loved those stories. Never thought that might really be me, though. Always kind of assumed it'd be her. Wonder if she even remembers. I've been wanting to ask her, about how you decide to give your life for something, but I haven't found the right time.

## Now

Three nights running there's been a blood red sunset, and I've seen a crown in the clouds, or in the shape of the hills.

What if this is real? Would I do it? Would you give your life to save a harvest? To save a town? To save four friends? What good will they make out of it, anyway? Am I really considering...dying?

What it comes down to is, how do I want to go out? Am I ready? The year's gone so quick, and when I look back at it, I had a lot of fun, but I haven't left anything that will matter in five years. I think I'd like to make a difference, to do something that matters.

I've never liked dwelling on this stuff. Drew always did the hard thinking, and got better answers than I ever could. How I wish just one of these friends wasn't involved. I'd trust their advice on anything...

But they're all caught up in it. Is it fair to ask them? Can I trust their answers or would they just try to manipulate me? I need to ask someone, and there's no one else I would trust.

# Tina

## *Wounded soldier*

*I hate that chair. Some days I'd rather die than get back into it. Some days I think I might.*

- Active, sporty, adrenaline junkie. Named Athena, like the goddess. I know. Shut up.
- Protective of younger brother **Theo**. He's actually named Theseus, so ha! Not just me.
- Always loved the army. Joined up shortly after leaving school.

## How I know the other PCs

Started dating Theo's friend **Drew** on leave. He's not nearly so annoying as he was when he was young. He can be quiet and intense when he's not trying to show off, and the music counts for a lot.

The boys introduced me to **Sapphire** and **Jane**, who they'd "bonded with" in some uni course the four of them have never stopped talking about. Not that they leave me out, oh no. The way they talk I think they forget I wasn't actually there. Anyway, that's where they learned about this Year King thing. Wish I'd never heard of it.

I've been close to Sapphire and Jane since I dragged them off hiking in Coastal NSW. Sapphire convinced us to do a dawn ritual on this sacred site up in the mountains, and then on the climb back down she would have fallen if Jane wasn't there. Sapphire thinks it happened 'cos we angered the ancestors. I always thought that was silly. This year, I'm not so sure.

## Where I was: washed-up warrior

I served with distinction in Afghanistan until I was wounded in a firefight - paralyzed from the waist down. I've been home almost two years. Five surgeries and endless rehab, less hope each time.

Gradually through this last year the doctors and therapists have changed from talking about getting better, to talking about adapting and making the most of what I have. I've tried, I really have, but all the wheelchair sports and stuff just feels coddled and padded and *fake*.

Drew has been amazing. He moved in a few months after I got back, has been caring for me and working when he can ever since. He's also not above pestering me until I get out of a funk, get up and do the stuff I need.

He doesn't know it, but Drew might have saved my life once, by getting home just as I was seriously thinking of ending it. After that I swore I wouldn't let myself consider it again. I've always thought that was a coward's way out. I half thought that decision might mark the end of the tunnel or maybe some kind of a turnaround. But it hasn't, it's still just me. Stuck in the house. Stuck in that chair.

## So we made Theo our Year King...

At the party where we made my brother the Year King, I told him how badly I need to walk again. It scared me how intense it felt, I prefer to have more control than that.

## The turn of seasons

This year's almost been worse, things just going bad at any opportunity. Benefits keep being cut off for weeks at a time, rehab stalling, and the chair needing repairs that we can't afford.

I'm used to thinking about sacrifice. From Grandad telling us about the Anzacs who died trying to keep the fascists out of his village, to every new recruit that joined the squad. As a soldier you don't know what it's going to cost, or whether it'll make any difference in the end. You can't know any of that. You just do what has to be done, for the people that need you, and you trust it will all work out.

Then I went and did the same, for some little village in Oruzgan Province that couldn't care less. I knew what I was risking, but I never really thought about still being here after the sacrifice was made. Living on but not really alive. Never properly seeing the bush again, or challenging myself against the sea, or the mountains, or anything that wasn't prepared and assisted and padded like a bloody school trip. There's not a day I don't wake up and wish I could take it back. They tell me that with this Year King thing maybe I can. I more than half believe it.

I just never thought Theo might be making the sacrifice for me.

*The Year King*

**Tina - The Soldier**

**Drew - The Friend**

**Jane - The Artist**

**Sapphire - The Seeker**

**Theo - The Year King**

## **The Year King.**

**Jane, Drew, Sapphire and Theo:** you studied this at uni. **Tina,** you know this from the rest of the PCs.

It is said that in some cultures, long ago, in times of great hardship, the people would appoint a king to rule over them for a year. For a year this king would get the best of everything the people had to give. For a year this king would get everything they desired, except freedom. And at the end of the year, the king would be sacrificed for the people.

Many cultures have had a tradition of sacrificing a king, a priest, or some representative of the divine, somebody significant, pure or powerful. It is argued Christianity itself has elements of this tradition. In other cultures a new king or priest is chosen by ritual combat. In his book *The Golden Bough* James George Frazer suggests some version of the sacred, sacrificial king shows up as part of fertility rituals worldwide.

In some traditions this is said to happen every year to ensure a good harvest. In some the king must be slain by a new king come to take his place. In some by a priestess, a priest, or a mob of the people.

Some traditions say the king must go as a willing sacrifice. Some...don't.

On one thing all the stories agree: on the last day of that year, the king must die.

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For stories which have any kind of magic in them, it's very common for people to get caught up without meaning to, because they didn't realise some significance to what they did, or where they went. It happens in everything from horror movies to fairy tales, but the thing that's different about us is, those people always at least know that the magic is real, that it's really happening. They can point to something and say: "There, definitely, that couldn't be an accident."

## **That night, one year ago.**

It started with a game of “Who has it worse”.

As we so often did, the five of us had taken off for a weekend at Jane’s family’s farm - twenty acres of bushland just shy of an hour’s drive up into the Brindies. As Saturday evening turned to night we mulled some wine and settled in to bitching about life, comparing our sorry lots.

Things hadn’t been great, for sure. None of us had regular work, any savings, or any prospects to speak of. Debts were starting to build up. In the few years since uni Jane had been pursuing her art with no success. Theo and Drew no longer even got occasional pub gigs, and had started to argue more than they played. Not that Drew had much time for rehearsals, anymore. First world problems, but they mattered to us. Tina, of course, had had to be carried off the plane. She always won this game.

Somehow it got mixed up with talk of the old myths we studied at uni. Joking about how in those days people didn’t put up with this kind of grief. They would have found someone to hold responsible, given the right offerings, sent someone on a quest and had it all set right.

Sapphire got talking about how people understood the world better back then, and how they were much more connected with things, until we all told her to stow it, and have another drink.

A bit later someone said we should do that, ourselves. Have a ritual to heal the connections. Someone else pointed out that it was midwinter, that night. Someone said what we needed was a Year King.

So that’s how Theo ended up sitting on the big old stump out the back, wreathed, crowned and anointed. Each of us laid on him our woes, written unsteadily on pages from Drew’s notebook, then bundled up unread and thrown in the fire. Each of us named him our King for a year, and called on him for a boon once his year was up. “Or else,” Tina said.

Jane asked for her art to be successful.

Sapphire asked to see the connections she had never seen.

Tina said if he was going to do magic, he should make her legs work again.

Drew looked at Tina for a long time, until she called him an idiot and thumped him on the arm. But when he spoke he asked to make it big as a musician.

Theo solemnly promised to do all these things, and we all stood there in the quiet, until Drew made a joke about the Wizard of Oz, and we all went back inside, to the warm.

## *Playtest run sheet. Pheno Online - August 2020*

*Dear GM: you want them all to live, and live as friends. But your job is to make that as hard as they can bear.*

*This is a game about going into the darkness together...  
...and finding yourselves there.*

### **Follow this as a rule:**

You have no say on whether the magic is real. The game depends on the characters facing a hard decision that they care about, and no way to be certain. For the game to work, you **MUST NOT** decide whether you think it is real or not, and you can't confirm or reject anyone else's opinion. (In play, I certainly empathised with them, and wished I could.)

### **Setup:**

You'll need a clock or timer to place somewhere prominent, where the players can see it. There is a character sheet for each of five players. Each player should also read the handouts **The Year King** and **That night, one year ago**.

### *Intro:*

Once enough players have arrived:

- Go over the conceit, concept, blurb. Check everyone's comfortable with it.
- Possible ice breaker: "So, how many characters/NPCs have you killed in the con so far?"

Give out PCs. Let them read.

Welcome and thanks.

Give safety briefing. The game discusses death, murder, maybe suicide. Warn people to support each other and encourage folk to speak up or step away if they're uncomfortable, whatever works for them. Discuss and agree, as a group, how you will handle sensitive content in the game and what to do if a player becomes uncomfortable. You might choose a formal mechanism, two are described below. Make sure it is something everyone agrees to and is comfortable using. Whether you adopt a formal system or not, it is important for everyone to stay aware of each other's safety throughout the game. This is a *responsibility* of yourself, and of players, to yourselves and each other. Does anyone want to put in any particular lines or veils?

### **X Card:**

An *X card* is placed prominently where people can reach it. Touching it means you want the scene to end. It does, immediately and with no questions asked. A *code word* does the same thing: when the word is spoken, the scene ends immediately, with no questions asked.



**Lines and veils:**

A *line* is something the players and GM agree not to cross - content and subject matter that all involved agree will not be part of the game.

A *veil* describes something that will be in the game, but not discussed in detail.

Say that much of the game will be the hours leading up to and right after the decision. I don't plan to see a whole lot of the outcome or implications, if any. Maybe as far as next morning, maybe just after midnight.

Give introduction:

"This game is focused on the small, quiet moments. There'll be action, arguments and whatever else you want to do, but I expect the game will come back to stillness. I'm fine if there's fairly long periods which don't seem to have much going on. On the other hand: if you're sitting quiet I might assume you're just processing. If you're ever bored or stuck for something to do, catch my eye or come over and talk to me.

"For the game, I'll ask you to indulge me in one thing. At some point I'll start a clock, where we all can see it. Whatever you decide to do, it needs to happen and be done before the clock strikes 12. If possible, I'd prefer you save it until sometime in the last hour if you can. Your characters can believe that for whatever reason appeals to you. We can work it out now or let it develop during the game, but twelve is the deadline. The clock will be ticking. I won't speed it up or slow it down. And I *won't* remind you when it's close.

"So, the characters. You're all friends. Dear friends. You all care for and confide in one another. This year has brought tensions between you, but the connection is still there.

"You know, all five of you, that today you're expecting to end Theo's life. You all know the others are too. None of you want to be left out of that decision, to leave it to others. You want to hear from the others, too. Well, maybe most of them, but it's not a perfect world.

"I don't know the ending. I don't know how it *should* end up. It depends on what you decide, and do. That's what I want to learn from you."

Make sure everyone's across how the Year King thing works: according to the ritual, the Year King is anointed, and a year later is sacrificed. Possibly to emphasise you can say:

"Talking about it mid year, Sapphire and Drew both agree that if this was real, the King would have to be killed on the evening one year from the day, at midnight, and his blood, his death, will ensure a good harvest for the faithful. They're not as clear on: does it have to be a sacrifice?"

How? Does he have to be willing? Some traditions did it by combat in a sacred grove. And more than these, what happens if it's real and you don't go through with it? They both agree there's always a price.

"It's been sort of assumed in your discussions you'd end where it began, on Jane's family's property out past Tharwa in the Brindies."

**Weather note:** Drought! It's cold but dry and getting drier in the last few months. Ominous clouds roll in over the mountains late in the day. Big windy dry thunderstorm. (Possible lightning fires). Build to a howling wind storm as the game goes on. Eventual rain, maybe at the stroke of midnight. If you want it cold you could do possible snowfalls before dawn.

### *Start game - introductions and prologue:*

Ask the players questions:

Is anyone's PC not inclined to be here? Brainstorm. Note there's not a hard 'box'. It's expected you're all here by choice and staying by choice. The game won't force you to stay together and... it probably won't work well if you split up.<sup>1</sup>

Do any of your PCs feel totally one way or the other? It's fine if some of you are leaning strongly, so long as you can imagine being swayed the other way.

Ask each, starting with Theo:

"So. It's a pretty absurd, even horrific possibility. When did you start to think about it seriously? Was it something that happened?" (Offer the turn of the seasons as a prompt) "Did you talk to anyone about it, who? But you didn't resolve anything, why not?"

### *Start play - Act 1*

Start by describing a Year King ceremony in ancient Greece. You can put a player in it, first person if you want. It might be a dream or vision, or a remembered past life.

Say: "Ok. The day has arrived. You're planning to drive out in the late afternoon."

Pick someone. Say they wake up. Ask them what they're thinking. (This is an opportunity to push their issue, but don't reveal too much of it to other players.) Do this to as many as you like. End with Theo on his Last Day.

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<sup>1</sup> GM - In play, one team separated around mid-evening, and the game basically fell apart. No one is really written to want to 'hunt down' the others.

Ask each PC in turn: What have they done that last day or so? How are they getting to the property? Meeting at someone's place? All in one car? Who's driving? Make sure most people are driving together or the cars are close.

If Theo drives out alone, maybe point that out to one of the sensitive PCs - should they be supporting him?

### **On preparations**

Let people set up a couple of Chekov's guns, but don't let it bog down. Reassure people if there's stuff they would have brought you can work that out in play.

### **The roo**

On the drive, see if you can let them get into a conversation, then bam! Roo in the road. Too close to stop! Give the driver an option to swerve to danger (bad edge, ditch? fence? trees?) or hope to stop in time? If they try to stop, they hit the roo. If they swerve, the roo gets hit by the other car / an oncoming ute or just jumps straight into the side of their car. Or perhaps there's just another roo that was unseen just off the road, and they hit that. Either way, it dies, and it dies slow. Let each person enjoy the sensation. **Oooh, foreshadowing.** (*Untested - If you like, use the roo as Voight-Kampf test. Tell the first person up they do something that surprises them, and ask what it is.*)

Roo might be female, but *do not* include a joey to rescue.

### **Arriving**

After, let them reach the house however they want. The cars are still fine, it was not a big roo.

Give them a good comfortable sense of the farmhouse. (Maybe it's an old rambling colonial farmhouse, with a verandah and endless yard.) Sculpture of Jane's in the yard. There's the stump and firepit. There's some old mighty trees. There's a sharp drop down to the gully and a ridge up the other side (...where phone signal is better, but still...subject to GMly requirements).

Establish a big grandfather clock in the entrance hall? It's stopped. Hopefully someone will set it.

Let them settle in. To get them split up and moving, ask about chores and dinner. Follow them through the early evening.

### *Slow phase - Act 2*

You probably won't need this, but if the game slows down:

- Let it. This situation can do a lot to players just by being there.
- Ask PCs what they're thinking about.
- Ask them prompt questions like:

- Who do they know that died? What happened?
- What do they remember about Theo?
- What do they look forward to? What will they never get to do?
- **Ask for a story about death that moves them. Great or small ones. In history, in stories, in dreams or whatever. Ask for stories about loss.**

Give these room to breathe and create conversations. Involve other PCs. If these go out of character, encourage that and let the players chat. (In play, I never had time for any of these, but you might).

### **Events**

If it helps, do these events with a little freeze frame, where you tell the player. Afterwards, tell at least one other player how they saw the PC act - you want them to know something's up but not all the nuance - so they must talk about it.

Note - these might not work too soon after the roo.

### **Tina sees the Mountains**

The first chance Tina really looks at the bush, describe what she's missing. Go for that terrible ache of never getting out there. ("Hey Tina, that ridge has some interesting technical sections. Overall it's so slight it would barely be graded but even so...you'll never get to do it.")

### **Jane sees her art**

Any one time. When she sees pencils, or the sunset, or just a bloody bowl of fruit on the table. Freeze Jane and show her all the days she won't hold a brush, and all the things she'll never do again.

### **Sapphire sees connection, friendship**

Tina and Drew are obvious, but anything where she can feel left out.

### **Drew sees..**

Drew sees something simple - something left behind. Maybe a guitar sitting there - does it have strings? Something he put down, and never picked up again.

For Drew just point out Tina or Theo and ask him about his fears and risks. Or what's changed since childhood.

### **A Call to Jane**

*Cue: Jane's chance at her art.*

From **Seymour of Gallery X** - he *might* have space for a couple of small pieces in his gallery. Does Jane want it? Can she produce something new and upbeat, on short notice (few weeks)? Seymour wants to give her a chance, if she's up for it. Tells her to call on Monday to confirm.

### **A call to Tina**

*Cue: Tina's chance to walk again.*

Late afternoon someone tries to ring Tina's phone a few times - crap service, can't answer or can't hear, maybe have them finally get through on Drew or even **Theo's** phone. It's Tina's doctor, **Dr Lao**, calling out of hours to suss out Tina's emotional state and sound her out about a chance at a new surgery (cutting edge! visiting! foreign! brilliant!). Doc will be happy to be talking to Drew or Theo as she can ask them straight out "Is she up to it?" (She wouldn't normally ask anyone but the patient, but you know how Tina's been.) Finish with a suggestion they call the practice on Monday for an appointment and she'll try get them on the list. With a bit of luck it could make all the difference.

However the conversation goes, make it very clear that the doctor was trying to stay hopeful and upbeat, but when she said "with a bit of luck" it sounded to you like "it would take a miracle". If Tina doesn't get the hint, say Theo's death is the only miracle going.

*When things start to settle, and you're ready to lead in to Act 3.*

### *Start the clock - Act 3*

Set the clock so "midnight" is about 30 mins before the end-of-session. Ideally you want about 70-90 minutes of session left when you start it. This leaves 15 minutes after midnight, and 15 minutes for debrief.

Sometime early in this hour, remind them Theo must be dead by midnight if they're going to do it. And that you *won't* tell them explicitly, but the clock is running.

There's no explicit, expected or scripted climax or ending. Trust the players to do *something* at that deadline, play to see what. Play to find out what they'd decide. If they let it slide on by, wait for a few minutes after and then tell them that they've missed it. Let their reaction to that play out for a good few minutes, and then wrap up.

*Remember, however the ending plays out, you DO NOT know whether the magic is real, even after, and you MUST NOT say anything that seems to decide it either way.*

Debrief.

Thank everyone.