This is How You Lose the Time War

v1.0 by dhasenan

A war across timelines. A war of surreptitious agents carefully arranging butterflies to curate the hurricanes years and centuries later. Each act is careful, subtle, so as not to disturb the home timelines that the two factions occupy – a mercy born of a treaty as both sides agree that a war to the knife would be too costly. A thousand thousand strands of time braided together.

To call it a timeless romance would be to ignore the importance of time within it.

Take +1000 Cochineal Points.

Backgrounds

Time War Agent. The boots on the ground modifying histories across hundreds of branches of time. You can start out working for the **Agency**, a mildly authoritarian regime of mechanical and electronic technology, or **Garden**, an organic polity that shades somewhat into a hive-mind.

Perks

Traveling the Braids (variable): In this jump, for free, you may travel across timelines and across eons; this is your job as an agent of Garden or the Agency. For **200cp**, you may travel on your own power and may freely travel through time, timelines, and alternate dimensions in settings where such things are at all possible. For **600cp**, you may travel on your own power across time, timelines, and alternate dimensions in all settings, assuming your benefactor allows it.

Garden and the Agency both expend considerable effort to ensure their own safety from retroactive destruction. Regardless of whether you fall under the aegis of either, you are protected from being retroactively destroyed. This protection is free and works in this and later jumps.

Lived a Fine Life First (100cp): Butterflies can do all sorts of undesirable things. You might be smart enough to get the primary changes to your liking, but it takes a whole ’nother level of skill to ensure the secondary effects are good. But with this, you can make sure everyone you impact who’s incidental to your goal sees a change in keeping with your morals.

Useful Skills for Every Strand (100cp): No matter where you end up, you will find yourself possessed of the basic skills required to conduct an ordinary life there. Only an ordinary life, though; if you want to drop by the Mongol Empire and join their ranks of mounted archers, you’ll have to put in some work, but you’ll at least have enough skills to be useful to a local settlement.

Done a Runner (200cp): One would think that a hostile time traveling organization could track down stray agents at their leisure. They have eternity, after all. But you have ways of obscuring your tracks, moving acausally, and locking in your history just enough to let you stay ahead of hostile time

travelers, provided you stay on the move. Note that, if you remain loyal to your faction, they will provide this protection as part of your terms of employment.

Recognition (300cp): Red and Blue had never seen each other before, and they wore different bodies each strand, even several per strand, but Blue immediately recognized Red. You too can always recognize those you share a personal bond with, even if it's the bond of a disliked rival or hated enemy.

Woman of Many Bodies (300cp): You have been birds and branches. You have been bees and wolves. You have been ether flooding the void between stars. But though you've been enmeshed in this wholeness, they are not the whole of you. No matter what form you take, you retain your mind, and you can work your way back to your preferred body. While you are in an altered form, you are able to control it as well as you control your normal body.

Burn Before Reading (300cp): You can send letters through esoteric and transient means: a parchment to be burned before reading, a missive encoded in the bubbles of a boiling jar of water, the whistling of the wind through a forest of bones, patterns in the skin and guts of a carp. You can even include postscripts!

Consumptive Tracking (400cp): Like the seeker, you can track someone down by taking artifacts of their past into yourself. Eating works, but so does shoving splinters of wood into your own flesh. The artifacts work best when they are emotionally charged and represent a connection between you and the person you're tracking; otherwise, the effect is weaker. The more artifacts you consume, the better you can track them.

A Game of Chess, Each Piece a Go Board (400cp): Red was unparalleled at strategy until Blue came along. This grants you a similar level of potential, enough to match either with some time and training. Or taken a different way, you can become a warlord who conquers galaxies.

A War of Braids (400cp): The war between Garden and the Agency is at times subtle, a matter of altering now to change the distant future in ways that could be hard to predict. Stab a mugger to protect a philosopher to speed up the invention of an abstract branch of mathematics by seven centuries. Whisper a word in an ear to change the course of empires. With this perk, that kind of warfare and meddling comes naturally to you.

You Ask If We Eat (600cp): Both Garden and the Agency are nations of post-humans, and you are one of them. Interesting aspects include rapid regeneration, converting distracting physical sensations into status reports, and surpassing the need to eat. You are ageless and capable of switching into new forms as suits your current mission. You're all but immune to disease and poison; it would take something technologically marvelous or supernatural to harm you (though both the Agency and Garden have such technological marvels available to them). You are strong enough to tear holes through heavy bronze exoskeletons to sever metal spines with your bare hands.

Items

Mrs Leavitt's Guide to Etiquette and Correspondence (100cp): While the original is specific to the UK of Strand 61, this copy is comprehensive guide to etiquette that updates for every setting. Merely

having this on your person saves you from accidental blunders, but if you want to come across as more than average in politeness, you'll have to actually read it.

Hiding Place (100cp): A hollowed out cavity behind your eye. It's large enough to hide three sumac seeds, secure enough to hide it from people who can scan your brain on a whim.

A Thin Blade (100cp): From 13th century Toledo, this is a finely wrought stiletto. Use it on yourself and it can safely extract any sort of tracking system embedded in you with only minor damage.

Slow-Acting Poison (200cp): Perfect for coating keyboards in random temples to techno-gods. This will kill anyone who's not immune to poisons in general. It takes an hour to take effect.

Companions

If you should find yourself conversing with your opposite number, perhaps something will blossom. Far be it from me to cut short your joy should you manage to safeguard from both Garden and the Agency. *This is a love story. Honor that and you may bring your lover(s) along for free.*

And should you have some friends you wish to bring along, by all means. Plant a seed in summer of a fifth of your starting stipend. By autumn you can harvest a crop, three times as much for each of your companions. *200cp to import all your companions, who gain 600cp each.*

Drawbacks

I May Well Be Paranoid (+100cp): Are you seeing shadows? The paranoia is pervasive, but not sharp. An anxiety in the back of your head that occasionally becomes sharp.

The Reward for Good Work (+100cp): Is more work. Despite time travel giving you all the time in the multiverse, your command has you running ragged most days. If you try dodging responsibility through ineptitude, you get intensive training instead.

Meat for Their Teeth (+300cp): Your faction has identified you, wrongly or not, as a traitor. They are slightly slower than you at navigating the time braids, but they are relentless, and while you need to stay ahead of them every time, they only need to catch up once. If they catch you, they will interrogate you, then torture you, then disassemble your mind piece by piece to identify every last shred of treachery.

End

You've doubtless gleaned some interesting tidbits across the strands. They'll keep working in your future travels so long as you continue to put in the maintenance, though this won't save them if they're destroyed.