

# CHAPTER 1

# WHO ARE THE SPIRITS?

## INTRODUCTION

What is pact magic, why might characters utilize it, and what are common reactions to its use? A method of magic translated from medieval works is the basis for pact magic presented here. Modifications and additions reflect role-playing mechanics as well as the heroic quests and classic themes of Good's triumph over Evil. Additionally, this chapter explores various questions. How do characters discover spirits? Do priests, wizards, and other characters embrace pact magic, reject it, or twist it to their own use? What stories drive heroes, and what can happen when characters quest in search of new spirits? You will find answers here to these and other questions, as well as a vignette illustrating a day in the life of a spirit binder.



*Azos the binder researches a spirit's legend, geometric seal, and summoning ceremony.*

Real-world scholars and practitioners of pact magic hold varying perspectives on the nature of the spirits. Drawing from these sources and common fantasy motifs, the spirits invoked by pact magic could have different possible origins.

**Ancestors:** Some souls return to empower the living as gifts authorized by a people's gods. These spirits are less like ghosts and more like divine servants that carry out godly designs.

**Exiled or Forgotten Creatures:** Spirits of mighty beings may be lost or exiled. Where are the Olympian gods? Did they cease to exist due to neglect? Or do they still reside in some mysterious place beyond space and time, Heaven and Hell?

**Fiendish Entities:** These evil beings seek to lure mortals into selfish power. They may appear regal and helpful, or use other ruses to confuse and corrupt otherwise hesitant mortals.

**Free People:** The multiverse, with its mortals, genies, gods, and other beings, is an illusion or fabrication. Some call it a "matrix." The "real reality" lies beyond the confines of the multiverse. A soul can escape to reclaim its "true" body and freedom from slavery. Certain beings likely patrol the boundary between the multiverse and this reality, monitoring events.

**Nature Spirits:** These are the essence of mountains, oceans, forests, and progenitor animals such as Brother Coyote and the Great Bear. Such spirits have their own perspectives and goals. At best, mortals conceive of nature spirits in human terms in order to grasp their significance and to try to negotiate for influence over the caprice of the natural world. Whether people should interact with these spirits is another matter. Consider that a lion may be "natural," but toying with a hungry lion is a foolish and dangerous proposition.

**Otherworldly Beings:** These spirits hail from realms we fail to understand, places of shadows, reflections, thoughts, and dreams. Many of these beings possess trickster-like qualities and can be dangerous because we do not understand how to deal with them.

**Prisoners:** In Greek mythology, the gods imprisoned the rebellious titans. In other myths, demons are often consigned to fume in dark pits. Yet their power can be tapped from these twilight prisons by following eldritch rituals.

**Psychological Aspects of One's Self:** The mind is a tangle of archetypes, half-thoughts, psychic potentials, and story threads that may be harnessed when we shun what we think we know. Strange rituals evoke these fragments of the self. Perhaps the evoked qualities hint at a next step in evolution.

**Transcendent Souls:** This perspective teaches that the material body is a crude, loathsome husk, a trick foisted by an evil entity. However, bright individuals can shed their crude bodies through the acquisition of gnostic knowledge. The spirits have used this knowledge and may share it with special mortals.

Although this book does not take a hard stance to advocate one specific perspective, most of the spirits presented here were once mortals, demons, or angels whose souls now linger in some remote, unknowable place. An intriguing and flexible location for the spirits is outside the multiverse of planes,

## INTRODUCING PACT MAGIC INTO YOUR CAMPAIGN

There are several ways to place pact magic in an ongoing campaign. The simplest way is to describe it as an ancient art that is lost to time. This explains why it is "new" yet full of history and options. A character might find a tome, meet a binder, stumble upon an ancient artifact, or be approached by agents traditionally allied with or against a spirit's cause. Because any spellcaster can learn to seal a pact with a spirit, options such as these work well for most adventuring bands.

all together beyond space, time, and existence. This approach allows characters of all ethos and morals to seal pacts and express humanistic stories that are familiar to them while not interfering with a campaign setting's cosmology. Alternatively, spirits hail from planes of existence corresponding to thirteen constellations. If you wish, within your campaign setting, various groups may have incompatible answers, or take stances to further their own agendas even if they know the truth.



*Summoning a spirit involves drawing a unique diagram and following procedures specific to that spirit.*

## A TYPICAL BINDING CEREMONY

A pact magic user, also called a binder, summons spirits and enjoys their aid. How specifically does this work? Most of the description here draws from real-world pact magic, with some alterations to fit a heroic fantasy setting. The process is variously referred to as summoning a spirit, evoking a spirit, pactmaking, or sealing a pact. Here are typical steps.

First, a binder researches a spirit, including its name, associated geometric seal, and legends. He will want to find out how fit he is to channel that particular spirit. When summoning a spirit requires a binder to speak elvish then he wants to learn this language because even a small mistake in pronunciation might cause an unwanted effect.

For the next step, the binder prepares to conjure the spirit. This involves drawing a magic circle that contains the spirit's geometric seal, and then performing a ritual. The ritual might be simple or complex. Pact magic requires preparation and uninterrupted completion over the course of several minutes. This differs from the usual role-play spellcasting. The advantage is that once you acquire a spirit's abilities, those abilities are a

natural part of you, often usable at will all day long.

Now, the binder summons the spirit. This is not a trivial matter. Just moving slightly outside the magic circle, missing a step in the ceremony, or making some other mistake can lead to serious consequences. Thus, a pact magic user must attempt a binding check to summon a spirit without error. Some spirits are far more difficult to summon than others are. As the summoner evokes the spirit, he may experience waves of emotion, bodily sensations, or other phenomena that threaten to confuse him and cause a mistake.

Some people say that with training they can see a spirit manifest in the same way that a psychic can view auras. The spirit often has a terrible or frightening appearance that combines various human, animalistic, and supernatural qualities.

Next, the binder and spirit negotiate. This requires a forceful and smooth personality to obtain a spirit's favor. Each spirit rules over a theme. The spirit wishes to dominate the binder for its own ends. If the negotiation goes well, then the spirit grants the binder mastery of four to six abilities that fit with that theme. In exchange, the spirit has gained a foothold or window into the world.

If a pact magic user is careful, he secures abilities for a short period, typically a few hours to a few days. For convenience, this is 24 hours in game terms. The binder gains supernatural abilities such as breathing fire, dominating monsters, foreseeing the future, and locating gold coins.

If a pact magic user is not careful, then his personality may shift to meet the spirit's needs. In game terms, this involves personality quirks as well as possible alignment shift if the binder makes a major mistake. A mistake may also harm other people. For example, if a stray hair fell into an area that you used as a summoning circle, then the owner of that hair might suffer a price for the benefits that you enjoy. Similarly, a binder may experience bonuses and penalties when dealing with a spirit's traditional enemies and allies; one of the spirit's foes might be one of the binder's beloved family members!

Finally, a binder receives tactical bonuses when he actively strives to live out a spirit's story and aspirations. This represents a deep *simpatico* between spirit and binder. These bonuses are minor by themselves; but when added together, they can become major advantages.

## SOCIETAL REACTIONS TO PACTMAKING

Discovery and power are exciting, but the conflicts and consequences that flow from binding spirits can be more exciting, and more dangerous. Sometimes, when a person unearths something old then society embraces it. Often, however, lore has been forgotten for a reason. Perhaps pact magic fell out of

# PACT MAGIC IN ACTION

"His Holiness, the Archon, has approved your suggestion to apprehend the corrupted ones," the bishop told Alexandra. His tone was grave, and he looked her in the eye as if checking her faith, as if she might be possessed.

"Thank you," Alexandra said quietly, and bowed lightly. "I will take the utmost righteous care."

Over the next three days, brothers at the local monastery prepared materials and reviewed procedures to summon three spirits. Alexandra would bind with Pavatu, Child of the Wind. He was friendly if somewhat flighty. Then there was Kaiya, Avatar of Grace. She was once a beatific angel who volunteered her god-granted soul so that mortals might better combat evil.

"If we were to have a favorite, it would surely be Kaiya," the brothers informed her with earnest chipperness.

The last spirit would be Ethaniel Midnight. He was a vestige of a serial killer that even the Nine Hells had rejected. This would be the first time for Alexandra with his spirit, and only the second time for the brothers. She was still shocked the Archon approved of binding him. Yet, Ethaniel was the only spirit to grant a summoner the ability to realign a creature's moral outlook to its cause.

"Don't worry dear," the brothers offered. "If the Archon approves, then it is the will of our god. And surely, when is it not a good time to redeem the fallen?"

During the three days' preparation, Alexandra studied the profiles of her quarry, a band of once-helpful adventurers now tainted by fiendish blood. The blood made them powerful.

On the second day, a soul weaver knocked at the monastery's large iron-oak doors. He would fortify Alexandra's mind using spells. For the first time in anyone's memory, the Archon had approved the aid of a wizard and practitioner of pact magic.

"It's all alchemy and scientific formula," he informed her. "Even with a few mistakes, the presence of Kaiya's spirit... yes, yes... will check Ethaniel's malign tendencies."

On the morning of the third day, Alexandra woke from a nightmare, but could remember nothing. This was the day.

The ceremony went flawlessly.

"No errors we could tell," the brothers reassured her.

However, Alexandra felt agitated hours after Ethaniel manifested himself in the ceremony. He had appeared so friendly during the first few seconds that he appeared, before bloody hooks emerged from his skin. The vision had sent Alexandra reeling to the edge of the summoning circle. Fortunately, the legends said that he never harmed a hair on a woman. That was why they picked Alexandra for this mission.

"Good luck! May the grace of the holy prophets go with you," the brothers told Alexandra as she rode away toward the city to meet their informant, Rex. He had said the band of fiendish adventurers was hiding in the southeast quarter of the city, in an area of spacious walled mansions.

She met Rex just inside the city walls. He was young.

"You will lead me safely to the mansion?" She asked him.

"And they are not expecting me or set to ambush us?"

"As far as I know," he replied.

Ethaniel's gift for discerning truth immediately told her that Rex was honest. Yet, an unpleasantness tugged at her. She – or maybe Ethaniel's spirit – considered how to lure Rex to his doom. Alexandra had two short swords, but her dagger would

do better to slowly flay him.

She caught herself and meditated upon Kaiya's warm smile.

"You're not what I expected," Alexandra said sweetly to Rex as they walked toward the southeast, along a busy street.

"Oh yeah?" He said. "It's nice to get some appreciation."

That is it, Alexandra thought, Kaiya's graceful tongue is the ideal way to lead Rex to his doom.

Alexandra caught herself again. She shook her head as if to wake herself from Ethaniel's influence.

"You okay?" Rex asked, concerned.

"Yes," she replied. "Maybe I am overly prepared for today."

"Yeah? You have not seen what I have seen. They stabbed that poor chap. I watched as the grimoire devoured his spirit, just so the lot of them could gain a little extra power. Then horns and scales appeared on their faces. They weren't the same after that."

The two arrived on a street corner fifty paces from the mansion. Its high walls and tall overgrown trees obscured most of the actual building.

"You go in first," she said. "Then I will follow."

Rex walked over, signaled the guard as he had learned, and went inside. After two minutes, the keen ear of Pavatu's spirit picked up Rex's conversation with a gnome and an elf. To her ear, their voices carried clearly on the wind. It was time.

Alexandra strode confidently to the entrance. A goblin guard jumped out to block her way.

"You, halt!" The goblin said. "This is private property."

"Evil is never private," she responded. "You now have an opportunity to confess your sins and surrender yourself." Angelic Kaiya was speaking through her.

The goblin gave her a funny look. As she stepped forward, it drew a dagger from its sleeve into its palm and lunged to stab her. Fortunately, Pavatu was at Alexandra's command. Even if this goblin were a warrior king of a thousand battles, it had no chance. Pavatu's wind pushed aside the goblin's arm as if it were a branch in a gale.

Alexandra strolled past the wrought-iron gate and down the front garden path to the mansion's solid oak door.

Two guards trained crossbows on her from a ledge as three more armed guards emerged from a shack to her right.

"Halt now!" One of them shouted.

She used the opportunity to view their auras. Kaiya's gift of angelic sight told her all the guards held evil in their hearts.

"You now have an opportunity to repent," she announced. "Throw down your weapons. I will spare you."

The two guards on the ledge fired on her. The first bolt was off its mark. The second would have hit her square in the chest. Instead, Kaiya's grace transformed it into a small song bird that flew away. Alexandra did not even think about this.

The three other guards rushed her.

Instinctively, she cupped her hands in front of her mouth and blew on them. Pavatu's spirit produced a gale force blast that knocked them back into the bushes and the mansion's hard stony walls. At the same time, in the corner of her mind, she detected a mind-control spell cast against her, but all three spirits protected her, each in its own way.

Kaiya finished the path and knocked firmly using the door's iron knocker. Now the real action, and the real test of wills within her, would begin.



favor. Perhaps it is linked to the follies of a fallen empire, hated cabal, or legendary dragon. Maybe it threatens the status quo.

As you introduce pact magic, consider where it fits in your campaign. Most likely, not every land or branch of an organization responds to binding spirits in the same way. Do people respond with fear, anger, curiosity, concern, doubt, shame, or another emotion? In addition, the character will likely discover that he or she is not the only binder. Here are some common reactions to pact magic and typical consequences for binders.

## Unknown and Ignored

Pact magic may be new or so rare that few if any have an opinion of its use. When asked, spellcasters may dismiss it as a trick surely played by magical creatures, or scoff at its likely inferiority compared to the established science of spells. Clerics will be highly skeptical of anything beyond divine purview. The binder may encounter ridicule, doubt, or curiosity, but little more.

## Fear and Persecuted by All

In this scenario, everyone fears pact magic and will betray its practitioners. Spellcasters may resent this form of magic because it does not require convoluted casting or sincere prayers. Clergy may preach that the gods reject spirit binding for important reasons while arcane casters will develop spells to detect and combat pacts. Among the common people, physical changes and shifts in personality associated with pact magic are frightening and suggest a binder has gone mad, lost his soul, or is a vehicle for fiendish plans. Kings and other secular leaders reject pact magic because it may induce panic and they cannot control it. After all, a mage can be bound and gagged and his components and spellbooks taken away, and a priest can be defrocked and/or his god will likely stop granting him spells. However, a binder relies on no crutches and owes no lasting allegiances; thus, he is viewed as a rogue element that disrupts the hierarchy. In this scenario, a binder must keep a low profile and be certain of his choices and abilities. Preserving the seals, ceremonies, and legends is also a top priority. Secret societies, safe houses, and out-of-the-way locations are common, as are spies, double agents, and slayers sent to ferret out and eliminate binders.

## Hated by Gods, but Used for Power

People are rarely willing to forego power; if the balance of ideological forces is in their favor, or demand is high during a time of conflict, then cries of “ungodly” magic will be drowned out or given lip service while arcane spellcasters—and possibly rogue priests—enjoy its power. Secular leaders give quiet approval and perhaps sponsor secret societies. While they may proclaim a common bond with clergy, they know that pact magic is in their own interests. A binder in this society will not fret about capture or death so long as he remains discrete. Pact magic research for its own sake may be discouraged, and competition between binders may be intense as they rival for leaders’ attention. In turn, leaders may direct their brightest citizens away from the usual paths to train in binder circles. Secret academies may vie for students. Meanwhile, clergy must be appeased. A binder who earns enemies or is overly blatant with his powers risks being handed over to the clergy as a token example. In times of peace, or when leaders need a scapegoat, binders may discover their luck changes. In addition, wizards may ultimately view pact magic as they would view a sorcerer’s innate talents: as a threat to the science of magic.

## Authored by the Gods

Spirits move at the behest of gods in fulfillment of complex divine plans too murky for mortals to see clearly. In this scenario, priests regulate who may bind. Good churches will authorize angelic spirits as gifts or aids for the pious on their quests. Similarly, chaotic, evil, and lawful churches will promote spirits that align with their causes. Within a pantheon of deities, a constellation of spirits might fall within the portfolio of a deity. Whatever the specifics, spirits may have been “created” from a deity’s truest followers or even greatest foes. The spirits act as the deity’s ghostly hands to empower worshipers in a way that is more potent than individual spells but less disruptive than sending an avatar. Pact mages might form a star-chamber or similar elite unit within a church. Rogue binders who have fallen from the faith, as well as spies and double agent binders, represent ongoing threats and opportunities for adventure.

## Embraced As Heroes Of The People

In highly repressive societies, people look to anyone for aid. If wizards and clerics are instruments or leaders of an oppressive regime, then who else can stand up except spirit binders? Some heroes might rise from the mass of common people, while others could be deposed nobles attempting to reclaim their former glory. Either way, the binder likely alternates between careful concealment of her powers and stunning displays that cheer the populace and frighten or disparage those in charge. The more a binder can make authorities look ineffectual, the more likely people are to aid her and rally to her cause. In this society, the binder likely has potential students or imitators, some of whom may do more harm than good, or are overly eager to move too soon. The binder must also understand that ultimately, most of the common people are fatalistic—after all, they have endured their low status for decades or centuries—and will not behave as heroically as the binder will. In addition, if a pact magic user is truly a threat and not just a nuisance then she knows she will be a target for witch-hunts wherever she goes.

## COMPARE WITH ARCANE & DIVINE MAGIC

Summoning spirits is a quick route to power compared to the rigorous study of arcane magic or the difficult tests of faith of divine magic. Therefore, those who are impatient, incompetent, corrupt, destructive, or outright mad can acquire power beyond what many people might say is appropriate for mere mortals to possess. Furthermore, binding spirits is not as predictable as casting spells. Arcane spells are akin to scientific tools that a wizard learns to master. Similarly, a deity bestows divine spells to a follower because of freely given faith and adherence to moral strictures. If one commits evil before a good deity, he will suffer divine wrath. In contrast, a spirit can influence a summoner’s personality and seek to fulfill its own agenda. A summoner may become a puppet of his tools and lose volition to a strange and possibly vile being. Also consider, if the spirits reside in some non-space beyond the multiverse, then they are outside the purview of gods who hold themselves as the final arbiters of all things. Historically, the gods may have banished the spirits for attempting to disrupt the cosmic order. For these reasons, a character who dabbles in pact magic will probably discover that his fellow spellcasting adventurers are leery at best, and other priests and mages may be doubly suspicious, if not outright hostile.

## Pact Mages as Living Gods

In this society, individuals who wield supernatural powers are treated akin to gods, and those who are the most skilled at pact magic hold premiere leadership roles. The ruling class has access to pact magic, but peasants and slaves, and perhaps even low-ranking spellcasters do not. A pact magician might identify himself with certain spirits; he is proclaimed a spirit's "chosen one." Alternatively, pact magic might be a guarded secret. The populace believes their rulers possess god-like powers but the rulers know either they are mere humble vessels of the spirits or they have discovered secret knowledge that empowers them, perhaps justifying their self-proclaimed godhood. Following this scenario, a divine spellcaster may be a naysayer; she must be careful or binders will arrive to silence her and erase knowledge that the rulers are impersonating gods. Despite their high status, binders in this society do not enjoy perfect freedom. While they often command great material resources,

there is only so much room at the top for so many "living gods." Long-term survival involves watching one's back and perhaps active subterfuge. Ultimately, societies like these do not end well; the gods are eager to punish those who have not listened to their priests and prophets.

## A Gift for Everyone

This is a benign, spirit-friendly society. Most likely, pact magic holds its own as one of several magical traditions. Highly magical societies may embrace pact magic as yet another useful tool. With its acceptance, schools pop up, research blossoms to define all possible spirits, and holidays or ceremonies allow everyone to experiment with new spirits or perhaps call upon favored spirits. If this is an egalitarian society, then people will be encouraged to bind with neutral or less threatening spirits over extreme or possibly destructive ones. A spirit that grants the ability to cause earthquakes is not as benign as one that grants the ability to heal disease. On the other hand, in a competitive society, individuals

*When the ceremony is complete, the binder witnesses a terrible manifestation of the spirit before it grants its powers.*

and organizations will compete to summon the most impressive spirits with the greatest impact. Either way, societies under this scenario are usually agnostic or they view gods, spirits, spells, and all the other forms of magic as equal or at least valuable and worth promoting. Power within the society is maintainable by agreed-upon values, strong traditions, or the balancing influence of the spirits themselves.

Regardless of how society receives pact magic, when a character considers summoning a spirit, he or she may want to explore first how comrades, superiors, followers, and the local populace will respond. Ultimately, she may decide to avoid pact magic, use spells or sleight of hand to disguise its use, or embrace and flaunt it, keeping in mind that whenever a form of magic is present, a society will likely have ways to detect those who use it.

## ANCIENT LORE

Unlike arcane spell research, which focuses on the acquisition and mastery of specific spells, the binding of spirits involves ongoing historical research because the spirits are aware and their relationships with other beings, including gods, can potentially complicate or endanger a binder's life. A wise binder seeks to learn more than the history of specific spirits and how to bargain with them. His studies will likely reveal ideas that question the nature of the multiverse, the place of the gods, and what it means to exist. Perhaps it does not matter if particular ideas are "true" or "false" because, as binder sages describe, truth exists only within the confines of reality. As a binder explores what lies "outside"—perhaps the "real reality" or "what cannot be"—he or she may encounter ideas that seem to have a life of their own. Thus, besides the usual dangers of binding spirits, there is enough maddening lore to tax one's sanity regarding the great questions of life, death, the afterlife, and nothingness. Below are



some perennial binder questions and sample answers to inspire you as you integrate pact magic into your campaign setting.

## Where Do the Spirits Reside?

If you decide that the spirits are astral entities, ancestral spirits, angels and demons, or nature beings, then the question of where they reside is fairly straightforward. They reside in some heaven, hell, the Astral Plane, the Plane of Dreams, or other plane of existence. However, if you use pact magic with the idea that the spirits are souls cast out from the multiverse, then one wonders where they reside. Daring binder sages suggest that the multiverse, with its mortals and immortals, demon wars and genie kingdoms, is but an illusion. A “more real reality” lies outside the multiverse. This place is beyond space and time. Regardless of which mythos a binder subscribes to, he may encounter mysterious regions such as the Apocryphal Desert, the Outer Darkness, and the Ravaged Sea. Similar to a faux world nestled inside a snow globe, these regions represent a final boundary between the multiverse and whatever lies beyond. Many of these places are bizarre and deadly, haunted by the remains of many beings, a twilight zone where a soul can hide or become lost beyond even the reach of most gods, for a time. For example, visitors of the Astral Byways describe an environment that is like home, yet distorted in terms of space and the flow of time. A hallway door might lead to a room, a street or garden, another plane of existence, or that which lies beyond the multiverse. Binder explorers who have returned from regions such as these report that once a creature steps through past the edge of the multiverse – a relatively easy task if one knows where to look – then he vanishes and never returns, except perhaps as a spirit that can be summoned.

## Why Were the Spirits Created?

Each spirit’s legend traces its origins to a unique life. Many spirits were once mortals. Why didn’t these beings die and migrate to the afterlife as they were supposed to? Some binders search for a single, general answer—usually, a god or gods decided that the creature didn’t deserve the usual reward or punishment; or the creature found a secret key to escape the gods. Other binders believe that every spirit’s journey was necessarily unique. A mortal who tries to duplicate a spirit’s path will fail because he or she must create or evoke a unique, compelling story. A few binders suggest the question is misguided. They say, “Ask not, why spirits, but why gods and mortals?” Perhaps reality is created by beings beyond the confines of the multiverse, and spirits are fragments of those who have escaped this creation, or perhaps the spirits are the creators. As an added complication, a spirit might come from the binder’s future, or have been an angel or demon, a sentient spell, a god, or even a fictional character. While dead gods surely decay somewhere, the notion that an as-yet unborn hero or a character from a bard’s song could somehow become a spirit is more difficult to explain, and has left sages puzzling for centuries.

## Are All Spirits the Same?

Binder sages tend to describe a taxonomy of spirits. They organize the spirits by level of difficulty to bargain with as well as by thirteen mystical themes called constellations. Most binders do not place significance on whether a spirit is good or evil, lawful or chaotic. Rather, the spirits are catalysts for qualities already present in a binder. It is up to a binder to choose each day whether he cares to explore a particular aspect of himself.

## How Many Spirits are There?

It is possible that there are hundreds or thousands of spirits. In the early history of the multiverse, the titans—a race described in the *MM*—attempted to wrest control from the gods; they failed and the gods banished most of them. The Titan League (see Chapter 10: Organizations) aids a character to dedicate himself to bind with one of numerous spirits of the titan race. The existence of these aspiring titans suggests that dozens if not hundreds of titan spirits reside on some secret prison plane or perhaps outside the multiverse altogether. Similarly, the fabled Atlan Empire self-destructed in a single day. The atlan people (see Chapter 2: Races) used pact magic almost exclusively, and in the cataclysm most of them vanished with their empire. No god, necromancer, or traveler has had contact with their souls since. Yet binder sages report interviews with atlan souls who exist in some form far beyond the multiverse.

## Do Spirits Interact with Each Other?

With experience, binders discover that not all spirit abide each other happily. Some relationships are explainable—the spirit of a strongly good-aligned creature might resist a pact with the spirit of anything evil. Yet some spirits hold grudges or preferences for no apparent reasons. Some binders wonder whether the spirits are insane, while others suspect that the spirits interact rationally in a shared arena. Perhaps their rivalries were born from binder feuds. Here lie many mysteries.

## Can Spirits Act on their Own?

Although a pact with a living “vessel” is normally required to allow a spirit to enter the world, there are other ways. A binder can craft a construct body or fleshy simulacrum to house a spirit for a brief time. Much has been learned from these golem-bound and shadow-bound spirits. Moreover, rogue spirits called “ravagers” have found a way to reenter the multiverse and are usually found roaming the Astral Plane. Most frighteningly, ravagers can enter the Material Plane where they possess mortals, exerting a powerful influence that physically alters their hosts and directs the hosts’ behavior toward inscrutable ends. A kind maid or tinkerer, or a great king, can become a raving lunatic in a single moment. Sometimes, a gang of ravagers possesses a group of hosts. Even rarer than ravagers are “living nightmares,” spirits that are given form by the earth or by dreams due to intense magic, strong emotions, or other events.

## How Does Someone Become a Spirit?

Idle binders wonder if they will waste their existence in some afterlife, or if becoming a spirit is a more potent way to not only live forever, but to transcend time. When a creature becomes a spirit, it is suddenly available to binders in all epochs of history past, present, and future. Gods and powerful magic can turn a soul into a spirit. Ravage binders and others strive to become spirits. While legends suggest that spirit life is a curse or punishment, these legends might be a ruse to hide a truth too terrible to hear. The gods were not always gods. There was a time before time. The spirits whisper that realms of wonder and madness exist beyond the multiverse, perhaps an infinite number of realms. They whisper that the real world is a fiction told by a bard who is a character in a book written by someone who does not exist, but could if the creature dreaming of him ever awakens. This is what the spirits whisper. However, binders say most of the spirits are deceitful, and one should not believe their tormenting stories.

# THE BINDER'S QUEST

Many binders do not view morality and ethics through the same lens that most folks do. They tend to eschew the religious dogma of priests and gods. They also scoff at philosophical precepts typical of secular kingdoms and characters. Instead, they speak of a supernatural awareness and a tendency to action that is nurtured by sealing pacts with spirits. It may be true that the spirits are fragmented vestiges, tortured prisoners, or deceptive tricksters. Yet, experience suggests that there is a consciousness unique to the inaccessible—perhaps impossible—realm of the spirits.

A binder may progressively coax—some might say “summon”—this consciousness. This process requires the binder be a sound vessel, which is promoted by meditation and exercise. However, monastic exercises only open windows and doors; regularly sealing pacts summons the spirit of consciousness itself. Frequently, binders who travel this path experience one or two awakenings within days or months of their first pact. Afterwards, they may wait years before experiencing the higher levels. Some never experience a next level at all, though they may believe they have.

Binders speak of a mundane book, *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, which aids the process. This tome suggests practices to engage in while bound to a spirit. It warns against trying too hard, yet encourages the binder to remain mindful. This tome also describes four progressively more abstract and powerful levels of consciousness typical of the spirits.

## The Individual Soul

It is said that simple meditation unveils the 1st level, where all that exists are individual souls. While bound with a spirit in a meditative trance, the pact magic user experiences the reality and primacy of his or her own soul. From this moment, the character views spirits as important and convenient tools to advance oneself in life. These binders adventure to test and increase their personal power, whether for good or ill, whether by rigorous discipline or random luck. The binder feels that even the gods and their otherworldly minions are simply “creatures,” each possessing a soul—or something—like the binder’s soul. What merely varies is that some individuals may have more confidence, truth, freedom, or power compared to others. When focused at this level of consciousness, a binder feels free to express and defend his inner power and beliefs, whatever those may be, and feels that satisfaction is attainable only when he or she believes in himself or herself.



*Azos the binder repulses three goblins by using a powerful lion roar granted by the spirit he has bound.*

## The Great Story

Intense study and knowledge of all the spirits is often required to open the way to the 2nd level, where all souls are linked in a wondrous and terrible story as hinted at through the spirits’ legends. While in a meditative reverie, the pact magic user perceives how he or she is a player in a profound and complex narrative spanning kingdoms and ages past, present, and future. From this moment, the binder views the spirits as potential allies and binds them to advance a larger goal or ideal beyond himself or herself, whether by good or evil, or for justice or freedom. These binders undertake quests in the name of the great story. Even the gods and their minions are pawns in a saga that few can comprehend. This binder feels called to clarify the great story, evangelize to others, and either conform to or rebel against his or her place in it.

## The Infinite Nothing

The varied life of the adventurer and rich experiences of triumph and failure are needed to reveal the 3rd level, where there are no souls. In a despairing moment of insight, the pact magic user watches helplessly as the great story that he or she understood with perfect clarity unravels into meaningless threads. So goes any purpose associated with it. From that moment onward, the binder views the multiverse as an illusion. All that exists in a nonexistent, futile void. The spirits are mere dark shadows on a cave wall. The pact magic user realizes that he or she binds them toward efforts that are ultimately doomed. Even the gods are fated to live lies, suffer betrayal, and perish at the end of time. A binder at this level endures and fails, seeks and misses, arouses hate through love, believes and wanders like the wind and waves crashing upon rocks. This binder may adventure to somehow escape the bindings that the spirits have lured him into. Many binders retire at this point.

## The Paradox Point

Every binder's path to his level is uniquely his or her own. The 4th and highest level is where all things are somehow true and false, joyful and sorrowful, serious and humorous, meaningful and empty at the same time. Very few pact magic users have attained this level of supernatural consciousness, and binder lore warns those who say they have, probably have not. Just as often, this level of consciousness is indistinguishable from insanity, and perhaps is a state akin to that of the spirits themselves, where every thought and action is both good and evil, lawful and chaotic. One theory states that these binders tasted a moment of spirit life and choose to return to aid their fellows. A binder who has attained this level might be a master over a great kingdom, a plain-looking milkmaid, or a hermit ushering in the next invention of pact magic. However, he or she is no longer quite mortal, and adventures for reasons that can change the multiverse, even as nothing changes.

A few binder sages speculate about a 5th level of consciousness that can only be obtained when one somehow escapes the confines of the multiverse. Since no one has returned from becoming a spirit, it is difficult to describe what this state might be like. What is important, most say, is that every binder is called to attempt a special path, one that differs markedly from the otherworldly paths that priests and wizards pursue, not to mention the path of ordinary folk.

## CHARACTER CONCEPTS

Why would your character use pact magic? Chapter 2: Races and Chapter 3: Classes suggest particular backgrounds. However, a character of any race or class might dabble or turn to this form of magic. Here are some common motivations and backgrounds for your characters.

**Accident of Birth or Mishap:** Exposure to the supernatural energies of pact magic while in the womb, or in youth, has awakened you to a unique potential. You might find yourself outcast from family and country. You might be running from those who wish to study you – dead or alive. You might be the object of constant adulation, or ignored. The vagaries of birth do not always show themselves immediately. You may discover halfway through your career that you have talent, perhaps while randomly perusing an ancient tome.

**Advocate of Spirits:** You are a priest or devout follower of a pact magic deity. The god might be neutral in its perspectives, wishing to maintain a balance of forces; or this god might preach its own agenda, such as the release of spirits to unleash chaos upon the world. Either way, you zealously advocate the use of pact magic.

**Curious Dabbler:** Tired of the usual prayers and spells? Perhaps your spellbook or prayer book makes your eyes glaze over? Perhaps you feel that it is time to sample something new. Alternatively, you might love and trust the divine or arcane magic you have known for many adventures, but a particular quest calls for something special. What better way to surprise one's foes while shaking up the status quo for oneself?

**Favorite of the Spirits:** You did not choose to start summoning spirits. They chose you. This happens when a character's story closely matches the temperament and life of a par-

ticular spirit. There is simpatico. A spirit might contact the character directly—spirits forever perceive the world through the eyes and ears of those who bind with them, and one day a spirit perceives you. It whispers to its astute binder, who then approaches you. Whether you choose initiation into the secrets of pact magic, and how deeply you go, are up to you.

**Guardian of the Great Tradition:** Several races trace their genesis or rise to greatness to a particular spirit, set of spirits, or the practice of binding. While some might eschew the past as a saga of follies, others seek to restore past glories. This might mean returning spirits to some form of existence or promoting the use of pact magic among one's own kind. For you the past is a powerful guide and a magnet for poor communities and disillusioned individuals. Unfortunately, the world—or the nature of a spirit—may have changed too much for these traditions to continue as they once did. Perhaps now you must improvise.

**Mystic of the Perfected Self:** You focus inward. You care less about spirits' legends, divine agendas, or societal struggles and more about how to perfect your own potential. Perhaps you have formulated a strict monastic approach, or you find pact magic is an exciting window to an inner well of creative potential. If you have been adventuring for some time, the path of the perfected self might reflect a sudden need to explore neglected aspects of your life.

**Pragmatist:** Pact magic is merely one of numerous useful approaches to magic. It is available, so why not take advantage of it? You shake your head in pity when you encounter those who fear it. If you are an established adventurer, pact magic might be the optimum key to obtain that special fortress, dragon steed, or superlative magic item you have been longing for.

**Quester of Godlike Power:** The abilities granted by the spirits are supernatural in nature. No one can dispel or interrupt them by the usual means. They are often usable at will, and do not require awkward materials, convoluted gestures, or nuisances such as preparing individual spells in advance. Normally, only strange beings and the gods cavort with supernatural powers at their fingertips. This concept fits the character that is looking for the ultimate adventuring reward, who aspires to the self-made gift of godlike power. Beware though, because the gods are watching you!

**Rebel Against the Gods:** Why did the gods cast these souls from the multiverse? Why do the gods allow spirits to engage mortals? Many spirits were mortals. Did these mortals attempt to ascend to a station equal to the gods, or even presume to rise about them? Perhaps you have had enough of gods, their priests, and other divine agents interfering in the lives of mortals. Drawing on the power of spirits is a natural step to understanding how to quell divine excesses.

**Revolutionary Against Tyranny:** Want societal change? In societies that oppose pact magic, do the authorities really care about theological or academic reasons, or do they fear the power that the spirits provide to anyone willing to call upon them? When any magic user can seal pacts, a church or arcane academy might engage in a witch-hunt for suspects. Perhaps suspects are innocent; perhaps the witch-hunt causes tyrannical institutions to turn on themselves. As a sincere revolutionary, you might even embrace pact magic contrary to your better judgment because it will usher your vision of change. A paladin who summons a neutral, chaotic, or evil spirit risks everything if he makes even one mistake; yet that spirit might be the only way to halt an even more ominous tide of evil.

*Azos the binder explores the dark chambers of a forgotten complex in search of spirit lore.*

**Scion of Ancient Heritage:** You were born into a family of pact magic users. Maybe you have trained since childhood. Perhaps your guardians indoctrinated you into a particular cause or philosophy. Your “family” might be a lone cell keeping a secret from their neighbors, or part of a worldwide organization dedicated to sealing pacts. On the other hand, perhaps you have been adventuring for some time; a stranger suddenly approaches you claiming to be a lost relative or other “family” member who offers knowledge of your true heritage, perhaps for a favor or price.

**Seeker of Secrets:** You wish to learn all you can about binding spirits, including their legends and the best ways to utilize each one safely. Sages and legends suggest there are far more than a few dozen spirits to bind. Perhaps an entire race of people became spirits; and surely, if the gods have exiled a few creatures you know about, then they have likely exiled many more that you do not know about. You research and explore ancient sites. As you adventure, perhaps you find a prophecy that names you outright and describes your sealing a pact with a particular spirit to save the world.

**Weapon Against Pact Magic:** You oppose the use of pact magic and have educated yourself to better defeat it. Blending in as a spy or double agent might involve learning to bind spirits. You may have started down this path when you faced a powerful binder foe, even if you had no personal opinion against pact magic, or perhaps you engage in a lifelong quest to defeat a childhood enemy.



## PACT MAGIC IN A FANTASY SETTING

In a fantasy multiverse of dungeon ruins and fiery dragons, which races and classes bind spirits, and when?

Convincing a spirit to share its abilities requires charisma, while containing its abilities and channeling them quickly requires a strong constitution. There are only a few races that possess both qualities. Among the civilized races, humans, half-elves, and gnomes pursue pact magic with ease. Among the savage races, only hobgoblins and troglodytes are well-suited. Of course, individuals of any race – even non-humanoids – may pursue pact magic with varying results. In particular, ancient and powerful races such as rakshasas and titans are known to secure the power of spirits. Less informed mortals may mistake them for lesser gods. Fortunately, such creatures rarely act openly.

Several kinds of characters engage in pactmaking. First is the spellcaster who is already familiar with magic. After brief study to learn the basics, a druid, wizard or other caster can learn to use magical energy as a lure, and exchange his or her daily allotment of spells for a spirit’s granted abilities instead. In contrast, professional pact magic users are more devoted. These individuals may blend binding with stealth, martial arts, or other pursuits; or, they may focus entirely on pactmaking, learning how to bind multiple spirits at once and share their abilities with allies. Finally, there is the vile binder, a monster that makes blood sacrifices of sentient creatures, luring the spirits with the delicious taste of souls in order to obtain easy power.

In terms of alignment, the spirits are too weak or distant to command clear moral or ethical agendas. True heroism (or anti-heroism) stems from a binder character’s choices during his or her adventures rather than direct spiritual influence.

When pact magic is accepted in a campaign setting, then its practice will likely be common. Each spirit excels around a particular theme such as desert travel or battling demons. Spellcasters will bind a spirit whenever they perceive that their brief spells are insufficient. A spell that protects you for ten minutes from heat and flames is a cruel joke when stranded on the Elemental Plane of Fire! In a setting where pact magic is rare or outlawed, binding spirits serves the same needs but characters will think twice before risking persecution or enjoying too much attention.

## ADVENTURING FOR NEW SPIRITS

The search for fresh pact magic can motivate an adventure or a campaign. Any spellcaster can make pacts and may want to locate spirits that are just right for him or her, or express a particular concept. Fortunately, there are numerous spirits if one looks hard enough. Even a dedicated binder who knows dozens of ceremonies may seek specialized magic items or want to engage organizations dedicated for or against particular spirits’ causes or pact magic in general. The quest process, and its possible dangers, is endless. Presented below are a few typical steps to locate and utilize pact magic.

## Discovering a Spirit

Tracking down information about a new spirit could be as simple as consulting a sage, visiting a fellow binder, or casting a *legend lore* spell. In societies open to pact magic, this might be a quick process; otherwise, it might require meeting bureaucratic criteria or bypassing traditional guardians of knowledge. These guardians might hoard the details of high-level spirits in vaults and share their secrets only with those who pass tests, swear oaths, and so on. In locales where pact knowledge is less common, unknown, or persecuted, a character may need to do a lot of quiet snooping or adventure a long way.

## Exploring all the Details

It is insufficient to know a spirit's name and the ceremony to summon it. A learned sage or potent spell can reveal all details. More often, however, a character gains partial knowledge and must adventure to learn the whole picture. When one detail is missing—or incorrect—then the character or her allies may suffer a dangerous surprise. Here is vital information every binder wants to know about a spirit:

- » Its name or names, its true legend, and whether it really “exists” (can be bound) or is just an apocryphal legend.
- » Its seal, what requirements it demands, and the appropriate ceremony to bind it.
- » What abilities the spirit grants and how it might influence one's personality and alignment.
- » Possible tactical bonuses, spirit companions, and other characteristics that vary with each spirit.

As an option, a binder might be able to seal a pact with a spirit while still searching to complete the picture; the character might only have access to the granted abilities he knows about. Alternatively, the binding check to successfully bind a spirit might be more difficult until the binder learns all the relevant knowledge.

## Right Place, Right Skill, Right Binder

Spirits do not bind with just anyone, or whenever. A spirit may require a special location, skill, proficiency, alignment, or race. For example, if a spirit requires that its ceremony be conducted in elvish, then the character may have to learn that language before sealing a pact. If the spirit's favored foe is orcs, and the character is a half-orc, then she is out of luck. If the spirit will only be bound near a river, and the character is in a desert, then the spirit is inaccessible. An experienced binder usually has a favored spirit and ignores that spirit's restrictions, or has learned how to ignore summoning requirements all together.

## Mastering Strategic Use

Even when you have unearthed all you can and have successfully bound a spirit, you may find it takes several encounters to determine how to best utilize the abilities it grants you. For example, King Mutaros, the spirit of Vengeance Unfulfilled, gives his summoners tactical bonuses when they are riding a horse, fighting a foe single-handedly, fighting a traitor, or standing up from a prone position. These actions reflect major points in King Mutaros's legend. Can these actions be combined to maximize a spirit's benefits? Should the binder invest in a steed? Focus on chasing down a traitor? Start demanding to fight foes single-handedly? Additionally, consider that some spirits synergize well together. Aza'zati, the Green Wyrmling enhances one's swimming skill while Dagon the Sea Fiend allows you to breath underwater. Together they form a potent duo.

## Consequences of New Pact Magic

What happens when a character's discovery butts against the interests and mores of society? If sealing pacts is merely frowned upon or regulated, then simple investigation of lore or even binding a spirit a single time might be treated with leniency. Maybe authorities only want to know what the character is up to. However, once a character starts freely using a new spirit's granted abilities, then the response is likely to be stronger, especially if the bound spirit was evil in life and alters the character's personality or alignment. Loved ones and allies may act to limit or stop the character. A very different consequence occurs when the binder's new discovery alerts semi-independent spirits (called ravagers)—or even deities and their otherworldly agents—who wish to promote the spirit or erase the spirit's name from the multiverse.

## Dealing with Other Spirit Binders

Spirit binders can be potent rivals. A binder or organization may become covetous of a character's discovery and seek to learn his or her hard-won secrets or eliminate the character. While some binders patiently wait for others to do the hard work of discovery, a few will compete directly to learn about new spirits before the character does, and possibly grab other treasure while exploring. It is not unheard of for binders to plant false information about ceremonies, granted abilities, and so on to confuse and harm their rivals. Binder organizations can also be aids, granting knowledge of spirits, revealing secret rites, and providing unique equipment. Why go it alone?

## Specializing

There are many ways to specialize. Undead characters devoted to N'alyia, the First Vampire, can ignore clerics' influence and the burning rays of the sun. However, one must locate N'alyia's shrine or one of her children first. There are demonic, infernal, and celestial spirits. Pursue the path of the atlan demon binder to acquire the abilities of chaotic, bloody fiends. Several organizations offer variations on binding, such as pact sex magic and vile ceremonies practiced by hags, nagas, rakshasa, and other monsters. Pact mages can also explore incantations, which are laborious rituals for binding “lesser spirits.”

## Tapping into Mysteries

Binding spirits is well-understood. Yet, there are strange, unreliable, and misunderstood phenomena.

**Astronomical Events:** Constellations correspond to particular spirits. Certain events such as shooting stars, eclipses, and planetary conjunctions modify the binding experience.

**Supernatural Consciousness:** The spirits exist in a way that mortals and even their gods cannot fully appreciate. Are spirits hopelessly insane and deceitful, or do they merely float inchoately amid a higher, impenetrable level of thought?

**Pact Maladies:** The mortal frame was not created to sustain the energies of multiple spirits. What maladies await those who bind powerful spirits, or too many spirits too often?

These are just three mysteries that many binders ponder over the course of their careers.

## Becoming a Spirit?

A high-level character may seek to become a spirit. This may require exploring Astral niches that form the border between the multiverse and the nonexistent space that spirits reside.