



BRYSON SPRINGS

A “No Security” 1930’s Horror Scenario



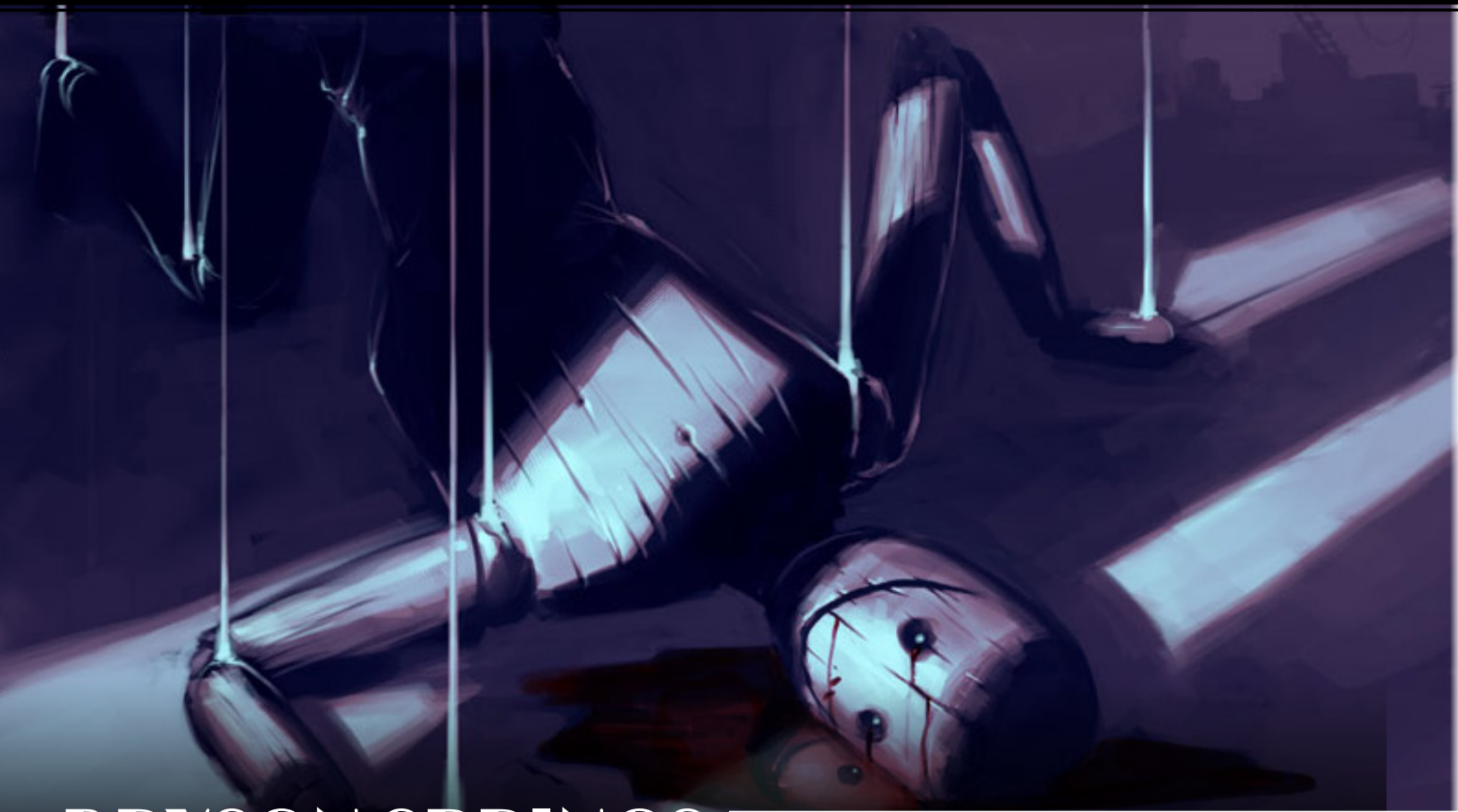
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BRYSON SPRINGS

INTRODUCTION

Bryson Springs is a cosmic horror/mystery adventure set in the desert wastes of the post-Dust Bowl America. Four to six players take on the role of characters unwittingly confronted with an ancient horror preying on a downtrodden populace. Thematically, the adventure juxtaposes the petty cruelty of mankind with an uncaring, enigmatic terror existing outside human perception.

This adventure starts with an overall description of the setting and plot for the GM's use. Information for the players can be found in the gameplay section, the details of which should only be revealed to the characters through roleplaying.

June 1935: Bryson Spring, CA

The town of Bryson Springs is located near the easternmost border of Southern California. By the time the players enter into the story, the town has dwindled along with the railroad that saw it founded. The only reason any population remains is the location's proximity to major roadways and the Bryson Springs Ranch, a once successful orange grove that provided a living to the few remaining residents. However, even the stability of the ranch has been thrown into question now that the blight affecting the rest of the country has sent its tendrils probing westward. The fields are dead, an entire year's crop lost, and the people are left with nothing but their unanswered prayers for rain.

The hard times have left the Okies — refugees of the Midwestern Dust Bowl — stranded without the migrant work they bet their survival on. Unable to move on without funds, the transients have constructed a semi-permanent shantytown out of found materials

and their own cars. The first stirrings of the WPA have built a concrete washhouse in the middle of the encampment, but otherwise there is no relief to be had from their crushing poverty.

Otis Grangerford runs a gas station that supplies these transients with what little goods they can afford until they move on. Further away, the State police maintain a small substation, if only to stage periodic eviction raids on the Hoover-town. Off the beaten path, an abandoned ghost town persists in a valley cut into the hills. It is no more than a strip of long derelict buildings, abandoned after rail traffic atrophied and left the town to its slow dwindling.

contacts could provide him and his sons some work. Luck was not on the Kelly's side. All doors remained closed, and the Kelly's found themselves scrapping by on daily work at the Bryson Ranch. Desperate, Paul began selling off the last of the family's possessions. He wrote an old acquaintance from his railroad days, Liang Wang, to come appraise an ancient scroll he'd acquired years ago while sifting through the belongings of a member of his work crew, killed in an accident and without an heir. It pained the old man to part with it; though unable to read a word of its writing, Paul had been known to gaze at the thing for hours in the night, admiring the way moonlight gleamed off the ornately-carved jade handles.

The Fisher's Scroll

Liang Wang, promised payment for a few hours appraisal work by a foreman he worked for during his first years in the country, traveled from San Francisco with his daughter, Ye. Upon arriving at Bryson Springs, it quickly became apparent that Kelly would have no means of paying for any services, but Liang lingered, partly out of joy of seeing his old tormentor brought so low, and partly out of fascination for the strange scroll he presented.

A sense of morbid curiosity turned into an extended stay. Liang forced his daughter to sleep in the cab of his truck as he spent hours pouring over the archaic language of the scroll. Its stories were bizarre, its writing sometimes nonsensical, its claims of heritage impossibly old. But as Liang prepared a rough translation with Paul Kelly watching over his shoulder, the two men soon realized that their perceptions had been forever altered by the words in the scroll.

They now saw the world as a sick puppet show, a poorly set stage production in which free will was a myth. Reality was no more than a child's diorama, a shallow, dimensionless approximation of the terrible truth. Mankind was but a game preserve, the sky but a porous veil through which the Fisher of Men pulled his unwitting prey.

Important Dates for the Setting

- Prohibition 1920-1933
- Dust Bowl 1930-36
- FBI gets its name in '35, shifts to anti-communist agenda in '36
- Herbert Hoover loses election in '33, FDR takes power in '34
- Emergency Relief Act (WPA) passed on April 8th 1935

GM INFORMATION

The Kelly's

Operating on a tiny plot of New Mexico land, the Kelly's had never imagined hardship quite so bad as the dustbowl. After suffering the death of family members and the loss of their farm, Paul "Pa" Kelly packed up his family and what few belongings they still possessed and headed to California. Paul had originally made his stake there working on the railroad, and he hoped old

As the days passed, Liang saw nothing but horror in the scroll, dark truths that a human mind could never square itself with. Kelly, having been exposed subconsciously to the contagion within the scroll for decades, saw a direct line to the man in charge and a way out of his sorrows. He saw salvation in the nightmare.

The Terror Begins

Anabelle Fabler had never given ear to the Ryan Spelling's advances, especially not after Bryson let her father go but kept that pervert on the payroll. That's why she was so stunned when he showed up out of the darkness as she returned from relieving herself in the barren groves, claiming he was there to give her what she'd always wanted. As he pinned her to the ground and worked her skirt up, she wondered what she could have possibly done to lead him on.

She managed to get out a scream before his hand clamped down over her mouth. She saw two men in the camp that might have heard her: one walked down a makeshift street, carrying a gas lamp. The other was no more than a shadow, leaning against one of the trucks disinterestedly.

She rejoiced when she saw the lamp man start and begin running towards her cries. Then the shadow man moved, every part of it suddenly alive in wild, flailing motion towards the man's light, its feet skittering across the dust and making the sound of chicken bones clicking together. The Samaritan was struck, and then the two figures were falling, tumbling end over end into the air, the gas lamp receding into the night sky like an added star in the constellation that she suddenly noticed was subtly wrong.

Spelling didn't notice as he rutted atop his victim, not even when Anabelle went stone still. He merely thought she'd finally realized his prowess and accepted the gift he'd given her.

The Wrong Lawman at the Wrong Time

Over the course of the next few days, seven people in total went missing from the shantytown outside the Bryson Ranch property. The local law enforcement, Sheriff Buford Kraft, took reports

from grief-stricken family members with more than a healthy share of skepticism; hobos disappeared in the middle of the night all the time, and he was all too happy to have a few less to deal with.

Even Kraft learned something was up when he found himself cleaning up two brutally mutilated corpses in a single morning, both single men without families, both pulverized into unrecognizable heaps of broken bone. One was found in the middle of desert, the other in the shattered remains of his shack, which appeared to have been bombed from on high. Something nefarious had definitely seeped into the Hooverville. As Buford dumped the corpses into a pauper's grave outside his station, he hoped the culprit would hurry up, move on down the line, and become someone else's problem.

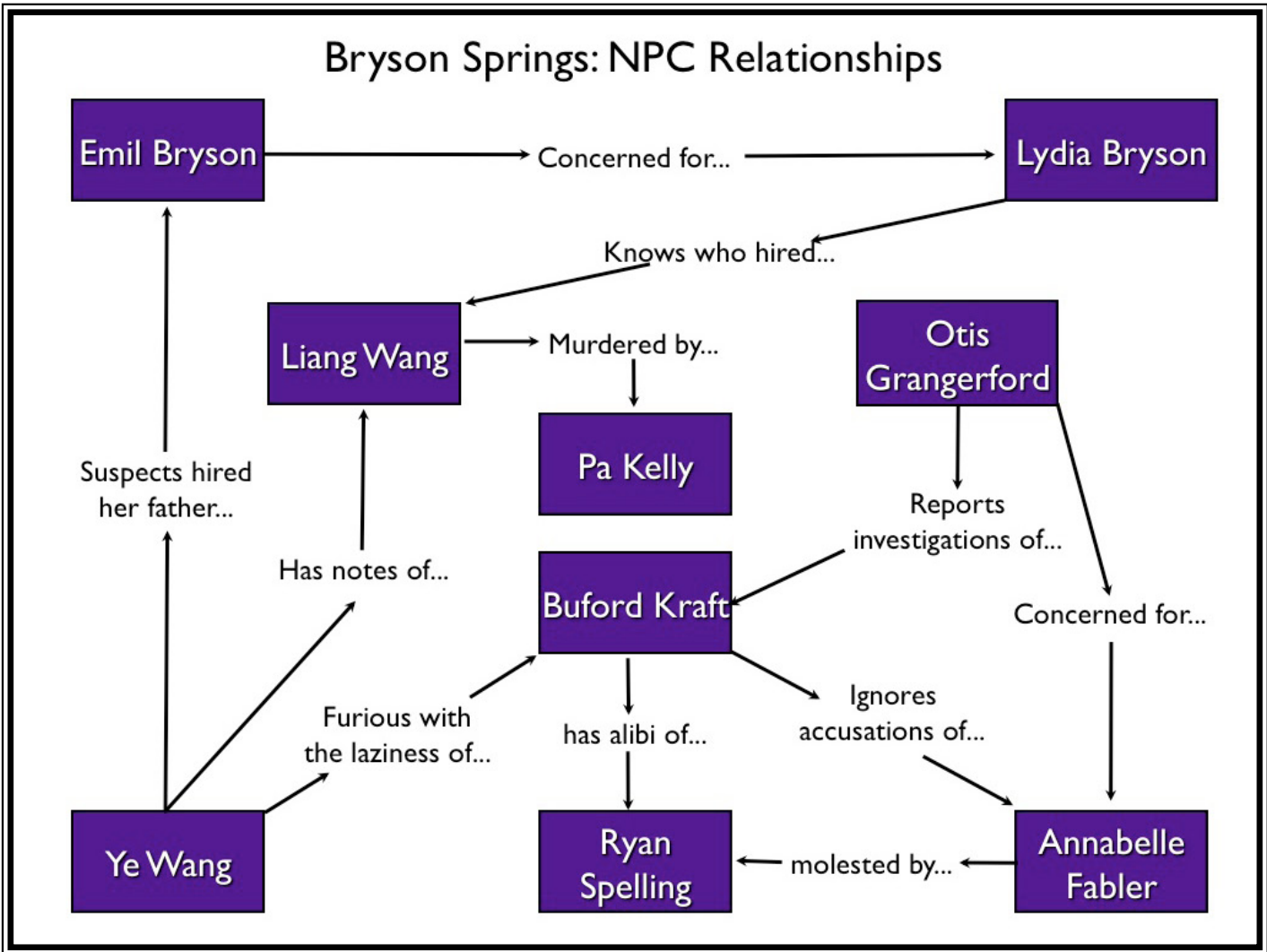
The Dead Chinaman

On the night everything boiled over, Buford Kraft was called out to the shantytown by Annabelle Fabler, one of the transient girls. Her old man had gotten himself beaten half-to-death by Ryan Spelling, one of the few ranch hands still actually working for Bryson. She was crying rape and claiming the drunken old sot was defending her honor.

As Buford dealt with Spelling at the ranch, apologizing for all the trouble and false accusations, a god-awful wail could be heard across the fields from the shantytown. By the time he got there, some Chinese woman was screaming to high heaven, waving a bloody briefcase and keeping a horde of curious Okies from entering the washhouse. She seemed grateful for Buford to arrive and allowed him to enter, though he couldn't make out what she was so worked up about.

He soon found out.

When Buford had finished puking up his dinner, the Chinese was yelling at him, demanding he arrest "Kelly and his monsters." He had to threaten the woman with his nightstick before she shut up, driving her away even as she vowed to bring real help in her broken English. When she was gone, Buford recovered himself, closed off the crime scene, and moved what few remains he could gather into the shed at the station. Then he called it in. There was no hope of keeping this nonsense quiet anymore. Bryson Springs was back on the map.



The Chosen Family

The family had been skeptical at first, but when he had made them stop feeling hunger, they had begun to listen. Then he'd gotten rid of the man that stole their gasoline, then the others, each more satiating than the last. He showed them the strings that pulled the world, and they had finally understood. Now the heretic chinaman was gone, and all there was left to do was show their new god that his game had grown sick and needed a cull.

List of NPC's

- Emil Bryson**—Ranch Owner
- Lydia Bryson**—Emil's 7-year-old daughter
- Buford Kraft**—Local state police
- Liang Wang**—San Franciscan laundry owner murdered in WPA washhouse
- Ye Wang**—daughter of Liang Wang
- Otis Grangerford**—drunkard and owner of Grangerford's gas
- Ryan Spelling**—Sadistic ranch-hand for the Brysons
- Annabelle Fabler**—Abused Okie who witnessed a strange event
- Paul "Pa" Kelly**—mad patriarch and servant of the Fisher of Men
- Kelly family (Ma, Tom, Jessup, Buela Mae, and Edmund)**—Cultists
- Marionettes or "Kuileixi Shi"**—tools of an otherworldly horror

The Monster

Marionettes, or “Kuileixi Shi”

The viewer’s eye seems to balk at the sight of them. At close range, the air around these creatures seems to wave unnaturally, as if reality decided on their shape at the last second. After a few eye-straining seconds, their appearance seems to settle on that of a man-sized artist’s perspective doll, limbs expertly carved from wood and scored with crude, asymmetrical slashes depicting features. This image is merely a desperate approximation on the part of a human mind unequipped to understand such horrors. The marionettes appear as such because reality has no code capable of representing them, so they manifest as a metaphor to their purpose: uncanny doppelgangers pantomiming human behavior, under the control of an infinitely more complex being. They are no more than the lures of the Fisher of Men, a dark, predatory god existing outside space and time.

At a distance in low light, marionettes resemble people doing regular activities: sleeping, bending over a car engine, leaning against a wall, etc. However, the locations for these poses are wildly improbable and selected by an alien mind: sleeping in the middle of the street, bending over and inspecting a fencepost, leaning on nothing, etc. Those unlucky enough to investigate this curiosity see the automaton spring into life, skittering forward on feet that barely touch the ground, limbs gyrating wildly as they attack.

There is no way to be certain a marionette is dangerous from afar unless one has cast the spell “See the Strings” from the Fisher Scroll. At that point, the location of the creatures can be traced by the strings of fire dangling down from inky-black vortexes in the sky.

Other signs of danger include craters where trees have been uprooted from the ground, but no drag marks or footprints can be found in the dust and the trunks are missing. These occur from failed “bites,” where the marionette has run into a tree and ripped it into the sky, thinking it a victim. If out at night, characters might also notice that the constellations above the grove resemble nothing ever before seen in the night sky.



If attacked, there is little hope for survival save escape. Even then, marionettes are deceptively fast, not so much running as hovering towards targets like bad puppetry. Should a character choose to fight, death is almost certain. Firearms are as effective as they would be against a solid tree trunk. Chopping instruments fair better, but few could get in more than one swing with an axe before the thing was upon them. Fire would work best, as the marionette still has the properties of dry wood despite being an only a metaphor for wood. Still, even if aflame, the creature need only grab its prey once before being “reeled in,” flying up into the sky, carrying its screaming victim to the Fisher of Men.

Killing your Players

Characters should be given a chance to run, disable, burn, or otherwise resist marionette attacks. They are, after all, servants of an enigmatic god and not the god itself. However, if a Marionette grabs someone, the character should only be able to focus on breaking the thing's grip. If the character succeeds, give them 10 feet worth of fall damage for every turn they spent in the Marionette's hooks. After a certain amount of time, escape is effectively futile.

If the GM wants to make things really creepy, give doomed characters a final choice. Once the pair reaches the upper atmosphere and the inky portal to other realms, have the Marionette gesture to indicate the character can go through or be let go. So what is it? Plummet to certain death, or be sucked into the sky to visit some nightmare god beyond imagining?

Characters choosing the latter should either just cease to be in the game or receive an appropriately terrifying description of their demise. Perhaps the "Fisher of Men" is a mass of cancerous flesh the size of a star, pulling in unwitting victims from thousands of dimensions at once to plummet into its ravenous maws like meteors to Earth. Maybe human senses aren't even capable of perceiving their own doom. The character's eyes could go blind at "the smell" of a millennia's worth of terrified death. The skin could flash freeze as it "hears" the icy symphony of deep space.

- State police investigating the murder of Liang Wang in the bathhouse
- FBI agent(s) transporting a prisoner in a sensitive investigation and retasked with investigating an attack at one of the WPA's new buildings
- Bank robber(s) being transported to Leavenworth for holding until trial
- Academic stranded en route to a conference due to a car breakdown
- Relative of the Wang's seeking answers for his daughter
- Socialist labor organizer trying to rally the transient population
- Ranch-hand(s) seeking work at the Bryson Groves
- Muckraking journalist investigating the missing persons, or perhaps just doing an interest piece on poverty and Hooverilles
- Wife of Emil Bryson, the ranch owner, concerned about rumors she's heard among the house staff

Plot Hooks

Getting the players together and facing the same threat is often the hardest part of any horror roleplaying game. The GM should make certain that players at least know about Liang Wang's death at the outset and have some plausible reason for going to Bryson Springs.

Investigative: Direct inquiries into the nature of Liang Wang's death are the easiest way to get PC's involved. State law enforcement could get involved as soon as Buford phones in a report; obviously, something more sinister than the typical Okie menace is going on. Since the WPA washhouse was the site of the murder, federal authorities could also be dispatched to take care of the situation before the project is besmirched. On the other side of the coin, the controversial nature of the WPA legislation and the social justice issues involved with the Okies and Asian Americans would likely attract journalists.

Personal: Though the victims at Bryson Springs are soon forgotten by the society, their family and friends might not be so accepting. Maybe Ye

GAMEPLAY INFORMATION

Character Selection

What type of character each player chooses is, of course, up to the players and the GM. However, certain types of characters lend themselves to the scenario better than others. There are three types of "hooks" that can lead characters into the scenario: investigative, personal, and happenstance. Here are some suggested character concepts that work well with the plot and setting:

contracts the help of a particularly skilled relative to find her father's killer. Maybe another transient looking for work arrives at camp to find the cousin he was expecting inexplicably missing. Perhaps Mrs. Bryson, always more concerned with social issues than her husband, notices unrest among the unfortunates camped outside their property.

Happenstance: Though difficult to pull into a group of cohesive players, cosmic horror is often at its best when it yanks unassuming people from their everyday lives. Perhaps an East coast professor finds himself stranded and confronted with a terror un-hinted at in his years of study. A criminal in the midst of transfer could suddenly find himself in a place far worse than prison, or a Socialist might be confronted with an evil even greater than that of Capitalism.

LOCATIONS AND NPC's

1. BRYSON RANCH

The Bryson Ranch was once a thriving place. Modeled in a hacienda style, the estate sprawls over several acres. Ivy crawls up adobe walls peaked with clay tiled roofs. The two large courtyards were once used to sort the massive orange harvest and now-empty bunkhouses could hold nearly a hundred workers at the peak of the season. Nowadays, it appears as if the blight that affected the land attacked the house as well. The gardens are browning or sickly, the paint has come chipping off the walls, and the staff has been reduced to a skeleton crew.

1a. The Main House

The former prosperity of the region can be seen in the ornate nature of the main house. Well-maintained rooms are filled with fine furniture and artifacts of the Bryson family's frontier past. Taxidermy, painting, and photographs hang from every wall. However, the whole estate has taken on a ghostly quality with the coming of the drought. With only a few maids, little Lydia, and Emil Bryson himself living on the premise, the household is cloaked in an eerie silence.

Emil Bryson can be found in the main house. He's an older man but fit, sporting a greying handlebar

mustache. He dresses in jeans, boots, and a leather vest. His fine white Stetson and string tie are the only clues to his status as the owner. Though ultimately a struggling businessman with a company to worry about, Emil has nothing but sympathy for the Okies camped nearby and wishes there was more he could do to help.

Emil knows very little of the terror that has recently gripped the Hooverville outside his property. He's aware that Buford Kraft was negotiating some kind of trouble with Ryan Spelling the other night when he got called away by a big commotion. Emil is curious as to what the commotion was; he doesn't particularly like that Spelling fellow, despite having kept him on for his skills as a jerkline skinner. He finds the young man's morals...questionable.

But he has bigger things to worry about: his ranch is failing and his daughter is retreating further and further into her own world. He is happy to help investigators any way he can.

1b. Courtyard

Lydia Bryson can be found playing with her puppets in the courtyard, even in the dead of night. She's been obsessed with putting on her little show in the past few weeks. Her favorite doll is no more than a crudely whittled totem carved from a dead orange tree. She claims she got it from "Mr. Kelly and the squinty-eyed man" as they walked to the north of the ranch some weeks earlier. When asked the doll's name, she is only able to respond that it's "the man that lives in the groves."

If left to her own devices, Lydia will sing the following song as she plays:

*My hand goes right and you go left
My hand goes left and you go right
I raise my hand and up you jump
I lower my hand and you're a lump*

*I pull your strings and you must do
Whatever I say that you must do
If you don't like it, I don't care
I sure hope I ain't got strings up there.
I sure hope I ain't got strings up there.*

1c. Barn

Ryan Spelling and the other remaining ranch hands often play penny poker in the barn after hours atop an overturned industrial spool. He's a handsome young man in a half-buttoned shirt and chaps, with a perpetual wry grin plastered across his face. Spelling is considered a bit insufferable by even his fellow workers, but he's good with the horses and indispensable to the ranch's operation, even at the reduced capacity. The old hands grin and bear it as Spelling brags about his romantic conquests.

Spelling has two favorite stories at the moment. The first concerns a graphic description of his romantic conquest of Annabelle Fabler, who was "just begging for it" as he says. The second is an exaggerated, heroic account of how he repelled a "yellow-bellied ambush" by Anabelle's father the previous night. The older hands won't support this last story, keen to knock the young man down a peg by pointing out he merely beat an old drunk up more for fun than protection. The old men try to change the subject from his boasting to the strange, missing trees uprooted from the orchard recently and their theories as to what's been happening.

Though certainly stupid, Spelling is not self-destructive. As soon as he recognizes someone in authority other than Buford Kraft might know the truth about his "romantic" relationship with Anabelle, he tries to flee the area. If chased, he attempts to mount a horse and lose any pursuers in the groves.

2. THE GROVES

The Grove has been blighted by depleted soil and drought, though it remains a mystery how the Dust Bowl conditions reached so far West. Row after row of dead trees cover acres of dusty ground that crunch with dead leaves at each step. Despite the desiccation, a faint citrus smell still clings to the air.

A Marionette can be found here, imitating a scarecrow. Particularly perceptive characters might notice that there is no need for a scarecrow in an orange grove. The shadowy shape seems to track anyone passing by, shifting almost imperceptibly to face to the passerby. Anyone that comes within twenty feet of the thing is attacked.

3. GRANGERFORD'S GAS

A dusty old building by highway 17, Grangerford's Gas is the only place within 50 miles to get supplies. The owner seems to know this and takes no care to maintain the property. The Hooverville is within walking distance of the station, making it a frequent victim of theft from the stranded transient population.

Otis Grangerford is likely to be the first character many players meet. He wears overalls and a straw hat, has the barnacle nose of an alcoholic and an unkempt beard. He eyes nearly everyone suspiciously and brandishes a shotgun until certain they aren't Okies out to scam him.

Otis is well aware of the problems in the shantytown; he's heard the rumors and the screams in the night. He worries most about Anabelle Fabler, a young Okie that reminds him of his estranged daughter. Otis would give candy to her younger siblings and chat with the young girl on a daily basis until about a week ago when she stopped visiting. Otis is dissatisfied with Buford Kraft's police work and quick to gossip about the officer's penchant for beating the Okies without actually doing anything to move them off the property.

4. STATE STATION #39

A one-room jailhouse, this run-down, wooden shack is little more than a storehouse for the state police's old documents and surplus equipment. There is a single, unoccupied cell and a desk. Otherwise, the room is a disorganized mass of poorly kept files. Outside, a shed houses lawn tools and whatever won't fit into the main building.

Buford Kraft can be found here during his infrequent trips to the area. He is fat, pimpled, sweaty, and bursting out of his uniform. He carries a non-standard issue "Judge" revolver low-slung on his hip, trying to fulfill his fantasy of being an old West lawman. Though considered a joke by the rest of the state police and sent on errands to backwater holes like Bryson Springs, Buford is keen to think himself as a king and the strip of highway his kingdom.

Buford is happy to talk about the case, though he refuses to see anything unusual about the disappearances. He can't help but admit Liang's death was unusual, but he can't see getting too worked up over "a chink" and suspects the killer has already moved on. He won't mention the pulverized bodies in the pauper's grave out back unless pressed, dimly aware that he should have reported those long ago.

4.a: The Office

Primarily filled with file cabinets, the building also has a cramped desk and a small jail cell. Buford is likely to imprison any characters that question his authority without law enforcement credentials. This indefinite detainment can be broken by other characters, or perhaps by the marionettes. The Kelly's are no fan of the law and would likely want to see Buford fed to their new god.

4.a.i: Office Clue: Missing Persons Reports

Buford Kraft's desk holds a number of half-finished reports for missing persons out of the Shantytown. It appears the pig only filled out enough of each report get whichever distraught family member was in his face out of the way. The disappearances occur at random dates over the last few weeks, seven in all. All people describe similar incidents; the victim leaves to talk to someone late at night. The person being talked to moves out of sight. Victim follows...and is never seen again.

4.b: The Shed

Liang Wang's body had been kept in the equipment shed for two days, rotting and waiting for "experts" from the city. Buford lets any higher ranking officials in, but the rusty padlock could be forced or picked.

Any character with a background in medicine can see that Liang died of a slow strangulation. Everyone can notice the horrific gouges covering every inch of his flesh, tearing his clothes to tatters. His wounds are consistent with being dragged behind a horse or car, but he obviously died inside the washhouse.

4.b.i: Shed Clue: Piece of Liang's Notes

A slip of paper can be found in one of his hands, available now the rigor has let up. The torn slip has a series of Chinese characters on it and a crude

drawing of the Chinese "Kuileixi Shi," a death totem used in ancient Chinese burials. The single, legible sentence translates into "We are all puppets!"

4.c: Pauper's Grave

Perceptive investigators notice a large patch of disturbed earth behind the station. Those with the clout to press Buford for answers can get an explanation and exhume, or they could uncover the shallow grave themselves given enough time. Underneath, they find the rotting corpses of two Okie men.

4.c.i: Grave Clue: Pulverized Bodies

The dead men either escaped from the marionettes too late or chose to fall rather than meet the Fisher of Men. As such, their bodies are totally crushed, shattered and ruptured from a fall of hundreds of feet. In his boundless idiocy, Buford just assumed they'd been beaten to death, but it is obvious these men met an extraordinary end.

5. HOOVERVILLE

A ramshackle conglomeration of sheet metal, found wood, and lived-in pick-up trucks, the Hooverville sprawls outwards from the Washhouse in random, disjointed streets. Residents are extremely hostile towards strangers in their business, but otherwise keep to their miseries.

5.a. The Fblers

Annabelle Fabler spends her days tending to her badly beaten father and the younger children in their tent on the orchard side of the camp. Her brothers are perpetually out, hitching rides and looking for work. She's a slightly pudgy girl with brown hair and a homespun dress. She refuses to leave the side of her father and wrings her hands in constant anxiety. Any attempts by men to get close to her are met with hysterical outbursts of fear

5.a.i: Annabelle's Clue: The Account of the Rape

Anyone showing convincing empathy towards either Annabelle or her father's condition is told about Ryan Spelling's sexual assault the previous week. Annabelle blames herself for the fact that Buford did nothing

because she “lost control” and told him about “seeing things” during the attack. She also regrets telling her father about the attack, which caused him to seek revenge on Spelling and get badly beaten.

If pressed, Annabelle reveals the “nonsense” that she told Kraft, revealing the first witnessed attack of the marionettes.

5.b. Ye Wang

After driving to the nearest phone to call for more help, Ye Wang returned to the Hooverville to wait for more news on the investigation of her father’s death. She shouts down any curious onlookers trying to enter the cordoned off male side of the washhouse and harasses Buford Kraft for answers on a daily basis.

Ye is happy to reveal everything she knows to any party interested in helping. However, Liang was very protective and didn’t want his daughter mixing with “the bums,” so she didn’t leave the makeshift camp of the family truck for the many days he was at the tent-city. She does know that he was working for a man named Kelly and that his work was likely academic in nature; he had been a scholar in the old country.

5.b.i: Ye’s Clue: Liang’s Briefcase

After discovering her father’s corpse, Ye pried her father’s briefcase from his hand least it be stolen by the Okies. She has yet to make any sense of the contents, as she can speak but not read English. She is hesitant to hand over the briefcase, but she allows characters to look if she feels they are there to help her. The contents are as follows.

Photograph: The crinkled, worn photograph shows an unfurled scroll with Chinese symbols on it leaning against a weathered, wood wall. The back reads:

“Old friend, require your expertise. Found this amongst the trappings of our rail days and curiosity has bested me. You need not travel far as the Hardship forces us West. Will seek work in Bryson Springs, a day’s drive from your home. Please visit soon to revisit better times. Payment provided for services rendered, of course. –K.”

Partial Translation: Written in Liang’s uncertain hand, this is a partial translation of the scroll.

Entitled in phonetic spelling, the document is called “*Kuileixi Shi*” next to the largest characters from the scroll’s picture. Full translation missing, but it should read something like “*Death’s Dolls.*”

A note in the margin reads, “*Claim Shang Dynasty? Obvious fake. Still remarkable craftsmanship of Jade scroll*”

Another margin note:

“No mention of burial dolls yet. Gibberish.”

A swath of Chinese characters, followed by English translation: “*Consider the fish. He lives in darkness. The ceiling to his house is soft, yet impenetrable. He knows nothing of the sun, trees, grass, or air. He knows food, and food only, until one day he sees the lure. He does not know the ways of weaving line, the plants used for colorful dyes, the strange art of lure making. He cannot suspect the patient deceptions of men or their predatory motives. He cannot see a net. He knows food only, and knows it well. And so, though the lure seems alien, offensive to his eyes, the fish sees food, for it is all he can see. He bites, and he dies a death beyond his imagining.*”

Another swath of characters, only partially translated: “*And such are we to it, the Fisher of Men (underlined with question marks), and we fall prey to our minds’ own metaphors (again underlined with question marks)*”

A final swath of characters. Translation is in American phonetic alphabet. Marginalia afterwards reads “*More Gibberish*”

Scrawled over phonetic translation, “*DO NOT READ!*” Followed by a few more characters, un-translated.

A paperclip and torn scraps of paper indicate some of the pages are missing.

5.b.ii: Ye’s Clue: See the Strings

Reading the final section of phonetic gibberish alone does nothing. However, speaking the syllables aloud casts a powerful spell meant to reveal the true nature of reality.

Once cast, the character sees the “strings” attached to and supposedly controlling every living thing. Gossamer twine, barely visible, seems tied to limbs of every person they meet, glinting in the light and trailing into vanishing point in the sky. The strings are always there, passing through ceilings and tree cover as if made of no more than mist. Only the character that read the syllables aloud can see this phenomenon; all other characters think it madness or a joke if told about it.

As the spell progresses, the character can see a different type of strings at night, lines of force seemingly made of fire that arc into the night sky, a night sky that now seems to have an end, a ceiling which swirling black vortexes peek through. These burning strings lead to the marionettes and warn of their coming.

Characters under the effect of the spell increasingly lose their grip on reality. Dimensions begin to appear false or hollow; buildings or mountains might startle the eye as suddenly two-dimensional, nothing more than cardboard cut-outs. Paranoia is the logical conclusion; the character can do nothing but presume everyone is under the control of some dark puppeteer lurking behind the stars. While casting the spell can certainly help one survive in Bryson Springs, the character under its influence certainly goes mad unless the Fisher of Men's influence of the area can be broken.

5.c: The Okies

Beaten down by hardships, the migrant workers are very reluctant to talk to anyone they don't know personally. However, certain methods of persuasion (bribes) and types of people (blue-collar) can wrestle information from them. Each Okie gives up a single piece of information to a character successfully questioning them. Role 1d6 and select a piece of gossip at random.

1. Annabelle's Fabler's strange behavior
2. Ryan Spelling's sadism and perversion
3. The exploded shack and the crushed man found amongst debris
4. Buford's incompetence and frequent abuse of power
5. Odd, shadowy figures around the outskirts at night
6. The shacks and vehicles being abandoned all over camp

Knowledge of Buford's missing person reports can get up to two pieces of relevant information from Okie family members for a successful persuasion check.

5.d: The Kelly's

Ma, Tom, Jessup, Buella Mae, and Edmund — all are disheveled and wearing home-spun. All have gone mad with the manipulations of their father.

The Kelly's, at first, seem like any other reticent family in the Hooverville. However, if they determine that the players are after their father, they do anything they can to manipulate investigators into joining the family at the Old Ghost Town. They believe entirely in Paul Kelly's vision and seek to isolate and kill anyone after their father. Each is armed with knives or hatchets.

6. The Washhouse

Set in the center of the Hooverville, the washhouse is one of the first uses of California's WPA money. It is an unappealing, concrete bunker set over one of the springs. The building houses a number of toilets, showers, and a trough for filling water buckets, all in the same room. Buford Kraft has roped off the men's side of the building.

Knowing how the Marionettes worked and that Kelly would kill him for his betrayal, Liang fled to the washhouse in hopes that the stone ceiling would keep the puppets from reeling him into the sky until morning. He was only partly right. The Marionette hunting Liang entered the washhouse, grabbed him, and began its ascent, slamming the locked pair into the concrete ceiling over and over again. Liang spent the rest of the night being dragged about every surface of the windowless room as the creature tried to find a way to open sky. His flesh was scoured from his bones by the rough stone. Literally every corner of the washhouse is spotted with Liang's blood and flesh, even the ceiling.

6.a: Washhouse Clue: Forensics

Anyone with the presence of mind to resist panic at the site of Liang's abattoir can learn some interesting facts from the scene.

The only place on the premise not soaked in blood is a square on the ground where Liang's briefcase landed. A crafty investigator might wonder where the obstruction has disappeared. Anyone with a rudimentary understanding of physics can tell there is no way anything could have thrown Liang against the walls and ceiling hard enough to kill him without leaving a massive splatter. However, the blood is evenly distributed throughout the room, with some spatters marks on the floor for drips seeming to come from on high. In fact, a keen eye can see a few of Liang's fingernails embedded in the concrete at impossible heights. The gore in the room must have taken hours to spread, and the culprit is someone able to defy the law of gravity.

7. Old Ghost Town

A dilapidated old western town abandoned after the railway changed tracks — little is left of this settlement save decrepit wooden frames along an abandoned main street. The town is surrounded on all sides by empty plains and desert. Cobwebs wave in the breeze across every window and entryway. There is a form huddled in a fetal position in the middle of the street — Kelly's guardian Marionette.

7.a: The Abandoned Brothel

Pa Kelly has been summoning the Marionettes from the basement of the old town brothel. Those looking for him might recognize the building as his base because of the attacking monstrosity. More subtle adventurers see the disturbed dust on the brothel door or the arcane Chinese symbols newly carved on the walls.

In the dirt cellar, Kelly has set up a dark lair to his Fisher of Men.

7.b: Paul Kelly

He has become disheveled and bloodshot. He's shirtless with suspenders on homespun trousers. He's armed with a double-barreled shotgun, hunting knife, and the Fisher's Scroll.

Pa's plan is to show the Fisher of Men the poor condition of his stock by continually culling them. He feels that the Fisher will have to see this soon enough and send back the rain and green days to his hunting grounds. Kelly's gone completely mad and uses his family as acolytes in the mad rituals learned from the scroll.

ENDGAME

There is no spell in Kelly's evil scroll to dismiss the Fisher of Men. Destroying the scroll does nothing either. If characters obtain the scroll's translation and can make sense of it, someone can summon a Marionette to attack Kelly himself. If successful, the plague ends once the madman is devoured by his dark god. The caster of this spell must risk having his or her mind torn asunder by forbidden knowledge, despite any noble intentions.

Outside of obtaining the scroll, the only way to save Bryson Springs is to overcome the Kelly family's defenses and kill Pa. Pa's body must be completely destroyed, both rendered dead and torn apart when it becomes another Marionette. However, with his avatar no longer putting chum in the waters, the Fisher of Men recedes from time and space again.

Until these solutions are discovered, the dark silhouettes continue their hunt, ranging ever wider to feed the Fisher's insatiable hunger.