

**GURPS**

Fourth Edition

# ALPHABET ARCANE™

## *LOST SERIES™*



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# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION . . . . .	2	C IS FOR COYOTE HELM . . . . .	4
About the Author . . . . .	2	F IS FOR FABULOUS PAVILION . . . . .	5
A COLLECTION OF OUTTAKES . . . . .	3	H IS FOR HELPFUL DOLL . . . . .	5
WHO IS THAT KID? . . . . .	3	N IS FOR NARMUD MARKET CIRCUS . . . . .	6
B IS FOR BLOCK PRINT CHARMS . . . . .	3		



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Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the **GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition**. Page references that begin with B refer to that book, not this one.

# INTRODUCTION

**Alphabet Arcane** is a fantasy roleplaying resource that’s compatible with the **GURPS Fourth Edition** rules. It is a collection of 26 adventure seeds, curious characters, and unusual artifacts. Some of the artifacts are trivial items, useful as red herrings or humorous diversions. Others are objects of staggering power.

Because they vary greatly in power, cultural flavor, and tone, not all of the items and adventure seeds will be suitable for every campaign. Those that don’t quite fit could be used when the adventurers travel to lands (or worlds) beyond the usual campaign setting.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stefan Jones has been writing adventure gaming material since 1981, including **GURPS MacGuffin Alphabet**, **GURPS Space: Uplift**, and **GURPS Unnigh**. His own life has been unadventurous, except for the time a bum tried to set him on fire. He works in the digital video industry and lives in a suburb of Portland, Oregon.



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# A COLLECTION OF OUTTAKES

The first draft of *Alphabet Arcane* was light on game mechanics and heavy on atmosphere-setting exposition. Some of the items changed drastically during editing . . . mostly for

the better, but in a few cases to reduce word count and simplify the game mechanics. *Alphabet Arcane: Lost Serifs* offers the best of the excised material.

## WHO IS THAT KID?

*Some of Alphabet Arcane's entries describe curious magical items. In the vaguely described world of the book, they are introduced as gifts given to Condor Boy, a legendary youthful hero. The box (p. 3) introducing Condor Boy was originally longer.*

Pick a child at random, and ask him if he has heard about Condor Boy. He'll look puzzled . . . not because he doesn't know all about Condor Boy, but because it's hard to imagine anyone who wouldn't.

*Alphabet Arcane* assumes that every country in the campaign has its own selection of Condor Boy stories. Many are variants of local legends and tall tales. But one adventure – Condor Boy's journey to the far edge of the world – is told everywhere, and it is not a story; it actually happened, ages ago.

This tale begins with Condor Boy's birth in a village on the great eastern steppes. His impoverished parents decided to abandon the stunted, sickly infant in the wilderness. Two days later, a giant condor deposited the babe on the thatched roof of his parents' hut, stole a goat, and flew away.

His parents took the hint. They named the lad Condor Boy. When he was weaned, they put him in the care of his uncle,

a trapper. He learned how to use a sling, set snares, and track prey. When he saw how the game and furs he brought home helped his family prosper, Condor Boy became overconfident. He ventured farther into the hills seeking prey more challenging than rabbits. He found it. In short order, he defeated a troll – more or less by accident – and rescued young Princess Crepescule from a band of scheming forest spirits.

Returning the Dusk King's favorite daughter didn't go quite as planned. While trying to impress the princess, Condor Boy shattered one of the great signal lamps on the Gates of Night with a sling stone. As a result, the Sun became lost and set an hour late. The celestial bureaucracy demanded punishment, and Condor Boy was brought before the Court of Twilight.

He was assigned a great quest as punishment: Beyond the edge of the world floated a monastery, home to an order of monks who tended the glass through which filtered the sands of time. Condor Boy was tasked with bringing an offering to the monks, and to beg them to set right the course of time.

At the urging of a grateful Dusk King, the court gave the young hero many gifts to aid him on his journey, some of which are described in *Alphabet Arcane* (see pp. 18-19, 23, and 33).

## B IS FOR BLOCK PRINT CHARMS

*This adventure seed is set along a caravan route beset by bandits. The charms of the title are mass-produced magical anti-theft scrolls. The setup for the entry (Alphabet Arcane, pp. 5-7) was originally a second-person fictional narration, suggesting how a patron might approach an adventuring party.*

Ah, it is good to see you again!

But you must remember? In the tavern the other night?

Ah, well, but anyone who buys a round for the house is a friend of mine. And I was quite impressed by your friend's account of your raid on the Chantam camp.

Ah, modesty! Perhaps your friend did exaggerate, but as I see it, there is as much false modesty in the world as bragging,

so all in all, they cancel each other out, and I take things as they are presented.

Come here with me a moment . . . yes, this way, down the row of Arowundee merchant stalls. Do you see these small papers hanging on the fringe of the awnings?

Prayers! I cannot read them, but I am told that the outlandish letters spell out a petition to the gods, seeking protection from thieves.

Look at the shape of the letters . . . and the designs.

Yes, all alike. Identical! Do you ever wonder how they can be made so? Well, as a child did you ever press a toy or a tool in clay or drying mud, to make an impression?

Hmm . . . I suppose faces would do that, too.

Well, the monks of Arowundee use impressions to make these prayer slips. They carve away the surface of a flat slab of stone so that only the shape of the letters and the design remain at the level.

You follow me?

The monks then smear thick, colored ink on the slab, and press paper upon it. Peel away the paper and it has the marks you see! Press on another paper, peel it up, and there you have its twin.

Well, here is the rub, so to speak. You have heard of Guruka Hemay, the fabulous bandit? Guruka has managed to kidnap a whole score of the monks who make these prayer slips. They know how to make the impression-stones, the thick ink, and the fine paper. But Guruka's cousin, Guruka La'Ramin, is a

magician. We believe he seeks a way to turn out sword-turning charms and arrow-turning charms as easily as the monks turned out these prayers.

Can you picture Guruka Hemay's bandit legion thundering out of the hills with those charms tied to their grotesque braided beards?

I see you can.

My associates and I . . . no, that is not important now . . . we do not wish to see this horror come to pass, either. We have knowledge of Hemay's movements, and the whereabouts of La'Ramin and the monks. What we do not have is the might of arms or knowledge of strategy to act upon this intelligence. Do you follow me?

## C IS FOR COYOTE HELM

*The Coyote Helm (Alphabet Arcane, pp. 7-9) is an artifact created by a long-dead civilization. It summons Lesser Coyote, one of the last survivors of the pantheon of gods worshipped by the inhabitants of that lost realm. The other deity, the Drummer, is described in the adventure seed ". Is for Full-Stop Drum, which appeared in Pyramid #3/1: Tools of the Trade – Wizards.*

*There was no room in Alphabet Arcane for the following material, which describes the awful place where Lesser Coyote and The Drummer dwell between appearances.*

### PARADISE

Like the gods of ancient Greece, the lost pantheon was believed to live in a paradise on a sacred mountain. Depending on the campaign, the place could literally be on the mountain (in which case, the peak will be very difficult and dangerous to climb), or in another plane that corresponds with the mountain.

The paradise was a sprawling complex of gardens and palaces. Near its center was a giant amphitheatre where the gods watched a hair-raising blood sport. The combatants were the spirits of champions sacrificed during wars between mortals.

Adjacent to the playing field was a banquet hall where the deities ate the spiritual manifestations of the animal and human sacrifices offered up by their followers. Beneath the banquet hall were dozens of small rooms where the paradise's servants and bureaucrats lived.

Off in a corner of the paradise was a ziggurat built from slabs of black granite. Beneath this forbidding structure was a series of vaults littered with piles of gold, gems, silver, artwork, and jars of essences and unguents. These items were the spiritual "ghosts" of items sacrificed to the gods; they were oddly light and pale in color. They cannot be transferred to the physical world, but if they still exist, they may be of value to other deities.

The complex was surrounded by a ring of lightly forested land. This beautiful, bountiful, supernatural spot was the resting place for the souls of especially favored mortals.

### PARADISE LOST

The ancient dwelling is now an awful, deserted place. It is silent, dark, and chilly (35° F). There are no sun, moon, or stars; a low ceiling of roiling clouds caps the sky just above the

highest remaining pinnacle. The only sound is a faint, deep, rhythmic tapping, and that can only be heard by those daring to venture into the complex's underground passages.

Mortals who make their way to the moribund paradise are struck with numbing despair and sadness. Roll Will-4 every 10 minutes to avoid slumping to the ground and weeping for as many minutes as the margin of failure.

### RESIDENCES AND RESIDENTS

An occasional faint glimmer can be seen racing through the dense, boiling cloud deck. These trails are the glow of tortured ghosts. They have no memories of their former selves. They know only unspeakable loss and a desire for release from their bondage to the place.

The Drummer is incarcerated in one of the treasure vaults. He never sleeps, instead spending his time obsessively rapping the floor of his cell with a dragon's thighbones. The creature treats intruders as beneath contempt, but if they bother him, he will quickly dispatch them. (The GM should treat the Drummer as the biggest, baddest Titan he can imagine.)

One room beneath the banquet hall is still occupied, by Lesser Coyote. She spends most of her time between appearances in sleep, curled up on a pile of old costumes. The floors and corners of her cell are cluttered with tapestries, tablets, and vases decorated with images of wolf and jackal deities from around the world (and possibly beyond). Lesser Coyote has teenybopper crushes on these gods. When she is settling in after a performance for whoever summoned her with the Coyote Helm, she has gushy daydreams about one or another. (These generally involve loping through meadows of wildflowers, hunting bunnies, and licking blood off each others' muzzles . . . it's a canine thing.)

Lesser Coyote will flee if confronted on her home turf. She isn't physically strong or tough, but she is fantastically fast and elusive. (Start with Basic Speed 12 and add lots of defensive martial-arts moves.)

Both the Drummer and Lesser Coyote can be killed on this plane; they will reappear in new bodies within a few weeks. They cannot be permanently defeated until the "end times" events described in ". Is for Full-Stop Drum (Pyramid #3/1: Tools of the Trade – Wizards) play out.

# F IS FOR FABULOUS PAVILION

*The MacGuffin of this entry (Alphabet Arcane, pp. 11-12) is a crystal orb containing a pleasant miniature scene: a charming party venue populated by happy, accommodating revelers. In the published book, the Fabulous Pavilion was a dreamland that could entrap anyone who spent too much time admiring it. However, in early drafts, the Pavilion was a material realm contained in a pocket universe. People entrapped by it were physically transported there. In the end, I think the “dream” version works better, but for completeness’ sake, I present some of the exposition describing the pocket universe.*

## NO WAY OUT?

There is no obvious exit out of the magic land. Clever landscaping and illusionary vistas make it seem like part of the natural world, but it is only about 500 feet across and bounded by an impenetrable crystalline wall. From a distance, the barrier gives the illusion of a pleasant landscape. To the north is a range of mountains, fronted by a real cliff over which a picturesque waterfall tumbles. In the other directions lie meadows and light woodlands. A persistent adventurer could try to cross the fields or plunge through the woods, but he would eventually bump into something smooth, cool, and very solid. Peering through the barrier between cupped hands reveals that a black abyss lies beyond.

Climbing the mist-slick cliff is difficult and dangerous. At the top is a ledge set against the edge of the barrier. Other than some shrubs and vines, there’s nothing up there but a bubbling pool, apparently fed by springs.

A river winds through the land, beginning at a pool under the waterfall. After passing through a meadow and woods, the river descends into a cool grotto lit by phosphorescent moss. There it gurgles down narrow openings in the rock. From there the water passes through a pipe and eventually cycles back up to the river’s source.

There is an exit. Careful observation of the servants and performers reveals that those entering the tiny kitchen shack stay there for many hours, and that over the course of a day, more

enter than could possibly fit inside. Unless an adventurer directly follows a servant entering the place, he will find the shack empty. Investigation reveals a hidden panel at the back of the pantry. Behind it is a spiral staircase.

## THE LABYRINTH

The spiral stair leads to a domed chamber about 20’ across and 10’ high. It is lit with oil lamps and is clean and well ventilated. There are several wooden tables. One is stacked with clean serving platters and trays. Another is crowded with bowls and baskets full of horrid stuff, including dead bugs, bat guano, spider webs, and shed hair. An adventurer who waits here long enough will see one of the servants descend the staircase, pile some of the filth onto a platter, and use a magic wand to turn the stuff into a tempting selection of finger food. (The wand holds the Create Food and Fool’s Banquet spells; it turns organic matter into two meals’ worth of tasty appetizers. It is *not* self-powered; activation costs 4 FP.) Another wand’s spells can transform foul water into wine or nectar; the magic in yet another can turn the offal into lamp oil.

There is another exit to the chamber. The hallway beyond is cramped, a bit over 2’6” wide and 4’2” tall. The walls are well-fitted stones, the vaulted ceilings reddish slate. For the first 20 feet or so, the corridor is clean and dry. It then takes several sharp turns and descends into a dank, noisome labyrinth. Some sections are roamed by spiders, others by rodents. Bats fly through every few minutes. Other areas have floors covered with pig manure, or walls that ooze a sticky, bubbly resin. Some corridors dead-end in prison cells with flimsy iron bars. Inside these rage boars, jackals, or giant rats.

Solving the maze takes at least an hour. At the far end is a ladder leading down to a large room with a circular pool set in the floor. A vortex of glowing water gurgles there. Anyone jumping in is transported to a dark cellar cluttered with bundles of aromatic wood, bolts of fine cloth, and casks of wine. Upstairs is the home of a wealthy merchant; outside, the thriving market city of Kheeshar, known in ancient times as Erutappet.

# H IS FOR HELPFUL DOLL

*The “helpful dolls” of this entry (Alphabet Arcane, p. 15) are meticulously detailed figurines – hippaya – which can animate and do simple tasks. These golem-like creations were created as tomb servants, intended to be buried along with royal personages to serve them in the afterlife. In early drafts, the dolls literally came to life, as flesh-and-blood people. The entry provided a write-up of Psotte, a particularly self-willed hippaya who wanders the world trying to gather up her “siblings.” The doll was introduced with this fictional narrative.*

I saw many strange things in my years as a soldier, and stranger things still trading on the rivers of the northern territory, but few compare to the strange thing that happened in the village of my birth.

Psotte Hippaya came to the village when I was a young boy. We children thought her a witch, because of her outlandish red hair, outlandish speech, and outlandish clothes, but most of all, because of her missing finger. One of us made up a story that in her land, witches were punished by having just that finger cut off. Within a week, the story had been repeated so much that it had become incontrovertible truth. Such is the way of children. In truth, the only unusual thing about her was her pet – a fine black rooster.

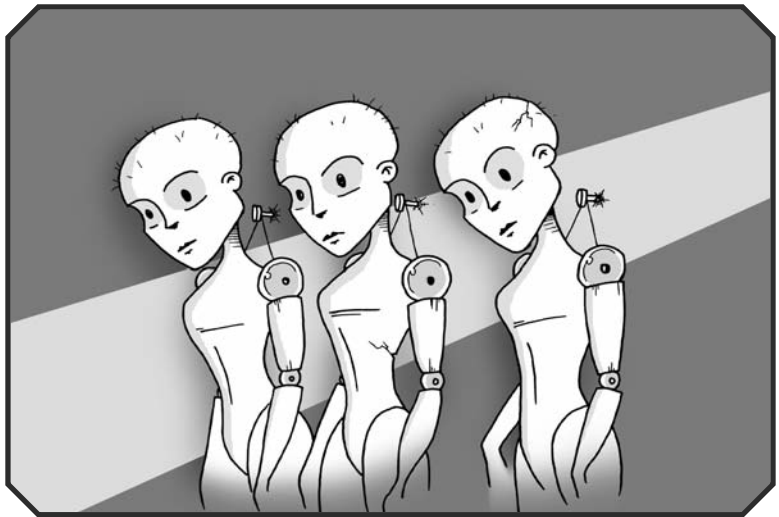
Psotte became a washerwoman. Within a short time, she became to us just another uninteresting adult. We came to see that she was merely another servant, unusual only in that she had her own small house and worked in many houses rather than one. But not all of the children grew bored with her.

Perhaps because she passed my window each morning and night, I noticed a strange thing about her. Not something one saw all at once, but over many years. When she was new to the village, Psotte wore her hair long and dressed in the colorful clothes of a young woman. When I was a youth, she wore her hair tied in a bun, and wore the bland stiff clothes of a woman who fate deigned would not marry. When I returned to the village after my first campaign, she wore dark clothing, walked hunched over, and gathered her hair under a cloth, as a woman with the years looming over her is expected to do. But as perhaps only I saw, each day as she left the main road and walked up the path to her hut, she would loosen her hair and brighten her step. She had not aged!

When I returned from my second campaign, Psotte was gone. I inquired of her among my old friends. This is what I heard from Uffun Lour Sun of-Lour-Saht, the half-brother of two thieves. Uffun was a lazy man and a drunkard, but an honest one who always paid back a debt.

Kwat Lour Wen of-Lour-Saht and Penim Lour Wen of-Lour-Saht were rough and cruel boys, and they became thieving and dishonorable men. They watched Psotte, but they only noticed that she did not seem to spend her money. Her clothing was cast-offs from her customers; her clients as often as not fed her as well. The rent on her modest hut could not have been more than a third of what she earned. So where did her money go? Kwat and Penim decided the washerwoman must have a sack of silver in her home, and that it would only be expected of them to take it. Things did not turn out as planned.

The brothers stole into Psotte Hippaya's hut late at night, dressed in black clothing. One carried a great sack and ropes, the other a gleaming knife and another sack. They rushed to Psotte's bed and prepared to thrust the sack over the woman's head . . . but instead of a woman who might scream and need to be threatened and tied up, they found in the bed a doll of wood and clay. The doll, no more than five hands high, looked



like Psotte. The only living thing in the hut was the rooster, which slept in its cage by the window.

The brothers, always more greedy than curious, did not stop long to stare and wonder, but began searching the hut, looking for the washerwoman's treasure. Instead of money, they found more dolls. All were dressed in strange clothes, much as Psotte had when she first came to town. They were about to smash the dolls out of spite when Kwat banged his head on the rooster's cage. The bird crowed, and at that instant, the doll on the bed grew and transformed into Psotte Hippaya, appearing just as she had 20 years in the past.

The woman sprang from the bed, raised her arms, and cried out in a strange tongue. Much afraid, the brothers fled the house, leaving the knife and a sack behind.

Psotte brought these items to Lour Saht the next day. She demanded compensation for his sons' rash acts. She took the bag of silver he offered, bought a cart and a donkey, and left town the next day, never to return.

— Account by Piwwot Mar Chosset of-Mar-Tren, as recorded by Peyoladas the Elder in "Soldiers' Tales"

## N IS FOR NARMUD MARKET CIRCUS

*There's no business like show business, but for the three entertainers of the Narmud Market Circus (**Alphabet Arcane**, pp. 20-23), it is their **only** business. They've been wandering the world since the dawn of history, cursed to never settle down or take up other jobs. This narrative introduction, describing how adventurers might encounter the Circus, was cut to reduce the word count.*

"I remember them!" said Master Khee, pointing at a troupe of entertainers setting up a ring across from the market. "I saw them when I was just a boy. You see them, Lampard?" He turned and smiled at his former apprentice. "Just like I told you."

Hemrick snorted. "I believe your master has finally turned the corner, wizard." Seeing the troubled look on Lampard's face, he added in a sympathetic tone, "It happens to us all, low or high."

"Ha!" said Tremmer Black. "Perhaps by 'boy' he meant the beginning of his second childhood."

Master Kee, oblivious to the talk about him, fumbled for his purse. They let him keep a few coppers in there, out of respect. "I should pay them something this time. They put on a great show, and all I could give them was a turnip."

"No . . . no," said Lampard to the young men, staring at the troupe as they unpacked their wagons. "He did tell me about them, over 12 years ago. There was no doubt that he had his wits about him back then."

"And he claimed he'd seen them as a boy?" asked Black. "But that was . . . if the stories are true . . ."

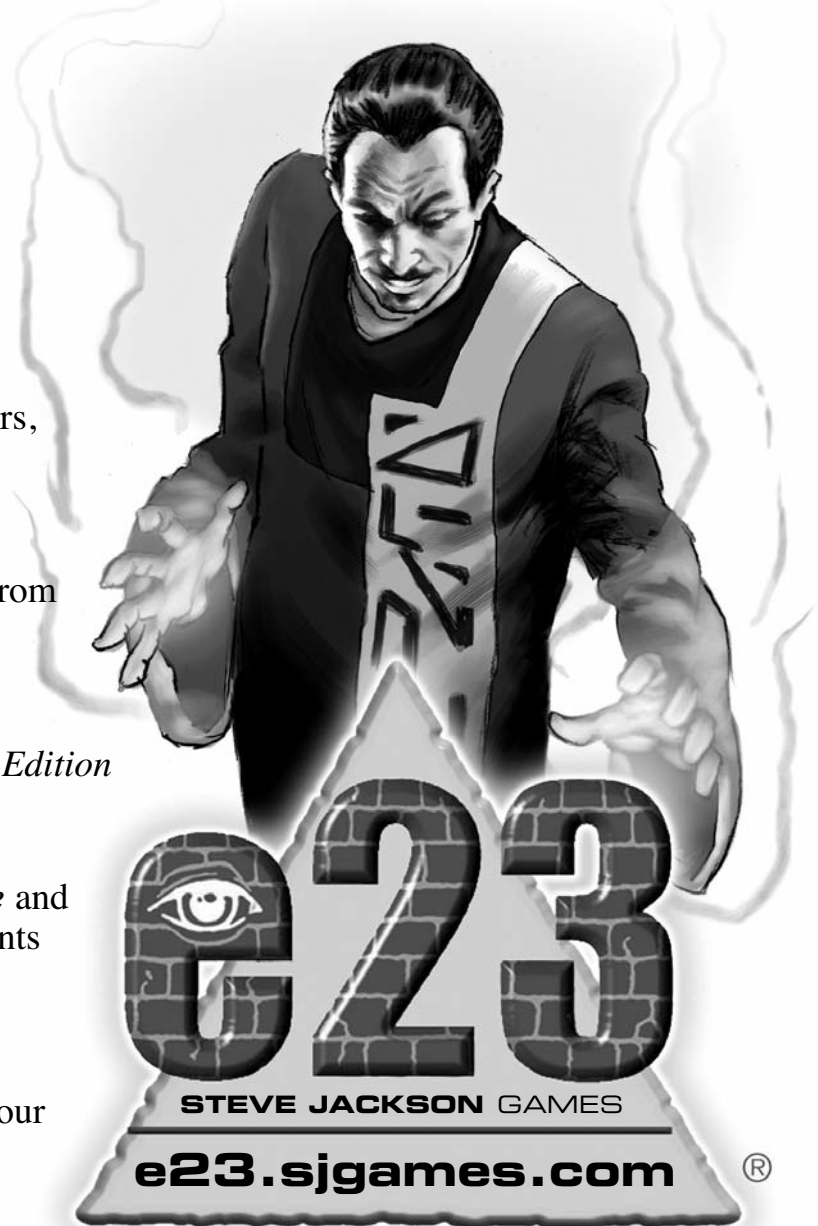
"My master was born in the reign of Lucas II – 600 years ago."

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