

protodimension magazine



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Managing Editor: Norm Fenlason

Chief Editor: Lee Williams

Art Direction: Norm Fenlason

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CONTENTS

4 CRIME SCENES

A Collection of Prepared Scenes

By Geoff Skellams

For Trail of Cthulhu® (GUMSHOE)

10 THE DEALS MEN MAKE

A Short Adventure

By Scott McClenaghan & Alex Williamson

For Dark Conspiracy®

42 NIGHTMARES AND WORSE

A Little Critter Cache

By Chad Bowser

For Basic Role Playing®

49 NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE

Fiction

By CW Kelson III (Tad)

52 A STRICT PROTEIN DIET

Character and Seeds

By Jeff Moeller

For Call of Cthulhu® (Modern)

60 THIS ISSUE'S RECIPE

Oatmeal-Zombie Muffins

By CW Kelson (Tad)

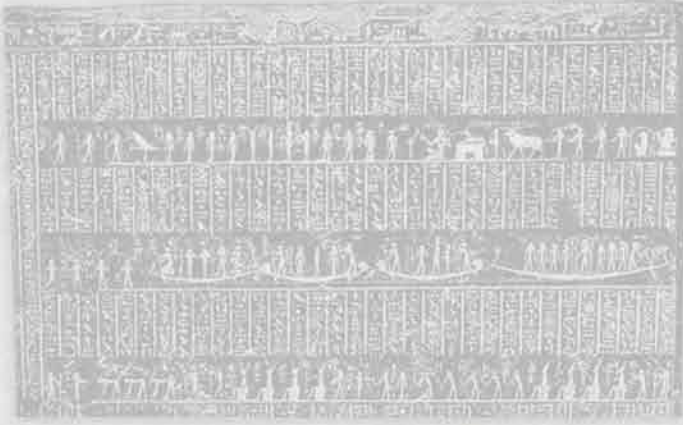
61 THE WILLOWS

Classic Fiction

By Algernon Blackwood



Crime Scenes



A Collection of Prepared Scenes
By Geoff Skellams
For Trail of Cthulhu®
(GUMSHOE)

This article presents three fleshed-out crime scenes, intended for use in a Trail of Cthulhu game, although they should be usable in nearly any of the GUMSHOE games, and potentially with any gaming system.

However, rather than provide a whole context, they are provided as isolated scenes, so that a GM can slot them into any game if they find themselves caught short without a scene to work with. The GM can use them as inspiration for a new adventure, using the clues provided to kickstart a story, or they may want to slot them into the middle of another adventure, planting clues earlier in the story that will lead to these scenes. Exactly how the investigators come to be in the scene, and what their motivations are is left to the Keeper to determine.

Each scene provides a brief description of what the player characters will find there, as well as a list of clues that can be recovered, including clues that can be recovered for free, as well as those that will require investigative point spends to recover. What these clues mean and where they will lead to next is left to the Keeper's imagination. Any missing details are left open to allow the Keeper to tailor them to their individual stories.

TEMPERATE RAINFOREST

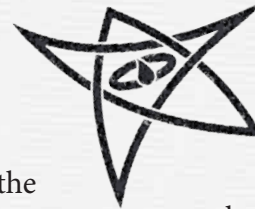
DESCRIPTION

The forest here is thick, with trees making it difficult to see too far ahead. Ferns and other undergrowth make going difficult, and add to the visibility problems. Rain drips down from the canopy above, a constant reminder of the inclement weather.

The car wreck lies upside down at the bottom of the gully, at the edge of a small stream. How it came to be there is confusing, as there is no road or track near the top of the cliff walls on either side of the gully, and driving through the forest would have been nearly impossible given the density of the trees. The wreck is extremely rusty and the underside of the car – now on top – is covered with a thick layer of dark green moss. Most of the car's panels are intact and even relatively undamaged, but the roof has severely caved in.

CLUES

With the exception of the car's roof, which is almost completely crushed, there is little damage to most of the car's panels. Investigators with Physics realize that the



damage isn't consistent with the car rolling down the gully walls. Instead, the car appears to have landed directly on its roof.

There are no tracks or roads for the car to have driven through the forest on. Investigators with Outdoorsman notice that several of the trees on the gully's edge have branches that appear to have been snapped off by something heavy, falling through the canopy. From the looks of the breaks, they happened some time ago.

Examining the wreck with Chemistry shows that the wreck has been in the gully for a considerable length of time. The car's yellow paint is faded and peeling, and the panels are severely rusted, something that would have taken several years, even in the damp conditions of the rainforest. This is backed up by the use of Biology; the amount of moss also indicates the car has laid here undisturbed for at least several years.

However, examining the car using Mechanical Repair shows the vehicle to be of a model that was only released about six months ago. There is no way that this car could have laid in the gully for several years.

Seeing into the cabin's interior is difficult, but there are two bodies in there, a

female stretched out in the front seat, and a male in the back. Both look like they were mummified; their skins are dried and leathery, stretched out over their bones. Investigators examining the bodies using Forensics learn that they have been dead a long time, and it is highly unusual that their bodies have not decomposed, given the moist surroundings of the area. A 1-point Anthropology spend reveals that they appear to have been preserved using an ancient Mayan technique, which is both difficult and requires expensive and hard to find materials to achieve.

The corpses are wrapped in the remains of what appear to be bandages, although the cloth is dark with mildew and rotting away. However, bound into the cloth are small gemstone trinkets. Geology reveals they are made from either Topaz or Jade, gemstones highly prized in Central America. A 1-point Occult spend shows they are related to symbols used by a Mayan death cult, which underwent a revival in Mexico about fifty years ago, but has since believed to have died out.

The trunk of the car is still locked, requiring the use of Locksmith to get it open. Inside it, there is an old leather suitcase, which contains some old rotting clothes, a mildew ridden journal and a silver fob

watch with the initials "CJV" engraved on the back. Water damage makes most of the handwriting in the journal illegible, but there are passages that talk excited about finally getting an appointment to meet with the curator at the British Museum, and others mention receiving letters from Miskatonic University, although it is not clear what the letters were about.

THE PRIVATE LIBRARY

DESCRIPTION

The girl's bloody body lies face up on the floor, next to the library's open window. She was young and beautiful, her life cut short by multiple stab wounds to the chest. Her face is contorted with a look of shock and surprise, her dead eyes staring at the ceiling. Her clothes – once expensive designer fashions – are now dirty and torn.

Despite this, there are no other signs of what happened in the room immediately visible. The walls of the room are lined with oak bookshelves, all filled with expensive leather bound volumes. Along the northern wall are a collection of locked glass-fronted cabinets, holding both very old books and a collection of artefacts from around the world – statues, masks, weap-



ons and the like, from a collection of exotic locales.

Sir Archibald Yestler, the library's owner stands stoically, looking down at the body of the girl, his hands clutched behind his back. He says nothing, but he is clearly thinking something. From elsewhere in the house, faintly comes the sound of a woman weeping.

There are no signs of forced entry on either the door or the windows, but there is a yellowish-green scuff mark on the windowsill, as well as a small blood smear.

CLUES

Sir Archibald Yestler reveals that the girl is his seventeen year old daughter, Felicity. She had disappeared about six months ago, after Sir Archibald had had a heated argument with her, and he had not seen nor heard from her since. He explains that she had started seeing a young, homeless man – who's name was Jacob, or Joshua, or something like that. Sir Archibald did not approve of the relationship at all, and had expressly forbidden Felicity from seeing the boy again. Felicity had defied her father, and declared that she would continue seeing the boy. Sir Archibald formally disowned her after she continued to defy him and he had not

seen her since. Assess Honesty reveals that there is more to the story, but Sir Archibald refuses to elaborate further.

A careful examination of the body using Forensics indicates that the girl died instantly from a stab wound to the heart, using a very sharp, single edged blade approximately six inches long. Judging from the wound pattern, it would appear they were made quickly and frantically by an individual approximately six feet in height, who had been standing very close to the victim at the time of her death. Given the body's temperature and state of rigor, she died about six hours ago, during the night.

The vast majority of the books on the shelves are mundane, mostly dealing with history, biographies and religious discussions. There are a small number of books dealing with more esoteric subjects, including the beliefs of native tribes in remote parts of the world. Careful examination of the library shelves with Library Use reveals several locations on the shelves where it appears that books have been removed. Scuff marks in the dust, and gaps between the other volumes indicate that as many as four books are currently absent. Sir Archibald that he had been reading one of them in his bedroom the previous evening, but he is unable to account for the

other three. A 1-point Library Use spend allows the investigator to cross reference the contents of the shelves with the library catalogue to determine that the missing volumes are *Black Magic of Southern Africa* by Arthur Myss (1883; English), *Military Reminiscences* by Sir Reginald Montrose, KCB (1916; English) and *A Comparison of Alien Mythologies*, translated by F. K. Arkinstall (1921; English).

An examination of the scuff marks on the windowsill using Biology reveal it to be a form of algae. A 1-point Biology spend reveals that the algae is often found in the steam tunnels underneath the city.

Examination of the artefacts within the locked cabinet using Archaeology or Anthropology reveals them to come from Southern Africa. Most are old weapons (particularly knives and clubs) used by the native tribes. There are also several masks and statues, which a 1-point Archaeology or Occult spend reveals potentially come from an extinct tribe in South Africa, infamous for their use of black magic. When used together, the artefacts are purported to possess the ability to speak with the dead.

The weeping is coming from Sir Archibald's distraught wife, Lady Elizabeth. A 1-point Reassurance spend reveals that



she had warned her husband about an outcome like this after he and Felicity had fought. Felicity had requested access on behalf of the boy she had been seeing to the more restricted items in her father's collection and Sir Archibald had refused. He believed that the boy was planning on stealing and selling them, as they would fetch a high price on the black market. Lady Elizabeth is not sure which pieces they were fighting over. Lady Elizabeth believes that Felicity did love the boy with her whole heart and tried to persuade her husband to give into his daughter's requests, but he would not hear of it.

Subsequent questioning of Sir Archibald on this front will draw his ire. However, a 1-point Reassurance, Intimidation or Interrogation spend causes him to back down reluctantly. He explains that his daughter had indeed been trying to get access to a painted stone idol that he had brought back from his time in South Africa. He subsequently loaned it to a senior Archaeologist from a prestigious museum (of the Keeper's choice).

A 2-point Architecture spend reveals that the library is several feet shorter than the walls outside would indicate. Careful examination of the library finds a secret entrance to a small tunnel leading

down, hidden behind one of the bookshelves. Where the tunnel leads and what can be found there is left to the Keeper's discretion.

THE ABANDONED WAREHOUSE

DESCRIPTION

The smell in the old, dilapidated warehouse is what hits you first – the smell of death, mixed with the smells of age and decay.

Seven bodies lie strewn around the warehouse floor, three men and four women. All of them are naked and have been mutilated to some degree or another. Some look as though they have only just been stabbed with a large weapon, while the worst of them has literally been torn in two (those viewing the scene should make a 3 point Stability check). The rest have wounds somewhere in between, including a couple who have had limbs torn off and thrown around the room. Blood is everywhere, particularly in pools around the corpses.

The centre of the floor is dominated by a double ringed chalk circle drawn on the floor. Strange symbols have been scrawled between the two circles and the melted remains of black candles are found

spaced evenly around the circumference. The circles and the symbols have both been scuffed in several places. Broken glass pieces are scattered all over the room, including on several of the corpses.

The burned remains of a leather bound book sit on an overturned wooden box just outside the circle. Little remains of it, but there are a few charred fragments that can still be read.

CLUES

Examining the bodies with Forensics reveals that they were all killed within the past several hours. There is still some warmth to them, and the blood has not yet dried completely. From the wound patterns on the corpses, they were attacked by something large and incredibly strong. The bodies with the more severe mutilations have not been cut with an edged weapon. Instead, they appear to have been torn using brute force. One of the bodies is lying as though she had been trying to escape to the warehouse door, but was cut down from behind, given the large gash mark in her back.

A careful examination of the scene, particularly using Evidence Collection, shows that the glass scattered about the room comes from the broken skylight in



the roof above the chalk circle. A 1 point Evidence Collection spend reveals that the window appears to have been broken from the inside, as though someone or something was trying to get out through it.

Investigators with Occult will be somewhat baffled by the chalk symbols scrawled on the floor. They are a mixture of symbols from different traditions, including Egyptian hieroglyphics, Norse runes, Sumerian cuneiform and Indian Sanskrit. A 1 point Occult spend will infer that the mixture of symbolism was probably intended to provide redundant levels of protection for what appears to be a summoning ritual of some sort. A 2 point Occult spend, however, can deduce that instead of making the protection stronger, the mixture of different mythologies and symbolisms most likely significantly weakened the effect of the spell. Whoever these people were, they were rank amateurs when it came to occult rituals.

The book is bound in a burgundy colored leather, with no markings on the outside. The charred remains of the book can be read by anyone who speaks Latin (or is prepared to make a 1 point Languages spend to do so). The few remaining readable passages hint at the summoning and binding of demons to do the summoner's bidding. While most of

the actual ritual has been burned away, the sections that are left are disturbing enough to require a 2 point Stability check.

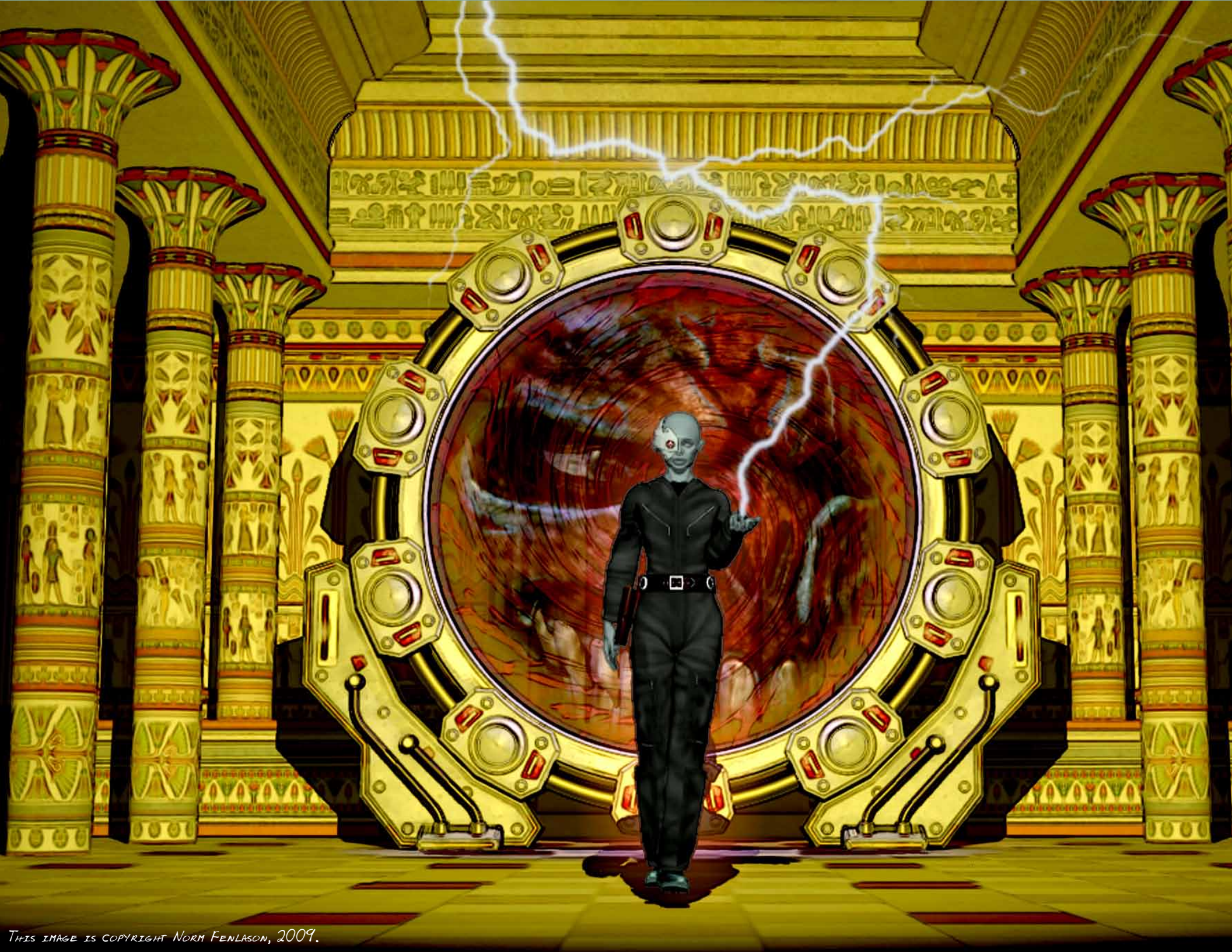
There are a large number of strange footprints in the blood spread around the floor. They humanoid, although definitely not human. An Investigator with Outdoorsman can deduce they were made by a bipedal creature with large taloned feet, who would sometimes even use its hands to steady itself. It was also a strong climber, given the blood trail leading up a couple of the roof support pillars to the broken skylight above.

Should Investigators search around the surrounding area outside the warehouse, they can discover several hobos living nearby. Questioning them using abilities such as Interrogation, Intimidation or Reassurance lets the Investigators learn that the hobos heard some weird chanting in that warehouse earlier in the night, and then there was screaming and the sounds of a big fight. They heard the sounds of a smashing window, and two of them claim to have seen a large dark shape emerge onto the roof, although they give conflicting reports about its shape and how it moved. If asked if they had seen anyone entering the warehouse, none of them recall seeing anyone, but one old guy remembers talking to an attractive, rich

woman a few days ago, who had come to the area looking to buy an old warehouse. He remembers her having a distinguished voice, and wore a lot of diamond jewelry, but didn't seem to have any bodyguards with her.

An Investigator may attempt to use Cthulhu Mythos to identify what sort of creature was summoned and escaped. A 1 point spend (accompanied by a 4 point Stability loss and a 1 point Sanity loss) reveals that a Mythos creature has indeed been summoned by the ritual and has escaped into the surrounding area. Unless it is caught and dealt with, there is a high probability that it will kill more people. The Keeper should not identify precisely what sort of creature has been summoned; indeed, the actual type of creature is left up to the Keeper to choose to best suit the adventure they're running.





The Deals Men Make



A Short Adventure
By Scott McClenaghan &
Alex Williamson
For Dark Conspiracy®

ADVENTURE SUMMARY

In this short adventure, the PCs will uncover a conspiracy where a rogue branch of the US military has chartered a corporate research firm called Neo Lunar to conduct experiments on the local populace in and around downtown New Orleans, Louisiana.

Although the research and experiments vary, there are two main points of focus.

The first is the exposure of human subjects to something called Living Script. It is an ancient and fluid form of written communication whose origin is unknown, although scientists suspect it is either alien or supernatural. The lucid and logical mind cannot translate its secrets, but as the scientists are learning, humans (particularly empathic humans) who approach a state of delirium (whether by drugs, disease, or psychosis) are able to infer basic truths. The US military is convinced that decrypting this Living Script will provide valuable insight into whatever schemes the recent deluge of Darklings into our world may be planning.

The second set of experiments is a response to the urgent need posed by NASA and other (private) space agencies for paramilitary support for off-world colonies. Within these military financed laboratories,

cybernetic surgeries of the most invasive kind are performed with oftentimes drastic results.

To support this research, a near endless stream of human candidates is required. To that end, Jackson, the leader of an unscrupulous crew of enterprising Louisianans, has been contracted to collect these test subjects, prepare them, and deliver them to an abandoned US Navy Airport just 20 minutes outside of New Orleans. It is within one of the hangars on this base and in a bunker beneath it, that the experimentation occurs.

Several gangs and small businesses have been similarly subcontracted by Jackson. They are paid very well to provide these bodies (which Jackson then stores and transports), but have no direct contact with Neo Lunar. One such company, a restaurant called The Soup Kitchen, is detailed below.

It is perhaps no surprise, that this whole military installation is merely a stone's throw from an area commonly known as Demonground.

If the PCs can infiltrate the various supply chains and eventually the base itself, it could go a long way to discovering some of the plans in motion, both of the US military and of some of its purported enemies.



It is important to remember that this short adventure is intended to generate lots of leads for future campaign material. Although combat opportunities abound, there is no actual Darkling or Dark Lord to fight or encounter here (although the existence of one is hinted at).

SCENE ONE: NEW ORLEANS DISAPPEARANCES

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

New Orleans. It is the definitive proof that the more things change, the more they stay the same. The city has suffered disaster after disaster. And each time it shows any sign of recovering itself, the fates conspire to reduce it again to some third world sprawl.

The smog is ever-worse today than yesterday. Oppressive sky-rises reach upwards into an ominous haze which seems to filter everything except an incessant and smothering heat. The sun is rarely discernible as anything beyond a dull and sickly yellow-brown nebula. New Orleans is hot and its people are miserable.

Sunglasses and sunscreen are a must. The ozone layer above New Orleans has thinned to the level of terminal risk. Mere hours in direct sunlight are enough to

cause blistering skin conditions and permanent eye damage without appropriate precautions. (Refer to New Orleans supplement by Eric W. Haddock for more information. In general, this is a good book to familiarize with before running any Dark Conspiracy adventure set in New Orleans).

Between the endless, streaming game shows, reality television, and sports programming, the occasional news story will be broadcast about oversized, diseased carrying vermin, or about the ever increasing crime rate, or about a pattern of civilian disappearances in the city outskirts and surrounding area. No one has paid these stories much mind until recently, when they seem to have taken a turn for the worse...

NEWS STORIES:

According to a recent news report, Darren Mayhew, son of House Representative Linden Mayhew was recently reported missing from an area in downtown New Orleans known for high rates of civilian disappearances. The police report having thoroughly investigated the case including following up on dozens of leads but are unable to determine what exactly happened. It is not known what

Darren was doing in this area at the time of his disappearance.

In other more disturbing news, there has been a rash of violent disturbances in and around the New Orleans district. Several times in the past few weeks, there have been incidents of one or more individuals attacking civilians, private property, and even law enforcement in what seem to be random and unprovoked acts of violence.

In one incident, an unidentified man arrived at a downtown laundromat and opened fire on the establishment killing all within, several bystanders, and two law enforcement officers, bringing the death toll to 17 before he was finally apprehended. While in transit to the authorities, the individual apparently attempted to escape and was killed while trying to do so.

Reports of similar incidents have detailed attacks on Highway 23 coming into and out of the district area. Since the incidents occurred outside of a controlled zone, law enforcement was not involved, but several US army deployments have failed to unearth the source of the attacks.

Just yesterday, two men attacked the Jefferson Davis branch of the S&J Trust banking corporation. The firefight between the men and the firm's legendary private



security was reported to have lasted over twenty minutes before a combination of law enforcement and National Guard contingents were finally able to bring the men down. The damage estimates to S&J Trust and surrounding buildings was estimated at 1.2 million dollars with a total of 44 people (including the two perpetrators) comprising the death count. Although one of the bodies was unidentifiable due to the nature of his wounds, the other was identified as Mortimer J. Hochard, a disabled veteran reported to have been living on the streets of New Orleans and who was reported missing several weeks prior to the incident.

SUGGESTED CHARACTER HOOKS:

1. One of the characters had a term of Drifter or Homeless and knew Mortimer Hochard. Mortimer was a gruff and cynical person, but seemed unable both physically and mentally of accomplishing the feats purported by the recent news reports. Although Mortimer was able to walk slowly for short durations, he was mostly confined to his wheelchair and suffered severe rheumatoid arthritis. Although he had generally given up on his country, his family, and eventually himself, he did accept responsibility for his own situation and rarely said differently.

2. Linden Mayhew, discouraged with the lack of police progress into the disappearance of his son, is offering the substantial reward of \$20,000 for information leading to his safe return. Several groups and individuals are following leads, motivated by this reward. The PCs may be amongst them.

One of the PCs has a friend or family member whose son or daughter has gone missing in the streets of New Orleans. With the recent news stories, they fear the worst.

3. The PC with the highest Foreboding ability has been having dreams about a roomful of delirious and feverish people working fervently somewhere within the bayou infested Louisiana to draw pages and pages of a strange alien script. The PC has even seen the script in his dreams, but every time he tries to reproduce it, he finds his memory of it has shifted enough that he can't. After hearing a recent new report about missing people in New Orleans, he cannot be convinced it is coincidence.

4. The PCs are attacked by two men with an inordinate stockpile of military issue weapons while attempting to enter or exit the New Orleans district. During the fire-fight, the PCs see evidence of heavy cybernetic augmentation on the two men. (Use

Cyborg Escapees I or II from Appendix D for this encounter).

THE SOUP KITCHEN:

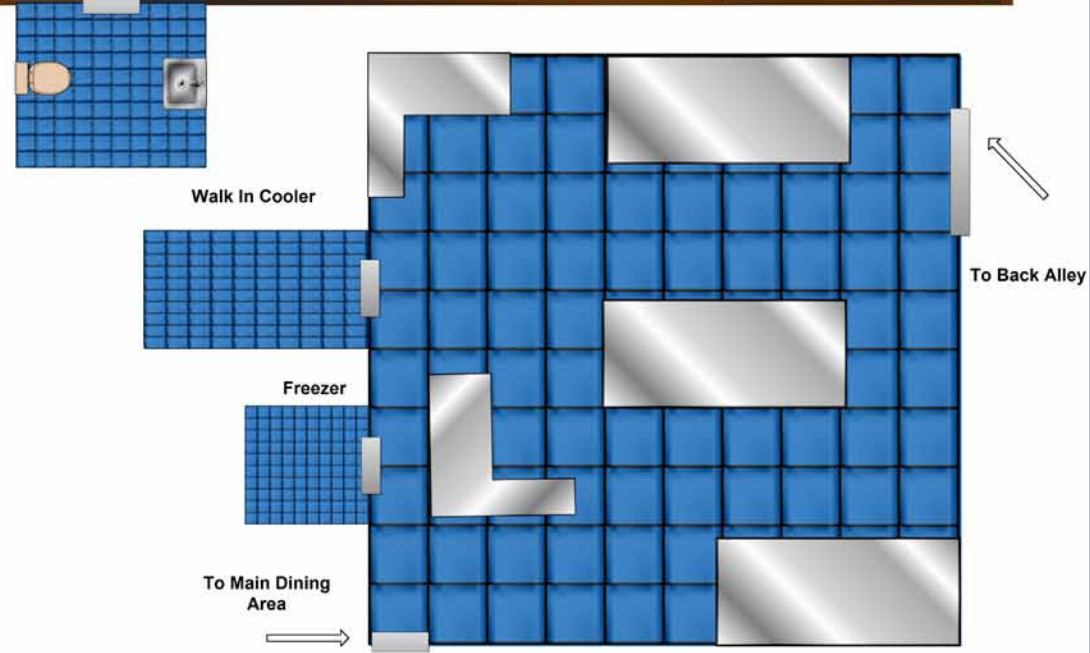
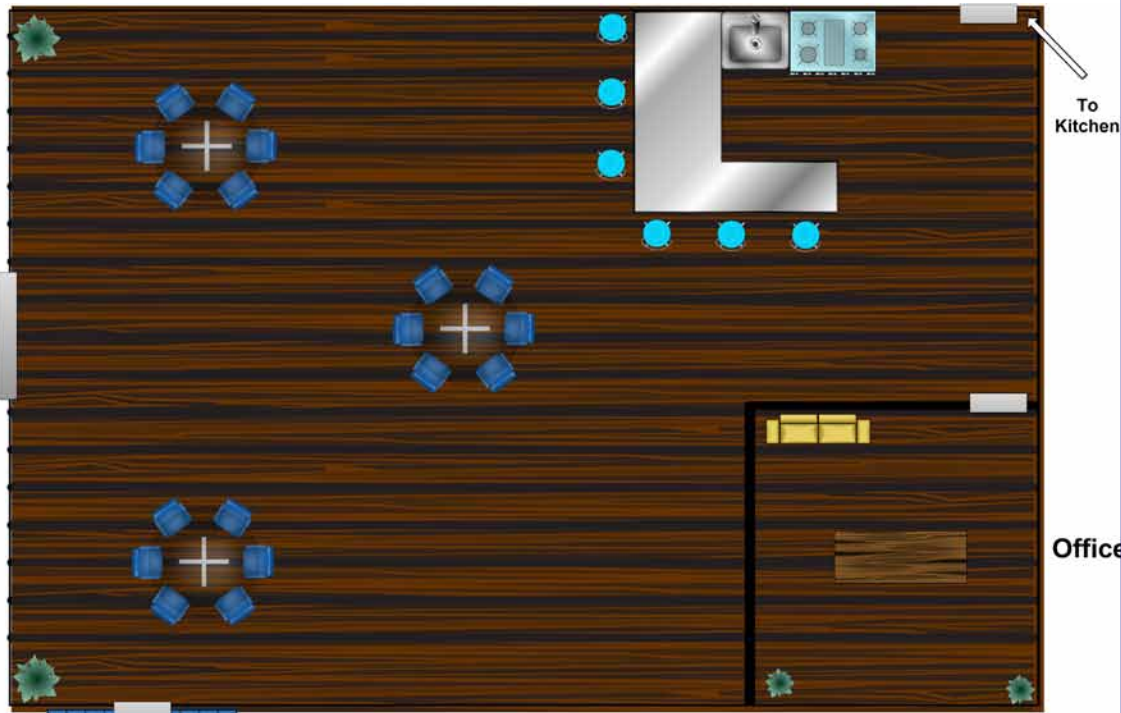
SEE MAP 1, NEXT PAGE.

The Soup Kitchen on Palmetto St. is a typical restaurant with mediocre fare for lunch or dinner. They tend to stay open particularly late which is when they get most of their business, from insomniacs, nightshift workers, and more recently, from the extra cash they earn by abducting the odd vagrant or two.

The Kitchen is run by Willie King, a 37 year old native of Louisiana and his younger brother Andre (33). Willie does most of the morning prep cooking, accounting, and supply ordering. Andre works afternoons and evenings and so, does the evening prep cooking and some of the ordering as well as most of the maintenance in and around the building. They have three hired hands, Terrence, Luthor, and Douglas who cook to order, clean the tables, handle the sales, etc... Terrence is 23 and has been here about two years. He is aware of Willie's extracurricular activities and will often assist him for a cut in the profits. Luthor is 28 and is a massive giant of a man. He's been working there for a little over a year and is aware of what is going on, but doesn't



MAP 1
SOUP KITCHEN



get involved. Douglas has been working here for only a few months. He knows something is going on; but not exactly what. What he'll do when he finds out is anyone's guess, but Willie and Andre are used to a high turnover. As one would expect, anyone who is terminated rarely shows up to work for a competitor.

THE ARRANGEMENT:

Willie, like several of the seedier establishments around downtown New Orleans, has made an arrangement with a group of locals residing in the nearby swamplands. The group is led by a sinister and industrious tenth generation native who goes only by Jackson.

Jackson pays Willie and small business owners like him to detain and turn over anyone who matches one of several profiles of people he's looking for. Jackson will pay up to \$500 per captive this way.

Willie and Andre use a variety of methods to detain these people. They tend to stay open into the wee hours, so they'll often have an opportunity to wait on someone in an otherwise empty dining room. Willie keeps a stock of strong sedatives which can be

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used to lace soup or beverages. They also serve alcohol and are next to an infamous bar called the Red Hole, so it isn't uncommon for someone looking for a late night snack to pass out in here.

There is also a perpetual "now hiring" sign in the front window which tends to draw stragglers and outcasts.

Andre also does what he can to spread rumors that the restaurant offers handouts to any beggar who knocks on the back door. The only rule is that he can't eat it

here, however if he fits a profile, well that's different. Andre keeps cloth and bottles of chloroform near the back door, but isn't above chasing someone down with a monkey-wrench.

Captives are generally handcuffed, bound about the arms and legs with rope or duct tape, gagged, and left inside a walk-in cooler until Jackson can pick him up, which happens a few nights a week, whenever Willie or Andre call to set it up. Calling Jackson can take a frustrat-

ingly long time (see JACKSON, JOB, AND JAKEE below).

THE RED HOLE:

Jamie Austin (28) and Randall Farby (31) run this watering hole right next door to the Soup Kitchen (on the west side). All the waitresses (four of them, Rachel, Becky, Rhonda, and Cybil) are natural redheads and have all been working there for at least a few years. Other girls occasionally fill it, they are either redheads (natural or dyed) or aren't there often enough to make a difference. It is said that the owners and many of the clientele have a fetish for it.

There are fights in here most nights. Being an out-of-towner and touching or leering too long at one of the barmaids is a good way to start one.

Jamie and Randall are on good terms with Willie and Andre. They have an idea what goes on over there, but they don't interfere as long as no one messes with their regulars. Luthor (the stocky assistant at the Soup Kitchen) has occasionally walked next door to assist with the more rowdy fights and formidable customers.

Two of the girls (Rhonda and Cybil) have been known to meet clients after work for the right price. All four girls also move

amp and blow through here, which Jamie and Randall take a cut of.

LEADS:

PCs have several options to approach the disappearances.

Many establishments are in on Jackson's scheme, but Willie and Andre have been particularly aggressive about it. So much so, that PCs investigating the area and talking to the people on the streets have some chance to overhear rumors about it.

Each character following up on the news stories and investigating the district known for high rates of disappearances may make a Difficult level Streetwise check once a day to encounter someone willing to share one of the following leads. Particularly good role-playing or innovative detective work may also generate information from this list:

Mortimer Hochard was a disabled veteran. He could walk short distances but was mostly confined to a wheelchair. He begged for food or took handouts at local restaurants and was drunk every day of his life since he's been on the street. He once even got a ticket for unsafe piloting of his wheelchair when he was too close to the French Quarter.

A few restaurants and shops around here offer handouts for the impoverished. Usually they ask them to sweep outside or do a trash run or something, but a few places do it for free. Willie's Soup Kitchen is a place like that, but it's on Palmetto Street right in the middle of where people are disappearing from.

Pidge's Laundromat, the one that burnt down last week, was a front for some kind of illicit activity. There were always creepy people hanging out around there, cars stopping at weird hours, and on several occasions, there was the smell of something dead. Whoever took out that place had to be connected somehow.

The infamous Red Hole is known for being a tough drinking spot. They'll fight about anything in there and it isn't unusual for folks to go missing after a bout of that, never to be seen again.

Darren Mayhew was a regular around here; a big time meth addict. He'd come around once or twice a week with his yuppie friends from the French Quarter to score some crank and hookers.

Heidi is one of the working girls on Palmetto St. She said she won't work there anymore because of one night when these guys in a beat down Caddy tried to pick

her up. One of the guys' faces was totally mashed up, like someone hit him with a mallet wrapped in chicken wire. She had a really bad vibe about them and decided to pass when they started getting angry. Luckily another car turned around the corner and those guys took off in a hurry.

Asking the locals about specific information only works if the PCs offer some kind of incentive, or if they can succeed at a Difficult Persuade or Interrogation check (they should be careful with the latter as most locals won't tolerate much out-of-towner trouble).

Most locals know about Jackson and the boys; that they live in an abandoned building a few miles northwest of town on Interstate 10, and that they own a beat up, red Cadillac and a similarly well worn blue van. Anyone working in a restaurant or grocery store may also know that the building is an abandoned meat packing plant and that they've recently gotten into the meatpacking industry. They supposedly hunt wild game and maintain some livestock. No one ever goes out there though.

Most locals have heard of The Soup Kitchen and say the food there is passable but nothing special, but that they're open late. The turnover is apparently a problem because they're always hiring.

PCs may ask about some of the victims who disappeared. Most victims were either junkies or meth heads; those who weren't tended to be stocky and very physically imposing types. (Even Hochard, who was disabled, had an imposing physique when he was standing).

If PCs ask too many questions about Jackson and his crew, it will eventually get back to them and Jackson will want to target them.

If the PCs visit the Soup Kitchen and start asking questions about the disappearances or about Jackson, the owners and employees will clam up. If pressed, it could go a few different ways depending on how many PCs are there and the methods they use. If it's just a PC or two, Willie or Andre might be tempted to drug them and turn them over to Jackson. They might even do it if everyone orders food. If the PCs start flashing weapons, they'll back down pretty quickly and will eventually roll over on Jackson. The money just isn't worth it.

If the PCs stake out the Soup Kitchen (or intimidate the owners into giving up Jackson), they'll eventually witness either a blue van or a red Cadillac arrive for a pickup. (Jackson uses the van if he's making several stops or getting multiple "volunteers" and the Cadillac otherwise.) Jackson

and his crew are detailed in Scene Two and in Appendix D.

SCENE TWO: JACKSON'S MEAT PACKING PLANT

THE DEAL:

By now, the PCs ought to have visited the Soup Kitchen and/or the neighboring Red Hole and done some preliminary investigating. They ought to have either witnessed or heard about Jackson by now.

The PCs may have also jumped to the conclusion that Jackson is responsible for all of the disappearances, and decided to pay him a visit at the abandoned meat packing plant.

These PCs would be half right.

Jackson does indeed coordinate the abduction of most of the abductees around New Orleans lately. However, in most cases, Jackson does so at the behest of a group of scientists who work for a privately funded research company called Neo Lunar. Neo Lunar has a contract with another firm called Aquifer, which supposedly specializes in water purification, but is in actuality a puppet of the US military.

Neo Lunar has a contingent within a hangar (and an underground laboratory beneath it) of an abandoned US navy air base. Within, they conduct all kinds of unspeakable experiments which require many test subjects. They have bargained with Jackson to provide these people, specifically for people physically dependant on any mind altering drug, or anyone of superior physical stature who are 1.8 meters or taller (1.75 for females). They will pay \$1000 per candidate, no questions asked. Jackson has arranged it so that he takes the van up to the base about once a week. In the meantime, he stores people at the meat packing plant where he and the boys live.

JACKSON, JOB AND JAKEE:

These three relatives (no one knows if they are brothers, cousins, etc...), Jackson, Job, and Jakee, are tenth generation Louisiana natives living on the fringes of a moderate swampland off Interstate 10 about 15 minutes northwest of New Orleans. An abandoned meat packing plant resides on what was once a prominent farmstead. However that area has long since flooded out and is no longer arable. The building still stands and various broken down tractors and farm equipment litter the acres around it.



Jackson and the boys used to raid Interstate 10 traffic until the military started patrolling it. So they turned to scavenging for a living. They would creep through the Poor Houses sector of New Orleans and occasionally the corporate sector if they thought they could get away with it. Sometimes they would scavenge the abandoned areas outside of New Orleans. It was on one such expedition to the US Navy air base that they encountered soldiers guarding the Neo Lunar encampment. Luckily for Jackson, the scientists realized the advantages of allowing them to take the odd engine parts or fuel tank in exchange for more useful services like providing a steady stream of test subjects.

After a few test runs, Neo Lunar began paying Jackson and his crew \$1000 a head for a suitable candidates if they conform to certain criteria. It was far cheaper and less scrutinized than the alternative of using prisoners and soldiers, and if it ever didn't work out, they could always eliminate Jackson and his crew before anyone really caught wind of it. It's been a mutually beneficial operation for several months now.

Unfortunately, not all of the people that Jackson gets actually meet the profiles that Neo Lunar has put out. Some are too tall, too fat, more lucid than expected, or oth-

erwise unusable as test subjects. When that happens, Jackson can't make any money off of the scientists, so he takes them back to the meat packaging plant to dispose of them.

The boys are natural and expert killers and Jackson has made the connections necessary to earn a tidy profit off of amateurish "snuff" videos of his victims. There are well over thirty such video in circulation all with similar style scenery and cinematography.

All three have also taken to eating human flesh, in particular, human brains. After someone is disposed of, Jakee will usually begin to carve slabs of meat and arrange the organs into piles. He does this mostly with a serrated K-bar knife, but for the brain, he has developed an awful tool (a modified tree trimmer with two sickle blades attached) which he places over the victims skull before pulling a rope which spins the blades and severs the skull cap (exposing the brain). The three likely have acquired various prion diseases.

Anything the boys don't consume is packaged and sold as beef back to the various grocery stores and restaurants within New Orleans.

These aren't nice men.

Jackson is 29 years old, 5'11, and bald but with dark brown sideburns which extend to the edge of the mouth and are connected by a mustache. His eyes have developed a sickly pink/gray tinge not unlike the corneal flesh burns experienced by a good number of New Orleans residents. His teeth are conspicuously sharp. He intentionally files them to maintain razor sharp points and edges and has even replaced some with serrated metal replicas. Of the three, only Jackson is capable of any meaningful social interactions outside of the group.

Job is 33, and at 6'4, he is a massive 240 lbs with matted brown hair. Job is a self mutilationist and his arms, legs, chest and face are covered with scars from slashes, burns, battery acid, and other excruciating forms of self torture. His preferred method of unarmed attack is a formidable head-butt. Job has a tennis-ball sized fracture in the front of his skull near his brow. Mounds of scar tissue cover the wound and it no longer bothers him. Job is unable to speak beyond grunts and simple monosyllable words. Due to some brain damage, he has a partial paralysis which has reduced his initiative and movement.

Jakee is 26, 5'7 with scraggly brown hair and beard. He is able to communicate but



he rarely makes much sense. He is hyper-active, easily excitable, and demonstrates mechanical genius, unfortunately paired with chronic bad judgment. Jakee often says the word “chicken” when he probably means something else and will often get violently angry at inanimate objects. Jakee also is responsible for disposing of some of the bodies that Neo Lunar returns to them (see below). Unfortunately, Jakee is not concerned with the risk of disease associated with consuming decaying animals, and he has grown addicted to consumption of the brains of some of the test subjects. Doing so gives him vibrant dreams and a sustained “high”.

THE MEAT PACKING PLANT AND SURROUND AREA:

An unpaved and muddy road leads south from Interstate 10, past chicken wire fencing and overgrowth to a dilapidated single story building beyond. The ground is a combination of weeds, overgrowth, vast sand patches, stagnant pools and rivulets. Just south of the building, a moderate sized swamp extends out of sight.

The building is a windowless, block structure, originally painted white. Huge streaks of gray and brown stain all sides of the building. Scraps of a steel awning are visible on the east side of the structure;

chained steel double doors are beneath it. Three other sets of double doors are on the west side.

Broken down vehicles litter the surrounding area; some buried tire-deep in the murk. Amongst them are a combine harvester, a farm tractor with attached chisel plow, another one with a stripped down disc harrow, a pickup with a sub-soiler hitched to it, a Zil with all doors ajar except one which is smashed in, a demolished school bus, and (if Jackson isn't using them) a blue van and red Cadillac parked near the awning.

THE COMBINE HARVESTER:

Jakee normally sleeps under here. A conspicuous spike harrow leans against one side of the harvester. The bars have all been removed and replaced with a web of chains to fasten the thing together. Jakee is strong enough to lift and swing this massive contraption at unsuspecting PCs.

Beneath the harvester are a handful of human skulls (some of the teeth have been smashed out) and a few other human bones as well. There is also large pile of smashed glass and dozens of plastic soda bottles with the labels all carefully removed.

CYPRESS TREE:

A gnarled cypress tree stands about thirty yards from the meat packing plant. Red and yellow towels are bundled together and tied around one of the higher branches. There is a fair amount of murk around the tree, and amidst that is a double braided 80 lb fishing line snare. Anyone stepping in it (up to 200 lbs) will be forced up towards one of the lower limbs, into which has been placed dozens of sharpened human teeth and bone fragments. The victim will suffer 1D6 points of damage to one leg as well as another 1D6 points of damage to a random hit location. He will suffer an additional 1D3 points of damage to his leg for each minute that he is suspended unless he can cut or break the line (200 lbs weight, combined STR of 9, or an edged weapon).

THE ZIL:

The doors are partially open, except for the driver's side back door, which is smashed shut. Anyone looking inside will see a soiled briefcase (empty) tucked under the front passenger seat.

Within the badly damaged seats of this beaten down car are spring loaded blades pulled from an old rotavator. Fully

opening any of the three doors will spring the trap, which will cause 3D6 – AGILITY points of damage divided amongst two random hit locations. These traps can be reset in minutes.

THE CADILLAC:

Jackson keeps the doors locked and a sawed off shotgun in the backseat. Job usually doesn't ride in the Caddy, but if he does, he uses a tire iron which he keeps in the passenger back seat pocket instead of the trunk. Jakee sleeps in the trunk; even while they're driving. He has half a mattress stuffed in there with a few blankets and soda or beer bottles and maybe some junk food since Jackson doesn't let him take meat out on rides. Jakee also keeps some pretty wild weaponry in the trunk with him. His latest contraption is an electrified steel rake attached to a car battery by soldered-on jumper cables. This vicious thing does 2D6 points of damage. On a critical success, he impales an enemy and pumps 2D6 points of electrical damage per round until it is removed (requires a successful grapple check, or just an action if Jakee has let go of it).

BUILDING EXTERIOR, WEST AND NORTH SIDES:

There are three sets of chained double doors on the west side of the building and another set on the north side. These are never used by Jackson and crew. Outside each of these doors, under a very thin layer of earth (poured over some stitched-together soda bottle labels), is a 3 ft. by 2 ft. pit trap framed by rusted steel meat grinders. (Difficult Observation check to notice, Average if alert). Stepping into one of these will cause 3D6 – AGILITY points of damage divided amongst three random hit locations. If the PC must climb out unassisted, he will take 1D6 points of damage while doing so to a random hit location.

BUILDING EXTERIOR, SOUTH SIDE (THE TUNNEL):

Behind a pair of large, gas powered generators, is a 3 ft. wide tunnel dug into the south side of the building. It looks about a foot and a half to two feet high, and seems to extend at least ten or fifteen feet beneath. This is one of Jakee's many crawlspaces. Near the bottom (18 feet in), a three inch diameter steel pipe burrows straight down into the earth. God knows what's buried there, but it does serve to drain the water. Here, fastened to the pipe, is a steel cultipacker roll removed from one of the trailers around the property. Two weighted

chains would pull the roll back towards the entrance, if not for the pipe holding it in place. However either of two pressure plates, or a trigger on the other side of the cultipacker roll, will trip the pipe, causing it to sink a foot into the ground, releasing the roll with very high tension. It would be a near impossible feat for a crawling person to dodge the trap, which causes 3D6 points of damage to the first person it hits (distributed among his three areas on the hit chart closest to the point of attack). It will cause him an additional 1D6 points of damage per round (30 seconds) until characters with a combined strength of 10 can unpin him, or he can somehow cut the chains.

At the bottom of the tunnel, near the pipe are a collection of human skulls whose brains have been scooped out by Jakee over the months. Also, anyone with good light, will notice (Average Observation check) a trap door in the wood floor above. (It comes up under area K on the Packing Plant map).

THE SWAMP:

The swamp is filled with all manner of swamp vermin. There are also several dead "floaters" that Jackson and the boys couldn't be bothered to bury or weight down. Something tends to take care of them over time. The PCs should feel no

inclination to explore out here, but if they do, a variety of swamp critters, giant slugs, and an ogre who lives within the murk (feeding off the bodies) should deter them soon enough. Jakee has also used some farm equipment to set numerous booby traps for 'gators or humans who roam too close to shore.

INSIDE THE PLANT:

SEE MAP 2, NEXT PAGE.

The smothering stench of decay wafts from any doorway here. Clouds of flies will greet any investigator as he enters. Most areas have rancid scraps of meat or bone; many have entire sections of decomposing meat slabs or human and animal body parts. Most of the floors are blood stained, but the working areas (area E and L) are literally covered with blood, sinew, and bone fragments.

AREAS A-D: These are locked stalls with aluminum siding sheets installed into interior side of all walls.

They are used as animal and human pens and reek of waste. Coils of hemp rope are piled against the corners of the stalls. If Jackson has picked up anyone recently, they will be stored in here, tied together into groups for

easy leading and to make it more difficult to escape.

A hallway leading to the wash basin has heavy traffic from captives. The basins contain filthy and probably contaminated water, but it will do for short term sustenance of the herd. It is also used to wash captives prior to processing. Two barbed, leather whips hang from pegs on the walls in the hall leading from the stalls to the watering basin. They've seen a lot of use.

AREA E: There is less gore here, but it's still disgusting. Jackson uses this as an office and it contains two desks, some chairs and a few file cabinets. There is a functioning phone in here. If Jackson isn't here, then it tends to ring half the day until Jakee gets bored enough to answer it and try to take a message. If this doesn't happen quickly enough, Job might get annoyed by the ringing and rip it from the wall.

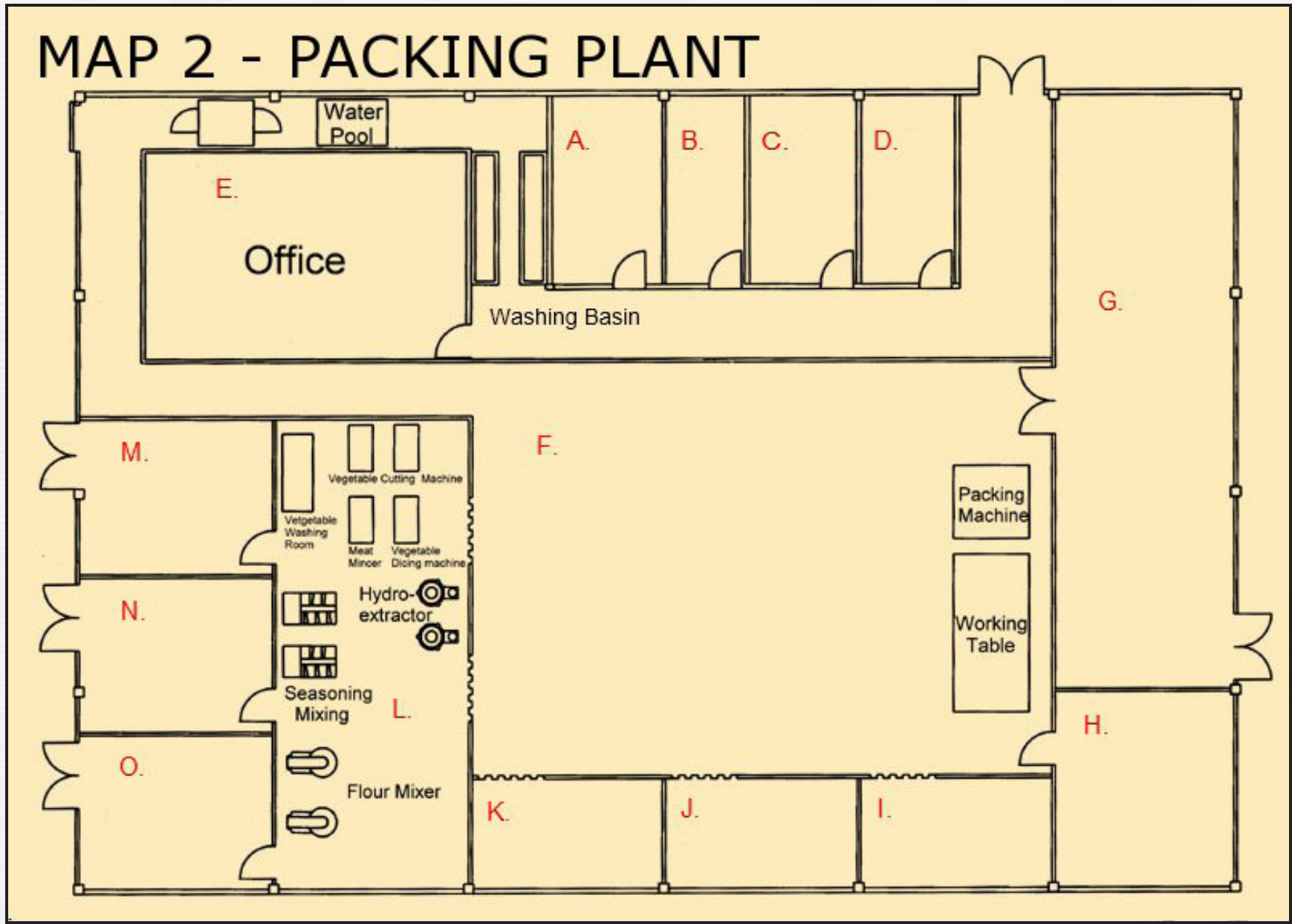
One of the desks and both file cabinets are filled with paperwork from the mid-nineties when the place was still in (legitimate) business. Accounting books, stationary, and the like fill these drawers. The other desk (Jackson's) is missing a few drawers. The remaining ones have keys

to some of the cars and tractors in the lot. There is also a ledger of various restaurants and grocery stores in the New Orleans area with some notes by each one (maybe an inventory or delivery list, or in some cases bill amounts). A stack of phone bills is also here. They seem to be recent. Under that is a manila folder stuffed with printed and handwritten notes. Within are profiles for suitable test subjects for a company called Neo Lunar:

PROFILE GROUP ONE: "Volunteers should be 1.8 meters tall (male) or 1.75 meters (female) and should be in good physical shape. Volunteers in good cardiovascular health are preferred. Candidates with injuries or defects may still be accepted if the defects are localized to one or two areas. In general, volunteers should not be sleight of frame, but see attached height/weight chart and Appendices C & D (Bone Structure and Total Body Fat/kg programs). Eligible candidates should be placed in Incubatory Tubules filled with amniotic solution described in Appendix A. Please adhere to the maintenance schedule described in Appendix B."



MAP 2 - PACKING PLANT



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PROFILE GROUP TWO: “Volunteers may be of any physical stature, but must not have any visual or hearing impairment. Candidates should be literate in at least one language, English preferred. Please run the Blood Toxicology tests listed in attached Schedules E & F. Note test results and whether they fall within the thresholds set in Schedule G: Impression Eligibility. If candidates are retained for more than 48 hours, please repeat the tests in Schedules E & F, though candidates will no longer need to meet the requirements in Schedule G.”

A page of hand written notes, entitled “Air Base” seems to be a mostly crossed of list subjects falling within either profile group one or two, and monetary amounts next to each list. A quick tally shows number into tens of thousands of dollars. Scrawled below that is “Need AKs” and below that in all CAPs red marker is “INCOLUNT LUNA” and then (and this is underlined) “TEN SECONDS ONLY!”

AREA F: This area and the hallway leading to it are festooned with chains hanging between posts which divide the hallway, and are intended to herd cattle (or whatever) into one of the

two entrances to area L (the processing room). These “cattle runs” are perverse and highly anticipated events taken very seriously by Job and Jackson and very much enjoyed by Jakee (who uses the opportunity to test new rigs or just to enjoy the suffering of others).

Blood, guts, entrails, sinew and bone hang from everything imaginable. On the east side of this hellish chamber are implements for carving and eventually packing any meat produced in area L. On one of the work tables is an oversized sewing machine used for some unspeakable purpose.

AREA G: This is the main entry that Jackson, Job and Jakee use. A van or Cadillac will normally back up to the awning outside this area as the boys escort any cattle inside, down the hallway, and to the pens (areas A-D). On the north wall of this chamber are a series of glass tubules filled with a yellow green solution. Printed pages of notes are attached to some of the tubules detailing the various instructions of use and maintenance. These tubules are used to store anyone intended for cybernetic surgery. The solution within assist in the various

preparation steps required, and so, rapidly decrease the time these patients must wait before surgery can begin.

AREAS H-K: These are walk-in coolers, powered by a pair of generators outside of the building. Jakee occasionally puts new “guests” into these areas so they can see what is in store for them. All areas have oversized meat hooks hanging from the ceiling. Only area H has a sealing door, the rest have heavy leathery sheeting for curtains. Anyone who isn’t immediately murdered (perhaps for some other form of entertainment) may be kept here, chained to the walls for as long as they can survive the cold (although area K is not cooled). Area K is also one of Jakee’s sleeping spots. He has an uncanny ability to wake up if someone comes near him, so will often sleep near the cattle just to intimidate them. Area K also has a trap door a few feet from the entrance. Anyone falling through this will set off the cultipacker trap beneath the building, and probably die. Jakee never warns the guests since the trap is not much trouble to reset.

AREA L: This ghastly chamber has seen the demise of tens of thousands of pounds of mammal. All manner of grinding, tearing, and ripping machines are here. Jackson, Job and Jakee generally work while their subjects are still alive, and the state of the machines shows evidence of regular and fervent resistance. Job has arranged an eerily efficient manner of assembly line here, accounting for the likely trajectory from one machine towards another. This room is his pride and joy.

AREAS M-O: These chambers were previously used to herd cattle toward their eventual demise in the processing room, but Jackson and Jakee have devised the more festive method described in area E. Now the rooms are used as sleeping quarters (though Jakee is never in his). Filthy mattresses are in each chamber except for area M which has a twin bed in it. Heaps of clothing, tools, fishing gear, beer and liquor are here.

SCENE 3: NEW ORLEANS US NAVAL AIR STATION

THE STATE OF THE FACILITY:

SEE MAP 3, NEXT PAGE.

This air base was originally constructed I 1954 and commissioned in December 1957. It replaced the original installation which was located on the northern edge of New Orleans (in use from 1941-1957). It was officially decommissioned in 2014 as part of a response to the Greater Depression by the Libertarian administration. Although decommissioned, a skeleton crew of soldiers patrols the area to secure minimal monitoring operations as well as to protect covert research and development operations conducted at the base.

There are ten active soldiers in all, 4-6 of which are on duty at any given time. Their orders are to run, monitor, and maintain the radar, as well as to secure the facility to the best of their ability while maintaining their covert nature. They've been given wide latitude to execute those orders.

Other denizens have worked their way onto the base amidst the various hangars, barracks, and the myriad of other buildings on base. These vary from squatters, survivalists, wild animals, and even some runoff

from the nearby patches of demonground which are to the east and southeast of the base.

ROADS AND SECURITY:

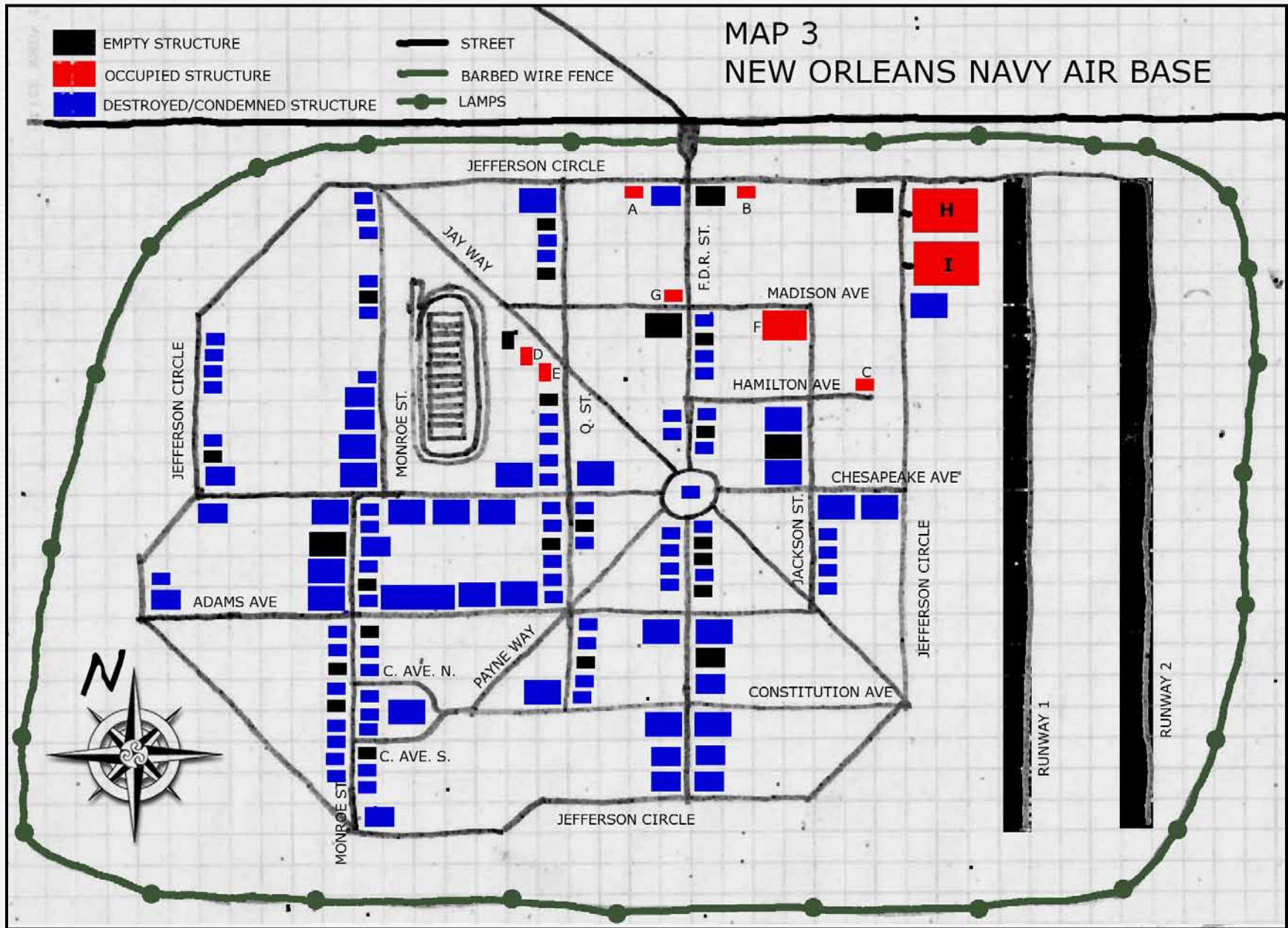
Most are dilapidated and unpatrolled though there are a few exceptions between some of the still inhabited buildings.

North and East Jefferson Circle and F.D.R. Street (between Jefferson and Madison) are monitored vigorously by Towers A & B and by occasional patrols of 2-4 soldiers. Madison and Hamilton are similarly monitored. Jay Way, near the barracks, gets regular traffic and is visible from the towers, though it is not actively monitored.

Patrols of 2-4 soldiers (25% likely to contain a security guard captain) will occasionally make the circuit of Jefferson Circle and the east runway to look for fence breaches. This happens once or twice, daily.

The base is also routinely patrolled by wandering dogs which have been cybernetically augmented in the laboratories beneath Hangar 2. These dogs are virtually silent and although are occasionally visible during daylight hours, they will be extremely hard to detect without instruments at night.





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Their MO is to sneak up silently behind moving creatures they do not recognize and bark a single warning. They will wait up to ten seconds for a verbal activation code: "INCOLUMT LUNA". If they don't hear that, they will attack, either to kill or to incapacitate for eventual dragging back to Hangar 2. After combat begins, other dogs may soon appear. Scientists or guards monitoring this may choose to cut their losses and dispatch "suicide" dogs. More information about these animals is in Area G: Kennel, Area I: Hangar 2 (Laboratory section), and Appendix D: Encounter Tables.

AIR BASE KEY:

A & B: Watch Towers: Generally only A or B is manned, not both (60% for Tower A, 40% for Tower B). M60 guns are mounted in each tower with several thousand rounds and various small arms also stored here. Air sirens can be activated from either tower, and both towers have radio communication to the other facilities on the base.

C: Radar Facility: There are always 2-3 technical operators on duty here, one of which is a security guard captain. The building is a squat 30x30 single floor concrete structure situated at the base of a forty foot radar dish.

From here, encrypted communication to other military or science facilities is possible. The operators watch for ground, air, and space activity.

Encrypted logs within the system computers detail radar findings since 2014 (when the base was officially closed but covertly still in use). Vast sections of data, sometimes weeks or even months, are occasionally missing. Recorded findings are limited to commercial aircraft, naval activity in the Gulf of Mexico, comets, lunar orbits (a fascinating and puzzling degree of detail on the latter), Mars, and miscellaneous notes on varying constellations and nebulae (characters proficient in astronomy may correlate the constellations and times with the relative times that Jupiter and its moons would have been visible in that direction). GMs interested in exploring direct connections to the Jovian moon drilling can expound upon those connections here (see Appendix E for more information).

D & E: Barracks: Each barracks has room for two dozen soldiers, but only 6-8 sleep in each one, with some of the remaining space being used by scientists and technicians. There will always be

at least a few soldiers and scientists in each bunker (25% chance sleeping). Two dozen bunks and foot lockers are here. Most of these are unlocked and empty. A few store U.S. Army uniforms, small arms and ammunition (generally M9 pistols). The occasional liquor bottle or photograph may also be found within some of the trunks. GMs interested in exploring leads to the U.S. military operations might allow the PCs to find a journal in one of the trunks. Suggestions for a journal of this kind are in Appendix E.

F: Motor Pool: The motor pool is always guarded by 1-2 soldiers. Within are dozens of U.S. military issue vehicles, several of which are maintained and in working condition. The structure is also filled with tools, service bays, engine and vehicle parts, fluids, and tires.

G: Kennel: This small, squat building is split into two main kennel areas, each filled with 8x4' cages, a larger main play area, a veterinary office, main office, and small laundry room. 1-2 soldiers are generally on duty at all times. Two dozen cybernetically augmented dogs (mostly purebred German Shepherd and Belgian Shepherd/



Malinois) are housed here, although half of these normally wander the navy base as part of the security detail.

Stocks of veterinary medicine, dog food, water, and toys are readily available. In the “play” area are stores of training tools like padded coats, arm pads, leg pads, leashes, rope, mock weapons, training dummies, and similar.

In the office are veterinary records, training records, and log sheets.

H: Hangar 1: A few working aircraft are here including large stores of serviceable parts, fluids, and tools. The hangar is only ever open if mechanical repairs are required which can't be completed at the motor pool. The building's only entrance is within clear view of both watch towers.

I: Hangar 2: On the surface floor, this hangar is similar to Hangar 1. Many large aircraft are here although only a few are serviceable and even fewer are currently operational. There are some tools and parts, but most of the tools, parts, and all the fluids are stored in Hangar 1. However near the center of the area is a service lift which descends to an underground labora-

tory. Although the lift is fitted with a badge reader and security code panel, neither is currently required to operate the lift. Descending the lift will lead to Area A of the underground laboratory.

UNMARKED ENCOUNTERS ON THE NAVY AIRFIELD

Key encounters are marked above, but other encounters are possible.

At the GM's discretion, these can be placed in specific structures on the map, or can be assigned based on character actions or randomly during the scene.

Of the remaining unoccupied buildings which are still standing, most are barracks, officer residences, training or academics facilities, or dining halls. Other buildings still stand though they have been sacked for supplies long ago. These include a hospital, movie theatre, water works building (still working, just not maintained), and a fire station.

The remnants of an old church are within the circle on Chesapeake Ave. There are chitinous tunnels within the ground here leading to patches of scorched earth southeast of the Navy Base. It is extremely common to see giant cockroaches and

similar vermin in this area. They rarely stray far, and the dogs don't go near here.

Squatters exist in a few of the buildings. The soldiers don't bother them, but occasionally the dogs do. When that happens, they are dragged back to Hangar 2 for possible use or execution. The squatters choose to stay because of the large stores of food and entertainment (the power still works in many facilities). When these run out, they will probably leave and not return.

Three Nukids have staked out a meager existence in one of the larger obliterated buildings. They wandered in a few weeks ago, probably from the deep swamp, and have been living off of food stores, vermin, giant cockroaches, some of the dogs, and occasionally even human scavengers. Unfortunately, two or three dogs (even cybernetically augmented as they are) are really no match for these genetic mutations. It will take a concentrated effort to drive them out (or a show of firepower).

UNDERGROUND LABORATORY

SECURITY:

There are security cameras in areas A, C, D, K, and all unmarked hallways. Video is visible on any monitors at guard stations (at A, C, and K), and the feed is archived



in area J and also uploaded via satellite to other Neo Lunar facilities near real-time.

Double doors are generally locked and require keypad access. The code is 54808 and all soldiers know it. It changes only if there is reason to do so (an escape, security breach, transfer, etc...) Doors to B, C, D, I, and J also require keycards (carried by half the soldiers and all scientists) and have a different code: 92231).

Several alarms exist in the facility. A silent one can be triggered from most rooms or guard stations and will alert all guard stations in the laboratory as well as the watch towers and bunkers outside. The standard alarm can be triggered from any room or guard station and will cause blaring alarms throughout the facility. The last alarm can be triggered in select rooms or guard stations and will cause the entire compound to sound in alarm including air sirens outside.

If any alarms are triggered, soldiers and cybernetic dogs will begin to show up from the lift in Area A.

Also, if this happens, most connectivity to other Neo Lunar facilities will be terminated except for data upload channels (which go to a quarantined area). Connectivity will not be restored until

Neo Lunar has confirmed the facility is not compromised.

LABORATORY KEY:

SEE MAP 4, NEXT PAGE.

AREA A: Lift to main hangar level.

Near the east end of this wide hall is a guard's desk normally occupied by a single guard. If the facility is under alert, a second guard will be present along with one of the cyborg dogs. The lift to the main hangar is at the west end of the hall.

AREA B: Observation Deck.

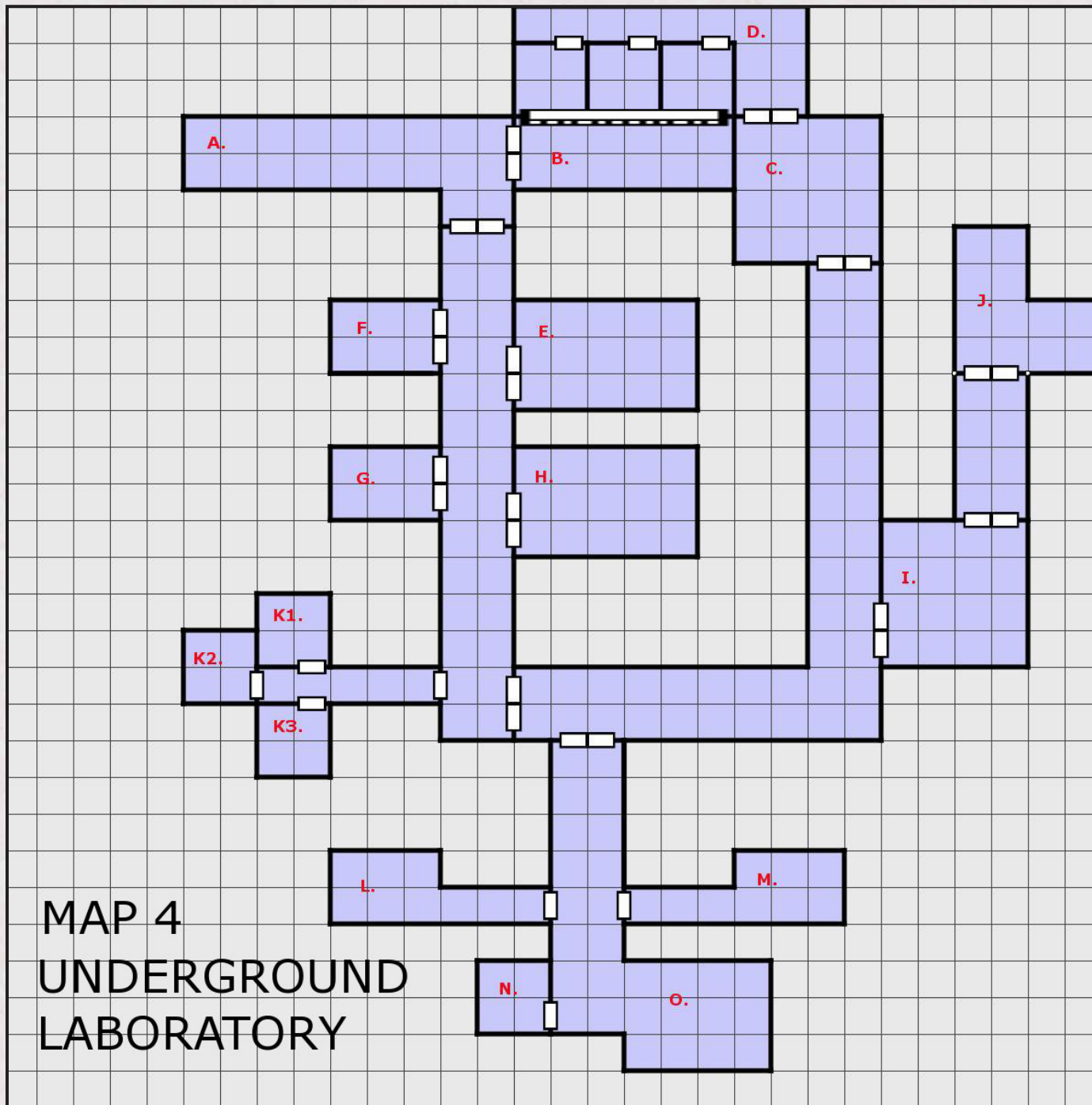
Here, 1-3 scientists take and review notes, collect data, and observe test subjects in area D. There are a few computer terminals, desks, and chairs, some whiteboards, and a few spiral notebooks with scribbled notes. A glass wall to the north reveals the three vestibules in area D. Intercoms allow communication to the subjects (or at least allow scientists to hear the audio within the vestibules).

A quick review of the notebooks reveals that the scientists are chronicling subject interpretation of something called Living Script. Patients are

identified by number and any drugs or illnesses they have are listed. Then detailed interpretations, often direct quotes, are listed.

If the notebooks are reviewed at length (Average Psychology or Medical check permitted once after each hour of review), a reader will notice strong similarities in the interpretations of subjects with higher drug prescriptions or mental illnesses. These interpretations deal mostly with a race of aliens or elders who have made some kind of pact with mankind. The aliens or elders are described as ancient, twisted, and unknowable, and the subjects describe them with much fear and trepidation. The aliens hate a group of beings known as "Free Ones" and have sent them a series of warnings in the hopes that they will repent. Notes indicate that some charcoal drawings and paintings done by the subjects have been scanned and archived. The subjects don't have access to pens or pencils due to the high likelihood that they will harm themselves with these implements.

The computers are diskless, but have network access into Area J (unless any



MAP 4 UNDERGROUND LABORATORY

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of the alarms have been triggered). Computer Operations (Average) is required to navigate relevant observation data once they have a valid login (obtainable from any scientist with an Average Interrogate or Difficult Persuasion check). It is a formidable Computer Operations check to hack into the network without a valid login (see Area J and Appendix E for information stored on the network servers).

AREA C: Security area and Patient Ward

Individual cells are here on the NE and east walls, in addition to a security desk in the SW corner with monitors. 10-12 patients are stored here at any one time, all of which are near incapacitation due to any combination of drugs, fever, and mental illness. This is the subject pool for Area D.

If the PCs arrive here within 30 days of starting the adventure, one of the captives is Darren Mayhew. After this time, he will have either overdosed or ceased providing useful reports.

AREA D: Living Script Testing



1-2 soldiers are on duty here most times. Locked cabinets with sedatives and tranquilizer guns are on the east wall. Plastic restraints and patient clothing is also here. There is a locked broom closet on the west wall with some cleaning supplies.

Three vestibules to the south are visible from Area B. Within the two east vestibules, are meter-sized chunks of a dense rock or metal, covered with symbols and strange markings. Subjects from Area C populate at least two of the three vestibules. The left-most vestibule is a sort of waiting area for prepped subjects.

Locked cabinets within the vestibules provide access to paper, markers, charcoal, paint and brushes, modeling clay, and even a few musical instruments. All three vestibules have white-boards on both the east and west walls. Cameras are in each vestibule, but the data goes directly to the network servers in Area J and is not visible at the security desks.

Patients within vestibules containing the obelisks are generally delirious or nonresponsive, although violent reactions are common. Violent patients will be allowed to rage as long

as the other subjects are first removed from the same vestibule. (The scientists have found such violent tirades to be particularly insightful). Groups of subjects will sometimes be found humming or chanting, or scribbling in mad bursts between periods of observing the obelisk or each other's work. Drawings of space and alien terrain are most common, although sketches of anything as well as poems, sheet music, short stories, and even mathematical equations and technical diagrams are all possible.

AREA E: Infirmary

Several beds and surgical tables are here with sheets between them. An array of drugs and medicines fill locked cabinets in the NE corner. Walk in coolers and freezing units in the SE corner house a blood supply and temperature sensitive medicines.

Anyone observing the medicine cabinets can make an Average Medicine check to surmise that many of these medicines are intended to combat various drug overdoses. A Difficult Medicine check reveals that many of the remaining medicines, supplies, and prepared scripts are intended to treat injuries sustained due to low

pressure environments or extreme cold.

More traditional medicines and supplies are here to treat combat related wounds.

1-2 patients may be resting or prepped here, but will be sedated.

AREA F: Recovery/Prep Room

Pre- or post-op patients are generally resting here, under sedation. Six beds separated by sheets are here. Locked medicine cabinets line the west wall and a single diskless computer terminal (also on the west wall) allows access to patient files unless any of the alarms have been triggered. (Average Computer Operations check to access this information with a valid login. It is a Formidable check to gain access without a valid login. See Area J and Appendix E for information on the network server).

4-6 patients will be resting here. Half of these are post-op from various cybernetic procedures completed in Area O. The rest are either being prepped for surgery or are recovering from some curative operation performed in Area F, the infirmary. There

is a 15% chance that one will stir in the presence of any noise or light and respond violently.

AREA G: Pressure Testing Chambers

Two chambers are on the west wall of this room. Inside each chamber is a black circle painted on the metal floor. Controls outside the lockable chambers are to the north wall with a pair of diskless computer terminals near that. (Average Computer Operations check to navigate with a valid login, Formidable check to gain access without a valid login. See Area J for information available).

0-2 scientists will be working here, with a 10% chance that one of the chambers contains a patient.

Anyone observing the chamber and the controls can make a Biology, Chemistry, or Physics Average check to determine that the chambers are temperature and pressure controlled. In laboratory cabinets on the south wall, are various lenses, lights, bulbs, prisms, and laser devices. (Anyone examining these things can make a Physics Average check to determine that these implements are used to produce and measure light in the invisible

spectrum, particularly UV light and gamma radiation).

AREA H: Cybernetic Test Chamber

This appears to be a firing range. The walls are soundproofed and there are a number of locked metal cabinets with various firearms, ammunition and ear protection inside.

The range is not particularly long, so it appears the room is more of a ballistics laboratory. Mounts and holders on the east side of the room can be set to secure various items. At least one of the mounts seems capable of human restraint.

There is a 10% chance this room is occupied by 1 scientist firing at a nondescript metal in one of the mounts.

AREA I: Conference Hall

A few tables are here, clustered around a small podium in the southeast corner. A ceiling projector, some whiteboards, and two diskless computer terminals are here, one of which is cabled to the projector. (Typical access requirements for the terminals exist for users with Computer Operations skill as long as no alarms

are triggered, see Area J or Appendix E for more information).

AREA J: Data and Storage Center

The entire L-shaped room is climate controlled and is covered with removable floor tiles (for running cables and the like). Halon dispensers are in the ceiling. Multiple cameras monitor every part of the room.

The north area of this L-shaped room houses rack-mounted computer systems. There are about eight cabinets containing a total of around sixteen servers, several switches and routers, a disk array, and a few terminals. Access to these systems (with or without a valid login) is handled as normal, but the local consoles can be used whether or not any alarms have been triggered. Data stored within these systems (and so, accessible from the network) is detailed in Appendix E: DATA STORAGE.

The east expanse of this room contains lots of bins, shelves, and cabinets which all contain various physical data collected from either of the two research projects being conducted here.



AREA K: Patient Ward

Each ward is sealed with a reinforced steel door and holds 4-8 patients in varying levels of cybernetic surgery progress. Most patients are heavily sedated, lying in beds attached to IV. The few who aren't are true volunteers from other military facilities. Mortimer Hochard and a few other cybernetically augmented abductees were kept here until they escaped and wreaked havoc within New Orleans.

A manned security desk is near the east door in the hallway. 1-2 guards are here at all times (25% one is a security guard captain).

AREA L: Cybernetics Laboratory

Several laboratory counters, cabinets, and two computer terminals are here. Access to these terminals (with or without valid login, and not if any alarms are triggered) is handled as normal. See Area J or Appendix I for more information.

Notes with proportional changes required for habitats with a surface gravity of 0.165% of Earth's vs. one with 264%. From the notes, it appears the cybernetic technology is designed

elsewhere according to specification and then shipped here.

Cybernetic implants of varying size and function fill the laboratory, 20-25 parts in all. Most are secured in foam cases. The rest are on laboratory counters. The pieces are mostly sub-dermal breast and back plates, skull plates, muscle and bone fittings, and a few ocular devices.

There is a 70% chance that 2-4 scientists will be here. If so, there is a 25% chance that cyborg (either restrained or sedated) and an accompanying soldier will also be here.

AREA M: Chemical Laboratory

Laboratory counters and cabinets fill the room and are covered with microscopes, beakers, varying chemicals, fluids, and gas tanks. NBC suits are here, and the room is fitted with two airtight tanks for the testing of radioactive material (though these latter look unused).

One computer terminal is here. (Normal access requirements based on whether someone has a valid login or not exist).

There is a 50% chance that 1-2 scientists will be working here.

AREA N: Neurosurgery Laboratory

A cerebral scanner, a patient chair (with head fittings), a few file cabinets and a computer terminal are here. (Access requirements for the computer are as normal).

A lighted view box (for reviewing x-rays) is on the west wall. The nearby file cabinets contain forty or so files with associated x-ray images.

There is a 40% chance 1 scientist is here. If so, there is a 50% chance that one of the candidates from Area C is in the chair.

AREA O: Cybernetic Operation Ward

This ward is subdivided into ten operating tables separated by sheets, and a path leading to the east portion of the room where medical supplies and various cybernetic technology is stored. Each of the tables is fitted with restraints and a few of the smaller ones seem suited more to animals than humans.

There is a 90% chance that 2-4 doctors are operating here and the room



is always guarded by two alert soldiers (armed with tranquilizer rifles and standard firearms). There will be 0-5 patients here at any time, which should be heavily sedated, but 10% of the time, one may have recently arrived from prep and may respond violently to excessive noise or light.

APPENDIX A: LIVING SCRIPT

In 2012, two obelisks were retrieved by the US military. Both obelisks were covered with a cryptic set of runes and symbols which defied all attempts at translation. The symbols themselves, on occasion, were observed to fluctuate, shift, and even transform into new symbols entirely. This has happened and been documented on numerous occasions. Extensive video record exists showing the metamorphosis, although it still cannot be explained.

The change is suspected to be chemical in nature, except that no catalyst can be determined. The change will happen in extreme temperatures, in extreme exposure to light (any part of the spectrum), exposure to sound, or even in a vacuum. It has completely baffled scientists.

Based on evidence obtained at the scene of discovery, scientists researched and confirmed that although the symbols

could not be deciphered, it was possible to expose subjects to this Living Script, and obtain great similarities in impressions made upon them. These similarities definitively increased if the subjects were sleep deprived, delirious, or had their mental faculties similarly impaired by drug, disease, or psychosis. In some cases, the obelisks, themselves, seem to have an effect on observers, tending to bring them closer to these states of mind as they “lose themselves” within the script.

Even otherwise nonsensical patients could agree on messages derived from Living Script, but the nature of gathering this information, made it extremely difficult to record facts in any level of detail. Yet the tests continue. Recent references to a dark and mysterious being that scientists are calling “Ra” are particularly disturbing.

Neo Lunar has obtained more of these samples, but these first two are still stored in a sub level laboratory of a Navy Base Hangar near New Orleans, not far from where they were originally found.

Detailed notes exist within the facility on Living Script, the suppositions of the scientists researching it, and a large volume of anecdotal impressions and stories relayed by subjects attempting to “read” the script.

The GM must decide whether Living Script will be relevant to his campaign beyond this module, and if so, whether or not it relates to the Jovian moon drilling, and how much information to disseminate to his PCs.

APPENDIX B:

NEO LUNAR: LUNAR FOCUSED CYBERTECHNOLOGY

Neo Lunar has spent an extraordinary amount of effort on cybernetic augmentation. Many of these implants seem to be of questionable value. For example, many procedures merely stabilize muscles, regulate involuntary body functions, provide enhanced protection from UV light, radiation, pressure, sub-zero temperatures, or provide subjects with a method of breathing if they are asphyxiated or submerged.

The benefit seems minimal, or at least not worth the investment, until one consults developer notes and considers the true purpose for these augmentations.

The purpose of these procedures is to provide a workforce with the survival abilities to maintain and possibly even colonize select regions of our moon.

Although many countries have long held interested in space exploration, most governments have recently diverted spending from these programs to law enforcement, the prison system, and various social programs. So the purpose of such an indiscriminate expenditure of resources is unclear.

If the GM wishes to pursue this thread within his campaign, information to do so is provided here. It is also easily tied to the Jovian moon drilling hooks provided in the main Dark Conspiracy sourcebook. Otherwise, it can be merely glossed over for the purposes of answering PC questions pertinent to this adventure.

America has several lunar bases which are maintained covertly. A recent volcanic eruption on the moon surface both surprised and encouraged the scientific community with possibilities for limited colonization of the moon. For now, scientists conduct chemical and physics research not possible on our planet.

One of these facilities houses a portal to a vastly unexplored proto-dimension with physical properties, so far, identical to our own, including various applications of the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics. Information on the portal or its origins

is limited at this facility, but apparently a lot of information on it has been amassed.

Other lunar facilities have implemented a varied set of mostly unsuccessful attempts to create a life sustaining environment on the moon surface and even beneath its surface. However one experiment was successful.

A few miles into the surface of the moon, near the site of the volcanic eruption, scientists have been able to cultivate a sustained biosphere of sorts, although they are a far way off from anything which could sustain animal life.

Still, the research continues, and not only from the Americans.

APPENDIX C:

AQUIFER: MILITARY TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Funding has long been diverted from NASA and any space exploration. Even privatized space exploration efforts (beyond high-priced earth or moon orbits) have virtually stopped. The governments and corporations just can't justify it.

Yet it is necessary.

To make it happen, the US military outsources certain specialized training programs to companies promoted as more streamlined for such offerings. Many of these companies are shell-companies which also own or are owned by other companies with diverse interested beyond training.

Aquifer is one such company. It operates a chain of water purification facilities (which are generally fronts for R&D into chemical or weapons research, alien research, and in the case of child-company Neo Lunar, space exploration and cyber technology).

Vast expenditures of money and resources are diverted to these training companies for various covert purposes. Additionally, candidates within various military branches are selected and deployed for various training programs. These programs vary from a few weeks, to a few months, to several years in some cases. The accident rate on such programs is high (though most enlisted chalk that up to covert redeployment).

Aquifer, Neo Lunar, and related companies engage in all manner of nefarious commercial trade, including black market sales of weapons, drugs, and human trafficking. If it can be done covertly or at least

APPENDIX D: ENCOUNTER TABLES (CONTINUED)

Soup Kitchen

Willie King

Strength	4	Education	2
Constitution	4	Charisma	6
Agility	5	Empathy	0
Intelligence	6	Initiative	1
Health	8/16/17	Move	8m

Skills: Streetwise 3, Persuasion 1, Luck 1, Observation 3, Bargain 1, Melee(Armed) 1

Gear: Knife, Handcuffs with key, \$40

Terence

Strength	6	Education	1
Constitution	5	Charisma	4
Agility	6	Empathy	0
Intelligence	4	Initiative	1
Health	11/22/23	Move	8m

Skills: Streetwise 3, Melee(Armed) 2, Act/Bluff 2, Stealth 2, Observation 3, Pickpocket 4

Gear: Knife, \$20, key to backdoor

Andre King

Strength	6	Education	1
Constitution	5	Charisma	4
Agility	4	Empathy	0
Intelligence	4	Initiative	2
Health	11/22/23	Move	8m

Skills: Streetwise 4, Melee(Armed) 2, Act/Bluff 2, Stealth 2, Observation 2

Gear: Wrench(club), Handcuffs with key, \$25, key to backdoor

Luthor

Strength	8	Education	1
Constitution	8	Charisma	4
Agility	6	Empathy	0
Intelligence	4	Initiative	1
Health	16/32/33	Move	8m

Skills: Streetwise 3, Melee 6, Small Arms (Pistol) 3, Thrown Weapons 4, Observation 4, Persuasion 4

Gear: Knife, \$20, key to backdoor



APPENDIX D: ENCOUNTER TABLES (CONTINUED)

Jackson's Crew

Jackson

Strength	7	Education	3
Constitution	7	Charisma	4
Agility	5	Empathy	0
Intelligence	6	Initiative	4
Health	14/28/29	Move	8m
Skills: Melee(Armed) 5, Rifles 4, Observation 4, Stealth 3, Act/Bluff 3, Bargain 4, Stalking 2			
Gear: Sawed-Off Double Barrel, 16 extra buckshot shells, Keys to Packing plant office, switchblade, van keys, \$160			

Jakee

Strength	8	Education	1
Constitution	6	Charisma	2
Agility	5	Empathy	2
Intelligence	4	Initiative	3
Health	14/28/29	Move	8m
Skills: Melee(Armed) 5, Stealth 4, Tracking 4, Stalking 2, Observation 2, Foreboding 3, Mechanic 4			
Gear: Combat Knife, tools, modified treesaw (treat as chainsaw with 2m reach)			

Job

Strength	10	Education	1
Constitution	8	Charisma	1
Agility	3	Empathy	0
Intelligence	2	Initiative	2
Health	18/36/37	Move	6m
Skills: Melee(Unarmed) 6, Stealth 4, Observation 2, Tracking 5			
Gear: Barbed wire garrote, treat head butt attack as Club			



APPENDIX D: ENCOUNTER TABLES (CONTINUED)

Abandoned Air Base

Soldier (Security Guard)

Strength	6	Education	4
Constitution	5	Charisma	3
Agility	5	Empathy	0
Intelligence	4	Initiative	3
Health	11/22/23	Move	8m

Skills: Pistols 5, Melee(Armed) 4, Observation 4, Stealth 2, Interrogation 3, Thrown Weapons 2, Computer Use 3

Gear: Folding Baton, Uzi 9mm Submachine gun, 3 ammo clips, kevlar helmet, 2 in 6 chance to have flashbang or tear gas, 3 in 6 chance of key card

Soldier (Technician)

Strength	6	Education	8
Constitution	5	Charisma	5
Agility	5	Empathy	0
Intelligence	8	Initiative	1
Health	11/22/23	Move	8m

Skills: Engineer 8, Pilot (Fixed Wing) 8, Vehicle Use (Heavy Vehicle) 6, Engineer 6, Mechanic (6), Bargain 2, Observation 4

Gear: Uniform, tools, M9 pistol

Soldier (Captain)

Strength	7	Education	5
Constitution	7	Charisma	5
Agility	6	Empathy	0
Intelligence	6	Initiative	5
Health	14/28/29	Move	8m

Skills: Rifles 5, Melee(Armed) 5, Observation 6, Computer Use 4, Stealth 4, Interrogation 5, Thrown Weapons 4, Leadership 4

Gear: Mossberg 12 gauge loaded with slugs, 20 extra shells, Kevlar vest and helmet, 1 Flashbang grenade, key card

Scientist

Strength	4	Education	8
Constitution	5	Charisma	6
Agility	5	Empathy	0
Intelligence	8	Initiative	1
Health	9/18/19	Move	8m

Skills: Biology 7, Physics 8, Chemistry 8, Medicine 5, Engineer, 7, Bargain 2, Observation 4, Computer Use 7

Gear: Lab coat, clipboard, scalpel, pens and pencils, 2 in 6 chance of having syringe full of sedatives, key card



APPENDIX D: ENCOUNTER TABLES (CONTINUED)

Abandoned Air Base (continued)

Cyber Guard Dogs

Strength	5	Education	0
Constitution	5	Charisma	2
Agility	8	Empathy	0
Intelligence	1(5)	Initiative	5
Health	10/20/21	Move	12m

Skills: Melee 4, Stealth 6, Stalking 6, Observation 7

Gear: Body plating(treat as Armor 1), Enhanced senses(treat Int as 5 for Observation rolls), 1 in 6 chance to be Suicide Model equipped with internal destruct device(treat as Frag Grenade)

Cyborg Escapee (Type II)

Strength	9	Education	3
Constitution	9	Charisma	3
Agility	6	Empathy	0
Intelligence	4	Initiative	3
Health	18/36/37	Move	8m

Skills: Biology 7, Physics 8, Chemistry 8, Medicine 5, Engineer, 7, Bargain 2, Observation 4

Gear: Body Plating (treat as Armor 1 and UV protection), UV eye protection, diminished effects due to temperatures between -5 C and 85 C.

Cyborg Escapee (Type I)

Strength	7	Education	3
Constitution	7	Charisma	3
Agility	10	Empathy	0
Intelligence	4	Initiative	5
Health	14/28/29	Move	12m

Skills: Melee 7, Stealth 9, Stalking 9, Observation 4, Small Arms (Rifle) 6, Small Arms (Pistol) 6, Thrown Weapon (5), Climbing 5

Gear: None

Typical Candidate for Living Script Interpretation

Strength	5	Education	3
Constitution	5	Charisma	4
Agility	5	Empathy	2
Intelligence	5	Initiative	1
Health	10/20/21	Move	8m

Skills: Streetwise 4, Melee (Unarmed) 2, Stealth 2, Observation 4, Willpower 5, Act/Bluff 4, Luck 3, Persuasion 3, Foreboding 2

*Some of these skills are dulled or modified by drugs.

Gear: None



cannot be directly tied to the US military, and it generates money, it is being done.

APPENDIX E: DATA ARCHIVES

This section contains the various data available to PCs who enter the system with various project related logins, and is sorted that way. Unless the PCs have access to laptops or similar technology, it is unlikely they will be able to take this information with them. Individual servers could be hauled away (average 50 kg per server) but a random subset of data is stored on each server. (The disk array weighs 200 kg but handles backups of most of the other systems).

LIVING SCRIPT ANALYSIS:

Extensive records on interpretations of Living Script by medically treated subjects and members of the scientific community exist and date back several years. Individual cases and summaries are available. Case after case of interpretation by members of the scientific community result in inconclusive findings and many cases of detrimental effects to the observers have been recorded (insanity, irritability, and depression being the most common).

The greatest progress seems to have been made with mentally unstable subjects, subjects affected by severe flu or disease, or subjects under the influence of mind altering drugs. Here, there is a tending of subjects to have great similarities in their interpretations. More, the subject matter of the interpretations vary, but they vary more by date than by candidate.

Recent weeks has seen more vivid, if extraordinary interpretations. An ancient being with powers suggesting immense solar energy (classified as "Ra" by the scientists here, perhaps as a reference to the Egyptian god) is believed, by candidates, to walk amongst mankind in secrecy. Candidates describe his ability to disguise his appearance and his psyche. The candidates universally fear this being that, if you believe the interpretations, is able to be in many places at once, to exist in parallel with itself, and even to create itself. Further, even the death of "Ra" is a portent to a "dark age" in our dimension.

Older documentation details a kind of Covenant between mankind and another race of aliens or elders. Transgressions by one side or the other have resulted in a kind of "war" and so, an increase of an alien presence in our dimension. It is believed by the candidates that this war has

happened before and will happen again; that it occurs in cycles.

Even older research is laden with hard science (apparently, even scrawled by candidates previously thought to be incapable of such proficiency) and demonstrates the application of various laws of physics and chemistry in and around our solar system (and perhaps, in parts unknown). Many fluctuations on these properties (by different candidates) converge on similar areas within our system, particular upon Io, within a few spots in our asteroid belt, on our own sun, and even in small pockets on our moon. Most of these locales do imply conclusions, but locales in and near Io do line up with Jovian moon drilling projects that our world has previously engaged in. References to other Neo Lunar companies exist here, including some private address space (currently offline, though routable from this facility) and a few email addresses.

CYBERNETIC RESEARCH:

Data collected here is more concrete and supported by hard science. Arrays of pressure, temperature, light, and gravity tests have been conducted on cybernetically altered candidates with the majority of testing being done between -150 C' and 100

C', a surface gravity of about 16% of earth's, high UV exposure, and 10^{-14} torr (near 0 pressure) environments. Enough references to our own moon exist within the literature to make it clear that this is the environment they are attempting to simulate.

References are made to existing and planned research facilities on the surface of the moon, including one which houses or is near a "gate" or portal of some kind. Very little additional information about that is here.

Extensive research is being done on what it would take for cybernetic candidates to be able to adapt to moon-like environments without debilitating their ability to function in an earth-like environment.

Preliminary research has been done to prepare candidates for environments simulating that of Jupiter, but the most recent findings show that kind of progress to be unattainable in the near future, however the surface of Io, one of Jupiter's moons, seem to mostly fall between thresholds of Earth and our own moon for all test categories.

CHEMICAL RESEARCH:

Research is limited here. Ongoing projects include determining whether alloys

of self-regulating density could be created which would be conducive to generating or protecting a field of stable pressure. Recent advances have been inconclusive.

An unrelated project involves the examination of obelisk fragments from Area D. Analysis suggests the obelisks are formed of an ionized Iron(60) not commonly found on our planet, although this is mixed with other more mundane elements like silicon and magnesium.

The fragments have been exhaustively studied as the symbols were observed to transform. Researchers agree that it is a chemical transformation rather than a bio-transformation or physical one.

APPENDIX F: SUGGESTED FUTURE PLOT LEADS

NEO LUNAR

Obvious opportunities exist for PCs to find notes on Neo Lunar and attempt to investigate the various lunar colonies. PCs with any computer skills (or interrogation skills) may be able to generate a list of military installations with similar goals as this one, perhaps even including one particular facility in Tampete used to launch shuttles toward the lunar colonies.

If the GM does choose to incorporate this into his campaign, he could include a soldier's journal in one of the barracks containing conscious-ridden notes about the happenings and purposes within this facility. This journal will contain comparisons to his assignment at previous facilities in Tampete, Houston, and Brighton.

Alternatively, if Darren Mayhew is found, and better yet, rescued, Linden Mayhew will be very grateful (paying the \$20,000 if Darren is returned safely).

As a House Representative, Linden Mayhew has heard the name Neo Lunar in passing within his circles, but really has no idea of the origin or purpose of the company. If he learns that Neo Lunar was responsible for the disappearance of his son, he may seek to learn more about them. If it can be proven his son was harmed or killed by Neo Lunar operations, Linden may make it his life's ambition to seek retribution against this company, possibly involving the PCs to do so.

Although Linden does not yet know much about Neo Lunar's inner workings, he will make a valuable ally to PCs investigating them.

JOVIAN DRILLING

This lead is not exclusive of the Neo Lunar lead, and in fact, works well with it. GMs choosing to explore this portion of the Dark Conspiracy mythos should include detailed scientific journals describing launch sites in Tampete, a chronology of events in the Jupiter system, and what sort of modifications would be required to make the cybertechnology suitable on the outer planets. It should be intimated that at least one Living Script fragment was obtained from the Jupiter system, which promotes the theory that the symbols are either a record or a form of communication used by a more advanced race.

LIVING SCRIPT

If the GM is interested in pursuing this in his campaign, it works well with the Jovian Drilling leads. New fragments also work well as a sort of beacon to attract the attention of PCs as a rash of bizarre behavior exhibited by nearby denizens when these things turn up tend to make the news. PCs are likely to cross paths with Neo Lunar and other agencies if they pursue these leads.

Whether Living Script is an evergreen communication method, a code, or a warning, it is definitely clear from the abundance of data collected at the Navy Airfield that Living Script has direct relevance to some kind of ancient and possibly terrible deal between mankind and another group of entities.

RA

Though never named by the candidates in their attempts to translate the obelisks of Living Script, the scientists studying those interpretations have come to name a commonly described entity as "Ra". It is unknown whether Ra is an ET, a Darkling, a Dark Lord, or something else altogether, however Ra is definitely very old. Instances of Ra (for Ra is thought to be able to exist in parallel with itself, possibly even creating itself) predate Earth's written history and possibly even Earth, itself (if astronomical data supposed to correspond with those events is to be taken at face value).

Cults did exist to this unnamed entity, identified by prayers, songs, and rituals exhibited by candidates who saw themselves as celebrants in some terrible ritual. Perhaps these cults still exist. In all instances of worship, across cultures, times, and possibly even solar systems, one concept remains static. The entity absolutely never responds to its cultists.



Nightmares and Worse



A Little Critter Cache
By Chad Bowser
For Basic Role Playing®

Here are five new creatures for BRP powered horror or thriller games. Each entry includes not only the relevant stats, but what various skill rolls might reveal about the monster to those hunting it. Some of the information gleaned for the monsters is contradictory, this is intentional. On the one hand, it allows a GM to choose the information most appropriate to his game. On the other hand, it shows the disparate and sparse information available about the monsters in the game and how two people can see the same event and provide completely different reports of what transpired.

This book was designed with the Basic Roleplaying Big Gold Book in mind, so some skills will not match Call of Cthulhu skills. To remedy this, the appropriate Call of Cthulhu skill is listed in brackets.

Two other elements of the stat block that might not be familiar to Call of Cthulhu keepers are the powers section and the stress loss. Many of the powers, such as Danger Sense or Astral Projection, are self-explanatory, even to those unfamiliar with the BRP powers system. The stress system for BRP was introduced in issue 2 of Uncounted Worlds. Designed to model the psychic trauma in movies such as 28 Days Later and Blair Witch, it allows for quicker, more dramatic mental breaks with faster recovery times.



BARBEIRO

From a distance, the barbeiro looks like an ordinary man with a slight stoop. Up close, it's horrendous. Dressed in ragged, bloody shards, its skin has a sickly pallor. Its face is devoid of any feature except for a small slit where a human's mouth would be. Its most frightening aspect, however, and how it earned its name, are its hands. Each finger has been replaced with a rusty straight razor. Blood continually seeps from open sores where the razors have been crudely grafted to the hand.

The barbeiro stalks the poorest slums or the most isolated farmlands looking for prey. It sneaks up behind a victim and slits his throat. It then drains as much blood as possible through the slit on its face.

The opening on its face contains not only its mouth but a complex array of sensory organs allowing the barbeiro to see, hear, smell, and taste. It can't speak.

Knowledge (Folklore) [Occult]: The homeless say it's best to sleep in a shelter around these parts. Too many have wound up in the morgue. Petey said he escaped from the killer, some crazy guy in a mask with a razor blade. Petey's usually good for a tall tale or two, but he's got this strange scar. Of course, the police are ignoring the claims.

Knowledge (Folklore) [Occult]: I saw a vampire out by Old Man Johnson's cabin! It was feeding on him. By the time I went home, got my crossbow and returned there, he was drained dry. I followed the tracks down to the river, but he musta turned into a bat and flew away. You know they can't cross running water, right?

Knowledge (Occult) [Occult]: They say the Soviets were trying to build the ultimate super assassin at one of their labs in central Asia. The problem with the ultimate assassin? It kills everything, starting

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Roll</i>	<i>Avg</i>
<i>STR</i>	5D6	17-18
<i>CON</i>	3D6	10-11
<i>SIZ</i>	3D6	10-11
<i>INT</i>	3D6	10-11
<i>POW</i>	3D6	10-11
<i>DEX</i>	6D6	21
<i>Move:</i>	12	
<i>Hit Points:</i>	15	
<i>Damage Bonus:</i>	+1D4	
<i>Armor:</i>	2 points of pale, leather hide.	
<i>Attacks:</i>	Claws 85%, damage 1D6+db Blood Drain, drains 1D6 STR or POW	
<i>Skills:</i>	Climb 65%, Dodge 45%, Hide 65%, Insight 50%, Listen 65%, Jump 70%, Sense 75%, Spot 55%, Stealth 70%	
<i>Powers:</i>	Danger Sense 60%, Emotion Control 45%	
<i>SAN/Stress Loss:</i>	1/1D6 to see a barbeiro.	

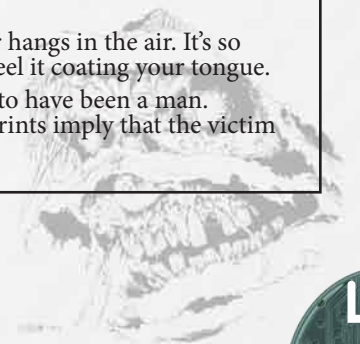
with the Soviet scientists that created it.

Knowledge (Occult) [Occult]: Those aliens from Zeta Reticuli are the least of our problems. I'd take an anal probe any day over the aliens from HD2094586. They look almost human, but they're killers, slaughtering anyone and everyone they meet. I saw one not far from the Green Bank Telescope. It was slinking around when it heard me. I had to run for my life. It was fast!

Medicine: The victim's throat was slit and then the blood drained. The body was then moved to its current location. Flakes of rust were found in the wound.

Sense: A strong iron odor hangs in the air. It's so thick, you can almost feel it coating your tongue.

Track: The killer appears to have been a man. Blood drops near the prints imply that the victim wounded his assailant.



LAZARUS (PLURAL: LAZARI), THE FOREVER MEN

A Lazarus is a human that's become immortal.

The process of becoming immortal has also endowed the person with psychic abilities.

The Lazari have one goal, world domination.

Even without his psychic skills, a Lazarus is a powerful business man. He's been the head of his corporation for decades, or possibly centuries. When he amassed his wealth, he looked for ways to prolong his life, and he found it. Science provided the means for him to live forever. As a Lazarus realized his power, he first used it help his business. He could tell when to buy and when to sell. When plastics were going to take over, when the dot com bubble was going to burst. Soon, however, each Lazarus detected that there were others like him. Knowing that great minds think alike, they began to seek each other out.

Once they realized they weren't alone, the Lazari decided to use their powers for more than just corporate gain. They decided they could use their power, money, and influence to change the world for the better. Better for them, at least.

The Lazari know the value of working from behind the scenes. Almost all of them have faked their death at one time or another. Or they paid to have an obituary entered into the records at the appropriate time.

Now, they spend most of their time in the Astral Plane watching the currents of the past, present, and future flow before them. When traveling astrally, they keep their bodies in safe rooms deep within their mansions, Knowledge (Business) [Accounting]: You have to hand it to Hoffman Energy. They change their CEO every few years, but the business has maintained a consistent trajectory. Normally, regular upheaval at that level of leadership would throw off business plans.

Knowledge (History) [History]: There was a dissertation being prepared on how TransGlobal Bank has survived every downturn in the economy and emerged stronger. Unfortunately, the doctoral candidate had a car accident the morning she was set to present.

Knowledge (Occult) [Occult]: The real question

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Roll</i>	<i>Avg</i>
STR	3D6	10-11
CON	3D6	10-11
SIZ	3D6	10-11
INT	3D6	10-11
POW	3D6+12	22-23
DEX	3D6	10-11
APP	3D6	10-11
Move:	12	
Hit Points:	11	
Damage Bonus:	None	
Armor:	None. Might wear 5 point ballistic cloth tuxedo to special functions.	
Attacks:	Fist/Punch 50%, 1D3+db Pistol 45%, 1D8	
Skills:	Appraise 55%, Bargain 75%, Etiquette 55%, Fast Talk 60%, Insight 70%, Knowledge (Business) 70%, Persuade 70%, Status 95%	
Powers:	A Lazarus has the following Psychic powers. Astral Projection 65%, Clairvoyance 45%, Cryokenesis 30%, Danger Sense 70%, Eidetic Memory 55%, Emotion Control 40%, Empathy 50%, Intuition 45%, Mind Blast 30%, Mind Control 65%, Mind Shield 50%, Precognition 70%, Telepathy 55%	
SAN/Stress Loss:	0 loss to see a Lazarus.	

you need to be asking yourself is, "who's controlling the Bilderberg Group?" There's this cabal of men, alive forever it seems like, that really pull the strings. The New World Order's not going to come from governments. Instead, these men are going to let the governments fall and step up to take their place.

Knowledge (Occult) [Occult]: I was on an astral trip, visiting Alcheringa when I encountered a group of powerful sorcerers. When they saw me, they came after me. I barely escaped with my

life!

Knowledge (Religion) [Occult]: "The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went to the daughters of men and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown."

Research (Audiovisual) [Library Use]: The man in the background of the recent taping of the Senate Appropriations Committee looks exactly like the man who founded Anodyne Weapons, in 1921. And he hasn't aged a day!



SCUTTLE

The scuttler is a small creature from the depths of pre-history. It averages three feet in height, but weighs up to one-hundred fifty pounds because it's covered in thick exoskeleton that protects it and aids in underwater breathing.

It is a consummate hunter, stalking ocean and lake beds for prey. When it finds a suitable target it spears it with a specialized appendage ending in a ten inch long spike. The scuttler has two such appendages in place of arms. It frequently uses one arm to spear the prey and hold it in place while it stabs the prone victim in place with the other arm.

Scuttlers can survive on land, though they prefer to stay close to shore to aid in any escape. When hunting on land, a scuttler prefers hiding in boathouses, under piers, and among sand dunes where the shadows can help it hide.

The scuttler's exoskeleton is chitinous, similar to a crab's. Papillae between chinks in the exoskeleton capture and hold oxygen when the creature surfaces and then dives. This allows the creature to stay underwater for months a time.

A scuttler swims by extending a membrane that extends from the base of its spear back to its body.

Knowledge (Folklore) [Occult]: The killer from beneath preys on children who go into the water alone.

Knowledge (Folklore) [Occult]: The assassin crab lives under the abandoned boathouse, leaving at night to stalk the village.

Knowledge (Lake Shore Region) [Library Use]:

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Roll</i>	<i>Avg</i>
<i>STR</i>	3D6	10-11
<i>CON</i>	3D6	10-11
<i>SIZ</i>	2D4+4	9
<i>INT</i>	2D4+4	9
<i>POW</i>	2D6	8-9
<i>DEX</i>	3D6	10-11
<i>Move:</i>	6 (12 Swimming)	
<i>Hit Points:</i>	12	
<i>Damage Bonus:</i>	None	
<i>Armor:</i>	4 points of exoskeleton	
<i>Attacks:</i>	Spear 55%, 1D8+db Bite 30%, 1D4	
<i>Skills:</i>	Dodge 30%, Hide 40%, Stealth 45%, Swim 75%	
<i>SAN/Stress Loss:</i>	0/1D3	

According to county records, ten swimmers have gone missing in the lake in the past fifteen years. Supposedly each of them suffered fatigue and drowned.

Medicine: Autopsy victim appears to have been stabbed with a sharp blade. Flakes of chitin found in wounds. Cause of death is drowning. Numerous bite marks, presumably from opportunistic aquatic feeders.

Science (Biology) [Biology]: Creature appears to have evolved from crabs. Its adaptations have

rendered it a fast swimmer and efficient hunter. It is an air breather, but appears to be able to air where its chitinous plates overlap and absorb the oxygen through numerous papillae. A carnivore.

Track: Subject appears to walk on two legs that terminate in webbed feet. Stride is ten to twelve inches in length; subject is approximately two to four feet tall. Depth of tracks in wet sand indicates the creature might weigh upwards of one-hundred eighty pounds. Spoor is broken chitin and scat similar to a crustacean.



SHADOW SPIDERS

Sometimes it appears the shadows are moving, even though logic dictates there's no reason for them to be fluttering and twitching.

It's the shadow spiders, tendrils from a hive mind from another plane. Each spider is the color of shadow and can only exist within the borders of a shadow. If someone closely examines a shadow filled with shadow spiders, he sees hundreds of small, grey-black creatures squirming and writhing within. If someone reaches into the shadow, he feels nothing. His hand passes through unscathed.

They come to this plane to feed on the dreams of people, transferring the energy to the hive mind on its home plane. As the creatures steal the dreams of sleepers, they insert images of their home plane into the memory to fill the voids. People attacked by shadow spiders always have a lurking suspicion that there's a dark, nebulous, hostile world just beyond ours.

The spiders are insubstantial, existing only as a shadow of the hive mind. They never tire, need to eat, or are injured by physical weapons.

Light drives the spiders back to their home plane.

When the shadow spiders drain a victim, it drains a number of Power Points [Magic Points] equal to its Drain level.

To chase off the creatures, light must be directed

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Roll</i>	<i>Avg</i>
<i>INT</i>	4D6	14
<i>POW</i>	4D6	14
<i>Move:</i>	14 (limited to shadows only)	
<i>Hit Points:</i>	None	
<i>Damage Bonus:</i>	None	
<i>Armor:</i>	None (immaterial)	
<i>Powers:</i>	Drain (6), Intangibility	
<i>SAN/Stress Loss:</i>	0/1D3	

at them. Ambient light doesn't work because it leaves nooks where shadows can play.

Targeted small flames such as matches or candles reduce the shadow spiders' POW by 1.

Targeted large flames such as flamethrowers and fireballs reduce the shadow spiders' POW by 1D8.

Targeted small electronics such as household flashlights reduce the shadow spiders' POW by 1D4.

Targets large electronics such as spotlights reduce the shadow spiders' POW by 1D10.

When the shadow spiders' POW is reduced to 0,

the creature must return to its home plane. It regenerates 1 POW per day.

Knowledge (Folklore) [Occult]: The itsy bitsy spider crawled into momma's bed / crawled up the baby and drained his head / momma lay there sleeping while baby lay there dead / and the itsy bitsy spider crawled out of momma's bed.

Knowledge (Occult) [Occult]: Some astral projectionists claim to have met a race of intelligent spiders who feed on human intellect. Hogwash, right? Humans don't have intellect!

Medicine: Autopsy victim died of a heart attack. Features are frozen in fear.



THE TENEMENT

Tenements are strange creatures from another plane. Some scholars even argue that all the tenements are merely fractured extensions of a single alien entity. When a tenement emerges into this plane, it does so by either subsuming an existing apartment, hotel room, duplex or flat or creating one where none existed before. Those same scholars who aren't sure how many tenements exist also can't explain why tenements only appear in communal living structures and never as a standalone building. Multiple tenements will sometimes combine to form entire floors or blocks of rooms.

Tenements either closely mimic the features of a the living space they're replacing or use prior knowledge of human dwellings to create a facsimile when forming a new living space. A successful Spot Hidden check gives the impression that something, maybe even everything, is slightly off about the room. Maybe everything is two centimeters to the left or there's a faint odor of cinnamon in the air, even though there's no cinnamon in the home.

When someone steps inside a living space that's a tenement, they are actually stepping inside the tenement and passing into the plane of existence where the tenement resides, they just don't realize it.

A tenement feeds off the POW of humans who dwell within them. If a person stays inside the tenement for more than four hours, the tenement starts drains the person's POW. If the target is reduced to 0 POW, he dies.

POW Drain: The tenement opposes its POW against its chosen target's POW on the resistance table. If the tenement succeeds, it drains 1D6 POW from the target. If it fails, it drains no POW and the target realizes that something was mucking about in his mind. Providing that the victim has not died, these characteristic points are not permanently lost and regenerate at the rate of 1 point per day of relative rest, or twice that long if the character is not resting. As long as the target is in the tenement, it can't recover POW.

When the tenement has fully drained its target, it returns to its plane. If it occupied an existing apartment, that apartment returns to normal. If it created a brand new living space, that space, and anything placed within it are lost to the tenement's home dimension.

Damaging the tenement, by shooting holes in the

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Roll</i>	<i>Avg</i>
<i>STR</i>	NA	NA
<i>CON</i>	NA	NA
<i>SIZ</i>	NA	NA
<i>INT</i>	4D6	13-15
<i>POW</i>	6D6	19-21
<i>DEX</i>	NA	NA
<i>Move:</i>	NA	
<i>Hit Points:</i>	Equal to POW	
<i>Damage Bonus:</i>	None	
<i>Armor:</i>	None	
<i>Attacks:</i>	POW drain	
<i>SAN/Stress Loss:</i>	1D3/1D8 to realize what a tenement is. 1D20/1D100 to get sucked into its dimension. Not that it really matters because there's no air there.	

wall, pulling up floorboards, or hanging pictures doesn't damage the monster. However, anyone looking through the hole will see into the tenement's home dimension, a swirling void of clouds and colors not unlike a stellar nursery. If the hole is larger than a grapefruit, winds start howling through the hole, dragging objects that weigh less than 10 lbs toward it. If the hole, or group of holes, is roughly the size of an office chair, the winds will pull anything less than 250 lbs toward it. If a character is pulled toward the hole, he must oppose his STR against the tenement's POW or be sucked into the void. If he succeeds, he's found something to grab onto. A tenement can repair any hole, regardless of size by expending 5 POW. It can recoup these POW by draining a target.

A tenement can be driven back to its home plane by reducing it to zero POW, usually through psychic combat. If a tenement is forced back, everything inside, including people is whisked back to the tenement's freezing, airless dimension. Kind GMs can allow each character one Dodge check to leap out of the room.

Art (Architecture): That's weird, Steve said he lives

in apartment 23, but the architect who built these always stopped at apartment 22.

Insight [Psychology]: Ever notice how wiped Henry is since he came to town? Not sure what's up, but the bags under his eyes are atrocious; he looks like the walking dead.

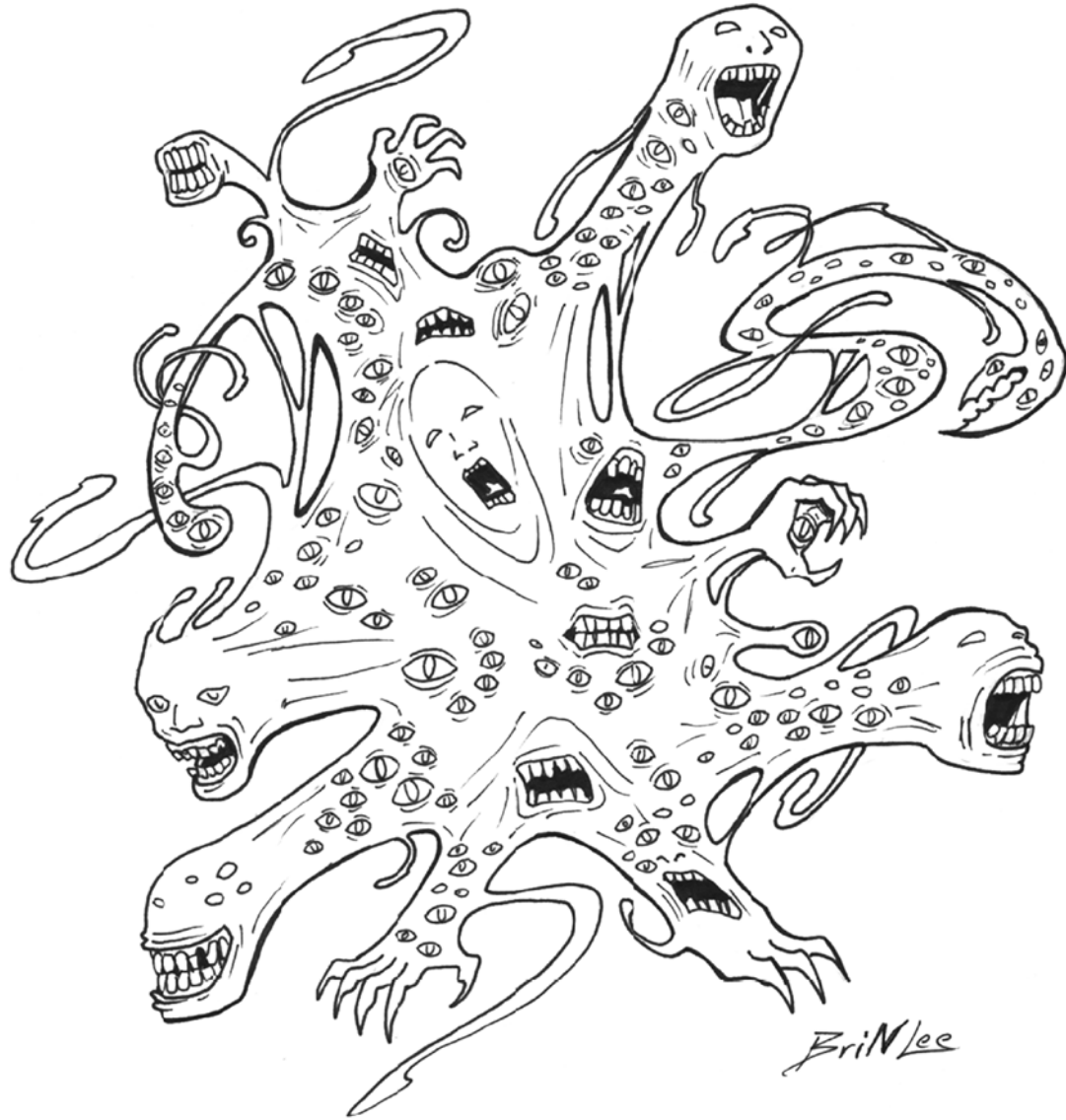
Knowledge (Folklore) [Occult]: Did you ever hear the urban legend that hotels don't like to have a room 13 or a floor 13 because bad things always happen there? Well, Hyacinth always made a point of staying in room 13 in every hotel we stayed at, just to flaunt danger. I wonder where she's gone off to? Haven't seen her since we stayed at the Excelsior.

Knowledge (Occult) [Occult]: They say that this hotel was built on a rift in time and space and that other dimensions periodically reach through into the hotel.

Psychotherapy [Psychoanalysis]: Henry's suffering from a severe case of mental fatigue. He just needs lie down and rest for a while.

Research (Records) [Library Use]: The blueprints for the hotel show that there's only seven floors and forty-two rooms. Not, eight floors and forty-eight rooms like we saw when we went inside.





Not In Kansas Anymore

Fiction
By CW Kelson III (Tad)

Got that brick tied to the steering wheel keeping me straight on the road to Wichita from where I started at. It curves at times, little rolling elements once in a while, still it works well enough for me. Cell Phone reception sucks in spots, still barely enough bars to hold onto for my hotspot action. All alone in the car and the wide blue sky reaching into all the eight corners of the compass.

The asphalt rolled beneath the tires, 4 MP3 players with 4 tracks rolling on continuous, Gangsta, Mario Takes A Walk, Japan to Kenya & Back, and Beyond Despair. Still there I am sitting in the car seat, heat searing while I am rolling on and on under the wide blue sky reaching to all the corners of vision.

Mental cacophony to match the ceaseless monotony of the scenery passing to either side, while in front and behind is nothing but the same for hour after hour after hour. The music and words all melded together into an alteration of self for the duration. Just the four songs over and over the same and changing, with the different durations of each song adding onto the monotonous difference as well.

The road passes along and along and along, the four some hours it should take taking more than the four some hours it

should take taking longer than the four some hours it should take. The sun sits there above the car roof while the drums play and the violins ache and repeat over and over and the string holding my car on the road becomes the lifeline to which sanity clings in ever lengthening dribs and drabs.

The car drives its self while I take a nap and the car just drives its self along the road and I am utterly unconcerned. Wakening from the impromptu nap with visions of trailer park witches transformed into blue hairs and Loas whispering tales of krews along with recipes as well.

Daylight remained above and the road stretched in a sold straight line ahead and behind. The cattle that were there before are gone now. The clouds that were there are gone now. The sound of the motor engine is gone now. The air rushing past the open windows remains the same, the heat beating down remains the same, the music remains the same, hours past the arrival time and the MP3s remain the same the same the same the same echoing the finality of the wastelands between one place and another.

Falling asleep again at the wheel, shoes wedged to hold the gas pedal down while the tank never runs dry and it all echoes



around inside the skull showing the inner workings of thoughts turned on their sides. The notebook sits there calling out with blank pages to write down what is not happening at all.

The day turns into day once more and it all stays the same while the car moves down the arrow straight road between Kansas City and Wichita and the road signs all say the same as well. Nothing changes at all on the road.

Gas gauge stays the same, sun stays the same, heat stays the same, no clouds at all in the sky and the road stays the same.

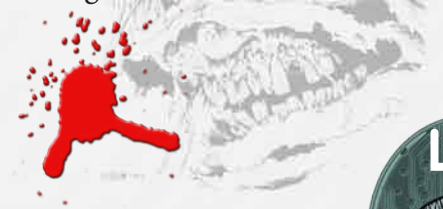
Not sleepy anymore, not hungry either, no thirst exists while the music plays on and on, over and over again. No longer does change exist in this world in which existence consists of pleather seats, dashboard of dials that never move, a single red brick tied to the steering wheel and a road that stretched past the horizon from the past into the future as well. Harmonics from the interactions of the music are making the never endings in my feet and hands tingle and move of their own accord in little circles and arcs of twitches and minor fit like episodes. The inner flesh of my eyelids are starting to itch and burn as well as lift away from the dry orbs that sit inside the hollows where the eyeballs have

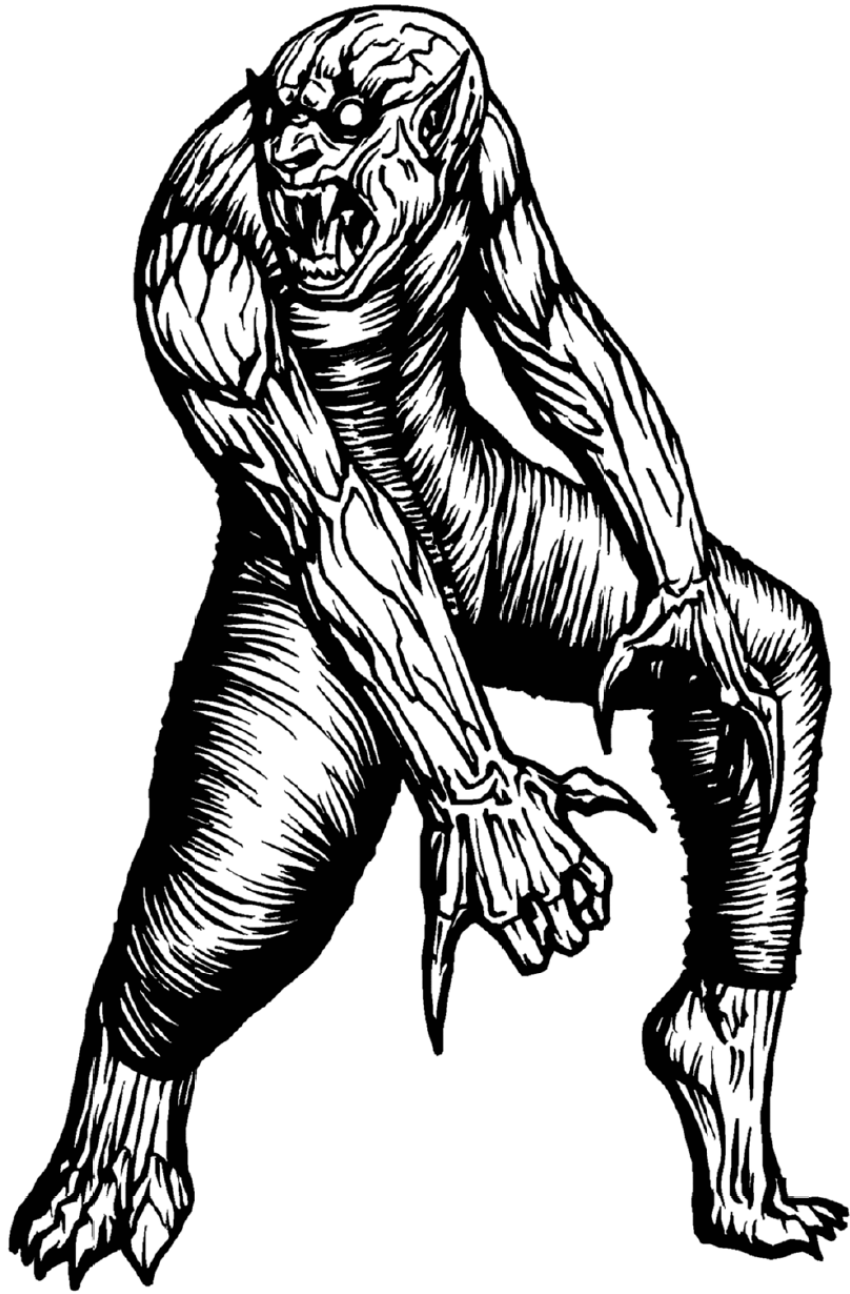
been sitting this entire trip. Reaching up ascertains that the little grape like balloons of eyeballs are deflating, softening and deforming under the pressure of moving along at 370 thousand feet an hour over the course of a lifetime spent sitting in the front seat of a car moving from one place to another having forgotten the reason why it all started off.

Fingers slowly elongating to make it easier to wrap around the hot plastic steering wheel sitting in the sun standing silent vigil overhead of the moving vehicle going endlessly along the roadway, where the mile markers all look the same and it is a blurred procession of tumbleweeds moving in the same direction only slightly faster, slightly out of focus all the while the music loops around and around into a single continuous stream of converted impressions of analog and digital into digital into analog into auditory into visually stimulating simulations of multiple layers of never be there ever again in a loop all around the place. Fingers wrapped around the steering wheel, looping around and around several times, ring fingers wrapping about and knotting in each other while the wheels spin along in endless hiss of rubber on asphalt in a fetish sentimentality of brutal conversion from flesh to oil to plastic to flesh to plastic to oil secreted from pore

opening under the beating down rays of ultraviolet crisping tender flesh past medium till nearly well done and black strips flake away in the rushing torrent of slipstream airflow crashing in from 4 open windows and vents set to pull in via openings in the body of the car while the body in the front seat moves a single step closer to symbiosis and the fingers are turned into simple flaked away tendons and ligaments, lightly tanning in the sun, with bones bleaching white in the Midwestern Sun and cattle skulls are the closest approximates after time spent searching.

In the last service attended visions of large wild cattle, humps full of fat to sustain them, horns as wide as a plain, moved in endless herds while the first men offered their young in sacrifice in the hunt. Afterwards the mixed bones bleached together in common midden heaps until such a time as a car passed along and made echo of then and now and until such a time as flesh baked away leaving a car running with shoes wedged to hold the gas pedal down and a lonely red brick held on a string, a piece of twine to be more precise, held the course straight and narrow.





A Strict Protein Diet



Character and Seeds
By Jeff Moeller
For Call of Cthulhu® (Modern)

Cyphre: *You know, some religions think that the egg is the symbol of the soul, did you know that?* [Cyphre peels a hard-boiled egg with an oddly long, claw-like thumbnail]

Angel: *No, I didn't know that.*

Cyphre: *Would you like an egg?* [Takes a big, sloppy bite]

Angel: *No thank you, I got a thing about chickens.*

Angel Heart (1987)

Melvin Taylor, What Is Publicly Known:

Melvin Taylor, all sports pundits agree, is the baddest man on the planet. Period. He came out of a poor neighborhood, a single parent family in suburban Boston, and did not finish the 11th grade. He is 22 years old, 6'8" tall, 300 lbs., and looks like Mr. Olympia despite never having engaged in formal weight training.

Pictures of Melvin from high school are scarce, but they depict a tall (6'4") but very scrawny youth with terrible skin. It is common knowledge that he was picked on by

gang members at his inner city high school, and at his mother Gloria's urging, started studying martial arts and boxing at the local Y.M.C.A. gym to learn to defend himself. Or so the stories go; Melvin's mother died last year of a drug overdose, and no one can find anyone who actually worked with him at the gym. Those people all seem to have slunk into the fabric of society.

He is blazingly fast and incredibly tough, traits which led him to win gold medals in **both** Judo and Boxing at the Olympic Games at the age of 19. As soon as fights could be arranged after the Games, Melvin won both a major boxing championship and a major mixed martial arts title. He has successfully defended both titles, without being in any serious trouble on any occasion, about a dozen times each over the past three years. This is an unheard of pace.

He still lives in the Boston area, across the state line in Rhode Island, in an old Newport mansion. He is by all reports fabulously wealthy and lives with a large posse—all male. Oddly, he is single and has never been reliably, romantically linked to anyone. His posse scrupulously avoids trouble with the law; when he wants to hear a band or dine out, he simply hires the band for an evening for a private function, or reserves a night club. He once turned in



a posse member who was found in possession of a firearm in violation of local law.

Melvin has numerous clothing endorsement contracts, including for sneakers, athletic wear, and sunglasses. He notoriously refuses to endorse many other types of goods, especially food items. Strangely, he serves as an unpaid spokesman for the National Egg Producer's Council. He volunteered for this role.

He rarely gives interviews, but when he does, it is usually to the same ESPN reporter, Jerry Holmes. He does not lend money or engage in any investment or business activities, at least not those that might involve any kind of background check.

Melvin always refers to himself in the third person in interviews, and comes across as hopelessly shallow, narcissistic and condescending. Yet, he quickly reacts to any negative publicity or press coverage by throwing money at a carefully targeted charity, one tied to his most recent critic.

In interviews, he credits his success to hard work, natural talent and a special, strict protein diet. It is widely reported in the press that he eats only vegetables, whole grains, and eggs of any sort. He enjoys sushi (as long as it is roe based).

There is a nasty and persistent rumor that Melvin Taylor has no genitals of any kind. Several tabloid magazines have offered rewards of \$1,000,000 for photographic proof of this. So far, no one has managed to get close enough to him to document this bit of slander. The rumor is said to have originated with a ring girl at an MMA contest last year, who got a good, close up angle on a "wardrobe malfunction" during a clinch. The ring girl, Edith Slovik from the Ukraine, disappeared shortly thereafter. Melvin took to endorsing and wearing a new brand of tight-fitting, sharkskin wrestling singlet, impervious to slippage in the groin region, by the time of his next bout.

He crows about, and voluntarily produces to the press prior to every bout, squeaky clean doping test results.

Melvin Taylor, What is Known to a Select Few, Or Discoverable Through A Moderate Of Digging:

No one that the investigators will be able to find is closely related to, or an *old* friend of, Melvin. No one knows who his father is, although a few losers and degenerates have made public claims of paternity. His birth certificate lists no father.

Teachers, school officials, local neighbors from the old neighborhood, and the like can relate that Melvin was large but skinny and hopelessly unathletic as a child and adolescent. He did not exactly drop out of school in the 11th grade, either. His mother, Gloria, was Haitian, and a few people in the old neighborhood remember her being hauled off by immigration officials. Melvin just disappeared from school and the neighborhood when this happened.

Interviews with members of the last boxing or judo Olympic teams, or knowledgeable sports reporters, can easily confirm that Melvin had his current *ubermensch* build when he attended his first Olympic trial. Team members or coaches from that time are extremely reluctant—indeed, even afraid—to talk about him, as a *Psychology* roll can detect. The last guy who came around doing really deep research on this time period—Ari Blumberg, a reporter for the Daily Moon tabloid—was found beaten in a night club restroom, and, for some reason, then ended up in an insane asylum in Vermont.

Ari Blumberg was (according to his editors and confidantes) doing an investigative journalism piece on Melvin. He suspected that Melvin had found some new type of undetectable steroid. Something happened

to Ari one night a few months ago, after he is reported to have encountered Melvin and some of his posse at an exclusive night club in Manhattan. He was found in the men's room, beaten severely and gibbering insanely. His notes could not be found, and his PDA went missing.

Melvin, in an effort to squelch allegations of his personal involvement in Ari's beating, paid to have poor Ari receive the best inpatient, long term psychiatric care available, at a private institution near Bennington, Vermont. He even had his limo driver, "Tony" Patel, drive him there. Edith Slovik, the ring girl, supposedly went back to the Ukraine in a big hurry, according to her friends in the U.S. Her family and friends in the Ukraine are worried sick and claim to have no idea where she is.

Melvin Taylor, What Can Be Found Out With A Considerable Amount Of Digging:

Somehow gaining access to the financial records of Melvin's boyhood Y.M.C.A. gym reveals (*Accounting*) that Melvin never attended any martial arts or boxing classes there. The instructors in martial arts and boxing who might have had contact with Melvin around that time have mysteriously disappeared without a trace.

Passport control records, or getting a look at Melvin's passport, reveal that he accompanied his mother to Haiti at the age of 17, and returned to the U.S. a year later to try out for the Olympic teams.

In the files of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, there is a record from secondary inspection at the Atlanta airport. They initially believed that Melvin was not Melvin, given how much his appearance had changed in a year. However, they eventually allowed him to enter.

In exchange for a large political donation (\$5,000,000) to his Congressman's reelection campaign, Melvin managed to get his mother, Gloria, a private bill granting her U.S. citizenship and got her back into the country as well. (*Library Use* or appropriate inquiry via Freedom of Information Act requests for records dating after her deportation).

Ari Blumberg is hopelessly insane in a private mental institution in Vermont, but under successful *Psychoanalysis* might burble something enlightening, along the lines given in handout #1.



Some Insane Ravings, Courtesy of Ari Blumberg

He dared me, you know. HE DARED ME! I just did what he said... I followed him into the bathroom. He made me look. But that wasn't the worst. That I could've explained somehow. It was the drive here. The driver...explained things to me. It doesn't matter. Nothing matters.

A Strict Protein Diet Investigator Handout #1



EDITH SLOVIK:

If the investigators somehow get a hold of passport control records or departing flight information for the day after the “wardrobe malfunction” fight, Edith actually flew under her own name to Reykjavik, where she is in hiding under an assumed name. They might (**Computer Use + Accounting**), if they are able to hack into her credit card records, find stray credit card charges that show that Edith has friends and has spent vacation periods in Reykjavik before, and guess that she might be there. Sufficient shoe leather in Reykjavik, perhaps with the intercession of some **Persuade** rolls (modified in favor of legitimate law enforcement personnel), might find her hiding in a friend’s home under an assumed name. She is more likely to cooperate remotely, over a disposable phone, if she is located.

Edith saw what she saw, and is afraid for her life: Melvin has no genitals whatsoever. His genital region is smooth and covered with bizarre tattoos, which she can roughly sketch out. A **Cthulhu Mythos** roll equates some of the tattoos as symbols of Nyarlathotep, the Crawling Chaos. **Occult** rolls separately identify a number of symbols to be associated with Haitian voodoo.

HAITIAN AUTHORITIES:

They are hopelessly corrupt and disorganized for the most part. However, they are also bribable, and if bribed, a civil servant might get motivated to dig through poorly kept records or ask around. They can then confirm that Gloria Taylor was deported back to Haiti about five years ago, and that her son, Melvin, came with her. She reported her residence in a now-earthquake devastated slum region of Port-au-Prince.

Local ward chiefs from that neighborhood (**Persuade** or bribe) might help the investigators find people who know the Taylor family. A lot of people do, but most of them are unwilling to talk. They are obviously scared, and some might make the sign of the cross when being asked about the Taylors. **Persuade, Fast Talk**, or large bribes (enough to relocate a Haitian extended family to somewhere nice) might get someone to mention that Melvin’s maternal grandfather was a notorious *houn-gan*, or voodoo priest.

Olympic Records: Good luck getting copies of the actual records. Attempts to look at them without a subpoena are politely rejected, since they are medical records. Subpoenas from law enforcement officials are fought tooth and nail by the

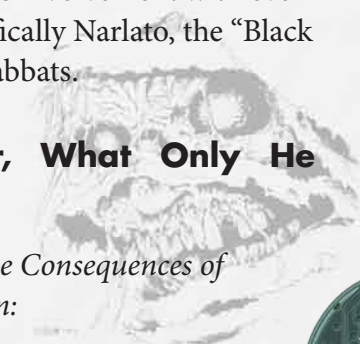
best lawyers that Melvin’s millions can buy, and people who might otherwise quietly talk get nervous. If somehow obtained via burglary or bribery, they reveal that Melvin was determined to be of questionable gender on a gross visual inspection, but confirmed to be male through chromosome analysis and allowed to compete as a male. Appropriate roleplaying might, in the case of law enforcement personnel, get someone to summarize these findings “off the record.” Melvin was also suspected of steroid abuse of some sort by the Olympic authorities, but tested squeaky clean several different times.

THE HAITIAN OCCULT NETWORK:

Asking around about Melvin’s grandfather, Jean-Baptiste Taylor, will reveal that he had a reputation as a notorious sorcerer. He disappeared about 20 years ago. Mythos knowledgeable sources might have heard rumors of his involvement with even darker gods, specifically Narlato, the “Black Man” of witches’ sabbats.

Melvin Taylor, What Only He Knows:

The Deal and The Consequences of Constant Escalation:



Melvin's grandfather may be dead, but that didn't stop his mother from summoning him up and asking for his help to obtain revenge on those who had disrespected her and her son by bullying him and deporting her from the U.S. She sacrificed her soul in exchange for her son to be respected. In exchange for the sacrifice of her soul, Melvin's grandfather introduced Melvin, at a midnight ritual at which Melvin committed his first human sacrifice, to Nyarlathotep, in his guise as the mocking, deal-making Narlato, the "Black Man" of black Sabbaths.

Melvin signed his name in blood in Narlato's book, and was surprised when the Black Man asked him what his favorite food was. Eggs proved to be a good answer, as they are symbolic of the soul, and consuming them in ritual has a singular power.

The deal is this: Melvin has been taught a ritual, which will be referred to as *Consume Essence*, which enables him to be an *ubermensch*. It draws on tantric rituals, sympathetic magic concepts, and a bit of hyper-dimensionality. Melvin elaborately prepares eggs, of some sort, mixed with his own blood and that of a fresh human sacrifice. The method of preparation (sushi, scrambled, sunny side up) does not matter.

He must do this once a week, with blood from a fresh human sacrifice, or he begins to wither and die. Sometimes, Melvin is not able to find a sacrifice discretely, and he begins to fade and wither at the rate of 1 random physical attribute point (STR, DEX, CON) per missed week, only to rebound and "buff up" again when he can get back on schedule. When on the rebound, he regains lost points, 1 point at a time, most recently lost first.

Much of his vast earnings go to the controlled acquisition (via abduction, enslavement, sponsoring human trafficking rings, or otherwise) of suitable sacrificial victims. He often travels abroad to find victims and kinds of eggs that he has not eaten before.

Melvin owes everything to the deal he made with Narlato. He is the best athlete in the world, thanks exclusively to magic. The initial few rituals transformed him. Some parts of him grew, while others shriveled and eventually, just fell off, leaving a simple aperture for voiding waste. Like an egg, he is undifferentiated but perfect. But Melvin simply does not care. Finally, he has the respect that he never had growing up as a kid.

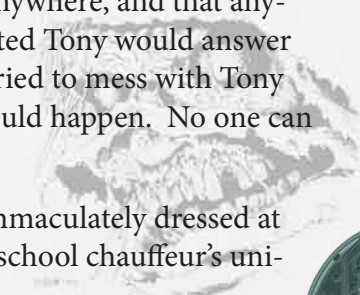
Narlato finds Melvin's ongoing efforts to meet the terms of the deal highly amusing, since Melvin does not seem to yet real-

ize that, eventually, he is doomed. In the meantime, he is content to watch the chaos and laugh. Melvin is doomed because the cost of maintenance is ever higher: the ritual must feature ever rarer, ever more precious, ever more difficult to obtain eggs, to maintain not only his level of performance, but to avoid the process of beginning to wither away.

Eventually, Melvin will reach a logical end point: there is such a thing as an egg-related abomination beyond his ability to execute, and when he gets there and does not know what else he can do, he will wither and die at a rate of 1 randomly selected physical attribute point (STR, DEX, CON) per week. Either that, or Melvin will finally be forced do something stupid or indiscrete in an effort to obtain some "better" eggs than last time, will get caught, and will die in prison or be killed in the attempt.

The Limo Driver: Anthony N. "Tony" Patel just showed up one day, and Melvin told his posse that he was the only one who would drive him anywhere, and that anyone who disrespected Tony would answer to him. One guy tried to mess with Tony just to see what would happen. No one can find him now.

Tony is 30ish, immaculately dressed at all times in an old school chauffeur's uni-



MELVIN TAYLOR

Nationality: *American.*

*STR 20 DEX 20 INT 13 CON 20 APP 15
POW 18 SIZ 20 EDU 09 SAN 00 Luck 90*

Hits: 20.

Age: 22.

Damage Bonus: +1D6.

Education: *High School Dropout.*

Skills: *Accounting 35%; Credit Rating 75%;
Climb 70%; Cthulhu Mythos 05%; Drive
Automobile 35%; Listen 70%; Occult
25%; Persuade 40%; Psychology 30%;
Spot Hidden 70%; Sneak 70%.*

Languages: *English 55%; Haitian Creole 25%.*

Attacks: *All unarmed hand-to-hand attacks
(Punch, Kick, Head Butt, Grapple), 99%,
damage varies.*

Martial Arts 99% (boxing and judo).

Defenses: *Dodge 99%.*

Spells: *Consume Essence, Contact
Nyarlahotep (Narlato).*

Indefinite Insanities: *Homicidal Maniac,
Narcissistic Personality Disorder.*

Notes: *Melvin's genital area is not even
remotely human any longer. SAN loss
0/1D3.*

form, and speaks with a refined, Colonial English accent. He appears to be Arabic or South Asian in origin. He is unflinchingly polite and not inclined to talk to investigators at first. If the investigators start getting close to the truth, however, Tony takes a greater interest in them. He might offer them a ride to the hospital after they are beaten or have their legs broken by Melvin's posse, or might be openly parked outside of a secret rendezvous with a recalcitrant witness (who is soon thereafter killed horribly and messily despite any and all security precautions). At that point, he might tease and taunt the investigators with cryptic hints and wisdom far beyond his apparent station. He might even offer them a hard-boiled egg, and talk to them about how it symbolizes the soul before he takes a huge, indelicate chomp out of one.

He is fond of using limousine driving as a metaphor for the inevitability of man's destruction and the return of the Old Ones. "The destination was long, long ago determined, sir. You might as well arrive in style. My job is just to get you there."

Attacking Tony results in (best case scenario) a 1D10/1D100 SAN loss as he transforms into one of his less eye-pleasing forms, and (worst case scenario) a total party kill.

PLOT SEEDS:

1. The Tabloid Story

An investigator in law enforcement, a journalist, or anyone with a reputation for expertise in the bizarre, receives an anonymous envelope with no return address, postmarked from Miami, Florida (the home of the Daily Moon tabloid, not coincidentally). Inside is a typewritten, unsigned letter accusing Melvin Taylor of using witchcraft to obtain his athletic prowess. (No one at the Daily Moon suspects how close to the truth this is; it is just a coincidentally true story that they make up to pique the curiosity of the investigators).

Included with the letter are the name and location of Ari Blumberg at his private mental hospital in Vermont; a photograph of Melvin Taylor from age 16 (shortly before he dropped out of high school); a barely recognizable photo of him dated 18 months later (looking like a huge, rippling facsimile of humanity); and a voice-mail recording on a CD from Edith Slovik to Ari Blumberg, transcribed in handout #2. Note that the Las Vegas area cell phone number given has been disconnected.





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**Voicemail On The CD—
Female Voice With Heavy
Eastern European Accent**

“Mr. Blumberg? This is Edith Slovik. You may have heard of me, I’m the ring girl? You won’t believe what I saw at the fight tonight. I heard you’ve been looking for something on Melvin Taylor? Well, where his, um, equipment is, there is nothing but all these tattoos of weird symbols. Call me at 702-555-1212.”

**A Strict Protein Diet
Investigator Handout #2**

This is intended by Ari Blumberg’s editors as tossing some breadcrumbs on the water. They are trying to get some cat’s paws to spend some time and see if there is anything to this story so that they can exploit it. The \$1,000,000 bounty is real enough though.

2. The Disaster At The Boston Aquarium

Melvin has been going through a tough time in the media lately. He has been undergoing a grueling schedule (including a stint on a celebrity dance competition show), and looked vulnerable in his last mixed martial arts bout. A promising young fighter took him the distance, and Melvin uncharacteristically is fighting a rematch in two weeks. He has been refusing interviews.

The proverbial heat has been on, and Melvin has been missing some of his weekly sacrifices. He has degraded to 18s in STR, CON and DEX and SIZ as a result. Pundits have commented on how he seems to be ill and/or “training down”. Melvin has been feeling some heat from ongoing media attention (and perhaps investigator inquiries), and is reluctant to travel overseas to find some sacrifices in some

quiet corner of the world. Getting desperate, and starting to realize that eventually, he is either going to have to stop the escalation pattern or get caught, Melvin has hit on a grand scheme.

If one human sacrifice plus rare eggs can give him a boost, Melvin reasons, what would happen if he killed lots of people all at once and harvested some eggs from the aftermath? And so, he is planning to have a group of terrorists, through numerous intermediaries and at fantastic cost, to rig the Boston Aquarium to blow up in a massive truck bomb ramming and explosion. He is planning to be at the Aquarium doing a promotional/charity event (albeit at the other end of the Aquarium) when this goes down, and he has the detonator in his pocket (since he has to do the sacrificing). In the confused aftermath, Melvin plans to grab some fish, harvest some roe, and sneak out with it in the chaos.

This will, regretfully, work—Melvin will maximize his statistics all in one fell swoop, win his rematch, and be stable for a period of several months. After which, he will start to wither again, and have to come up with some



new plan that somehow one-ups this latest bit of madness.

Investigators tied into Homeland Security or other intelligence agencies might get wind of the terrorist plot, get a lead on some of Melvin's cat's paws, and position themselves to foil (or try to foil) the bomb plot. They may not be happy to realize that Melvin and his limo driver are conveniently scheduled to be at the aquarium as the terrorist plot unfolds.

3. Eggs Are Eggs

Eventually, when he gets desperate, runs out of ideas, or his limo driver suggests it to him, it will dawn on Melvin what the final frontier is: human eggs. Once that frontier is crossed, it becomes difficult to one up prior efforts, except by constantly adding to the numbers of victims involved. Melvin spirals into self-destruction, and the investigators might learn of a disturbing pattern of serial killings around the Boston area (or other places where Melvin can be traced to): all women, with their abdomens slit open and their ovaries missing, always one more than the last time. The killings will correspond to a week on, week off maintenance

program as Melvin tries to stave off doom.

The endgame is for the investigators to simply keep close tabs on Melvin, and eliminate him or arrest him when he is caught in a compromising position. His limo driver mysteriously disappears, despite every effort to corral him.



THIS ISSUE'S RECIPE

Oatmeal-Zombie Muffins

By CW Kelson (Tad)

These are muffins my wife makes that I really enjoy. Sharing them here so you too can enjoy them as well.

Oatmeal-Zombie Muffins

Ingredients:

1 cup Flour
1 cup Brown Sugar
1 tsp Baking Powder
1 tsp Soda
1 Cup Vegetable Oil

2 Eggs
1 Cup Leftover Cooked oatmeal
1 cup Raisins
1 tsp Vanilla
1 Zombie, ripened, sliced

Combine Flour, Brown Sugar, Baking Powder and Soda together.

Combine Oil, Eggs, Raisins, and Vanilla (will be thin)

Combine both sets of ingredients.

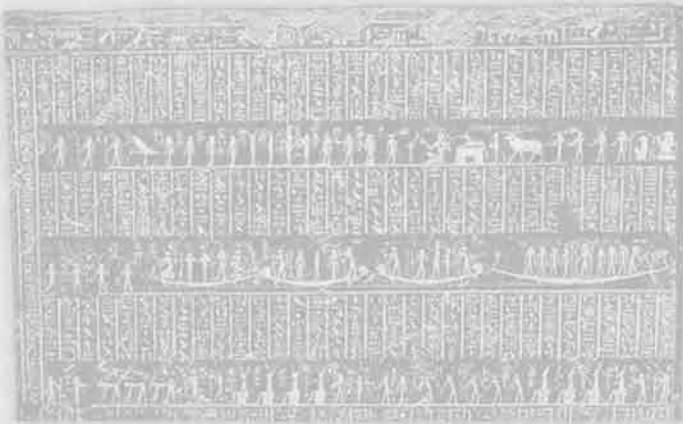
Scoop into muffin tins and then bake at 350F for 18 minutes

(Note: I use cooked raisins instead of uncooked ones to make them softer and plumper)

Let cool. Serve with sliced zombie. They refrigerate well for later breakfast enjoyment.



The Willows



Classic Fiction
By Algernon Blackwood

THE WILLOWS

Algernon Blackwood (1907)

I

After leaving Vienna, and long before you come to Budapest, the Danube enters a region of singular loneliness and desolation, where its waters spread away on all sides regardless of a main channel, and the country becomes a swamp for miles upon miles, covered by a vast sea of low willow-bushes. On the big maps this deserted area is painted in a fluffy blue, growing fainter in color as it leaves the banks, and across it may be seen in large straggling letters the word *Sumpfe*, meaning marshes.

In high flood this great acreage of sand, shingle-beds, and willow-grown islands is almost topped by the water, but in normal seasons the bushes bend and rustle in the free winds, showing their silver leaves to the sunshine in an ever-moving plain of bewildering beauty. These willows never attain to the dignity of trees; they have no rigid trunks; they remain humble bushes, with rounded tops and soft outline, swaying on slender stems that answer to the least pressure of the wind; supple as grasses, and so continually shifting that they somehow give the impression that the entire plain is moving and alive. For the wind sends waves rising and falling over the whole

surface, waves of leaves instead of waves of water, green swells like the sea, too, until the branches turn and lift, and then silvery white as their underside turns to the sun.

Happy to slip beyond the control of the stern banks, the Danube here wanders about at will among the intricate network of channels intersecting the islands everywhere with broad avenues down which the waters pour with a shouting sound; making whirlpools, eddies, and foaming rapids; tearing at the sandy banks; carrying away masses of shore and willow-clumps; and forming new islands innumerable which shift daily in size and shape and possess at best an impermanent life, since the flood-time obliterates their very existence.

Properly speaking, this fascinating part of the river's life begins soon after leaving Pressburg, and we, in our Canadian canoe, with gipsy tent and frying-pan on board, reached it on the crest of a rising flood about mid-July. That very same morning, when the sky was reddening before sunrise, we had slipped swiftly through still-sleeping Vienna, leaving it a couple of hours later a mere patch of smoke against the blue hills of the Wienerwald on the horizon; we had breakfasted below Fischeramend under a grove of birch trees roaring in the wind; and had then swept on the tearing current past Orth, Hainburg, Petronell (the old





Roman Carnuntum of Marcus Aurelius), and so under the frowning heights of Thelsen on a spur of the Carpathians, where the March steals in quietly from the left and the frontier is crossed between Austria and Hungary.

Racing along at twelve kilometers an hour soon took us well into Hungary, and the muddy waters—sure sign of flood—sent us aground on many a shingle-bed, and twisted us like a cork in many a sudden belching whirlpool before the towers of Pressburg (Hungarian, Poszony) showed

against the sky; and then the canoe, leaping like a spirited horse, flew at top speed under the grey walls, negotiated safely the sunken chain of the Fliegende Brucke ferry, turned the corner sharply to the left, and plunged on yellow foam into the wilderness of islands, sandbanks, and swampland beyond—the land of the willows.

The change came suddenly, as when a series of bioscope pictures snaps down on the streets of a town and shifts without warning into the scenery of lake and forest. We entered the land of desolation on wings,

and in less than half an hour there was neither boat nor fishing-hut nor red roof, nor any single sign of human habitation and civilization within sight. The sense of remoteness from the world of humankind, the utter isolation, the fascination of this singular world of willows, winds, and waters, instantly laid its spell upon us both, so that we allowed laughingly to one another that we ought by rights to have held some special kind of passport to admit us, and that we had, somewhat audaciously, come without asking leave into a separate little kingdom of wonder and magic—a kingdom that was reserved for the use of others who had a right to it, with everywhere unwritten warnings to trespassers for those who had the imagination to discover them.

Though still early in the afternoon, the ceaseless buffetings of a most tempestuous wind made us feel weary, and we at once began casting about for a suitable camping-ground for the night. But the bewildering character of the islands made landing difficult; the swirling flood carried us in shore and then swept us out again; the willow branches tore our hands as we seized them to stop the canoe, and we pulled many a yard of sandy bank into the water before at length we shot with a great sideways blow from the wind into a backwater and managed to beach the bows in a cloud of spray.

Then we lay panting and laughing after our exertions on the hot yellow sand, sheltered from the wind, and in the full blaze of a scorching sun, a cloudless blue sky above, and an immense army of dancing, shouting willow bushes, closing in from all sides, shining with spray and clapping their thousand little hands as though to applaud the success of our efforts.

“What a river!” I said to my companion, thinking of all the way we had traveled from the source in the Black Forest, and how he had often been obliged to wade and push in the upper shallows at the beginning of June.

“Won’t stand much nonsense now, will it?” he said, pulling the canoe a little farther into safety up the sand, and then composing himself for a nap.

I lay by his side, happy and peaceful in the bath of the elements—water, wind, sand, and the great fire of the sun—thinking of the long journey that lay behind us, and of the great stretch before us to the Black Sea, and how lucky I was to have such a delightful and charming traveling companion as my friend, the Swede.

We had made many similar journeys together, but the Danube, more than any other river I knew, impressed us from the very beginning with its aliveness. From its

tiny bubbling entry into the world among the pinewood gardens of Donaueschingen, until this moment when it began to play the great river-game of losing itself among the deserted swamps, unobserved, unrestrained, it had seemed to us like following the grown of some living creature. Sleepy at first, but later developing violent desires as it became conscious of its deep soul, it rolled, like some huge fluid being, through all the countries we had passed, holding our little craft on its mighty shoulders, playing roughly with us sometimes, yet always friendly and well-meaning, till at length we had come inevitably to regard it as a Great Personage.

How, indeed, could it be otherwise, since it told us so much of its secret life? At night we heard it singing to the moon as we lay in our tent, uttering that odd sibilant note peculiar to itself and said to be caused by the rapid tearing of the pebbles along its bed, so great is its hurrying speed. We knew, too, the voice of its gurgling whirlpools, suddenly bubbling up on a surface previously quite calm; the roar of its shallows and swift rapids; its constant steady thundering below all mere surface sounds; and that ceaseless tearing of its icy waters at the banks. How it stood up and shouted when the rains fell flat upon its face! And how its laughter roared out when the wind

blew up-stream and tried to stop its growing speed! We knew all its sounds and voices, its tumblings and foamings, its unnecessary splashing against the bridges; that self-conscious chatter when there were hills to look on; the affected dignity of its speech when it passed through the little towns, far too important to laugh; and all these faint, sweet whisperings when the sun caught it fairly in some slow curve and poured down upon it till the steam rose.

It was full of tricks, too, in its early life before the great world knew it. There were places in the upper reaches among the Swabian forests, when yet the first whispers of its destiny had not reached it, where it elected to disappear through holes in the ground, to appear again on the other side of the porous limestone hills and start a new river with another name; leaving, too, so little water in its own bed that we had to climb out and wade and push the canoe through miles of shallows.

And a chief pleasure, in those early days of its irresponsible youth, was to lie low, like Brer Fox, just before the little turbulent tributaries came to join it from the Alps, and to refuse to acknowledge them when in, but to run for miles side by side, the dividing line well marked, the very levels different, the Danube utterly declining to recognize the newcomer. Below Passau,



however, it gave up this particular trick, for there the Inn comes in with a thundering power impossible to ignore, and so pushes and incommodes the parent river that there is hardly room for them in the long twisting gorge that follows, and the Danube is shoved this way and that against the cliffs, and forced to hurry itself with great waves and much dashing to and fro in order to get through in time. And during the fight our canoe slipped down from its shoulder to its breast, and had the time of its life among the struggling waves. But the Inn taught the old river a lesson, and after Passau it no longer pretended to ignore new arrivals.

This was many days back, of course, and since then we had come to know other aspects of the great creature, and across the Bavarian wheat plain of Straubing she wandered so slowly under the blazing June sun that we could well imagine only the surface inches were water, while below there moved, concealed as by a silken mantle, a whole army of Undines, passing silently and unseen down to the sea, and very leisurely too, lest they be discovered.

Much, too, we forgave her because of her friendliness to the birds and animals that haunted the shores. Cormorants lined the banks in lonely places in rows like short black palings; grey crows crowded the

shingle-beds; storks stood fishing in the vistas of shallower water that opened up between the islands, and hawks, swans, and marsh birds of all sorts filled the air with glinting wings and singing, petulant cries. It was impossible to feel annoyed with the river's vagaries after seeing a deer leap with a splash into the water at sunrise and swim past the bows of the canoe; and often we saw fawns peering at us from the underbrush, or looked straight into the brown eyes of a stag as we charged full tilt round a corner and entered another reach of the river. Foxes, too, everywhere haunted the banks, tripping daintily among the driftwood and disappearing so suddenly that it was impossible to see how they managed it.

But now, after leaving Pressburg, everything changed a little, and the Danube became more serious. It ceased trifling. It was half-way to the Black Sea, within seeming distance almost of other, stranger countries where no tricks would be permitted or understood. It became suddenly grown-up, and claimed our respect and even our awe. It broke out into three arms, for one thing, that only met again a hundred kilometers farther down, and for a canoe there were no indications which one was intended to be followed.

"If you take a side channel," said the Hungarian officer we met in the Pressburg

shop while buying provisions, "you may find yourselves, when the flood subsides, forty miles from anywhere, high and dry, and you may easily starve. There are no people, no farms, no fishermen. I warn you not to continue. The river, too, is still rising, and this wind will increase."

The rising river did not alarm us in the least, but the matter of being left high and dry by a sudden subsidence of the waters might be serious, and we had consequently laid in an extra stock of provisions. For the rest, the officer's prophecy held true, and the wind, blowing down a perfectly clear sky, increased steadily till it reached the dignity of a westerly gale.

It was earlier than usual when we camped, for the sun was a good hour or two from the horizon, and leaving my friend still asleep on the hot sand, I wandered about in desultory examination of our hotel. The island, I found, was less than an acre in extent, a mere sandy bank standing some two or three feet above the level of the river. The far end, pointing into the sunset, was covered with flying spray which the tremendous wind drove off the crests of the broken waves. It was triangular in shape, with the apex up stream.

I stood there for several minutes, watching the impetuous crimson flood bearing



down with a shouting roar, dashing in waves against the bank as though to sweep it bodily away, and then swirling by in two foaming streams on either side. The ground seemed to shake with the shock and rush, while the furious movement of the willow bushes as the wind poured over them increased the curious illusion that the island itself actually moved. Above, for a mile or two, I could see the great river descending upon me; it was like looking up the slope of a sliding hill, white with foam, and leaping up everywhere to show itself to the sun.

The rest of the island was too thickly grown with willows to make walking pleasant, but I made the tour, nevertheless. From the lower end the light, of course, changed, and the river looked dark and angry. Only the backs of the flying waves were visible, streaked with foam, and pushed forcibly by the great puffs of wind that fell upon them from behind. For a short mile it was visible, pouring in and out among the islands, and then disappearing with a huge sweep into the willows, which closed about it like a herd of monstrous antediluvian creatures crowding down to drink. They made me think of gigantic sponge-like growths that sucked the river up into themselves. They caused it to vanish from sight. They herded there together in such overpowering numbers.

Altogether it was an impressive scene, with its utter loneliness, its bizarre suggestion; and as I gazed, long and curiously, a singular emotion began to stir somewhere in the depths of me. Midway in my delight of the wild beauty, there crept, unbidden and unexplained, a curious feeling of disquietude, almost of alarm.

A rising river, perhaps, always suggests something of the ominous; many of the little islands I saw before me would probably have been swept away by the morning; this resistless, thundering flood of water touched the sense of awe. Yet I was aware that my uneasiness lay deeper far than the emotions of awe and wonder. It was not that I felt. Nor had it directly to do with the power of the driving wind—this shouting hurricane that might almost carry up a few acres of willows into the air and scatter them like so much chaff over the landscape. The wind was simply enjoying itself, for nothing rose out of the flat landscape to stop it, and I was conscious of sharing its great game with a kind of pleasurable excitement. Yet this novel emotion had nothing to do with the wind. Indeed, so vague was the sense of distress I experienced, that it was impossible to trace it to its source and deal with it accordingly, though I was aware somehow that it had to do with my realization of our utter insignificance

before this unrestrained power of the elements about me. The huge-grown river had something to do with it too—a vague, unpleasant idea that we had somehow trifled with these great elemental forces in whose power we lay helpless every hour of the day and night. For here, indeed, they were gigantically at play together, and the sight appealed to the imagination.

But my emotion, so far as I could understand it, seemed to attach itself more particularly to the willow bushes, to these acres and acres of willows, crowding, so thickly growing there, swarming everywhere the eye could reach, pressing upon the river as though to suffocate it, standing in dense array mile after mile beneath the sky, watching, waiting, listening. And, apart quite from the elements, the willows connected themselves subtly with my malaise, attacking the mind insidiously somehow by reason of their vast numbers, and contriving in some way or other to represent to the imagination a new and mighty power, a power, moreover, not altogether friendly to us.

Great revelations of nature, of course, never fail to impress in one way or another, and I was no stranger to moods of the kind. Mountains overawe and oceans terrify, while the mystery of great forests exercises a spell peculiarly its own. But all

these, at one point or another, somewhere link on intimately with human life and human experience. They stir comprehensible, even if alarming, emotions. They tend on the whole to exalt.

With this multitude of willows, however, it was something far different, I felt. Some essence emanated from them that besieged the heart. A sense of awe awakened, true, but of awe touched somewhere by a vague terror. Their serried ranks, growing everywhere darker about me as the shadows deepened, moving furiously yet softly in the wind, woke in me the curious and unwelcome suggestion that we had trespassed here upon the borders of an alien world, a world where we were intruders, a world where we were not wanted or invited to remain—where we ran grave risks perhaps!

The feeling, however, though it refused to yield its meaning entirely to analysis, did not at the time trouble me by passing into menace. Yet it never left me quite, even during the very practical business of putting up the tent in a hurricane of wind and building a fire for the stew-pot. It remained, just enough to bother and perplex, and to rob a most delightful camping-ground of a good portion of its charm. To my companion, however, I said nothing, for he was a man I considered devoid of imagination. In the first place, I could

never have explained to him what I meant, and in the second, he would have laughed stupidly at me if I had.

There was a slight depression in the center of the island, and here we pitched the tent. The surrounding willows broke the wind a bit.

“A poor camp,” observed the imperturbable Swede when at last the tent stood upright, “no stones and precious little firewood. I’m for moving on early tomorrow—eh? This sand won’t hold anything.”

But the experience of a collapsing tent at midnight had taught us many devices, and we made the cozy gipsy house as safe as possible, and then set about collecting a store of wood to last till bed-time. Willow bushes drop no branches, and driftwood was our only source of supply. We hunted the shores pretty thoroughly. Everywhere the banks were crumbling as the rising flood tore at them and carried away great portions with a splash and a gurgle.

“The island’s much smaller than when we landed,” said the accurate Swede. “It won’t last long at this rate. We’d better drag the canoe close to the tent, and be ready to start at a moment’s notice. I shall sleep in my clothes.”

He was a little distance off, climbing along the bank, and I heard his rather jolly laugh as he spoke.

“By Jove!” I heard him call, a moment later, and turned to see what had caused his exclamation. But for the moment he was hidden by the willows, and I could not find him.

“What in the world’s this?” I heard him cry again, and this time his voice had become serious.

I ran up quickly and joined him on the bank. He was looking over the river, pointing at something in the water.

“Good heavens, it’s a man’s body!” he cried excitedly. “Look!”

A black thing, turning over and over in the foaming waves, swept rapidly past. It kept disappearing and coming up to the surface again. It was about twenty feet from the shore, and just as it was opposite to where we stood it lurched round and looked straight at us. We saw its eyes reflecting the sunset, and gleaming an odd yellow as the body turned over. Then it gave a swift, gulping plunge, and dived out of sight in a flash.

“An otter, by gad!” we exclaimed in the same breath, laughing.



It was an otter, alive, and out on the hunt; yet it had looked exactly like the body of a drowned man turning helplessly in the current. Far below it came to the surface once again, and we saw its black skin, wet and shining in the sunlight.

Then, too, just as we turned back, our arms full of driftwood, another thing happened to recall us to the river bank. This time it really was a man, and what was more, a man in a boat. Now a small boat on the Danube was an unusual sight at any time, but here in this deserted region, and at flood time, it was so unexpected as to constitute a real event. We stood and stared.

Whether it was due to the slanting sunlight, or the refraction from the wonderfully illumined water, I cannot say, but whatever the cause, I found it difficult to focus my sight properly upon the flying apparition. It seemed, however, to be a man standing upright in a sort of flat-bottomed boat, steering with a long oar, and being carried down the opposite shore at a tremendous pace. He apparently was looking across in our direction, but the distance was too great and the light too uncertain for us to make out very plainly what he was about. It seemed to me that he was gesticulating and making signs at us. His voice came across the water to us shouting

something furiously, but the wind drowned it so that no single word was audible. There was something curious about the whole appearance—man, boat, signs, voice—that made an impression on me out of all proportion to its cause.

“He’s crossing himself!” I cried. “Look, he’s making the sign of the Cross!”

“I believe you’re right,” the Swede said, shading his eyes with his hand and watching the man out of sight. He seemed to be gone in a moment, melting away down there into the sea of willows where the sun caught them in the bend of the river and turned them into a great crimson wall of beauty. Mist, too, had begun to ruse, so that the air was hazy.

“But what in the world is he doing at nightfall on this flooded river?” I said, half to myself. “Where is he going at such a time, and what did he mean by his signs and shouting? D’you think he wished to warn us about something?”

“He saw our smoke, and thought we were spirits probably,” laughed my companion. “These Hungarians believe in all sorts of rubbish; you remember the shop-woman at Pressburg warning us that no one ever landed here because it belonged to some sort of beings outside man’s world! I suppose they believe in fairies and elemen-

tals, possibly demons, too. That peasant in the boat saw people on the islands for the first time in his life,” he added, after a slight pause, “and it scared him, that’s all.”

The Swede’s tone of voice was not convincing, and his manner lacked something that was usually there. I noted the change instantly while he talked, though without being able to label it precisely.

“If they had enough imagination,” I laughed loudly—I remember trying to make as much noise as I could—they might well people a place like this with the old gods of antiquity. The Romans must have haunted all this region more or less with their shrines and sacred groves and elemental deities.”

The subject dropped and we returned to our stew-pot, for my friend was not given to imaginative conversation as a rule. Moreover, just then I remember feeling distinctly glad that he was not imaginative; his stolid, practical nature suddenly seemed to me welcome and comforting. It was an admirable temperament, I felt; he could steer down rapids like a red Indian, shoot dangerous bridges and whirlpools better than any white man I ever saw in a canoe. He was a grand fellow for an adventurous trip, a tower of strength when untoward things happened. I looked at his strong face



and light curly hair as he staggered along under his pile of driftwood (twice the size of mine!), and I experienced a feeling of relief. Yes, I was distinctly glad just then that the Swede was—what he was, and that he never made remarks that suggested more than they said.

“The river’s still rising, though,” he added, as if following out some thoughts of his own, and dropping his load with a gasp. “This island will be under water in two days if it goes on.”

“I wish the wind would go down,” I said. “I don’t care a fig for the river.”

The flood, indeed, had no terrors for us; we could get off at ten minutes’ notice, and the more water the better we liked it. It meant an increasing current and the obliteration of the treacherous shingle-beds that so often threatened to tear the bottom out of our canoe.

Contrary to our expectations, the wind did not go down with the sun. It seemed to increase with the darkness, howling overhead and shaking the willows round us like straws. Curious sounds accompanied it sometimes, like the explosion of heavy guns, and it fell upon the water and the island in great flat blows of immense power. It made me think of the sounds a planet

must make, could we only hear it, driving along through space.

But the sky kept wholly clear of clouds, and soon after supper the full moon rose up in the east and covered the river and the plain of shouting willows with a light like the day.

We lay on the sandy patch beside the fire, smoking, listening to the noises of the night round us, and talking happily of the journey we had already made, and of our plans ahead. The map lay spread in the door of the tent, but the high wind made it hard to study, and presently we lowered the curtain and extinguished the lantern. The firelight was enough to smoke and see each other’s faces by, and the sparks flew about overhead like fireworks. A few yards beyond, the river gurgled and hissed, and from time to time a heavy splash announced the falling away of further portions of the bank.

Our talk, I noticed, had to do with the faraway scenes and incidents of our first camps in the Black Forest, or of other subjects altogether remote from the present setting, for neither of us spoke of the actual moment more than was necessary—almost as though we had agreed tacitly to avoid discussion of the camp and its incidents. Neither the otter nor the boatman, for in-

stance, received the honor of a single mention, though ordinarily these would have furnished discussion for the greater part of the evening. They were, of course, distinct events in such a place.

The scarcity of wood made it a business to keep the fire going, for the wind, that drove the smoke in our faces wherever we sat, helped at the same time to make a forced draught. We took it in turn to make some foraging expeditions into the darkness, and the quantity the Swede brought back always made me feel that he took an absurdly long time finding it; for the fact was I did not care much about being left alone, and yet it always seemed to be my turn to grub about among the bushes or scramble along the slippery banks in the moonlight. The long day’s battle with wind and water—such wind and such water!—had tired us both, and an early bed was the obvious program. Yet neither of us made the move for the tent. We lay there, tending the fire, talking in desultory fashion, peering about us into the dense willow bushes, and listening to the thunder of wind and river. The loneliness of the place had entered our very bones, and silence seemed natural, for after a bit the sound of our voices became a trifle unreal and forced; whispering would have been the fitting mode of communication, I felt, and the



human voice, always rather absurd amid the roar of the elements, now carried with it something almost illegitimate. It was like talking out loud in church, or in some place where it was not lawful, perhaps not quite safe, to be overheard.

The eeriness of this lonely island, set among a million willows, swept by a hurricane, and surrounded by hurrying deep waters, touched us both, I fancy. Untrodden by man, almost unknown to man, it lay there beneath the moon, remote from human influence, on the frontier of another world, an alien world, a world tenanted by willows only and the souls of willows. And we, in our rashness, had dared to invade it, even to make use of it! Something more than the power of its mystery stirred in me as I lay on the sand, feet to fire, and peered up through the leaves at the stars. For the last time I rose to get firewood.

“When this has burnt up,” I said firmly, “I shall turn in,” and my companion watched me lazily as I moved off into the surrounding shadows.

For an unimaginative man I thought he seemed unusually receptive that night, unusually open to suggestion of things other than sensory. He too was touched by the beauty and loneliness of the place.

I was not altogether pleased, I remember, to recognize this slight change in him, and instead of immediately collecting sticks, I made my way to the far point of the island where the moonlight on plain and river could be seen to better advantage. The desire to be alone had come suddenly upon me; my former dread returned in force; there was a vague feeling in me I wished to face and probe to the bottom.

When I reached the point of sand jutting out among the waves, the spell of the place descended upon me with a positive shock. No mere “scenery” could have produced such an effect. There was something more here, something to alarm.

I gazed across the waste of wild waters; I watched the whispering willows; I heard the ceaseless beating of the tireless wind; and, one and all, each in its own way, stirred in me this sensation of a strange distress. But the willows especially; for ever they went on chattering and talking among themselves, laughing a little, shrilly crying out, sometimes sighing—but what it was they made so much to-do about belonged to the secret life of the great plain they inhabited. And it was utterly alien to the world I knew, or to that of the wild yet kindly elements. They made me think of a host of beings from another plane of life, another evolution altogether, perhaps,

all discussing a mystery known only to themselves. I watched them moving busily together, oddly shaking their big bushy heads, twirling their myriad leaves even when there was no wind. They moved of their own will as though alive, and they touched, by some incalculable method, my own keen sense of the horrible.

There they stood in the moonlight, like a vast army surrounding our camp, shaking their innumerable silver spears defiantly, formed all ready for an attack.

The psychology of places, for some imaginations at least, is very vivid; for the wanderer, especially, camps have their “note” either of welcome or rejection. At first it may not always be apparent, because the busy preparations of tent and cooking prevent, but with the first pause—after supper usually—it comes and announces itself. And the note of this willow-camp now became unmistakably plain to me; we were interlopers, trespassers; we were not welcomed. The sense of unfamiliarity grew upon me as I stood there watching. We touched the frontier of a region where our presence was resented. For a night’s lodging we might perhaps be tolerated; but for a prolonged and inquisitive stay—No! by all the gods of the trees and wilderness, no! We were the first human influences upon

this island, and we were not wanted. The willows were against us.

Strange thoughts like these, bizarre fancies, borne I know not whence, found lodgment in my mind as I stood listening. What, I thought, if, after all, these crouching willows proved to be alive; if suddenly they should rise up, like a swarm of living creatures, marshaled by the gods whose territory we had invaded, sweep towards us off the vast swamps, booming overhead in the night—and then settle down! As I looked it was so easy to imagine they actually moved, crept nearer, retreated a little, huddled together in masses, hostile, waiting for the great wind that should finally start them a-running. I could have sworn their aspect changed a little, and their ranks deepened and pressed more closely together.

The melancholy shrill cry of a night-bird sounded overhead, and suddenly I nearly lost my balance as the piece of bank I stood upon fell with a great splash into the river, undermined by the flood. I stepped back just in time, and went on hunting for firewood again, half laughing at the odd fancies that crowded so thickly into my mind and cast their spell upon me. I recalled the Swede's remark about moving on next day, and I was just thinking that I fully agreed with him, when I turned with a start and

saw the subject of my thoughts standing immediately in front of me. He was quite close. The roar of the elements had covered his approach.

II

"You've been gone so long," he shouted above the wind, "I thought something must have happened to you."

But there was that in his tone, and a certain look in his face as well, that conveyed to me more than his usual words, and in a flash I understood the real reason for his coming. It was because the spell of the place had entered his soul too, and he did not like being alone.

"River still rising," he cried, pointing to the flood in the moonlight, "and the wind's simply awful."

He always said the same things, but it was the cry for companionship that gave the real importance to his words.

"Lucky," I cried back, "our tent's in the hollow. I think it'll hold all right." I added something about the difficulty of finding wood, in order to explain my absence, but the wind caught my words and flung them across the river, so that he did not hear, but just looked at me through the branches, nodding his head.

"Lucky if we get away without disaster!" he shouted, or words to that effect; and I remember feeling half angry with him for putting the thought into words, for it was exactly what I felt myself. There was disaster impending somewhere, and the sense of presentiment lay unpleasantly upon me.

We went back to the fire and made a final blaze, poking it up with our feet. We took a last look round. But for the wind the heat would have been unpleasant. I put this thought into words, and I remember my friend's reply struck me oddly: that he would rather have the heat, the ordinary July weather, than this "diabolical wind."

Everything was snug for the night; the canoe lying turned over beside the tent, with both yellow paddles beneath her; the provision sack hanging from a willow-stem, and the washed-up dishes removed to a safe distance from the fire, all ready for the morning meal.

We smothered the embers of the fire with sand, and then turned in. The flap of the tent door was up, and I saw the branches and the stars and the white moonlight. The shaking willows and the heavy buffeting of the wind against our taut little house were the last things I remembered as sleep came down and covered all with its soft and delicious forgetfulness.



Suddenly I found myself lying awake, peering from my sandy mattress through the door of the tent. I looked at my watch pinned against the canvas, and saw by the bright moonlight that it was past twelve o'clock—the threshold of a new day—and I had therefore slept a couple of hours. The Swede was asleep still beside me; the wind howled as before; something plucked at my heart and made me feel afraid. There was a sense of disturbance in my immediate neighborhood.

I sat up quickly and looked out. The trees were swaying violently to and fro as the gusts smote them, but our little bit of green canvas lay snugly safe in the hollow, for the wind passed over it without meeting enough resistance to make it vicious. The feeling of disquietude did not pass, however, and I crawled quietly out of the tent to see if our belongings were safe. I moved carefully so as not to waken my companion. A curious excitement was on me.

I was half-way out, kneeling on all fours, when my eye first took in that the tops of the bushes opposite, with their moving tracery of leaves, made shapes against the sky. I sat back on my haunches and stared. It was incredible, surely, but there, opposite and slightly above me, were shapes of some indeterminate sort among the willows, and

as the branches swayed in the wind they seemed to group themselves about these shapes, forming a series of monstrous outlines that shifted rapidly beneath the moon. Close, about fifty feet in front of me, I saw these things.

My first instinct was to waken my companion, that he too might see them, but something made me hesitate—the sudden realization, probably, that I should not welcome corroboration; and meanwhile I crouched there staring in amazement with smarting eyes. I was wide awake. I remember saying to myself that I was not dreaming.

They first became properly visible, these huge figures, just within the tops of the bushes—immense, bronze-colored, moving, and wholly independent of the swaying of the branches. I saw them plainly and noted, now I came to examine them more calmly, that they were very much larger than human, and indeed that something in their appearance proclaimed them to be not human at all. Certainly they were not merely the moving tracery of the branches against the moonlight. They shifted independently. They rose upwards in a continuous stream from earth to sky, vanishing utterly as soon as they reached the dark of the sky. They were interlaced one with another, making a great column, and I saw

their limbs and huge bodies melting in and out of each other, forming this serpentine line that bent and swayed and twisted spirally with the contortions of the wind-tossed trees. They were nude, fluid shapes, passing up the bushes, within the leaves almost—rising up in a living column into the heavens. Their faces I never could see. Unceasingly they poured upwards, swaying in great bending curves, with a hue of dull bronze upon their skins.

I stared, trying to force every atom of vision from my eyes. For a long time I thought they must every moment disappear and resolve themselves into the movements of the branches and prove to be an optical illusion. I searched everywhere for a proof of reality, when all the while I understood quite well that the standard of reality had changed. For the longer I looked the more certain I became that these figures were real and living, though perhaps not according to the standards that the camera and the biologist would insist upon.

Far from feeling fear, I was possessed with a sense of awe and wonder such as I have never known. I seemed to be gazing at the personified elemental forces of this haunted and primeval region. Our intrusion had stirred the powers of the place into activity. It was we who were the cause of the disturbance, and my brain filled to



bursting with stories and legends of the spirits and deities of places that have been acknowledged and worshipped by men in all ages of the world's history. But, before I could arrive at any possible explanation, something impelled me to go farther out, and I crept forward on the sand and stood upright. I felt the ground still warm under my bare feet; the wind tore at my hair and face; and the sound of the river burst upon my ears with a sudden roar. These things, I knew, were real, and proved that my senses were acting normally. Yet the figures still rose from earth to heaven, silent, majestically, in a great spiral of grace and strength that overwhelmed me at length with a genuine deep emotion of worship. I felt that I must fall down and worship—absolutely worship.

Perhaps in another minute I might have done so, when a gust of wind swept against me with such force that it blew me sideways, and I nearly stumbled and fell. It seemed to shake the dream violently out of me. At least it gave me another point of view somehow. The figures still remained, still ascended into heaven from the heart of the night, but my reason at last began to assert itself. It must be a subjective experience, I argued—none the less real for that, but still subjective. The moonlight and the branches combined to work out these

pictures upon the mirror of my imagination, and for some reason I projected them outwards and made them appear objective. I knew this must be the case, of course. I took courage, and began to move forward across the open patches of sand. By Jove, though, was it all hallucination? Was it merely subjective? Did not my reason argue in the old futile way from the little standard of the known?

I only know that great column of figures ascended darkly into the sky for what seemed a very long period of time, and with a very complete measure of reality as most men are accustomed to gauge reality. Then suddenly they were gone!

And, once they were gone and the immediate wonder of their great presence had passed, fear came down upon me with a cold rush. The esoteric meaning of this lonely and haunted region suddenly flamed up within me, and I began to tremble dreadfully. I took a quick look round—a look of horror that came near to panic—calculating vainly ways of escape; and then, realizing how helpless I was to achieve anything really effective, I crept back silently into the tent and lay down again upon my sandy mattress, first lowering the door-curtain to shut out the sight of the willows in the moonlight, and then burying my head

as deeply as possible beneath the blankets to deaden the sound of the terrifying wind.

As though further to convince me that I had not been dreaming, I remember that it was a long time before I fell again into a troubled and restless sleep; and even then only the upper crust of me slept, and underneath there was something that never quite lost consciousness, but lay alert and on the watch.

But this second time I jumped up with a genuine start of terror. It was neither the wind nor the river that woke me, but the slow approach of something that caused the sleeping portion of me to grow smaller and smaller till at last it vanished altogether, and I found myself sitting bolt upright—listening.

Outside there was a sound of multitudinous little patterings. They had been coming, I was aware, for a long time, and in my sleep they had first become audible. I sat there nervously wide awake as though I had not slept at all. It seemed to me that my breathing came with difficulty, and that there was a great weight upon the surface of my body. In spite of the hot night, I felt clammy with cold and shivered. Something surely was pressing steadily against the sides of the tent and weighing down upon it from above. Was it the body of the wind?



Was this the pattering rain, the dripping of the leaves? The spray blown from the river by the wind and gathering in big drops? I thought quickly of a dozen things.

Then suddenly the explanation leaped into my mind: a bough from the poplar, the only large tree on the island, had fallen with the wind. Still half caught by the other branches, it would fall with the next gust and crush us, and meanwhile its leaves brushed and tapped upon the tight canvas surface of the tent. I raised a loose flap and rushed out, calling to the Swede to follow.

But when I got out and stood upright I saw that the tent was free. There was no hanging bough; there was no rain or spray; nothing approached.

A cold, grey light filtered down through the bushes and lay on the faintly gleaming sand. Stars still crowded the sky directly overhead, and the wind howled magnificently, but the fire no longer gave out any glow, and I saw the east reddening in streaks through the trees. Several hours must have passed since I stood there before watching the ascending figures, and the memory of it now came back to me horribly, like an evil dream. Oh, how tired it made me feel, that ceaseless raging wind! Yet, though the deep lassitude of a sleepless night was on me, my nerves were tingling

with the activity of an equally tireless apprehension, and all idea of repose was out of the question. The river I saw had risen further. Its thunder filled the air, and a fine spray made itself felt through my thin sleeping shirt.

Yet nowhere did I discover the slightest evidence of anything to cause alarm. This deep, prolonged disturbance in my heart remained wholly unaccounted for.

My companion had not stirred when I called him, and there was no need to waken him now. I looked about me carefully, noting everything; the turned-over canoe; the yellow paddles—two of them, I'm certain; the provision sack and the extra lantern hanging together from the tree; and, crowding everywhere about me, enveloping all, the willows, those endless, shaking willows. A bird uttered its morning cry, and a string of duck passed with whirring flight overhead in the twilight. The sand whirled, dry and stinging, about my bare feet in the wind.

I walked round the tent and then went out a little way into the bush, so that I could see across the river to the farther landscape, and the same profound yet indefinable emotion of distress seized upon me again as I saw the interminable sea of bushes stretching to the horizon, look-

ing ghostly and unreal in the wan light of dawn. I walked softly here and there, still puzzling over that odd sound of infinite pattering, and of that pressure upon the tent that had wakened me. It must have been the wind, I reflected—the wind bearing upon the loose, hot sand, driving the dry particles smartly against the taut canvas—the wind dropping heavily upon our fragile roof.

Yet all the time my nervousness and malaise increased appreciably.

I crossed over to the farther shore and noted how the coast-line had altered in the night, and what masses of sand the river had torn away. I dipped my hands and feet into the cool current, and bathed my forehead. Already there was a glow of sunrise in the sky and the exquisite freshness of coming day. On my way back I passed purposely beneath the very bushes where I had seen the column of figures rising into the air, and midway among the clumps I suddenly found myself overtaken by a sense of vast terror. From the shadows a large figure went swiftly by. Someone passed me, as sure as ever man did....

It was a great staggering blow from the wind that helped me forward again, and once out in the more open space, the sense of terror diminished strangely. The winds

were about and walking, I remember saying to myself, for the winds often move like great presences under the trees. And altogether the fear that hovered about me was such an unknown and immense kind of fear, so unlike anything I had ever felt before, that it woke a sense of awe and wonder in me that did much to counteract its worst effects; and when I reached a high point in the middle of the island from which I could see the wide stretch of river, crimson in the sunrise, the whole magical beauty of it all was so overpowering that a sort of wild yearning woke in me and almost brought a cry up into the throat.

But this cry found no expression, for as my eyes wandered from the plain beyond to the island round me and noted our little tent half hidden among the willows, a dreadful discovery leaped out at me, compared to which my terror of the walking winds seemed as nothing at all.

For a change, I thought, had somehow come about in the arrangement of the landscape. It was not that my point of vantage gave me a different view, but that an alteration had apparently been effected in the relation of the tent to the willows, and of the willows to the tent. Surely the bushes now crowded much closer—unnecessarily, unpleasantly close. They had moved nearer.

Creeping with silent feet over the shifting sands, drawing imperceptibly nearer by soft, unhurried movements, the willows had come closer during the night. But had the wind moved them, or had they moved of themselves? I recalled the sound of infinite small patterings and the pressure upon the tent and upon my own heart that caused me to wake in terror. I swayed for a moment in the wind like a tree, finding it hard to keep my upright position on the sandy hillock. There was a suggestion here of personal agency, of deliberate intention, of aggressive hostility, and it terrified me into a sort of rigidity.

Then the reaction followed quickly. The idea was so bizarre, so absurd, that I felt inclined to laugh. But the laughter came no more readily than the cry, for the knowledge that my mind was so receptive to such dangerous imaginings brought the additional terror that it was through our minds and not through our physical bodies that the attack would come, and was coming.

The wind buffeted me about, and, very quickly it seemed, the sun came up over the horizon, for it was after four o'clock, and I must have stood on that little pinnacle of sand longer than I knew, afraid to come down to close quarters with the willows. I returned quietly, creepily, to the tent, first taking another exhaustive look

round and—yes, I confess it—making a few measurements. I paced out on the warm sand the distances between the willows and the tent, making a note of the shortest distance particularly.

I crawled stealthily into my blankets. My companion, to all appearances, still slept soundly, and I was glad that this was so. Provided my experiences were not corroborated, I could find strength somehow to deny them, perhaps. With the daylight I could persuade myself that it was all a subjective hallucination, a fantasy of the night, a projection of the excited imagination.

Nothing further came in to disturb me, and I fell asleep almost at once, utterly exhausted, yet still in dread of hearing again that weird sound of multitudinous pattering, or of feeling the pressure upon my heart that had made it difficult to breathe.

The sun was high in the heavens when my companion woke me from a heavy sleep and announced that the porridge was cooked and there was just time to bathe. The grateful smell of frizzling bacon entered the tent door.

“River still rising,” he said, “and several islands out in mid-stream have disappeared altogether. Our own island’s much smaller.”

“Any wood left?” I asked sleepily.

“The wood and the island will finish tomorrow in a dead heat,” he laughed, “but there’s enough to last us till then.”

I plunged in from the point of the island, which had indeed altered a lot in size and shape during the night, and was swept down in a moment to the landing-place opposite the tent. The water was icy, and the banks flew by like the country from an express train. Bathing under such conditions was an exhilarating operation, and the terror of the night seemed cleansed out of me by a process of evaporation in the brain. The sun was blazing hot; not a cloud showed itself anywhere; the wind, however, had not abated one little jot.

Quite suddenly then the implied meaning of the Swede’s words flashed across me, showing that he no longer wished to leave post-haste, and had changed his mind. “Enough to last till tomorrow”—he assumed we should stay on the island another night. It struck me as odd. The night before he was so positive the other way. How had the change come about?

Great crumbings of the banks occurred at breakfast, with heavy splashings and clouds of spray which the wind brought into our frying-pan, and my fellow-traveler talked incessantly about the difficulty the Vienna-Pesth steamers must have to find

the channel in flood. But the state of his mind interested and impressed me far more than the state of the river or the difficulties of the steamers. He had changed somehow since the evening before. His manner was different—a trifle excited, a trifle shy, with a sort of suspicion about his voice and gestures. I hardly know how to describe it now in cold blood, but at the time I remember being quite certain of one thing—that he had become frightened?

He ate very little breakfast, and for once omitted to smoke his pipe. He had the map spread open beside him, and kept studying its markings.

“We’d better get off sharp in an hour,” I said presently, feeling for an opening that must bring him indirectly to a partial confession at any rate. And his answer puzzled me uncomfortably: “Rather! If they’ll let us.”

“Who’ll let us? The elements?” I asked quickly, with affected indifference.

“The powers of this awful place, whoever they are,” he replied, keeping his eyes on the map. “The gods are here, if they are anywhere at all in the world.”

“The elements are always the true immortals,” I replied, laughing as naturally as I could manage, yet knowing quite well

that my face reflected my true feelings when he looked up gravely at me and spoke across the smoke:

“We shall be fortunate if we get away without further disaster.”

This was exactly what I had dreaded, and I screwed myself up to the point of the direct question. It was like agreeing to allow the dentist to extract the tooth; it had to come anyhow in the long run, and the rest was all pretence.

“Further disaster! Why, what’s happened?”

“For one thing—the steering paddle’s gone,” he said quietly.

“The steering paddle gone!” I repeated, greatly excited, for this was our rudder, and the Danube in flood without a rudder was suicide. “But what—”

“And there’s a tear in the bottom of the canoe,” he added, with a genuine little tremor in his voice.

I continued staring at him, able only to repeat the words in his face somewhat foolishly. There, in the heat of the sun, and on this burning sand, I was aware of a freezing atmosphere descending round us. I got up to follow him, for he merely nodded his head gravely and led the way towards the

tent a few yards on the other side of the fireplace. The canoe still lay there as I had last seen her in the night, ribs uppermost, the paddles, or rather, the paddle, on the sand beside her.

“There’s only one,” he said, stooping to pick it up. “And here’s the rent in the base-board.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him that I had clearly noticed two paddles a few hours before, but a second impulse made me think better of it, and I said nothing. I approached to see.

There was a long, finely made tear in the bottom of the canoe where a little slither of wood had been neatly taken clean out; it looked as if the tooth of a sharp rock or snag had eaten down her length, and investigation showed that the hole went through. Had we launched out in her without observing it we must inevitably have foundered. At first the water would have made the wood swell so as to close the hole, but once out in mid-stream the water must have poured in, and the canoe, never more than two inches above the surface, would have filled and sunk very rapidly.

“There, you see an attempt to prepare a victim for the sacrifice,” I heard him saying, more to himself than to me, “two victims

rather,” he added as he bent over and ran his fingers along the slit.

I began to whistle—a thing I always do unconsciously when utterly nonplussed—and purposely paid no attention to his words. I was determined to consider them foolish.

“It wasn’t there last night,” he said presently, straightening up from his examination and looking anywhere but at me.

“We must have scratched her in landing, of course,” I stopped whistling to say. “The stones are very sharp.”

I stopped abruptly, for at that moment he turned round and met my eye squarely. I knew just as well as he did how impossible my explanation was. There were no stones, to begin with.

“And then there’s this to explain too,” he added quietly, handing me the paddle and pointing to the blade.

A new and curious emotion spread freezingly over me as I took and examined it. The blade was scraped down all over, beautifully scraped, as though someone had sand-papered it with care, making it so thin that the first vigorous stroke must have snapped it off at the elbow.

“One of us walked in his sleep and did this thing,” I said feebly, “or—or it has been filed by the constant stream of sand particles blown against it by the wind, perhaps.”

“Ah,” said the Swede, turning away, laughing a little, “you can explain everything.”

“The same wind that caught the steering paddle and flung it so near the bank that it fell in with the next lump that crumbled,” I called out after him, absolutely determined to find an explanation for everything he showed me.

“I see,” he shouted back, turning his head to look at me before disappearing among the willow bushes.

Once alone with these perplexing evidences of personal agency, I think my first thoughts took the form of “One of us must have done this thing, and it certainly was not I.” But my second thought decided how impossible it was to suppose, under all the circumstances, that either of us had done it. That my companion, the trusted friend of a dozen similar expeditions, could have knowingly had a hand in it, was a suggestion not to be entertained for a moment. Equally absurd seemed the explanation that this imperturbable and densely practical nature had suddenly become insane and was busied with insane purposes.



Yet the fact remained that what disturbed me most, and kept my fear actively alive even in this blaze of sunshine and wild beauty, was the clear certainty that some curious alteration had come about in his mind—that he was nervous, timid, suspicious, aware of goings on he did not speak about, watching a series of secret and hitherto unmentionable events—waiting, in a word, for a climax that he expected, and, I thought, expected very soon. This grew up in my mind intuitively—I hardly knew how.

I made a hurried examination of the tent and its surroundings, but the measurements of the night remained the same. There were deep hollows formed in the sand I now noticed for the first time, basin-shaped and of various depths and sizes, varying from that of a tea-cup to a large bowl. The wind, no doubt, was responsible for these miniature craters, just as it was for lifting the paddle and tossing it towards the water. The rent in the canoe was the only thing that seemed quite inexplicable; and, after all, it was conceivable that a sharp point had caught it when we landed. The examination I made of the shore did not assist this theory, but all the same I clung to it with that diminishing portion of my intelligence which I called my “reason.” An explanation of some kind was an absolute

necessity, just as some working explanation of the universe is necessary—however absurd—to the happiness of every individual who seeks to do his duty in the world and face the problems of life. The simile seemed to me at the time an exact parallel.

I at once set the pitch melting, and presently the Swede joined me at the work, though under the best conditions in the world the canoe could not be safe for traveling till the following day. I drew his attention casually to the hollows in the sand.

“Yes,” he said, “I know. They’re all over the island. But you can explain them, no doubt!”

“Wind, of course,” I answered without hesitation. “Have you never watched those little whirlwinds in the street that twist and twirl everything into a circle? This sand’s loose enough to yield, that’s all.”

He made no reply, and we worked on in silence for a bit. I watched him surreptitiously all the time, and I had an idea he was watching me. He seemed, too, to be always listening attentively to something I could not hear, or perhaps for something that he expected to hear, for he kept turning about and staring into the bushes, and up into the sky, and out across the water where it was visible through the openings among the willows. Sometimes he even

put his hand to his ear and held it there for several minutes. He said nothing to me, however, about it, and I asked no questions. And meanwhile, as he mended that torn canoe with the skill and address of a red Indian, I was glad to notice his absorption in the work, for there was a vague dread in my heart that he would speak of the changed aspect of the willows. And, if he had noticed that, my imagination could no longer be held a sufficient explanation of it.

III

At length, after a long pause, he began to talk.

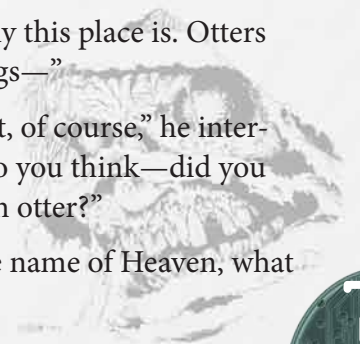
“Queer thing,” he added in a hurried sort of voice, as though he wanted to say something and get it over. “Queer thing. I mean, about that otter last night.”

I had expected something so totally different that he caught me with surprise, and I looked up sharply.

“Shows how lonely this place is. Otters are awfully shy things—”

“I don’t mean that, of course,” he interrupted. “I mean—do you think—did you think it really was an otter?”

“What else, in the name of Heaven, what else?”



“You know, I saw it before you did, and at first it seemed—so much bigger than an otter.”

“The sunset as you looked up-stream magnified it, or something,” I replied.

He looked at me absently a moment, as though his mind were busy with other thoughts.

“It had such extraordinary yellow eyes,” he went on half to himself.

“That was the sun too,” I laughed, a trifle boisterously. “I suppose you’ll wonder next if that fellow in the boat—”

I suddenly decided not to finish the sentence. He was in the act again of listening, turning his head to the wind, and something in the expression of his face made me halt. The subject dropped, and we went on with our caulking. Apparently he had not noticed my unfinished sentence. Five minutes later, however, he looked at me across the canoe, the smoking pitch in his hand, his face exceedingly grave.

“I did rather wonder, if you want to know,” he said slowly, “what that thing in the boat was. I remember thinking at the time it was not a man. The whole business seemed to rise quite suddenly out of the water.”

I laughed again boisterously in his face, but this time there was impatience, and a strain of anger too, in my feeling.

“Look here now,” I cried, “this place is quite queer enough without going out of our way to imagine things! That boat was an ordinary boat, and the man in it was an ordinary man, and they were both going down-stream as fast as they could lick. And that otter was an otter, so don’t let’s play the fool about it!”

He looked steadily at me with the same grave expression. He was not in the least annoyed. I took courage from his silence.

“And, for Heaven’s sake,” I went on, “don’t keep pretending you hear things, because it only gives me the jumps, and there’s nothing to hear but the river and this cursed old thundering wind.”

“You fool!” he answered in a low, shocked voice, “you utter fool. That’s just the way all victims talk. As if you didn’t understand just as well as I do!” he sneered with scorn in his voice, and a sort of resignation. “The best thing you can do is to keep quiet and try to hold your mind as firm as possible. This feeble attempt at self-deception only makes the truth harder when you’re forced to meet it.”

My little effort was over, and I found nothing more to say, for I knew quite well his words were true, and that I was the fool, not he. Up to a certain stage in the adventure he kept ahead of me easily, and I think I felt annoyed to be out of it, to be thus proved less psychic, less sensitive than himself to these extraordinary happenings, and half ignorant all the time of what was going on under my very nose. He knew from the very beginning, apparently. But at the moment I wholly missed the point of his words about the necessity of there being a victim, and that we ourselves were destined to satisfy the want. I dropped all pretence thenceforward, but thenceforward likewise my fear increased steadily to the climax.

“But you’re quite right about one thing,” he added, before the subject passed, “and that is that we’re wiser not to talk about it, or even to think about it, because what one thinks finds expression in words, and what one says, happens.”

That afternoon, while the canoe dried and hardened, we spent trying to fish, testing the leak, collecting wood, and watching the enormous flood of rising water. Masses of driftwood swept near our shores sometimes, and we fished for them with long willow branches. The island grew perceptibly smaller as the banks were torn away

with great gulps and splashes. The weather kept brilliantly fine till about four o'clock, and then for the first time for three days the wind showed signs of abating. Clouds began to gather in the south-west, spreading thence slowly over the sky.

This lessening of the wind came as a great relief, for the incessant roaring, banging, and thundering had irritated our nerves. Yet the silence that came about five o'clock with its sudden cessation was in a manner quite as oppressive. The booming of the river had everything in its own way then; it filled the air with deep murmurs, more musical than the wind noises, but infinitely more monotonous. The wind held many notes, rising, falling always beating out some sort of great elemental tune; whereas the river's song lay between three notes at most—dull pedal notes, that held a lugubrious quality foreign to the wind, and somehow seemed to me, in my then nervous state, to sound wonderfully well the music of doom.

It was extraordinary, too, how the withdrawal suddenly of bright sunlight took everything out of the landscape that made for cheerfulness; and since this particular landscape had already managed to convey the suggestion of something sinister, the change of course was all the more unwelcome and noticeable. For me, I know, the

darkening outlook became distinctly more alarming, and I found myself more than once calculating how soon after sunset the full moon would get up in the east, and whether the gathering clouds would greatly interfere with her lighting of the little island.

With this general hush of the wind—though it still indulged in occasional brief gusts—the river seemed to me to grow blacker, the willows to stand more densely together. The latter, too, kept up a sort of independent movement of their own, rustling among themselves when no wind stirred, and shaking oddly from the roots upwards. When common objects in this way be come charged with the suggestion of horror, they stimulate the imagination far more than things of unusual appearance; and these bushes, crowding huddled about us, assumed for me in the darkness a bizarre grotesquerie of appearance that lent to them somehow the aspect of purposeful and living creatures. Their very ordinariness, I felt, masked what was malignant and hostile to us. The forces of the region drew nearer with the coming of night. They were focusing upon our island, and more particularly upon ourselves. For thus, somehow, in the terms of the imagination, did my really indescribable sensa-

tions in this extraordinary place present themselves.

I had slept a good deal in the early afternoon, and had thus recovered somewhat from the exhaustion of a disturbed night, but this only served apparently to render me more susceptible than before to the obsessing spell of the haunting. I fought against it, laughing at my feelings as absurd and childish, with very obvious physiological explanations, yet, in spite of every effort, they gained in strength upon me so that I dreaded the night as a child lost in a forest must dread the approach of darkness.

The canoe we had carefully covered with a waterproof sheet during the day, and the one remaining paddle had been securely tied by the Swede to the base of a tree, lest the wind should rob us of that too. From five o'clock onwards I busied myself with the stew-pot and preparations for dinner, it being my turn to cook that night. We had potatoes, onions, bits of bacon fat to add flavor, and a general thick residue from former stews at the bottom of the pot; with black bread broken up into it the result was most excellent, and it was followed by a stew of plums with sugar and a brew of strong tea with dried milk. A good pile of wood lay close at hand, and the absence of wind made my duties easy. My companion



sat lazily watching me, dividing his attentions between cleaning his pipe and giving useless advice—an admitted privilege of the off-duty man. He had been very quiet all the afternoon, engaged in re-caulking the canoe, strengthening the tent ropes, and fishing for driftwood while I slept. No more talk about undesirable things had passed between us, and I think his only remarks had to do with the gradual destruction of the island, which he declared was not fully a third smaller than when we first landed.

The pot had just begun to bubble when I heard his voice calling to me from the bank, where he had wandered away without my noticing. I ran up.

“Come and listen,” he said, “and see what you make of it.” He held his hand cupwise to his ear, as so often before.

“Now do you hear anything?” he asked, watching me curiously.

We stood there, listening attentively together. At first I heard only the deep note of the water and the hissings rising from its turbulent surface. The willows, for once, were motionless and silent. Then a sound began to reach my ears faintly, a peculiar sound—something like the humming of a distant gong. It seemed to come across to us in the darkness from the waste

of swamps and willows opposite. It was repeated at regular intervals, but it was certainly neither the sound of a bell nor the hooting of a distant steamer. I can liken it to nothing so much as to the sound of an immense gong, suspended far up in the sky, repeating incessantly its muffled metallic note, soft and musical, as it was repeatedly struck. My heart quickened as I listened.

“I’ve heard it all day,” said my companion. “While you slept this afternoon it came all round the island. I hunted it down, but could never get near enough to see—to localize it correctly. Sometimes it was overhead, and sometimes it seemed under the water. Once or twice, too, I could have sworn it was not outside at all, but within myself—you know—the way a sound in the fourth dimension is supposed to come.”

I was too much puzzled to pay much attention to his words. I listened carefully, striving to associate it with any known familiar sound I could think of, but without success. It changed in the direction, too, coming nearer, and then sinking utterly away into remote distance. I cannot say that it was ominous in quality, because to me it seemed distinctly musical, yet I must admit it set going a distressing feeling that made me wish I had never heard it.

“The wind blowing in those sand-funnels,” I said determined to find an explanation, “or the bushes rubbing together after the storm perhaps.”

“It comes off the whole swamp,” my friend answered. “It comes from everywhere at once.” He ignored my explanations. “It comes from the willow bushes somehow—”

“But now the wind has dropped,” I objected. “The willows can hardly make a noise by themselves, can they?”

His answer frightened me, first because I had dreaded it, and secondly, because I knew intuitively it was true.

“It is because the wind has dropped we now hear it. It was drowned before. It is the cry, I believe, of the—”

I dashed back to my fire, warned by the sound of bubbling that the stew was in danger, but determined at the same time to escape further conversation. I was resolute, if possible, to avoid the exchanging of views. I dreaded, too, that he would begin about the gods, or the elemental forces, or something else disquieting, and I wanted to keep myself well in hand for what might happen later. There was another night to be faced before we escaped from this distress-



ing place, and there was no knowing yet what it might bring forth.

“Come and cut up bread for the pot,” I called to him, vigorously stirring the appetizing mixture. That stew-pot held sanity for us both, and the thought made me laugh.

He came over slowly and took the provision sack from the tree, fumbling in its mysterious depths, and then emptying the entire contents upon the ground-sheet at his feet.

“Hurry up!” I cried; “it’s boiling.”

The Swede burst out into a roar of laughter that startled me. It was forced laughter, not artificial exactly, but mirthless.

“There’s nothing here!” he shouted, holding his sides.

“Bread, I mean.”

“It’s gone. There is no bread. They’ve taken it!”

I dropped the long spoon and ran up. Everything the sack had contained lay upon the ground-sheet, but there was no loaf.

The whole dead weight of my growing fear fell upon me and shook me. Then I burst out laughing too. It was the only thing to do: and the sound of my laughter

also made me understand his. The stain of psychological pressure caused it—this explosion of unnatural laughter in both of us; it was an effort of repressed forces to seek relief; it was a temporary safety-valve. And with both of us it ceased quite suddenly.

“How criminally stupid of me!” I cried, still determined to be consistent and find an explanation. “I clean forgot to buy a loaf at Pressburg. That chattering woman put everything out of my head, and I must have left it lying on the counter or—”

“The oatmeal, too, is much less than it was this morning,” the Swede interrupted.

Why in the world need he draw attention to it? I thought angrily.

“There’s enough for tomorrow,” I said, stirring vigorously, “and we can get lots more at Komorn or Gran. In twenty-four hours we shall be miles from here.”

“I hope so—to God,” he muttered, putting the things back into the sack, “unless we’re claimed first as victims for the sacrifice,” he added with a foolish laugh. He dragged the sack into the tent, for safety’s sake, I suppose, and I heard him mumbling to himself, but so indistinctly that it seemed quite natural for me to ignore his words.

Our meal was beyond question a gloomy one, and we ate it almost in silence, avoiding one another’s eyes, and keeping the fire bright. Then we washed up and prepared for the night, and, once smoking, our minds unoccupied with any definite duties, the apprehension I had felt all day long became more and more acute. It was not then active fear, I think, but the very vagueness of its origin distressed me far more than if I had been able to ticket and face it squarely. The curious sound I have likened to the note of a gong became now almost incessant, and filled the stillness of the night with a faint, continuous ringing rather than a series of distinct notes. At one time it was behind and at another time in front of us. Sometimes I fancied it came from the bushes on our left, and then again from the clumps on our right. More often it hovered directly overhead like the whirring of wings. It was really everywhere at once, behind, in front, at our sides and over our heads, completely surrounding us. The sound really defies description. But nothing within my knowledge is like that ceaseless muffled humming rising off the deserted world of swamps and willows.

We sat smoking in comparative silence, the strain growing every minute greater. The worst feature of the situation seemed to me that we did not know what to expect,



and could therefore make no sort of preparation by way of defense. We could anticipate nothing. My explanations made in the sunshine, moreover, now came to haunt me with their foolish and wholly unsatisfactory nature, and it was more and more clear to us that some kind of plain talk with my companion was inevitable, whether I liked it or not. After all, we had to spend the night together, and to sleep in the same tent side by side. I saw that I could not get along much longer without the support of his mind, and for that, of course, plain talk was imperative. As long as possible, however, I postponed this little climax, and tried to ignore or laugh at the occasional sentences he flung into the emptiness.

Some of these sentences, moreover, were confoundingly disquieting to me, coming as they did to corroborate much that I felt myself; corroboration, too—which made it so much more convincing—from a totally different point of view. He composed such curious sentences, and hurled them at me in such an inconsequential sort of way, as though his main line of thought was secret to himself, and these fragments were mere bits he found it impossible to digest. He got rid of them by uttering them. Speech relieved him. It was like being sick.

“There are things about us, I’m sure, that make for disorder, disintegration, destruc-

tion, our destruction,” he said once, while the fire blazed between us. “We’ve strayed out of a safe line somewhere.”

And, another time, when the gong sounds had come nearer, ringing much louder than before, and directly over our heads, he said as though talking to himself:

“I don’t think a gramophone would show any record of that. The sound doesn’t come to me by the ears at all. The vibrations reach me in another manner altogether, and seem to be within me, which is precisely how a fourth dimensional sound might be supposed to make itself heard.”

I purposely made no reply to this, but I sat up a little closer to the fire and peered about me into the darkness. The clouds were massed all over the sky, and no trace of moonlight came through. Very still, too, everything was, so that the river and the frogs had things all their own way.

“It has that about it,” he went on, “which is utterly out of common experience. It is unknown. Only one thing describes it really; it is a non-human sound; I mean a sound outside humanity.”

Having rid himself of this indigestible morsel, he lay quiet for a time, but he had so admirably expressed my own feeling that it was a relief to have the thought out,

and to have confined it by the limitation of words from dangerous wandering to and fro in the mind.

The solitude of that Danube camping-place, can I ever forget it? The feeling of being utterly alone on an empty planet! My thoughts ran incessantly upon cities and the haunts of men. I would have given my soul, as the saying is, for the “feel” of those Bavarian villages we had passed through by the score; for the normal, human commonplaces; peasants drinking beer, tables beneath the trees, hot sunshine, and a ruined castle on the rocks behind the red-roofed church. Even the tourists would have been welcome.

Yet what I felt of dread was no ordinary ghostly fear. It was infinitely greater, stranger, and seemed to arise from some dim ancestral sense of terror more profoundly disturbing than anything I had known or dreamed of. We had “strayed,” as the Swede put it, into some region or some set of conditions where the risks were great, yet unintelligible to us; where the frontiers of some unknown world lay close about us. It was a spot held by the dwellers in some outer space, a sort of peep-hole whence they could spy upon the earth, themselves unseen, a point where the veil between had worn a little thin. As the final result of too long a sojourn here, we should



be carried over the border and deprived of what we called “our lives,” yet by mental, not physical, processes. In that sense, as he said, we should be the victims of our adventure—a sacrifice.

It took us in different fashion, each according to the measure of his sensitiveness and powers of resistance. I translated it vaguely into a personification of the mightily disturbed elements, investing them with the horror of a deliberate and malefic purpose, resentful of our audacious intrusion into their breeding-place; whereas my friend threw it into the unoriginal form at first of a trespass on some ancient shrine, some place where the old gods still held sway, where the emotional forces of former worshippers still clung, and the ancestral portion of him yielded to the old pagan spell.

At any rate, here was a place unpoluted by men, kept clean by the winds from coarsening human influences, a place where spiritual agencies were within reach and aggressive. Never, before or since, have I been so attacked by indescribable suggestions of a “beyond region,” of another scheme of life, another revolution not parallel to the human. And in the end our minds would succumb under the weight of the awful spell, and we should be drawn across the frontier into their world.

Small things testified to the amazing influence of the place, and now in the silence round the fire they allowed themselves to be noted by the mind. The very atmosphere had proved itself a magnifying medium to distort every indication: the otter rolling in the current, the hurrying boatman making signs, the shifting willows, one and all had been robbed of its natural character, and revealed in something of its other aspect—as it existed across the border to that other region. And this changed aspect I felt was now not merely to me, but to the race. The whole experience whose verge we touched was unknown to humanity at all. It was a new order of experience, and in the true sense of the word unearthly.

“It’s the deliberate, calculating purpose that reduces one’s courage to zero,” the Swede said suddenly, as if he had been actually following my thoughts. “Otherwise imagination might count for much. But the paddle, the canoe, the lessening food—”

“Haven’t I explained all that once?” I interrupted viciously.

“You have,” he answered dryly; “you have indeed.”

He made other remarks too, as usual, about what he called the “plain determination to provide a victim”; but, having now arranged my thoughts better, I recognized

that this was simply the cry of his frightened soul against the knowledge that he was being attacked in a vital part, and that he would be somehow taken or destroyed. The situation called for a courage and calmness of reasoning that neither of us could compass, and I have never before been so clearly conscious of two persons in me—the one that explained everything, and the other that laughed at such foolish explanations, yet was horribly afraid.

Meanwhile, in the pitchy night the fire died down and the wood pile grew small. Neither of us moved to replenish the stock, and the darkness consequently came up very close to our faces. A few feet beyond the circle of firelight it was inky black. Occasionally a stray puff of wind set the willows shivering about us, but apart from this not very welcome sound a deep and depressing silence reigned, broken only by the gurgling of the river and the humming in the air overhead.

We both missed, I think, the shouting company of the winds.

At length, at a moment when a stray puff prolonged itself as though the wind were about to rise again, I reached the point for me of saturation, the point where it was absolutely necessary to find relief in plain speech, or else to betray myself by some



hysterical extravagance that must have been far worse in its effect upon both of us. I kicked the fire into a blaze, and turned to my companion abruptly. He looked up with a start.

“I can’t disguise it any longer,” I said; “I don’t like this place, and the darkness, and the noises, and the awful feelings I get. There’s something here that beats me utterly. I’m in a blue funk, and that’s the plain truth. If the other shore was—different, I swear I’d be inclined to swim for it!”

The Swede’s face turned very white beneath the deep tan of sun and wind. He stared straight at me and answered quietly, but his voice betrayed his huge excitement by its unnatural calmness. For the moment, at any rate, he was the strong man of the two. He was more phlegmatic, for one thing.

“It’s not a physical condition we can escape from by running away,” he replied, in the tone of a doctor diagnosing some grave disease; “we must sit tight and wait. There are forces close here that could kill a herd of elephants in a second as easily as you or I could squash a fly. Our only chance is to keep perfectly still. Our insignificance perhaps may save us.”

I put a dozen questions into my expression of face, but found no words. It was

precisely like listening to an accurate description of a disease whose symptoms had puzzled me.

“I mean that so far, although aware of our disturbing presence, they have not found us—not ‘located’ us, as the Americans say,” he went on. “They’re blundering about like men hunting for a leak of gas. The paddle and canoe and provisions prove that. I think they feel us, but cannot actually see us. We must keep our minds quiet—it’s our minds they feel. We must control our thoughts, or it’s all up with us.”

“Death, you mean?” I stammered, icy with the horror of his suggestion.

“Worse—by far,” he said. “Death, according to one’s belief, means either annihilation or release from the limitations of the senses, but it involves no change of character. You don’t suddenly alter just because the body’s gone. But this means a radical alteration, a complete change, a horrible loss of oneself by substitution—far worse than death, and not even annihilation. We happen to have camped in a spot where their region touches ours, where the veil between has worn thin”—horrors! he was using my very own phrase, my actual words—“so that they are aware of our being in their neighborhood.”

“But who are aware?” I asked.

I forgot the shaking of the willows in the windless calm, the humming overhead, everything except that I was waiting for an answer that I dreaded more than I can possibly explain.

He lowered his voice at once to reply, leaning forward a little over the fire, an indefinable change in his face that made me avoid his eyes and look down upon the ground.

“All my life,” he said, “I have been strangely, vividly conscious of another region—not far removed from our own world in one sense, yet wholly different in kind—where great things go on unceasingly, where immense and terrible personalities hurry by, intent on vast purposes compared to which earthly affairs, the rise and fall of nations, the destinies of empires, the fate of armies and continents, are all as dust in the balance; vast purposes, I mean, that deal directly with the soul, and not indirectly with more expressions of the soul—”

“I suggest just now—” I began, seeking to stop him, feeling as though I was face to face with a madman. But he instantly overbore me with his torrent that had to come.

“You think,” he said, “it is the spirit of the elements, and I thought perhaps it was the old gods. But I tell you now it



is—neither. These would be comprehensible entities, for they have relations with men, depending upon them for worship or sacrifice, whereas these beings who are now about us have absolutely nothing to do with mankind, and it is mere chance that their space happens just at this spot to touch our own.”

The mere conception, which his words somehow made so convincing, as I listened to them there in the dark stillness of that lonely island, set me shaking a little all over. I found it impossible to control my movements.

“And what do you propose?” I began again.

“A sacrifice, a victim, might save us by distracting them until we could get away,” he went on, “just as the wolves stop to devour the dogs and give the sleigh another start. But—I see no chance of any other victim now.”

I stared blankly at him. The gleam in his eye was dreadful. Presently he continued.

IV

“It’s the willows, of course. The willows mask the others, but the others are feeling about for us. If we let our minds betray our fear, we’re lost, lost utterly.” He looked at me with an expression so calm,

so determined, so sincere, that I no longer had any doubts as to his sanity. He was as sane as any man ever was. “If we can hold out through the night,” he added, “we may get off in the daylight unnoticed, or rather, undiscovered.”

“But you really think a sacrifice would—”

That gong-like humming came down very close over our heads as I spoke, but it was my friend’s scared face that really stopped my mouth.

“Hush!” he whispered, holding up his hand. “Do not mention them more than you can help. Do not refer to them by name. To name is to reveal; it is the inevitable clue, and our only hope lies in ignoring them, in order that they may ignore us.”

“Even in thought?” He was extraordinarily agitated.

“Especially in thought. Our thoughts make spirals in their world. We must keep them out of our minds at all costs if possible.”

I raked the fire together to prevent the darkness having everything its own way. I never longed for the sun as I longed for it then in the awful blackness of that summer night.

“Were you awake all last night?” he went on suddenly.

“I slept badly a little after dawn,” I replied evasively, trying to follow his instructions, which I knew instinctively were true, “but the wind, of course—”

“I know. But the wind won’t account for all the noises.”

“Then you heard it too?”

“The multiplying countless little footsteps I heard,” he said, adding, after a moment’s hesitation, “and that other sound—”

“You mean above the tent, and the pressing down upon us of something tremendous, gigantic?”

He nodded significantly.

“It was like the beginning of a sort of inner suffocation?” I said.

“Partly, yes. It seemed to me that the weight of the atmosphere had been altered—had increased enormously, so that we should have been crushed.”

“And that,” I went on, determined to have it all out, pointing upwards where the gong-like note hummed ceaselessly, rising and falling like wind. “What do you make of that?”

“It’s their sound,” he whispered gravely. “It’s the sound of their world, the humming in their region. The division here is so thin that it leaks through somehow. But, if you listen carefully, you’ll find it’s not above so much as around us. It’s in the willows. It’s the willows themselves humming, because here the willows have been made symbols of the forces that are against us.”

I could not follow exactly what he meant by this, yet the thought and idea in my mind were beyond question the thought and idea in his. I realized what he realized, only with less power of analysis than his. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him at last about my hallucination of the ascending figures and the moving bushes, when he suddenly thrust his face again close into mine across the firelight and began to speak in a very earnest whisper. He amazed me by his calmness and pluck, his apparent control of the situation. This man I had for years deemed unimaginative, stolid!

“Now listen,” he said. “The only thing for us to do is to go on as though nothing had happened, follow our usual habits, go to bed, and so forth; pretend we feel nothing and notice nothing. It is a question wholly of the mind, and the less we think about them the better our chance of escape. Above all, don’t think, for what you think happens!”

“All right,” I managed to reply, simply breathless with his words and the strangeness of it all; “all right, I’ll try, but tell me one more thing first. Tell me what you make of those hollows in the ground all about us, those sand-funnels?”

“No!” he cried, forgetting to whisper in his excitement. “I dare not, simply dare not, put the thought into words. If you have not guessed I am glad. Don’t try to. They have put it into my mind; try your hardest to prevent their putting it into yours.”

He sank his voice again to a whisper before he finished, and I did not press him to explain. There was already just about as much horror in me as I could hold. The conversation came to an end, and we smoked our pipes busily in silence.

Then something happened, something unimportant apparently, as the way is when the nerves are in a very great state of tension, and this small thing for a brief space gave me an entirely different point of view. I chanced to look down at my sand-shoe—the sort we used for the canoe—and something to do with the hole at the toe suddenly recalled to me the London shop where I had bought them, the difficulty the man had in fitting me, and other details of the uninteresting but practical operation. At once, in its train, followed a wholesome

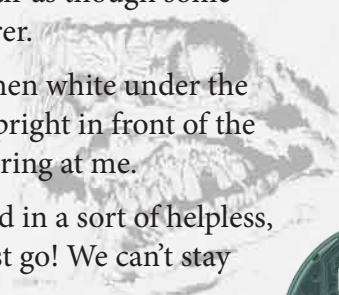
view of the modern skeptical world I was accustomed to move in at home. I thought of roast beef, and ale, motor-cars, policemen, brass bands, and a dozen other things that proclaimed the soul of ordinariness or utility. The effect was immediate and astonishing even to myself. Psychologically, I suppose, it was simply a sudden and violent reaction after the strain of living in an atmosphere of things that to the normal consciousness must seem impossible and incredible. But, whatever the cause, it momentarily lifted the spell from my heart, and left me for the short space of a minute feeling free and utterly unafraid. I looked up at my friend opposite.

“You damned old pagan!” I cried, laughing aloud in his face. “You imaginative idiot! You superstitious idolater! You—”

I stopped in the middle, seized anew by the old horror. I tried to smother the sound of my voice as something sacrilegious. The Swede, of course, heard it too—the strange cry overhead in the darkness—and that sudden drop in the air as though something had come nearer.

He had turned ashen white under the tan. He stood bolt upright in front of the fire, stiff as a rod, staring at me.

“After that,” he said in a sort of helpless, frantic way, “we must go! We can’t stay



now; we must strike camp this very instant and go on—down the river.”

He was talking, I saw, quite wildly, his words dictated by abject terror—the terror he had resisted so long, but which had caught him at last.

“In the dark?” I exclaimed, shaking with fear after my hysterical outburst, but still realizing our position better than he did. “Sheer madness! The river’s in flood, and we’ve only got a single paddle. Besides, we only go deeper into their country! There’s nothing ahead for fifty miles but willows, willows, willows!”

He sat down again in a state of semi-collapse. The positions, by one of those kaleidoscopic changes nature loves, were suddenly reversed, and the control of our forces passed over into my hands. His mind at last had reached the point where it was beginning to weaken.

“What on earth possessed you to do such a thing?” he whispered with the awe of genuine terror in his voice and face.

I crossed round to his side of the fire. I took both his hands in mine, kneeling down beside him and looking straight into his frightened eyes.

“We’ll make one more blaze,” I said firmly, “and then turn in for the night. At

sunrise we’ll be off full speed for Komorn. Now, pull yourself together a bit, and remember your own advice about not thinking fear!”

He said no more, and I saw that he would agree and obey. In some measure, too, it was a sort of relief to get up and make an excursion into the darkness for more wood. We kept close together, almost touching, groping among the bushes and along the bank. The humming overhead never ceased, but seemed to me to grow louder as we increased our distance from the fire. It was shivery work!

We were grubbing away in the middle of a thickish clump of willows where some driftwood from a former flood had caught high among the branches, when my body was seized in a grip that made me half drop upon the sand. It was the Swede. He had fallen against me, and was clutching me for support. I heard his breath coming and going in short gasps.

“Look! By my soul!” he whispered, and for the first time in my experience I knew what it was to hear tears of terror in a human voice. He was pointing to the fire, some fifty feet away. I followed the direction of his finger, and I swear my heart missed a beat.

There, in front of the dim glow, something was moving.

I saw it through a veil that hung before my eyes like the gauze drop-curtain used at the back of a theater—hazily a little. It was neither a human figure nor an animal. To me it gave the strange impression of being as large as several animals grouped together, like horses, two or three, moving slowly. The Swede, too, got a similar result, though expressing it differently, for he thought it was shaped and sized like a clump of willow bushes, rounded at the top, and moving all over upon its surface—“coiling upon itself like smoke,” he said afterwards.

“I watched it settle downwards through the bushes,” he sobbed at me. “Look, by God! It’s coming this way! Oh, oh!”—he gave a kind of whistling cry. “They’ve found us.”

I gave one terrified glance, which just enabled me to see that the shadowy form was swinging towards us through the bushes, and then I collapsed backwards with a crash into the branches. These failed, of course, to support my weight, so that with the Swede on top of me we fell in a struggling heap upon the sand. I really hardly knew what was happening. I was conscious only of a sort of enveloping sensation of icy fear that plucked the nerves out of their



fleshly covering, twisted them this way and that, and replaced them quivering. My eyes were tightly shut; something in my throat choked me; a feeling that my consciousness was expanding, extending out into space, swiftly gave way to another feeling that I was losing it altogether, and about to die.

An acute spasm of pain passed through me, and I was aware that the Swede had hold of me in such a way that he hurt me abominably. It was the way he caught at me in falling.

But it was the pain, he declared afterwards, that saved me; it caused me to forget them and think of something else at the very instant when they were about to find me. It concealed my mind from them at the moment of discovery, yet just in time to evade their terrible seizing of me. He himself, he says, actually swooned at the same moment, and that was what saved him.

I only know that at a later date, how long or short is impossible to say, I found myself scrambling up out of the slippery network of willow branches, and saw my companion standing in front of me holding out a hand to assist me. I stared at him in a dazed way, rubbing the arm he had twisted for me. Nothing came to me to say, somehow.

"I lost consciousness for a moment or two," I heard him say. "That's what saved me. It made me stop thinking about them."

"You nearly broke my arm in two," I said, uttering my only connected thought at the moment. A numbness came over me.

"That's what saved you!" he replied. "Between us, we've managed to set them off on a false tack somewhere. The humming has ceased. It's gone—for the moment at any rate!"

A wave of hysterical laughter seized me again, and this time spread to my friend too—great healing gusts of shaking laughter that brought a tremendous sense of relief in their train. We made our way back to the fire and put the wood on so that it blazed at once. Then we saw that the tent had fallen over and lay in a tangled heap upon the ground.

We picked it up, and during the process tripped more than once and caught our feet in sand.

"It's those sand-funnels," exclaimed the Swede, when the tent was up again and the firelight lit up the ground for several yards about us. "And look at the size of them!"

All round the tent and about the fire-place where we had seen the moving shadows there were deep funnel-shaped hol-

lows in the sand, exactly similar to the ones we had already found over the island, only far bigger and deeper, beautifully formed, and wide enough in some instances to admit the whole of my foot and leg.

Neither of us said a word. We both knew that sleep was the safest thing we could do, and to bed we went accordingly without further delay, having first thrown sand on the fire and taken the provision sack and the paddle inside the tent with us. The canoe, too, we propped in such a way at the end of the tent that our feet touched it, and the least motion would disturb and wake us.

In case of emergency, too, we again went to bed in our clothes, ready for a sudden start.

It was my firm intention to lie awake all night and watch, but the exhaustion of nerves and body decreed otherwise, and sleep after a while came over me with a welcome blanket of oblivion. The fact that my companion also slept quickened its approach. At first he fidgeted and constantly sat up, asking me if I "heard this" or "heard that." He tossed about on his cork mattress, and said the tent was moving and the river had risen over the point of the island, but each time I went out to look I returned with the report that all was well, and finally



he grew calmer and lay still. Then at length his breathing became regular and I heard unmistakable sounds of snoring—the first and only time in my life when snoring has been a welcome and calming influence.

This, I remember, was the last thought in my mind before dozing off.

A difficulty in breathing woke me, and I found the blanket over my face. But something else besides the blanket was pressing upon me, and my first thought was that my companion had rolled off his mattress on to my own in his sleep. I called to him and sat up, and at the same moment it came to me that the tent was surrounded. That sound of multitudinous soft pattering was again audible outside, filling the night with horror.

I called again to him, louder than before. He did not answer, but I missed the sound of his snoring, and also noticed that the flap of the tent was down. This was the unpardonable sin. I crawled out in the darkness to hook it back securely, and it was then for the first time I realized positively that the Swede was not here. He had gone.

I dashed out in a mad run, seized by a dreadful agitation, and the moment I was out I plunged into a sort of torrent of humming that surrounded me completely and came out of every quarter of the heavens at

once. It was that same familiar humming—gone mad! A swarm of great invisible bees might have been about me in the air. The sound seemed to thicken the very atmosphere, and I felt that my lungs worked with difficulty.

But my friend was in danger, and I could not hesitate.

The dawn was just about to break, and a faint whitish light spread upwards over the clouds from a thin strip of clear horizon. No wind stirred. I could just make out the bushes and river beyond, and the pale sandy patches. In my excitement I ran frantically to and fro about the island, calling him by name, shouting at the top of my voice the first words that came into my head. But the willows smothered my voice, and the humming muffled it, so that the sound only traveled a few feet round me. I plunged among the bushes, tripping headlong, tumbling over roots, and scraping my face as I tore this way and that among the preventing branches.

Then, quite unexpectedly, I came out upon the island's point and saw a dark figure outlined between the water and the sky. It was the Swede. And already he had one foot in the river! A moment more and he would have taken the plunge.

I threw myself upon him, flinging my arms about his waist and dragging him shorewards with all my strength. Of course he struggled furiously, making a noise all the time just like that cursed humming, and using the most outlandish phrases in his anger about “going inside to Them,” and “taking the way of the water and the wind,” and God only knows what more besides, that I tried in vain to recall afterwards, but which turned me sick with horror and amazement as I listened. But in the end I managed to get him into the comparative safety of the tent, and flung him breathless and cursing upon the mattress where I held him until the fit had passed.

I think the suddenness with which it all went and he grew calm, coinciding as it did with the equally abrupt cessation of the humming and pattering outside—I think this was almost the strangest part of the whole business perhaps. For he had just opened his eyes and turned his tired face up to me so that the dawn threw a pale light upon it through the doorway, and said, for all the world just like a frightened child:

“My life, old man—it's my life I owe you. But it's all over now anyhow. They've found a victim in our place!”

Then he dropped back upon his blankets and went to sleep literally under my eyes. He simply collapsed, and began to snore again as healthily as though nothing had happened and he had never tried to offer his own life as a sacrifice by drowning. And when the sunlight woke him three hours later—hours of ceaseless vigil for me—it became so clear to me that he remembered absolutely nothing of what he had attempted to do, that I deemed it wise to hold my peace and ask no dangerous questions.

He woke naturally and easily, as I have said, when the sun was already high in a windless hot sky, and he at once got up and set about the preparation of the fire for breakfast. I followed him anxiously at bathing, but he did not attempt to plunge in, merely dipping his head and making some remark about the extra coldness of the water.

“River’s falling at last,” he said, “and I’m glad of it.”

“The humming has stopped too,” I said.

He looked up at me quietly with his normal expression. Evidently he remembered everything except his own attempt at suicide.

“Everything has stopped,” he said, “because—”

He hesitated. But I knew some reference to that remark he had made just before he fainted was in his mind, and I was determined to know it.

“Because ‘They’ve found another victim?’” I said, forcing a little laugh.

“Exactly,” he answered, “exactly! I feel as positive of it as though—as though—I feel quite safe again, I mean,” he finished.

He began to look curiously about him. The sunlight lay in hot patches on the sand. There was no wind. The willows were motionless. He slowly rose to feet.

“Come,” he said; “I think if we look, we shall find it.”

He started off on a run, and I followed him. He kept to the banks, poking with a stick among the sandy bays and caves and little back-waters, myself always close on his heels.

“Ah!” he exclaimed presently, “ah!”

The tone of his voice somehow brought back to me a vivid sense of the horror of the last twenty-four hours, and I hurried up to join him. He was pointing with his stick at a large black object that lay half in the water and half on the sand. It appeared to be caught by some twisted willow roots so that the river could not sweep it away. A

few hours before the spot must have been under water.

“See,” he said quietly, “the victim that made our escape possible!”

And when I peered across his shoulder I saw that his stick rested on the body of a man. He turned it over. It was the corpse of a peasant, and the face was hidden in the sand. Clearly the man had been drowned, but a few hours before, and his body must have been swept down upon our island somewhere about the hour of the dawn—at the very time the fit had passed.

“We must give it a decent burial, you know.”

“I suppose so,” I replied. I shuddered a little in spite of myself, for there was something about the appearance of that poor drowned man that turned me cold.

The Swede glanced up sharply at me, an undecipherable expression on his face, and began clambering down the bank. I followed him more leisurely. The current, I noticed, had torn away much of the clothing from the body, so that the neck and part of the chest lay bare.

Halfway down the bank my companion suddenly stopped and held up his hand in warning; but either my foot slipped, or I had gained too much momentum to bring

myself quickly to a halt, for I bumped into him and sent him forward with a sort of leap to save himself. We tumbled together on to the hard sand so that our feet splashed into the water. And, before anything could be done, we had collided a little heavily against the corpse.

The Swede uttered a sharp cry. And I sprang back as if I had been shot.

At the moment we touched the body there rose from its surface the loud sound of humming—the sound of several hummings—which passed with a vast commotion as of winged things in the air about us and disappeared upwards into the sky, growing fainter and fainter till they finally ceased in the distance. It was exactly as though we had disturbed some living yet invisible creatures at work.

My companion clutched me, and I think I clutched him, but before either of us had time properly to recover from the unexpected shock, we saw that a movement of the current was turning the corpse round so that it became released from the grip of the willow roots. A moment later it had turned completely over, the dead face uppermost, staring at the sky. It lay on the edge of the main stream. In another moment it would be swept away.

The Swede started to save it, shouting again something I did not catch about a “proper burial”—and then abruptly dropped upon his knees on the sand and covered his eyes with his hands. I was beside him in an instant.

I saw what he had seen.

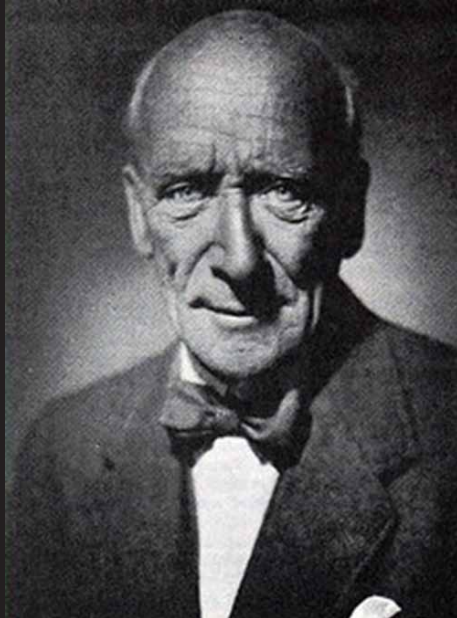
For just as the body swung round to the current the face and the exposed chest turned full towards us, and showed plainly how the skin and flesh were indented with small hollows, beautifully formed, and exactly similar in shape and kind to the sand-funnels that we had found all over the island.

“Their mark!” I heard my companion mutter under his breath. “Their awful mark!”

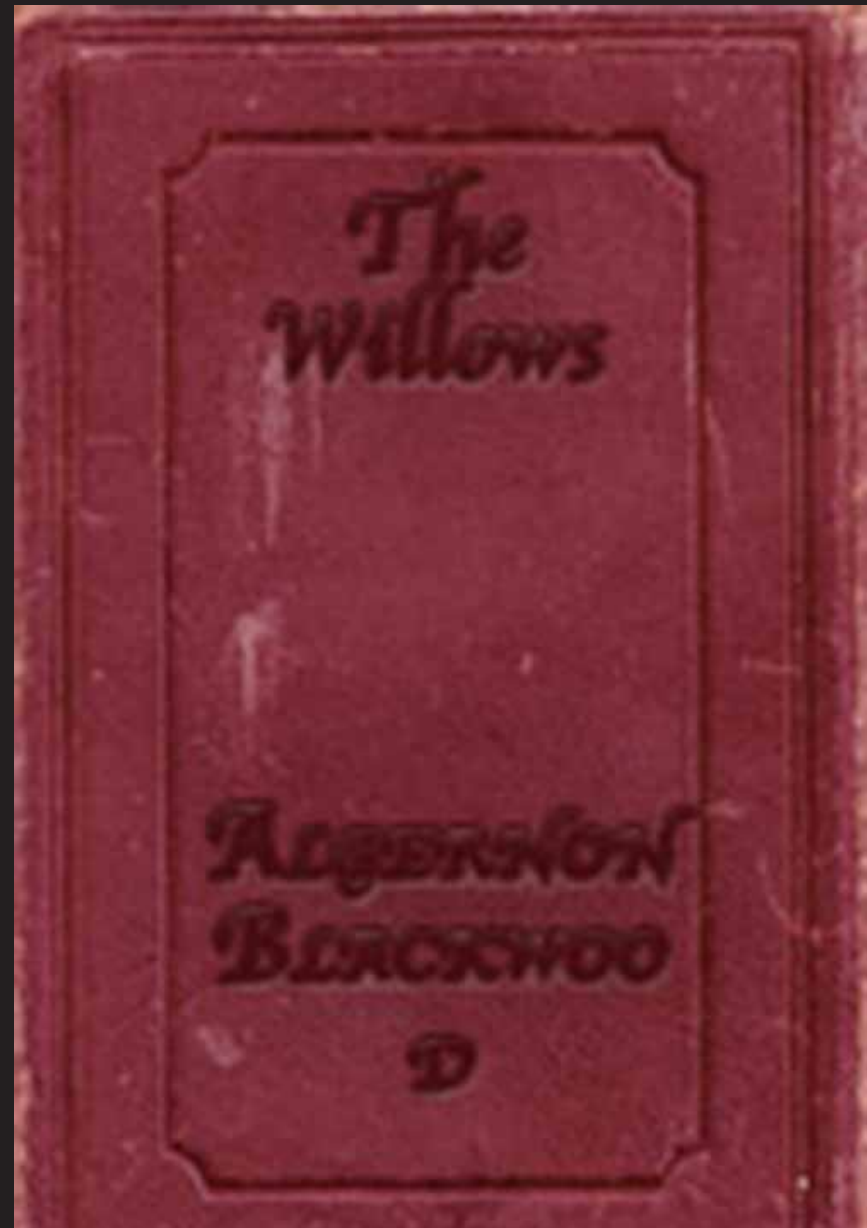
And when I turned my eyes again from his ghastly face to the river, the current had done its work, and the body had been swept away into mid-stream and was already beyond our reach and almost out of sight, turning over and over on the waves like an otter.



Algernon Henry Blackwood



<i>Born</i>	14 March 1869 Shooter's Hill, Kent
<i>Died</i>	10 December 1951 Bishopsteighton, Kent
<i>Occupation</i>	Writer, broadcaster
<i>Nationality</i>	British
<i>Genres</i>	Fantasy, horror, weird fiction
<i>Notable work(s)</i>	The Centaur, "The Willows", "The Wendigo"
<i>Influenced</i>	William Hope Hodgson, George Allan England, H. P. Lovecraft, H. Russell Wakefield, Elizabeth Louisa Moresby, Evangeline Walton, Ramsey Campbell



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