

PYRAMID[®]



Issue 3/5 March '09

**HORROR
& SPIES**

THE X-TERMINATORS



by Sean Punch

**NEW GURPS ADVENTURE!
A VERY COLD WAR**

by James L. Cambias

THE BLACK CHAMBER

by J. Edward Tremlett

THE BRICKS OF MARÛ-DÛ

by Steven Marsh

STEVE JACKSON GAMES

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Article Colors

Each article is color-coded to help you find your favorite sections.

Pale Blue: In This Issue

Brown: In Every Issue (letters, humor, editorial, etc.)

Dark Blue: *GURPS* Features

Purple: Other Features

Green: Recommended Reading

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IN THIS ISSUE

Men have spied on threats (and each other) since they first discovered shadows. But the shadows can hold secrets older than humanity. What happens when you combine espionage with horror? Secrets battling secrets . . . and the theme to this month's *Pyramid*.

Pyramid brings you more support for your *GURPS* campaigns with *The X-Terminators* by Sean Punch, *GURPS* line editor and agent of [FNORD]. Building off *GURPS Action 1: Heroes*, this article brings you three new templates designed to ramp up your monster-hunting adventures. Use them in conjunction with the three types of loadouts in *GURPS Loadouts: Monster Hunters*.

Once you've got your characters, drop them into the newest *GURPS* adventure, *A Very Cold War*, set at an icy Swedish research station. It's written by James L. Cambias, co-author of *GURPS Space* (among others).

For those who prefer espionage to monster hunting, introduce the group to *The Black Chamber* (revealed by J. Edward Tremlett). This super-secret organization tracks the progress of those who want to bring about the end times.

Need something for the PCs to chase after? Whether they're part of the Black Chamber or stumble onto the secret by themselves, *The Bricks of Marû-Dû* (detailed by Steven Marsh) is just the thing to seek.

In this month's *Random Thought Table*, we look at what the horror and espionage genres bring to each other; why *are* they such a good match?

Code Words provides some props to lure investigators into the horror. GMs can make their own secret messages, or use the ones provided for two articles in this issue.

Odds and Ends offers more useful bits, including a laugh amid the growing horror with *Murphy's Rules*. Two columnists give their views of other interesting material for horror, espionage, and conspiracy games with *Recommended Reading*.

The issue closes with a *Last Word* from Eloy Lasanta, CEO of Third Eye Games and creator of *Apocalypse Prevention, Inc.* Find out what he has to say about the intersection of horror and espionage.

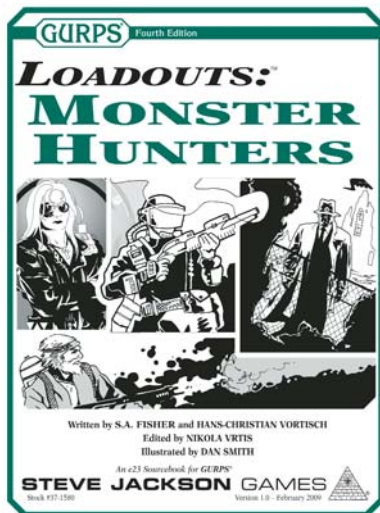
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FROM THE EDITOR

You asked; we listened! This issue contains the first full adventure we've seen in the newest version of *Pyramid*. Check out *A Very Cold War* and heat up your **GURPS** horror-and-spies game.



bad guys. *The Bricks of Marû-Dû* can serve as an adventure series or even campaign framework for many established games, including **GURPS Black Ops**.

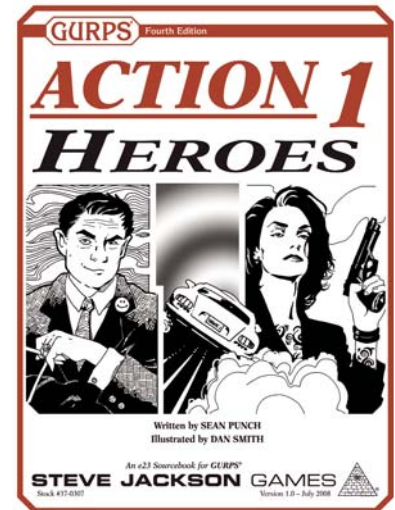
As we continue to experiment with the electronic format, this month we're including a JavaScript program that allows you to generate your own code pages like those featured in *Code Words*.

We've also maintained our tradition of including lots of modular material, designed to be useful for as many campaigns as possible. Sean Punch's *X-Terminators* nicely dovetails with several recent books (**GURPS Action 1: Heroes** and **GURPS Loadouts: Monster Hunters**, pictured here). *The Black Chamber* can be plugged into many horror/espionage games, as good or

As ever, we enjoy getting your thoughts about the magazine. You can write to us at pyramid@sjgames.com, or – for comments intended as part of a larger discussion – you can post to the Steve Jackson Games Forums at forums.sjgames.com, under the *Pyramid* sub-forum.

WRITE HERE, WRITE NOW

We love to get your feedback! Please feel free to send letters and comments to the address above. In addition, we're looking for "New Tricks for Old Dogs"; did you think of a clever use for an article in a past issue? Maybe you use the Vulture Squad as a PC group for a one-shot, or maybe the Perfect Defense imbuements inspired an entire campaign focused on magical armor. If so, e-mail us a brief (no more than 400 words) description of what you did and how well it worked.



The game system is going forward and breaking new ground . . . and it's getting fun. Pyramid is acting as a multiplier to this excellence and excitement.

– Jeffr0, on the Steve Jackson Games forums

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THE X-TERMINATORS

BY SEAN PUNCH

The *GURPS Action* series avoids the “weird action” sub-genre. In a traditional action game, this probably is for the best – few players would appreciate aliens, cryptids, and vampires showing up in a campaign inspired by *Die Hard* and *The Transporter*. All bets are off, however, if the heroes are modeled on BPRD agents from *Hellboy*, *X-Files*-style paranormal investigators, or fearless monster hunters like those in *Blade* or *Buffy*.

To run such a campaign, you’ll need *Action*, of course, along with *GURPS Loadouts: Monster Hunters* for suitable gear. You’ll also want a few extra templates, which appear here. These write-ups assume that you’re familiar with *Action 1: Heroes* – although they mostly make sense without it.

Players can use these templates to create freelance ghost busters, Men in Black, secret Vatican assassins (à la John Carpenter’s *Vampires*), and so on. If the campaign tells the story of a few individuals who deal in matters too weird for the authorities, then the GM may limit players to just these archetypes; as the customization notes illustrate, this still leaves lots of room for distinctive PCs. If the campaign follows the exploits of a well-funded government program, then squads might consist of ordinary agents reinforced by a few dedicated specialists. In that case, these templates and those from *Action 1* offer players 14 roles to choose from!

*You’re above the System. Over it.
Beyond it. We’re “them.” We’re “they.”
We are the Men in Black.*

– Zed, *Men in Black*

Equipping X-Terminators

These templates match the three roles that *Loadouts: Monster Hunters* suggests and equips. They possess the vital abilities recommended there, including the skills to use the equipment in each loadout. Just select a template and a loadout with the same name, and make sure the skills you pick

from the template agree with the equipment in the loadout options you choose.

In an *Action* campaign, loadout costs come out of the crew’s starting budget. *Action* assumes TL8, however. In a TL7 game, reduce all dollar amounts under *Standard (and Not-so-Standard) Issue (Action, p. 27)* by 25%. At TL6, cut them by 50%. You might also wish to replace the Computer Operation skill on the templates with another IQ/E skill, like Area Knowledge or Current Affairs.

SAGE

250 points

You interpret intelligence gleaned by the scout (p. 6-7) regarding paranormal menaces, and then research and develop weapons for the slayer (p. 8-9) to use against those threats. Thus, you’re like a combination investigator (*Action 1*, pp. 12-13) and wire rat (*Action 1*, p. 16) who seeks information and gadgetry useful for combating the supernatural. You also go into the field with the squad, collecting samples and treating unnatural afflictions for which the medic (*Action 1*, pp. 13-14) isn’t trained.

Attributes: ST 10 [0]; DX 12 [40]; IQ 15 [100]; HT 11 [10].

Secondary Characteristics: Damage 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 10 [0]; Will 17 [10]; Per 15 [0]; FP 11 [0]; Basic Speed 6.00 [5]; Basic Move 6 [0].

Advantages: Luck [15] and Quick Gadgeteer (Esoteric Armorer, -50%) [25]. • A further 30 points chosen from among lens advantages (*Action 1*, pp. 4-5), ST +1 to +3 [10/level], DX +1 [20], IQ +1 [20], HT +1 to +3 [10/level], Will +1 or +3 [5/level], Per +1 or +5 [5/level], Acute Senses (any) [2/level], Artificer 1-3 [10/level], Clerical Investment [5], Contact Group (Church, clinic, lab, university, etc.; Skill-12, 15, or 18; 9 or less; Somewhat Reliable) [5, 10, or 15], Cultural Familiarity [1/culture], Fearlessness 1-7 [2/level] or Unfazeable [15], Gizmos 1-3 [5/gizmo], Healer 1-3 [10/level], Illuminated [15], Intuition [15], Languages (any) [2-6/language], Serendipity 1-2 [15/level], Signature Gear [Varies], True Faith [15], Wild Talent 1 [20], or replace Luck [15] with Extraordinary Luck [30] for 15 points.

Question to consider: Does the heroes’ agency have a policy on collateral damage? Do the agents have a “license to kill”? Is it more important to keep the shadowy war secret than to achieve objectives?

Lenses for X-Terminators

Most lenses from *Action 1* (pp. 4-5) suit X-Terminators:

- *Intelligence* and *security* fit MIB types whose job is discovering and keeping paranormal secrets – possibly by silencing anybody who finds out!
- *Law enforcement* works for more publicly accountable investigators, who might well approach aliens and the supernatural like any other mystery.
- *Military* matches troops in a secret war: commandos hunting chupacabras in South America, soldiers guarding Area 51, etc.

All the PCs may share a single lens, but paranormal investigators are eclectic almost by definition, so a mixture is reasonable. In addition, two new lenses fit an X-Terminators campaign.

New Lens: Church

20 points

You're a current or former priest or monk of an established religion, or maybe a trusted layman. Catholic clergy dominate the genre, but nothing prevents PCs from being monster-slaying Buddhists or Muslims!

Skills: Religious Ritual (any) and Theology (same), both (H) IQ [4]. • Another 12 points chosen from Hidden Lore (Angels, Church Secrets, etc.), Leadership, Occultism, Public Speaking, Teaching, or Writing, all (A) IQ [2]; Diplomacy, History (Church), Literature,

Philosophy (any), Psychology, or Theology (any other), all (H) IQ-1 [2]; Mental Strength (E) Will+1 [2]; Exorcism or Meditation, both (H) Will-1 [2]; 2 more points in any lens skill to raise it by one level; or 6 more points to raise it by two.

Social Traits: Active clergymen *must* take their template's Duty, and *may* spend some of its advantage points (or leftover lens points) on Clerical Investment [5] and Religious Rank 0-4 [5/level].

New Lens: Gifted

20 points

For you, the paranormal is personal! This lens lacks the usual skills and social traits. Instead, pick some minor supernatural abilities that *aren't* usually found on templates (that is, advantages besides Higher Purpose, Illuminated, True Faith, and Wild Talent).

Advantages: Unusual Background (Supernatural Gifts) [10].

- Another 10 points chosen from Blessed [10], Channeling [10], Destiny (any) [5 or 10], Detect (Specific beings) [5] or (Specific class of beings) [10], Magery 0 [5], Magic Resistance 1-5 [2/level], Medium [10], Mind Shield 1-2 [4/level], Power Investiture 1 [10], Reawakened [10], Special Rapport [5], Spirit Empathy [10], Telekinesis 1-2 [5/level], or Visualization [10]. The GM may allow costlier advantages – e.g., Mind Reading or Precognition – with limitations that bring them to 10 points or less.

Disadvantages: Curious (12) [-5]. • -20 points chosen from among Duty (Agency, church, or similar; Extremely Hazardous; 9, 12, or 15 or less) [-10, -15, or -20], Fanaticism (Employer, nation, or service) [-15], Intolerance (Supernatural entities, rival nation, or other large group) [-5], Obsession (Learn a particular secret) [-5*], Secret (Dug up info that he shouldn't have) [-5 or -10], or Sense of Duty (Team) [-5]. • Another -25 points chosen from among the previous traits or Bad Temper [-10*], Delusion (Crazy belief contracted from a moldering tome) [-5], Insomniac [-10 or -15], Nightmares [-5*], No Sense of Humor [-10], Overconfidence [-5*], Paranoia [-10], Post-Combat Shakes [-5*], Skinny [-5], Stubbornness [-5], Workaholic [-5], or worsen Curious from (12) [-5] to (9) [-7] for -2 points or to (6) [-10] for -5 points.

Primary Skills: Armoury (Esoteric or Small Arms), Occultism, and Research, all (A) IQ [2]-15, and Intelligence Analysis (H) IQ [4]-15. • Two of Diagnosis, Forensics, Physician, or Psychology, all (H) IQ-1 [2]-14. • Four of Hidden Lore (any) (A) IQ [2]-15; Expert Skill (Psionics or Thanatology), Religious Ritual (any), Symbol Drawing (any), or Theology (any), all (H) IQ-1 [2]-14; Alchemy, Herb Lore, Ritual Magic (any), Thaumatology, or Weird Science, all (VH) IQ-2 [2]-13; Exorcism (H) Will-1 [2]-16; Esoteric Medicine (any) (H)

Per-1 [2]-14; or 2 points to increase any primary skill except Intelligence Analysis by a level.

Secondary Skills: Computer Operation (E) IQ [1]-15. • One of Boxing (A) DX [2]-12, Brawling (E) DX+1 [2]-13, or Karate (H) DX-1 [2]-11. • Either Judo (H) DX-1 [2]-11 or Wrestling (A) DX [2]-12. • Four of Fast-Draw (Ammo, Gizmo, Knife, Long Arm, or Pistol), Guns (Pistol or Shotgun), Knife, or Liquid Projector (Sprayer), all (E) DX+1 [2]-13; Throwing (A) DX [2]-12; or 2 points to raise any of those skills by a level. • Nine of Stealth (A) DX-1 [1]-11; Gesture (E) IQ [1]-15; Electronics Operation (Comm, Media, Scientific, or Sensors), Explosives (Demolition), Hazardous Materials (any), Holdout, Photography, Speed-Reading, Teaching, Traps, or Writing, all (A) IQ-1 [1]-14; Chemistry, Cryptography, Naturalist, Poisons, or Tactics, all (H) IQ-2 [1]-13; Surgery (VH) IQ-3 [1]-12; Scrounging (E) Per [1]-15; Observation or Search, both (A) Per-1 [1]-14; 1 point to raise any those skills by a level; or 1 point to buy any unselected primary skill at one skill level lower.

Background Skills: Choose a 20-point lens (*Action 1*, pp. 4-5). • Driving (Automobile or Motorcycle) (A) DX-1 [1]-11.

* Multiplied for self-control number; see p. B120.

The agency infiltrator is one of the most common and popular plots, but with modern background checks it's a difficult prospect. Supernatural powers on both sides can help or hinder these possibilities.

Sages and Quick Gadgeteer

Sages buy Quick Gadgeteer (p. B57) with a new Accessibility limitation. They *can* use *Time Spent* (p. B346) to reduce the times given here – possibly rolling at -10 to whip up a solution instantly!

Esoteric Armorer: You don't invent per se – you *modify* weapons to be more effective against paranormal foes. Starting with a mundane weapon and suitable exotic materials, each modification takes just 10 minutes and a skill roll. Use the *lower* of the Armoury specialty for that weapon and whatever academic skill the GM deems relevant to the creature you're hunting: generally Occultism, but Religious Ritual to bless items, Hidden Lore if the weakness you wish to exploit is little-known, and so on. To adapt a fragile artifact, smashed weapons parts, or a non-weapon that resembles your goal (e.g., aerosol deodorant when making a garlic sprayer), increase time to an hour. This latter case also covers converting scientific apparatus into weapons, which requires a roll against an appropriate science skill – or Weird Science, to make “a large and specially fitted Crookes tube” or an unlicensed particle accelerator to affect ghosts. -50%.

Customization Notes

A sage can fill many roles. Some possibilities, with recommended skills and lenses:

Esoteric Medic: To treat lycanthropy, vampirism, etc., get Alchemy, Diagnosis, Esoteric Medicine, Herb Lore, and Physician. Add Exorcism or Ritual Magic, for mummy's curses. Secondary training shouldn't overlook Chemistry, Hazardous Materials, Naturalist, Poisons, and Surgery. The idea of “squad medic” fits best with the law enforcement, military, and security lenses.

Exorcist: Casting out spirits calls for high Will, Clerical Investment, and special skills – Exorcism, Religious Ritual, Ritual Magic, and Theology. Some exorcisms are psychiatric treatments, using Physician and Psychology. Be sure to sink a few secondary skill points into “backup” Religious Ritual and Theology specialties! The church lens is obvious, and can bolster core skills, but gifted (with Blessed or Power Investiture) is an excellent alternative.

Parapsychologist: The classic paranormal investigator should boost Research, take Diagnosis and Psychology to examine subjects, invest heavily in Expert Skill (Psionics), and add Weird Science for off-kilter psi-tech. Good secondary training for staking out haunted houses and unveiling charlatans includes Electronics Operation (Scientific and Sensors), Observation, Photography, Search, and Stealth. The intelligence

and security lenses suit those working for secret government psionics projects; gifted fits freelancers who *are* psis.

Team Armorer: Any sage can equip the team – but a *good* armorer wants improved Armoury, Hidden Lore to know monster disadvantages, Diagnosis and Forensics for autopsies to discover new flaws, Alchemy or Herb Lore for exotic poisons, and Weird Science. Desirable secondary skills are Electronics Operation, Explosives, Hazardous Materials, Poisons, Scrounging, and Traps. For skills that make you a better shot with your inventions, take the law enforcement or military lens.

SCOUT

250 points

You're trained at what's arguably the scariest job on the squad: going in alone, ahead of the team, to discover where and *what* the bogeys are. For this you rely on stealth, keen senses, and a general knowledge of monsters and manifestations. Your mission normally resembles that of the infiltrator (**Action 1**, pp. 11-12), but frequently overlaps that of the assassin (**Action 1**, p. 7) or investigator (**Action 1**, pp. 12-13) – silent kills and extended observation come with the territory.

Attributes: ST 10 [0]; DX 15 [100]; IQ 13 [60]; HT 11 [10].

Secondary Characteristics: Damage 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 10 [0]; Will 13 [0]; Per 15 [10]; FP 11 [0]; Basic Speed 7.00 [10]; Basic Move 7 [0].

Advantages: Craftiness 1 [5] *and* Luck [15]. ● A further 25 points chosen from among lens advantages (**Action 1**, pp. 4-5), ST +1 or +2 [10 or 20], DX +1 [20], IQ +1 [20], HT +1 or +2 [10 or 20], Will +1 to +5 [5/level], Per +1 to +5 [5/level], Basic Move +1 to +3 [5/level], Absolute Direction [5] *or* 3D Spatial Sense [10], Absolute Timing [2], Acute Senses (any) [2/level], Catfall [10], Combat Reflexes [15], Craftiness 2-4 [5/level], Danger Sense [15], Daredevil [15], Fearlessness 1-7 [2/level] *or* Unfazeable [15], Fit [5] *or* Very Fit [15], Flexibility [5], Gizmos 1-3 [5/gizmo], Gun Perks [1/perk], Intuition [15], Languages (any) [2-6/language], Night Vision 1-9 [1/level], Peripheral Vision [15], Perfect Balance [15], Sensitive [5] *or* Empathy [15], Serendipity 1 [15], Signature Gear [Varies], True Faith [15], Wild Talent 1 [20], *or* replace Luck [15] with Extraordinary Luck [30] for 15 points.

Disadvantages: Loner (12) [-5] ● -20 points chosen from among Duty (Agency, church, or similar; Extremely Hazardous; 9, 12, *or* 15 or less) [-10, -15, *or* -20], Fanaticism (Employer, nation, or service) [-15], Intolerance (Supernatural entities, rival nation, or other large group) [-5], Obsession (Discover a particular dark truth) [-5*], Secret (Observed something he shouldn't have) [-5 or -10], or Sense of Duty (Team) [-5]. ● Another -25 points chosen from among the previous traits or Curious [-5*], Insomniac [-10 or -15], Nightmares [-5*], No Sense of Humor [-10], Overconfidence [-5*], Paranoia [-10], Post-Combat Shakes [-5*], Shyness [-5 or -10], Skinny [-5], *or* worsen Loner from (12) [-5] to (9) [-7] for -2 points or to (6) [-10] for -5 points.

If the enemy has supernatural abilities, might be easier for them to coerce someone who's already passed a background check with the heroes' agency.

Primary Skills: Climbing (A) DX [2]-15; Stealth (A) DX [1]-15†; Camouflage (E) IQ+2 [2]-15†; Navigation (Land) (A) IQ [2]-13; Occultism (A) IQ+1 [4]-14; Shadowing (A) IQ+1 [2]-14†; and Observation and Tracking, both (A) Per [2]-15. • *Two* of Forced Entry (E) DX+1 [2]-16, or Electronics Operation (Security), Lockpicking, or Traps, all (A) IQ [2]-13 – or just *one* skill at a level higher.

Secondary Skills: *One* of Boxing (A) DX [2]-15, Brawling (E) DX+1 [2]-16, or Karate (H) DX-1 [2]-14. • *Either* Judo (H) DX-1 [2]-14 or Wrestling (A) DX [2]-15. • *Five* of Crossbow, Fast-Draw (Ammo, Arrow, Knife, Long Arm, or Pistol), Guns (Pistol, Rifle, or Submachine Gun), Knife, or Liquid Projector (Sprayer or Squirt Gun), all (E) DX+1 [2]-16; Bow or Throwing, both (A) DX [2]-15; or 2 points to raise one of those skills or Camouflage, Observation, Shadowing, or Tracking by a level. • *Eight* of Jumping or Knot-Tying, both (E) DX [1]-15; Acrobatics or Escape, both (H) DX-2 [1]-13; Area Knowledge (any), First Aid, or Gesture, all (E) IQ [1]-13; Cartography, Electronics Operation (Comm or Surveillance), Photography, Research, or Scuba, all (A) IQ-1 [1]-12; Holdout (A) IQ [1]-13†; Forensics or Intelligence Analysis, both (H) IQ-2 [1]-11; Swimming (E) HT [1]-11; Hiking (A) HT-1 [1]-10; Search or Survival (any), both (A) Per-1 [1]-14; or 1 point to raise any of those skills or Stealth by a level.

Background Skills: Choose a 20-point lens (*Action 1*, pp. 4-5). • Computer Operation (E) IQ [1]-13 and Driving (Automobile or Motorcycle) (A) DX-1 [1]-14.

* Multiplied for self-control number; see p. B120.

† Includes +1 for Craftiness.

Customization Notes

Scouts lack a costly defining ability (like Quick Gadgeteer), so different specialists could populate the entire squad with minimal overlap. Template and lens suggestions include:

Counter-Scout: Revealing *rival* scouts who have superhuman gifts – and concealing team activities from them – takes a pro. Danger Sense is almost mandatory. High Traps is useful for trip flares and noisemakers. Guns aren't as important; instead, put points into Camouflage, Observation, and Throwing (for smoke grenades). Learn Area Knowledge and Survival to capitalize on terrain; Electronics Operation (Comm) and Gesture to alert allies; and Electronics Operation (Surveillance) to detect foes. The military or security lens is likely.

Covert Investigator: A MIB who monitors cults, wizards, and other *people* involved in paranormal events will appreciate Empathy or Intuition. He should be able to defeat security subtly, using Electronics Operation (Security) and Lockpicking. Concealed weapons are a must; get Guns (Pistol),

Quirks of Technology

In addition to template abilities, every PC may claim 5 points from quirks. In a campaign that uses *Loadouts: Monster Hunters*, consider spending these on abilities related to *gear*.

Perks

Weapon Bond (*Action 1*, p. 18) is a great use of a point. A related perk from *GURPS High-Tech* – summarized here for those working from *Action* alone – is also valuable:

Equipment Bond: You own a tool or a tool kit that's uniquely suited to you, giving +1 to the skill associated with that equipment. This is cumulative with any bonus inherent to the gear. This has nothing to do with quality – you're just used to *your* stuff. If you lose the equipment, you lose this perk! You may begin play with bonds to any tools or tool kits you possess. *1 point*.

Skills

The skills needed for loadouts appear on the associated templates. They're often *options*, though, so you may run out of template points trying to get them all. If so, just invest a few points from quirks in extra skills:

- Electronics Operation (Comm) to get the most out of that radio.
- Electronics Operation (Scientific) for obscure test gear.
- Explosives (Demolition) and/or Throwing for grenades and dynamite.
- Forced Entry for that nifty crowbar.
- Lockpicking for lockpicks.
- Navigation (Land) for your compass or GPS.
- Observation to capitalize on binoculars.
- Photography for cameras (including cell-phone cameras).

Knife, Fast-Draw, and Holdout. Knowledge of Intelligence Analysis, Photography, Research, and Search is valuable. The intelligence, law enforcement, and security lenses all fit.

Occult Assassin: When a battle would be unwise and standard assassination won't work, send in a scout with teeth. More Craftiness is a must. Bow, Crossbow, Knife (for stakes), and Liquid Projector often trump Guns, and extra points in Shadowing never hurt. Secondary training should emphasize reaching the target: Acrobatics, Hiking, Jumping, Scuba, and Swimming, plus higher Stealth. The military lens works best – but consider gifted, with Magic Resistance or Mind Shield to foil supernatural senses.

Spook-Finder: The most basic and important role is finding bogeys. Load up on Perception and sensory gifts (like Acute Senses), and favor higher Observation and Tracking over combat skills. Secondary skills should include Electronics Operation (Surveillance), Intelligence Analysis, Photography, and Research. Any lens works, but gifted with Detect or Medium is fun!

Even if the agency can detect supernatural coercion, old-fashioned blackmail or extortion can still be used to turn an NPC agent against the company.

SLAYER

250 points

You do wet work, which often ends up being *slimy* or *dusty* work when dealing with sewer monsters, mummies, etc. Your training shares elements with that of the demolition man (**Action 1**, pp. 8-9) and the shooter (**Action 1**, p. 14) – but you realize that you can't rely on standard guns and explosives alone. You must know your enemy, be skilled with unorthodox weapons, and have the muscle to drive stake (or silver katana) through scaly hide or undead heart.

Attributes: ST 13 [30]; DX 16 [120]; IQ 11 [20]; HT 12 [20].

Secondary Characteristics: Damage 1d/2d-1; BL 34 lbs.; HP 13 [0]; Will 11 [0]; Per 11 [0]; FP 12 [0]; Basic Speed 7.00 [0]; Basic Move 7 [0].

Advantages: Higher Purpose

(Slay monster type; see above) [5] and Luck [15]. • A further 30 points chosen from among lens advantages (**Action 1**, pp. 4-5), ST +1 to +3 [10/level], DX +1 [20], IQ +1 [20], HT +1 to +3 [10/level], Will +1 to +6 [5/level], Basic Speed +1 [20], Basic Move +1 to +3 [5/level], Combat Reflexes [15], Danger Sense [15], Daredevil [15], Enhanced Dodge 1-2 [15/level] or Enhanced Dodge 1-3 (Dive for Cover) [5/level], Fearlessness 1-7 [2/level] or Unfazeable [15], Fit [5] or Very Fit [15], Gizmos 1-3 [5/gizmo], Gun Perks [1/perk], Gunslinger [25], Hard to Kill [2/level], Hard to Subdue [2/level], High Pain Threshold [10], Higher Purpose (other) [5/level], Rapid Healing [5] or Very Rapid Healing [15], Serendipity 1-2 [15/level], Signature Gear [Varies], True Faith [15], Wild Talent 1 [20], or replace Luck [15] with Extraordinary Luck [30] for 15 points.

Disadvantages: -20 points chosen from among Code of Honor (Soldier's) [-10], Duty (Agency, church, or similar; Extremely Hazardous; 9, 12, or 15 or less) [-10, -15, or -20], Fanaticism (Employer, nation, or service) [-15], Intolerance (Supernatural entities, rival nation, or other large group) [-5], Secret (Illegal and bloody past ops) [-5, -10, or -20], or Sense of Duty (Team) [-5] or (Nation) [-10]. • Another -15 points chosen from among the previous traits or Bad Temper [-10*], Berserk [-10*], Bloodlust [-10*], Overconfidence [-5*], Pyromania [-5*], or Stubbornness [-5]. • A further -15 points chosen from either of the previous lists or Callous

[-5], Flashbacks [-5 or -10], Insomniac [-10 or -15], Nightmares [-5*], No Sense of Humor [-10], On the Edge [-15*], Paranoia [-10], or Wounded [-5].

Primary Skills: Six of Gunner (Machine Gun), Guns (Grenade Launcher, Light Machine Gun, Pistol, Rifle, or Shotgun), or Liquid Projector (Flamethrower, Sprayer, or Squirt Gun), all (E) DX+1 [2]-17; Throwing (A) DX [2]-16; or 2 points to raise one of those skills by a level. • One of Knife (E) DX+1 [2]-17, or Broadsword, Shortsword, Spear, or Two-Handed Axe/Mace, all (A) DX [2]-16. • Occultism (A) IQ+1 [4]-12.

Secondary Skills: Armoury (Esoteric, Heavy Weapons, or Small Arms) (A) IQ+1 [4]-12; Stealth (A) DX-1 [1]-15; and Tactics (H) IQ [4]-11. • Two of Brawling (E) DX+1 [2]-17; Boxing or Wrestling, both (A) DX [2]-16; Judo or Karate, both (H) DX-1 [2]-15; another primary Melee Weapon skill; or 2 points to raise any melee skill by a level. • Seven of Crossbow, Fast-Draw (Ammo, Knife, Long Arm, Pistol, or Sword), or Forced Entry, all (E) DX [1]-16; Camouflage, First Aid, or Gesture, all (E) IQ [1]-11; Electronics Operation (Comm), Explosives (Demolition), Leadership, Photography, Research, or Traps, all (A) IQ-1 [1]-10; Swimming (E) HT [1]-12; Hiking (A) HT-1 [1]-11; Observation or Survival, both (A) Per-1 [1]-10; or 1 point to raise any of those skills or Stealth by a level.

Background Skills: Choose a 20-point lens (**Action 1**, pp. 4-5). • Computer Operation (E) IQ [1]-11 and Driving (Automobile or Motorcycle) (A) DX-1 [1]-15.

* Multiplied for self-control number; see p. B120.

Customization Notes

Slayers can have any lens. Military suits *experts* with battlefield weapons; church or gifted (with Blessed) fits "holy avengers"; and gifted (with Destiny) is apropos for a would-be Buffy.

Most slayers select Higher Purpose, gear, and skills to hunt a particular quarry. They need the skills for *every* weapon in their loadout,

of course. Some examples:

Alien Slayer: Against predatory aliens in ultra-tech armor, nothing beats a minigun. Put all 30 advantage points into ST to get the necessary ST 16, and then take Gunner (Machine Gun). Don't omit Throwing for grenades. Judo and Wrestling are the best melee skills against opponents with impenetrable armor. For Armoury, take the Heavy Weapons specialty. Secondary training should include Fast-Draw for rapidly switching to lighter firepower; Camouflage and Stealth to be less exposed to futuristic weapons; and Explosives (Demolition) for big, explosive traps.

Cryptid Slayer: Assault rifles rule against weird-but-mortal things. They demand Guns (Rifle), Fast-Draw (Ammo) to feed them, and Guns (Grenade Launcher) if suitably accessorized.



For espionage adventures without the horror element, consider *GURPS Lair of the Fat Man* or *GURPS Operation Endgame* (both available from e23).

Slayers and Higher Purpose

Slayers receive a Higher Purpose (p. B59) to aid them against their foes. This *doesn't* require the gifted lens (p. 5); it abstracts intensive training at monster-slaying. The slayer must pick *one* class of prey: Aliens, Demons, Lycanthropes, Mutants, Undead, etc. This gives him +1 on *all* rolls – attack, defense, damage, resistance, etc. – made when battling such creatures.

Multiple levels of Higher Purpose are possible. These can extend the bonus to several categories of foes; e.g., Higher Purpose (Slay Demons) [5] and Higher Purpose (Slay Undead) [5] give +1 vs. demons and undead. A slayer can also take up to three levels against the *same* group for a higher bonus; e.g., Higher Purpose 3 (Slay Undead) [15], for +3 vs. undead.

Fire is superior against hordes of creepy-crawlers; add Liquid Projector (Flamethrower) and Throwing (for incendiary grenades). The most applicable Armoury specialty is Small Arms. Closing with big, strong monsters is *dumb*; select Broadsword or Spear, relegate Karate or Knife to backup, and avoid grappling. Handy secondary choices besides Fast-Draw are 2 points in each of Camouflage (for stalking), Explosives (Demolition), and Traps (for snaring not-so-bright things).

Supernatural Slayer: Vampires, werewolves, and suchlike call for unconventional weapons. Get Broadsword or Spear for

your silvered katana or bayonet, and Knife for silver-edged knives and machetes, and for stakes. Take Liquid Projector (Flamethrower) and Throwing for the fire option; Liquid Projector (Sprayer) for “vampire Mace”; or Liquid Projector (Squirt Gun) for holy water carbines. The obvious Armoury specialty is Esoteric. Useful secondary skills are Crossbow for long-range staking, plus every sort of Fast-Draw so that you can rapidly switch between all these weapons!

Zombie Slayer: Against infected zombies – the sort you don't want splattered on you – follow the advice for the cryptid slayer but change your Higher Purpose. If the zombies *aren't* infectious, then the chainsaw is de rigueur: add Two-Handed Axe/Mace. Valuable secondary skills for the zombie apocalypse include First Aid, Leadership, and Survival.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sean “Dr. Kromm” Punch set out to become a particle physicist in 1985, ended up the *GURPS* Line Editor in 1995, and has engineered rules for almost every *GURPS* product since. He developed, edited, or wrote dozens of *GURPS Third Edition* projects between 1995 and 2002. In 2004, he produced the *GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition* with David Pulver. Since then, he has created *GURPS Powers* (with Phil Masters), *GURPS Martial Arts* (with Peter Dell'Orto), and the *GURPS Action, GURPS Dungeon Fantasy, and GURPS Power-Ups* series . . . and the list keeps growing.

Sean has been a gamer since 1979. His non-gaming interests include cinema, cooking, and wine. He lives in Montréal, Québec with his wife, Bonnie. They have two cats, Banshee and Zephyra, and a noisy parrot, Circe.

As a duly designated representative of the City, County, and State of New York, I order you to cease any and all supernatural activity and return forthwith to your place of origin or to the nearest convenient parallel dimension.

– Dr. Ray Stantz, *Ghostbusters*

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A VERY COLD WAR

AN ATOMIC HORROR ESPIONAGE ADVENTURE FOR *GURPS*

BY JAMES L. CAMBIAS

On October 1, 1946, the submarine *U.S.S. Toro*, cruising on the surface near Narvik, tracked an unusual pair of meteors. They were moving west-to-east, then both *changed course* to the southeast. Their impact site was the waters of Lake Tornetrask in far northern Sweden – confirmed by observers at the Abisko Scientific Research Station on the lake. This incident sets the stage for this *GURPS* adventure; although it takes place in Sweden in 1947, the time frame and location can be changed to better suit the needs of the campaign (see p. 15).

In the past year, Sweden has been plagued by “ghost rocket” sightings – strange projectiles or lights passing overhead. (See the top box on p. 11 for more information.) The first confirmed impact forms the basis for this adventure. Both Swedish and American authorities are anxious to learn the true nature of the “ghost rockets” – are they Soviet missiles? Or something stranger?

Ghost rockets over Sweden!

The U.S. government has assembled a multidisciplinary team of investigators from the armed services, the defunct Office of Strategic Services, the new Atomic Energy Commission, and National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (in other words, the heroes). Because Sweden is a neutral country and wants to remain that way, the team must be civilian; military officers should be in civvies rather than uniform. If the team wants special equipment, the Navy can lend a couple of “frogman” suits equipped with first-generation SCUBA gear, plus a towed metal detector to find the rockets under the waters of the lake.

The mission objective is simple: Recover one or both of the objects from the lake, determine what they are, and document everything. Cooperate with the Swedes but don't reveal anything about American aircraft, rocketry projects, or knowledge of similar strange events.

ON THE SCENE

It takes two full days to fly from New York to Stockholm (via Newfoundland, Ireland, and London). From there the heroes hop to the Swedish air base at Lulea, at the far northern end of the Baltic Sea.

At Lulea the investigators meet Captain Matthias Larssen of the Swedish Royal Air Force, their liaison for this mission. Larssen is in the Intelligence branch, which is in charge of “aerial phenomena investigation.” He is very interested in recovering one of these ghost rockets. During the eight-hour drive from Lulea to Abisko, the captain can give the heroes a complete account of the ghost-rocket phenomenon (see top box on p. 11). As their car pulls into the tiny lakeside village at sunset, the first flakes of snow are starting to fall.

Captain Matthias Larssen

201 points

Captain Matthias Larssen of the Swedish Royal Air Force is a skilled and hardworking officer in the Technical Intelligence branch. His job is to gather and analyze information on foreign technology. He is also a Soviet spy. Ever since the Germans invaded Norway, he has been passing information to the Russians. During the war, it was on Nazi technology, but now he concentrates on letting his masters know what the West has discovered about Soviet hardware.

Given that horror often encompasses supernatural or magical abilities and espionage often incorporates high-tech or advanced gear, combining the two means that many gaming supplements can be used as support material.

The Ghost Rockets

From May to December of 1946, nearly 2,000 sightings of “ghost rockets” were reported in Sweden. Later in the year the sightings, spread to other European nations. Accounts described cigar- or torpedo-shaped objects moving overhead at high speed, accompanied by a hissing or rumbling noise. Sometimes the objects were described as having wings, sometimes not. The peak of sightings came during August 1946.

Possible explanations include misidentified meteors (the August peak coincided with the Perseid meteor shower), and mass hysteria spawned by growing tensions in postwar Europe. Some Swedish authorities suspected the rockets were Soviet tests of captured German rockets from Peenemunde – but others questioned why the Russians would test secret weapons over a foreign country rather than in the vast spaces of their own land.

His Russian superiors have asked Larssen to find out anything he can about the ghost rockets, because they *aren't* Russian missiles, whatever they are.

Larssen is a tall, fit, good-looking man, almost too big to be a pilot but surprisingly quick. He has very pale blue eyes and light brown hair, with a pencil mustache. He is a committed Marxist, but he is very good at hiding his true convictions; the result is that most people find him bland and slightly dull. He carries a 9mm automatic pistol as his sidearm.

ST 12 [20]; **DX** 11 [20]; **IQ** 12 [40]; **HT** 11 [10].
Damage 1d-1/1d+2; BL 29 lbs.; HP 12 [0]; Will 13 [5]; Per 12 [0]; FP 14 [9].
Basic Speed 6.00 [10]; Basic Move 6 [0]; Dodge 9; Parry 9 (Boxing).

Social Background

TL: 7 [0].

CF: Western European [0].

Languages: Swedish (Native) [0]; English (Accented) [4]; German (Accented) [4]; Russian (Accented) [4].

Advantages

Fit [5]; Handsome [12]; Indomitable [15]; Military Rank 4 [20]; Security Clearance [10].

Disadvantages

Duty (Swedish Air Force; 15 or less) [-15]; Loner (12) [-5]; Secret (Soviet spy) [-20].

Skills

Acting (A) IQ+1 [4]-13; Administration (A) IQ [2]-12; Bicycling (E) DX+1 [2]-12; Boxing (A) DX+1 [4]-12;

Electronics Operation/TL7 (Comm) (A) IQ [2]-12; Engineer/TL7 (Aircraft) (H) IQ+1 [8]-13; First Aid/TL7 (E) IQ [1]-12; Guns/TL7 (Pistol) (E) DX+2 [4]-13; Intelligence Analysis/TL7 (H) IQ+1 [8]-13; Mathematics/TL7 (Applied) (H) IQ [4]-12; Navigation/TL7 (Air) (A) IQ [2]-12; Piloting/TL7 (Light Airplane) (A) DX+2 [8]-13; Research/TL7 (A) IQ [2]-12; Soldier/TL7 (A) IQ [2]-12.

Abisko

Abisko is a little town on Lake Tornetrask, over a hundred miles north of the Arctic Circle. It is on the rail and road line from Narvik in Norway to Kiruna in northern Sweden. The village has only a few hundred inhabitants, but it is the gateway to the vast national park that stretches as far as the Norwegian border. In 1946, there aren't any tourists due to lingering wartime austerity and fuel shortages. After 1950, at least a couple of dozen skiers or hikers are staying at the tourist lodge.

In the winter the village is quite isolated. The nearest large town is Narvik, more than 20 miles away, over the spine of the mountains. The closest Swedish town is Kiruna, 60 miles away. There are telegraph and telephone lines, but in 1946, the only phones are at the research station, the park ranger station, and the tourist lodge.

The town has a single policeman, Officer Albin Lofstrom. He knows that the Swedish military is interested in recovering the meteorites, and he has made the connection with the ghost rocket sightings, so he does his best to cooperate with the armed services and maintain secrecy.

Other Heroes

The government is only one possible way to get the player characters involved. Heroes who are civilian scientists or journalists may simply be invited by the Swedes to participate, especially if they have previous experience with similar incidents. The Theoretical Science Foundation (see *GURPS Atomic Horror*) would be a perfect sponsor – especially with some under-the-table help from the Air Force.

For a more cinematic approach, the heroes can be Black Ops sent by the Company (see *GURPS Black Ops*). This mission is a Science department operation, aimed at discovering what the objects are, rather than on blowing stuff up. (The Combat Ops may be disappointed.)

Finally, heroes who are simply “freelance busybodies” could be in Abisko in time for the impact purely by chance. Perhaps they're on vacation, hiking and fishing on the borders of Lapland when fireballs from the sky crash into the lake; weirdness follows.

Some less-than-obvious books that might be useful: GURPS Places of Mystery (set pieces for interesting encounters), GURPS Bio-Tech (to represent the way an agency might incorporate horrific knowledge), and GURPS WWII: Weird War II (to provide historic inspiration for either side of the conflict).

The Lake

Tornetrask is a large glacier-carved lake fed by melting snow. From mid-winter to spring it is completely ice covered. The rest of the year, the water is exceedingly chilly. Even at the end of summer, the surface layers are only a few degrees above freezing. Swimmers without a protective suit risk hypothermia. The lake is deep, ranging from 160 to 550 feet. In the freezing water, there are large, menacing shapes – salmon and sturgeon.

The Research Station

The Abisko Scientific Research Station is where the PCs will be working. It is a small campus of buildings devoted to the study of the climate, ecology, and geology of the region. The acting director is Dr. Torben Lundeberg, who observed the meteor impacts and knows why the investigating team has come to his station. There are guest houses for visiting researchers, and Lundeberg is happy to lend one to the investigators.

The laboratories at the station are fairly well-equipped, comparable to a small college. There are dissection tables, microscopes, scalpels, freezers, and jars of formaldehyde for biological work. The geology lab has a small selection of acids for mineral testing, a couple of Bunsen burners, and a variety of drills, augers, and hammers for sample collection. For the study of the aurora borealis, there are magnetometers, several small telescopes, and a brand-new Geiger counter to measure radiation. The station has a 20-foot motorboat but no diving or detection gear. There are plenty of skis and snowshoes, but no snowmobiles or off-road vehicles due to fuel rationing. (If the adventure takes place after 1950, the station has half a dozen snowmobiles for winter and a couple of jeeps.)

The station has a small staff. Dr. Lundeberg is acting director and studies the glaciers in the region. His colleague Dr. Nils Linden is a biologist researching the reindeer populations and their effect on the local environment. Visiting graduate student Karl Holman is observing the aurora, looking for connections between auroral activity and climate.

Dr. Linden's wife, Astrid, lives with him and has taken over cooking duties for the entire staff. (After 1950, there is a full-time cook, Kirsten Alkberg.) Maintenance and stoking the furnace are the job of the station handyman, Gustav Nilson. He is an old Swedish Army veteran who drinks heavily and owns a Mauser rifle.

Dr. Torben Lundeberg

105 points

Dr. Torben Lundeberg is currently acting director of the research station. He is a small, wiry man in his late 50s, with a full gray beard and a deep "skier's tan" on his face and neck. Lundeberg is interested in recovering the meteorites, but at the same time, he is irritated by the distraction from his own research. Lundeberg wants to help the team find what they're looking for so they'll go away and let him get back to his glaciers.

Lundeberg owns a Mauser bolt-action rifle for hunting, and he brings it whenever he goes out on glacier expeditions. He carries an ice axe (treat as a pick) almost everywhere.

ST 10 [0]; **DX** 10 [0]; **IQ** 13 [60]; **HT** 11 [10].
Damage 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 10 [0]; Will 13 [0]; Per 13 [0]; FP 11 [0].
Basic Speed 5.25 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0]; Dodge 8; Parry 8 (unarmed).

Social Background

TL: 7 [0].

CF: Western European [0].

Languages: Swedish (Native) [0]; English (Accented) [4]; German (Accented) [4]; Latin (Broken) [2].

Advantages

Fit [5]; Status 2 [10].

Disadvantages

Bad Sight (Farsighted; Mitigator, Glasses, -60%) [-10]; Honesty (12) [-10]; Workaholic [-5].

Skills

Administration (A) IQ-1 [1]-12; Area Knowledge (Abisko Nature Park) (E) IQ+1 [2]-14; Cartography (A) IQ [2]-13; Chemistry/TL7 (H) IQ-1 [2]-12; Climbing (A) DX+1 [4]-11; First Aid/TL7 (E) IQ [1]-13; Geology/TL7 (H) IQ+1 [8]-14; Guns/TL6 (Rifle) (E) DX [1]-10; Hiking (A) HT+1 [4]-12; Meteorology/TL7 (A) IQ-1 [1]-12; Naturalist (H) IQ-1 [2]-12; Navigation/TL7 (Land) (A) IQ-1 [1]-12; Skiing (H) HT [4]-11; Survival (Arctic) (A) Per-1 [1]-12; Teaching (A) IQ-1 [1]-12.

THE METEORITES

The two meteorites struck the lake about a mile west of Abisko. The first hit near shore and broke up; a couple of fishermen recovered some of the fragments. The second is still in the lake, in 70 feet of water.

In the Lake

The first meteorite smashed into rocks on the lakeshore and broke into dozens of pieces.

Fishermen and beachcombers have recovered 200 lbs. of fragments, which amount to perhaps half of the total; the rest are in the lake. The first pieces were taken to the police station, but all have been moved to the research station.

The second lies in deep water 100 yards off the lakeshore. Locating it is difficult. From a boat, finding it requires a Perception roll at -10. The penalty for Electronics Operation (Sensors) with the trolling metal detector is only -4. Boat searchers can roll four times per hour. A diver can attempt a Perception roll at only -6, once per hour.

When found, the second object poses a problem for recovery because it is intact. It's a smooth bullet shape weighing 3,000 pounds (in the water, it is almost neutrally buoyant, with a net weight of only 300 pounds). Getting it onto a boat is tricky, requiring a Boating skill roll at -6 to avoid capsizing.



To test for jitters: Have an adventure with no supernatural elements. Humans are capable of their own evils.

The Brain Parasites

The alien brain parasites resemble three-inch white centipedes, though their actual biochemistry is more like that of a vertebrate. (Black Ops will note their obvious kinship to brainsuckers.) They are drawn to psychic energy; consequently, they home in on the most intelligent organisms available – in this case, humans. They neither breathe nor eat. The creatures are sensitive to temperature, and quickly go dormant in cold weather – unless they are safely nestled inside the brain of a warm-blooded host. They are also vulnerable to loud high-frequency sound.

The parasite enters its host when the victim is sleeping or restrained. It travels to the brain and merges with the host's nerve tissue. The merger takes about 24 hours. Once it is complete the parasite can control its host – or let its victim go about normal life without realizing the parasite is there. Brain parasites reproduce every month, releasing young that wait, preferably, in the host's mouth. They can be passed to a new victim by biting, or by having the host grapple the target long enough for the young to infest him. Parasites are telepathic among themselves.

The parasites themselves aren't very smart, but they don't need to be. The host can do the heavy thinking. The worm just sets priorities. Its first priority is to reproduce; the second is to protect young parasites that have not found hosts. Their communication is limited to basic concepts such as "attack that one" or "hide."

Brain Parasite

A white, soft-bodied centipede-like creature about three inches long.

ST: 1	HP: 3	Speed: 6.00
DX: 12	Will: 12	Move: 6
IQ: 4	Per: 8	Weight: 0.04 ounces
HT: 12	FP: 10	SM: -8
Dodge: 9	Parry: N/A	DR: 2

Bite (13): 1d-5 cut. Reach C.

Traits: Bestial; Cannot Speak (Mute); Clinging; Cold-Blooded; Dependency (Psychic energy; Common; Daily); Detect (Psychic energy); Doesn't Breathe; Doesn't Eat or Drink; Extra Legs (Cannot Kick); Horizontal; Incurious; Monstrous Appearance; Night Vision 5; No Manipulators; Permeation (Flesh); Possession (Parasitic); Radiation Tolerance (PF 10); Telecommunication (Telesend; Racial); Weakness (Ultrasound; 1d per minute).

Skills: Brawling-13; Stealth-14.

Parasite Hosts

A human possessed by a brain parasite can live or act normally while the parasite is not exerting control. The parasite attack usually leaves victims with Amnesia about being possessed.

When the brain parasite is dormant and not controlling the host, hosts still suffer from the Obsession (12) (Protect unhosted brain parasite) [-10]. Because brain parasites consume psychic energy, hosts are at -1 IQ and DX as long as the creature is inside.

Under direct parasite control the victims' mind shuts down completely; no skills are available. The brain parasite's IQ, Will, Perception and skills replace the host's.

In the Laboratory

When the heroes arrive, the research station has about 200 pounds of fragments from the first meteorite. The pieces are fairly big, ranging from a couple of feet long to a couple of yards. A chemist or metallurgist using the facilities at Abisko can easily determine that the fragments are a very light beryllium-aluminum alloy. The surfaces from the outside of the meteorite are smooth and show signs of intense heat from passage through the atmosphere. A successful Perception roll indicates that the meteorite was large and bullet-shaped.

The interior is irregular, like a metal foam. Under the microscope, it has a surprisingly organic look, as if grown or secreted rather than made with tools. Some bubbles contain traces of a jelly-like organic material. A Gieger counter detects moderate radioactivity – not enough to be harmful but consistent with something that has been in deep space for a long time.

The second meteorite, when recovered, is a big smooth bullet-like object, about nine feet long, with a diameter of three feet. It weighs 1.5 tons. The alloy is hard and tough, but

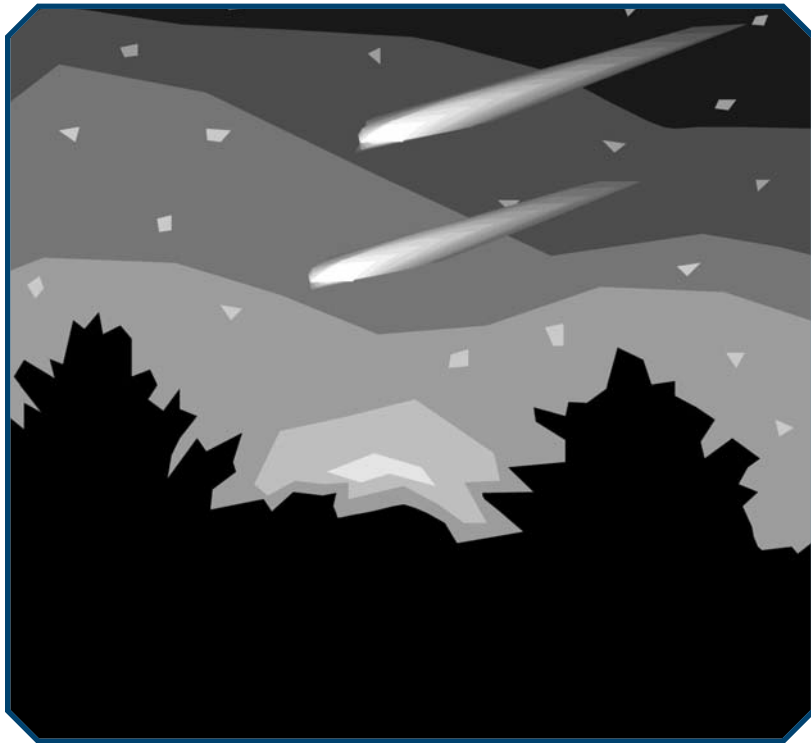
it can be cut by a hacksaw or a drill. Within the shell, there is a mass of gelatinous material, with hundreds of translucent eggs embedded in it. Each egg contains a tiny multilegged organism. It's white and soft, with numerous legs. It appears dormant – and unlike anything on Earth. (See box above for additional details.)

REDS IN SWEDE CLOTHING

As soon as the investigators get a good look at the meteorite fragments in the lab, Captain Larssen declares that he's calling in some extra men to maintain security. He borrows the radio set at the police station and sends a coded message. (If possible, all this should be mentioned in passing while the heroes are busy with other tasks – Captain Larssen is deliberately low-key about the whole thing.)

A plane arrives 24 hours later, touching down on the waters of the lake. It's a PBN-1 Nomad – a version of the venerable Catalina flying boat, used by nearly all the world's navies. The Swedish insignia are freshly painted.

One problem with many espionage games is that spy locations are often well-lit. GMs should attempt to bring in the darkness – literally – to increase horror.



Aboard the plane are half a dozen Russian SPETSNAZ commandos in Swedish uniforms, plus two aircrew. Larssen arranges billets for them with Dr. Lundeberg. He puts two of the soldiers on guard over the meteorite fragments and the intact object. The others go off “on patrol” outside the village.

Once out of sight, the commandos efficiently set about isolating Abisko from the outside world. The telephone and telegraph lines go down, a “rockslide” blocks the train tracks a couple miles to the west, a second “rockslide” cuts off the tracks to Narvik. The steadily falling snow ensures the road is impassable. Meanwhile, Captain Larssen makes certain that the radio is inoperable. All this work takes about a day, while the scientific investigators are busy recovering and studying the meteorites.

SPETSNAZ Commandos

175 points

These are Soviet elite troops, trained for covert operations in enemy territory. They are highly trained and thoroughly screened for political reliability. Most are veterans of many operations and go about their work with cool professionalism.

The men are all ethnic Russians, but for this mission, they were selected with an eye to fair hair and blue eyes, the better to impersonate Swedish troops. However, none of them speak more than a couple of words of Swedish, so they don’t talk when others are around.

The commandos are dressed in Russian-made arctic battle-dress with Swedish insignia. All Cyrillic writing and Russian identifying marks have been carefully removed. A close examination of one of the men’s outfits might reveal that all the

insignia are newly sewn on. Only an expert in Russian and Scandinavian military gear could notice that the men’s uniforms isn’t quite right for Swedish troops (if asked, Captain Larssen explains that they’re a “special unit”). They are armed with Finnish-made Suomi submachine-guns (GMs without *GURPS High-Tech* can use stats for a TL6 9mm SMG, p. B278), large combat knives, 9mm automatic pistols, and two grenades each. They have TL6 steel pot helmets (Soviet issue, which are very similar to Swedish versions, especially with a cloth cover).

ST 12 [20]; **DX** 13 [60]; **IQ** 12 [40]; **HT** 11 [10].
 Dmg 1d-1/1d+2; BL 29; HP 15 [6]; Will 12 [0]; Per 12 [0]; FP 12 [3].
 Basic Speed 6.00 [0]; Basic Move 6 [0]; Dodge 10*; Parry 10* (Knife).

Social Background

TL: 7 [0].

CF: Eastern European [0].

Languages: Russian (Native) [0]; English (Broken) [2]; German (Broken) [2].

Advantages

Combat Reflexes [15]; Fit [5]; High Pain Threshold [10]; Military Rank 1 [5].

Disadvantages

Callous [-5]; Duty (Military; 12 or less; Extremely Hazardous) [-15]; Fanaticism (Mother Russia) [-15]; Stubbornness [-5].

Skills

Brawling (E) DX+1 [2]-14; Camouflage (E) IQ+1 [2]-13; Carousing (E) HT+1 [2]-12; Climbing (A) DX [2]-13; Electronics Op/TL7 (Comm) (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Explosives/TL7 (Demolition) (A) IQ [2]-12; First Aid (E) IQ [1]-12; Gunner/TL7 (Machine Gun) (E) DX [1]-13; Guns/TL7 (Pistol) (E) DX+1 [2]-14; Guns/TL7 (SMG) (E) DX+1 [2]-14; Hiking (A) HT-1 [1]-10; Jumping (E) DX [1]-13; Knife (E) DX+1 [2]-14; Navigation/TL7 (Land) (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Scrounging (E) Per [1]-12; Soldier (A) IQ+2 [8]-14; Stealth (A) DX [2]-13; Survival (Arctic) (A) Per-1 [1]-11; Swimming (E) HT [1]-11; Throwing (A) DX-1 [1]-12; Traps/TL7 (A) IQ-1 [1]-11.

* Includes +1 for Combat Reflexes.

THE ENEMY WITHIN

While the investigators are investigating and the Soviet commandos are committing sabotage, the brain parasites from the first meteorite are taking over the village. About 30 of the parasites that survived the impact have found hosts, and there are another dozen unhosted young being carried around by the hosts in pockets or tucked inside clothing.

If the heroes insist on incorporating as much light as possible into their encounters, this might work against them; if the agents’ light source is suddenly extinguished or broken, they might be momentarily worse off as their eyes adjust.

Their goal is to gain control of the second meteorite. This means that before the meteorite is recovered, the parasite hosts are incredibly helpful and enthusiastic about finding it and getting it out of the lake. Once that's done, however, they don't want to let anyone take it away or damage it.

The parasites are cunning enough to wait until dark. At that point, they take direct control of their hosts and advance on the research station. It's a snowy night, and the GM should enforce full penalties for darkness and snow interfering with vision. (Feel free to alter the timeline if the heroes and Russians get into a firefight; nothing livens up a good battle like the arrival of alien brain-parasite zombies.)

The parasites are stupid but not suicidal, and they can read each others' thoughts. If their first attack gets cut down by gunfire, they'll pull back and try to infiltrate the research station by stealth. When within a building, they send some unhosted parasites under doors.

While all this is going on, the heroes may want to find a way to stop the parasites, assuming they've made the connection between the creatures in the meteorites and the zombies. The creatures are quite durable, especially when fortified inside a human skull. They don't eat, so they can't be poisoned (but their hosts can be!). They're more radiation-resistant than a human. High-frequency sound is fatal to them. (Heroes can discover this by experiment, or if time is short and the zombies are coming through the windows, by a successful Weird Science skill roll.)

OTHER TIMES, OTHER PLACES

While the historical "ghost rocket" flap in Sweden ended in early 1947, UFO sightings have occurred there nearly every year since. The adventure as written could be moved to any year during the Cold War, up to 1990. The main difference is that it becomes more difficult for the Soviet commandos to isolate the village, as there will be more portable radios and more motor vehicles.

With a little more tweaking, it can be shifted to a different locale. Ideally it should take place in a country that was neutral or "nonaligned" during the Cold War era, with lakes in remote areas. Good candidates include Brazil and much of Africa. In those nations, the research station would likely include foreign scientists, so Dr. Lundberg can be used as written.

OTHER HEROES, OTHER VILLAINS

The adventure as written assumes the heroes are *Atomic Horror* scientists or adventurers with abilities in the normal range. Cape-wearing heroes from *GURPS Supers* or super-human operatives of the Company in *GURPS Black Ops* need tougher opponents. Make the commandos super-elite by boosting their ST and DX a couple of points, and increase their combat skill levels even more. As an ace in the hole, they could even have one or two psychic talents, such as telepathy or psychokinesis, from the Soviet "State Committee for Mental Elevation."

For a greater challenge, upgrade the brain parasites by making them smarter. With human-level IQ (8 or 10, say), the parasites can use tools and weapons even when directly controlling their hosts. They will be able to lie, plan, set traps, and try to play off the Americans against the Russians.

For more true horror, make the parasite infestation incurable by removing the creatures' Weakness disadvantage. The only cure is a bullet to the head. The heroes have the stark choice of killing dozens of infected villagers or letting the menace out into the world. Fiendish GMs can milk the situation for all it's worth by giving the investigators a chance to meet people in the village – people who then become zombie alien parasite hosts.

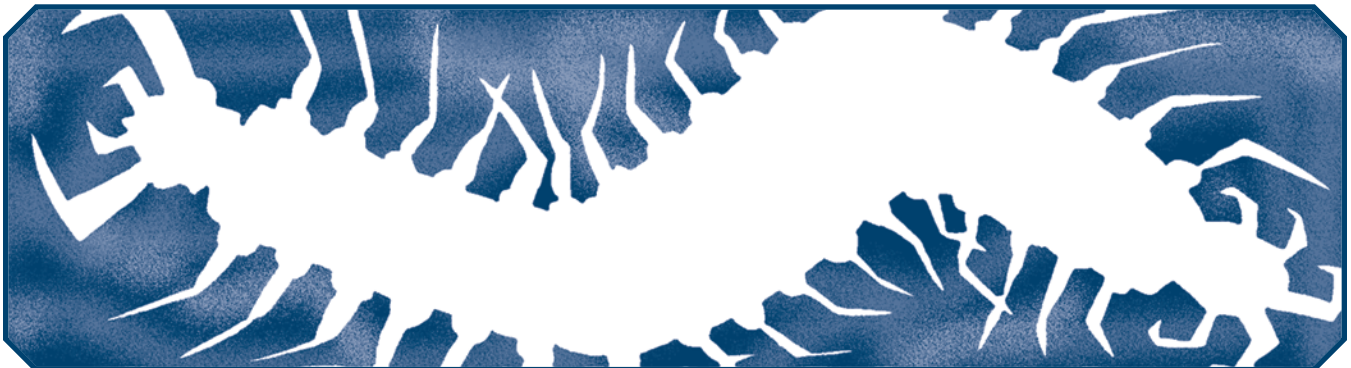
WEB RESOURCES

For a detailed chronology of the "ghost rocket" incident, see www.project1947.com/gr/grchron1.htm.

For more information about the real-world Abisko research station, see their Web site at www.linnea.com/~ans/ans.htm.

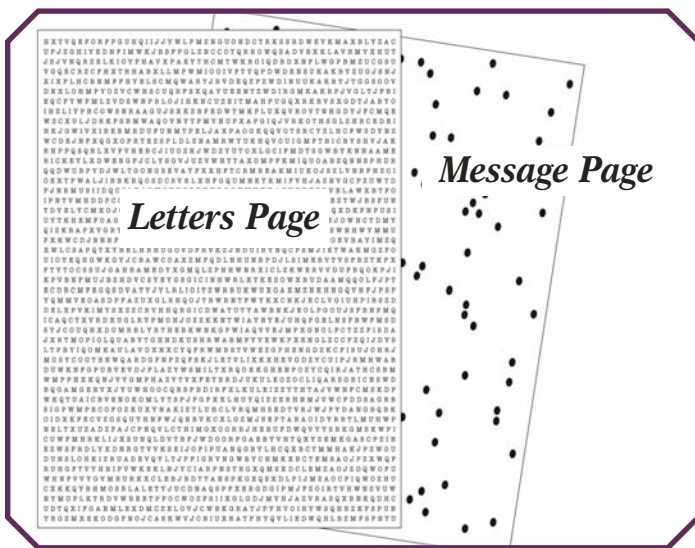
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James L. Cambias is a long-time contributor to *Pyramid* in all its forms. He's the co-author of *GURPS Space, Fourth Edition*, as well as *GURPS Mars*, *GURPS Planet of Adventure*, and *GURPS Castle Falkenstein*. When he isn't doing game writing, he's a science-fiction author; his short fiction has appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* and several original anthologies. Mr. Cambias is also the chief designer at Zygote Games, which publishes science- and nature-based card games. He lives in western Massachusetts and knows what it means to miss New Orleans.



CODE WORDS

The Code Word sheets are ready-to-use props consisting of two parts. The first part is the Letters Page. It's presumed that each side – the message writer and the recipient – possesses the code sheet. These are merely sequences of random letters; each line consists of the alphabet repeated twice and then shuffled. The second part is the Message Page, which is a series of dots. The Letters Page is superimposed over the Message Page, and the two-page group is held up to the light; the darkened letters are the ones that should be read.

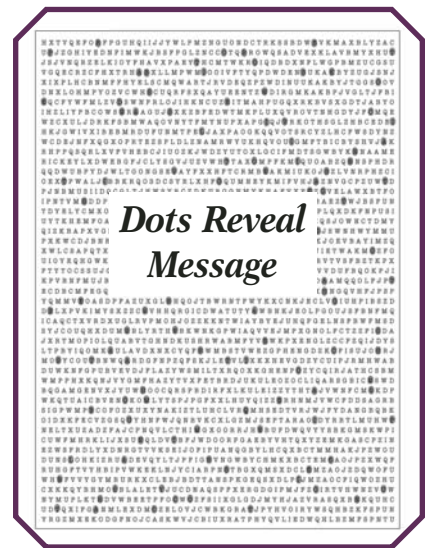


parts can be separate adventures. Maybe the heroes discover one part of the message slipped into a file they aren't supposed to be snooping around in, and they find the other part tucked into the belongings of a fallen enemy agent.

The third Letters Page doesn't have a corresponding Message Page and is included to let you concoct your own messages. To make your own with that page (or any of the other Letters Pages), simply tape down the Letters Page and a blank piece of paper atop of it; the tape keeps the pages from shifting, which will affect the positioning. It helps if either the blank paper is thin or slightly transparent, or if both pages are taped to a light table or window. Then, with your message in mind, go over the lines and "bubble" the letters you're using.

Also included with this issue is some simple HTML/JavaScript code that easily creates randomly shuffled lines of letters, like those used in the Letters Pages. Generate random lines of letters, copy/paste them into a word processor of choice, fiddle with the margins so each line fits, print out copies for both parties, and voila!

The basic technique relied on here doesn't even require the use of random Letters Pages. For example, it would be possible to generate Message Pages using any pre-agreed source of text, such as a specific issue of a magazine or a newspaper. If the heroes find a Message Page and a random magazine in the possessions of a random fallen foe, they may not realize the two parts go together. Of course, using existing text can be more challenging, since having all the characters one needs isn't as assured as using a randomly generated Letters Page.

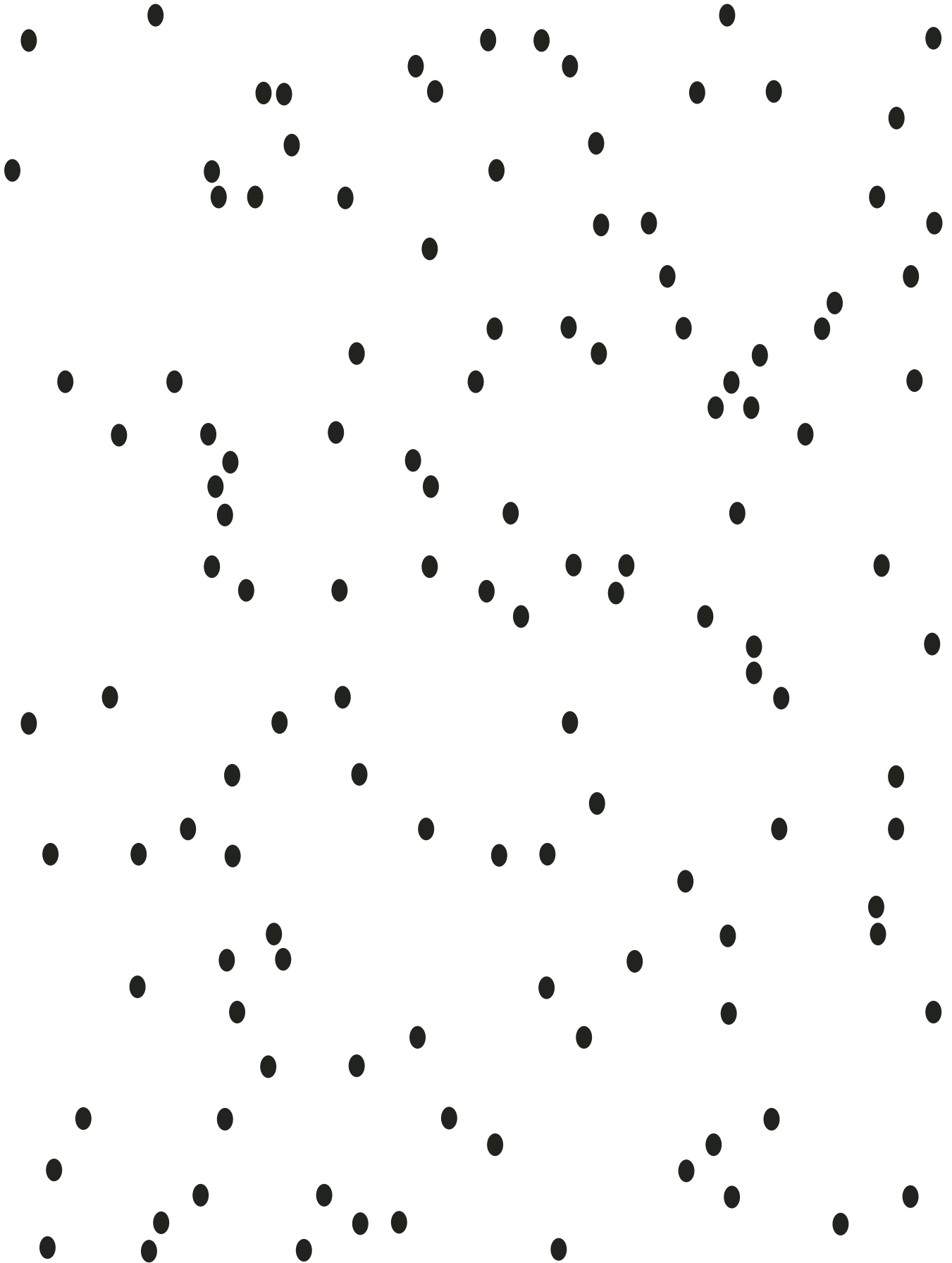


There are three Letters Pages and two Message Pages. Two sets of these pages are meant to be used with the material in the rest of this issue; the pages on pp. 17-18 tie into *A Very Cold War* (pp. 10-15) and those on pp. 19-20 relate to *The Black Chamber* (pp. 22-27).

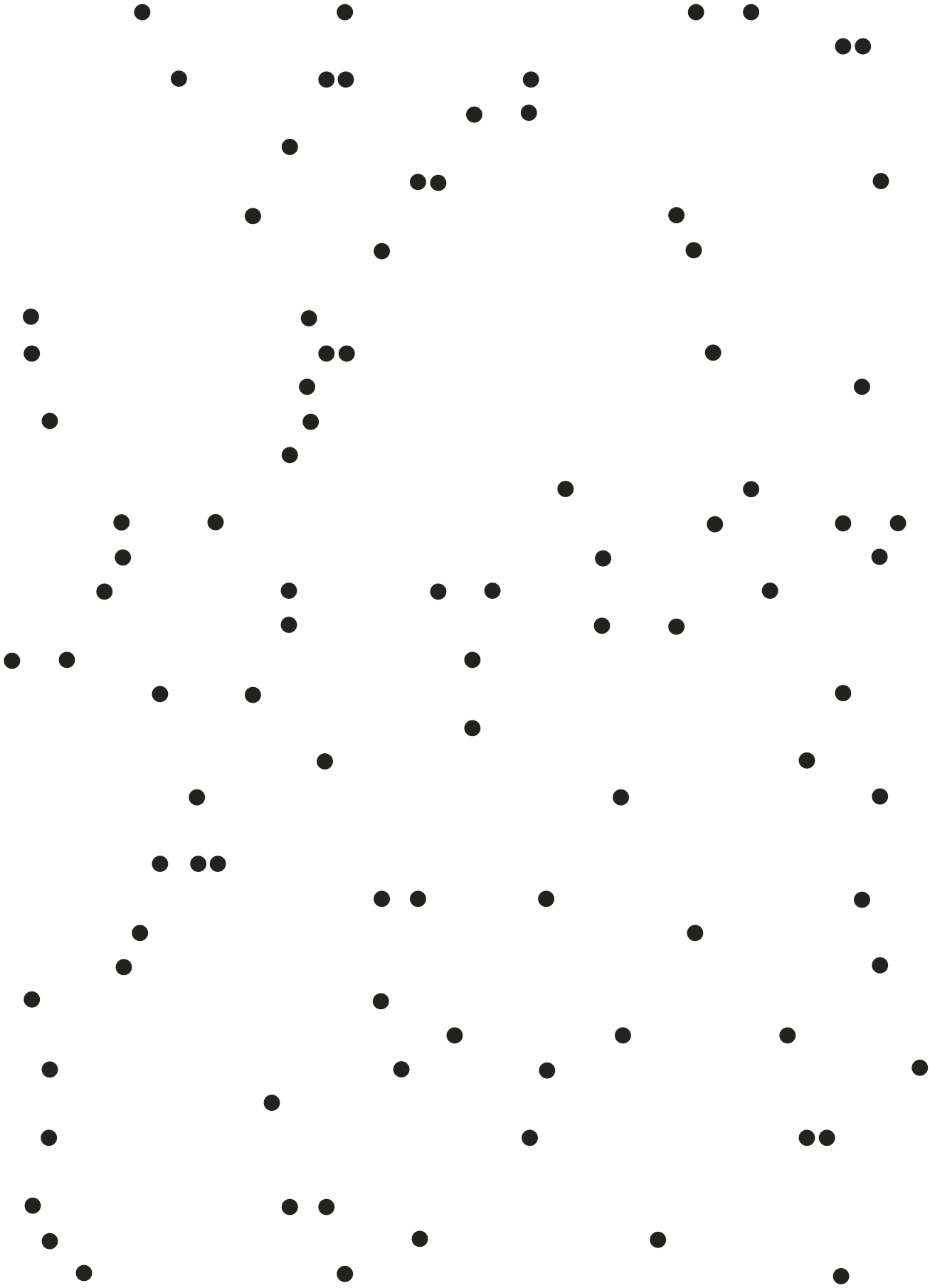
For *A Very Cold War*, the heroes are assumed to already be in possession of the Letters Page (and they would likewise know their contact at their agency has a copy). The agents can either be given the Message Page in the course of the previous adventure, or they can acquire it before the adventure begins. (Alternatively, since it can take some time to read the message, the players might get it at the end of the previous adventure, so they can decipher it before the next session.)

For *The Black Chamber*, the agents are not expected to possess either portion of the message. In this case, acquiring both

HXTVQEFORFPGUHQIIJJYWLP MZNGUONDCTRKSSBDWEVKMAXBLYZAC
UPJZGHIYEDNFIMWKJBSFPGLZNCOTQRROWQSADVEKXKLA VBMYXHUT
JSJVNRZELKIOYFHAVXPAEYTHCMTWKROIQDBDXNFLWGPBMZUCGSU
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WCDEJNFXXGXOPRTEZSPLDLZNAMRWYUKHQVOUIGMFTBICBYSHVJAK
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OEXTPWALJIBBKRQOSDCSYRLXHFQQUMNEYKMIFVHJAZNVGCPZUWTD
PJNB MUSIIDQCQLTJHWSYRCZDKUROGNMYKHA FVXPEZGVELAWXBTFO
IPNTVMHDDPCOGRKCVYSILQXKQLOUYMWJHAFR XZEGBAEZTWJBSFUN
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PXKWC DJBNRFFGZLDYQTSMCAWRVSTEXUPHIOLGUNHKJOEV BAYIMZQ
XWLC SAPQTXYBELH BHUGOVDFRVKZJNDUIRYNQCPSMJ IETWAKMGZFO
UIOYE QHGWKGYJCBAWCOAXZMFQDLNHUNRPDJLSIMERVTVSFBZTKPX
FTYTOCSSUJGAHBAMEDYXGMQLZPNHWNRXICLZKWERVVDUFBQOKPJI
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ECDBC MFEGQSDVATYJYLRLIOITZWRBUK WUXOAXMZ NKHNGQVHFJPS P
YQMMVEOASDPFAZUXGLRHQOJTBWRNTFWYKXC NKJECLVGIUHP IBSZD
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SYJCOUQH XDUMRBL YRTHEBKWNKGPWIAQVVEJMPXGNOLFCTZZFISDA
JXRTMOPIOLQUABVTGHNDKUSHRWABMFYVEWKPXENGLZCCFZQIJDYS
LTPBYIQOMKAULAVDXNXCYQFRWMBSTVWEZGPHENG DZKCFISUJOHRJ
MOSYCOUTBNWQARDGFNPZQF SKJLETVLIXKXHEVGDZYCUIPJRMHWAB
DUWKNFGPUBVEVDJFLAZYWSMILT XRQOXKGHENPOZYCQIRJATHCSBM
WMPPHXKQNJVYGMFHAZYT VXFETBRDJUKULEOZOCLIQARSGBICNSWD
BQGAMGENVXJYUWHOOCQRSPBDIRFXLKULEIZZYTHTAJ VWNFCMSKDP
WKQTUAICBVENOKOMLYTSPJPGFXXLHUYQIZZERHNMJVWCFDD SAGR B
SIGPWMP ECOFOZ XUXYNAKIZTLUHCLVRQMHS EDTVRJWJFYDANGBQBK
OIDXKFECVZGSQUYHNF WJQNBVKCXLGZMJSEPTARA OIDYRBTLMUHW P
NELTXUZADZFAJCPNQVLCTHIMGXOORR JHEBUFDWQVYYSBKGM SKWPI
CUWFMHRKLIJXSUNQLDVTBFJWDOORPGAEBYVHTQXYZEMK GASCPZIN
EZWSFRDLYXDNRGTVVKSEIJO FIPUANQGBYLHCQXBCTMMHAKJPZWO U
DUNSLOHKIZRUADEVQYL TJPFIGRVNGWBYCHMKXBCTEMSAOJPZXWQF
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YRGZMXEKODGFNOJ CASKWVJCB IUXRATPHYQVLI EDWQH L BZMFSPNTU



w d v E F i j b y e p D K h r s u q N o R x l M m n Y I P A Q c t T S f J g U Z V H W k O X L z C G B a
 N P W b y Z g B F r J u E D j f x L c Y M m O k h T I S t o q p e d U C v i z H K s l X n G A V w R a Q
 K h f n H S V T k g E b c X x i z t P a O v Z C Y Q R p F s d L l e U I J B A G u m W o D r M N q y w j
 r a N M c w K Y u h d n Q e W i B v P U p L t y G D s z f E Z b T A q I O x m o g H S l V R J F X C j k
 Z T o t s e A l i j z w S n E g D V a I P M p b m f c B W H Y O q u Q K x F h d X R G J r C N y v U L k
 Q n r y R o b e O q Z d p G H j J P l B a k s T h v Y M i u g D w N V c I t X L F C A x z K m U E W S f
 H N b m K e x S w M g I G O T r z R h j p o s Q v D q u l d A C c f L Y B E V U y a P F Z t W X k J i n
 I Z C G Y X c K t p o y W r O w V u l v Q s E q f z A L H x R e h m B b i n T P M U d a g D k F N S J j
 i s v O B P L l y A h d p T H N Z f z E r X K j w b x n c V o u R M C J Q U G a m k q D F g e t Y W I s
 N r Y w y P H F G V U D I j B C u o k R K T b q p E d c J m h M l Q a f n z O g x L A X e v t W Z S i s
 E P U j y B z q n l c k H f b o x J w i e S X K C m h F d R o g Q a u t G A W L I M T D v s z p V Y r N
 w D u J t m s o c O g a e b x i G L A k R E H C v h Q T f F K V n U z S M W I X j q y r Z d l B Y p N P
 L a q e n j d A F O h G E T z o n c x C y Q l R Y M f W i K V U p S s B I X k v g r H Z t J b m D u w P
 G V v d e N y I C f K X w p Q n o k H W M b R j c E z i Y Z U S s B A q F h x g r J T t l m D L u a O P
 y Q T A w r C b H z o a g j s J h l D Y S u B c E x i U p I X n z k F q v W K M m t N R f L O e v d G P
 l n T M N D J A L R Q x C B X F m S b h u G c p k H U s I i q Z o K v W g v f t j a O E z r e Y y d w P
 b U g L C J w W e M m z q F V h t E f r n K H x p A D B Z Q X o v i S R l G j O a d y I k c Y N T u P s
 U Q c E d l H V p A B o Z g h S f y r I i m x W u D J R v X L w a N o n G j b F e Y T k K M C q t P s z
 S A p L M b v j k Z E U o w f I H N x u K d D s R J g G X P h a O e n i y r F W Y T m C B t q V l z Q c
 o I b q N k F a t P u m j e G f T U n v x y l Q g h s X J O Z C M r d i W V Y H B K L p D R E w z A S c
 q F x y X J U f d t z v e I r T W n Y L g w z h j G S C O M i P K B H l o k m Q R V p D E b u a A s c N
 E U f X e Y B p m N A P K L T b l y D t o a G H I M C i n k r j v Z W z d R Q u V g o w x h s S c F q J
 Y y b M L a R E j s S k r H l Q X Z t O C g c q V U o W h T m v B z d w n D u p P x G f i A F e I N K J
 B f l A m Q s z V N k o D d P u U G j i F W L Z v r R H C I X t b w n E T h p O x M K g Y c e y S a q J
 g c I U P i S K R j u v y G s E X N a h o D t r l H C d m n b L w p O T v k Y x M A F W e z Z Q f q B J
 Z L s j K X C w a t m E l Q k o h B y H D g r O n v G d b f R p V T i N M Y x A F P W e z u I q S c U J
 B R i b q g w C p s v Q d V T s y I H t E l c n r G u k j M o W N h A K Y x F e P D z a f J Z O m U X L
 T i X W E O z Q N G V H A u k I l d t J q C n h M y j S o w B s P K Y D x F e a g Z v f r c p m U b L R
 j s J e B F V A w I S O h k Z l x q H r v n u y g N d X G z P K a Y D Q p t M L U E f C c o m i b W T R
 L x O E b t P G T Q v d g V l H X w c Z Y u y N q z F S o K a B D m p k M U I r n f C J h i A s W e j R
 V s P o X E J i S F p w D z H O C I n e y j a M B t x k K l v b m A T G U r Z u f W L h d Y N Q R q g c
 R C K I k G M b t o x N W n z U g u A h j e s f X F l v Q H m D Z T r S i y c J d o Y P q a B p w L E V
 Z x P E q a A H b J h n Y B d S X c l m f D F v z e W N U M T t i r j R y s o L u Q O g K G p w k C V I
 u q y S R X b C F L m K T t s g N p r V o i W o e l M U k A c d j P H Q n B Y D x f v J G E w h z Z a I
 b C r n N o x c V z a f d U P v j K G R L t M O l A T X H k p h g B Q F S Y D J q E m s i w z y e u W I
 p Q T q K r x L d X f Z F l G A h w E O s y c z R k H U P D u g B j J S Y e m n V M N i t o a v C W b I
 E H V O r S q N K F P Y G j m h D R z c y k b l A o g u B J e x n t w U d a M s i L W X p T v f Q Z C I
 C b j Y J M Q c N l X t Z U I H w d B A u p z K F W o s L k g S e y O D V q r R P i f m x h n v T E a G



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THE BLACK CHAMBER

AN AGENCY FOR DECRYPTING THE END TIMES

BY J. EDWARD TREMLETT

The National Security Agency, known as “The Puzzle Palace” and “No Such Agency,” is charged with intercepting and decoding foreign communications and intelligence, and protecting Americans from suffering the same fate – or so they tell the world. The Agency’s full range of activities is highly classified, as are its exact budget, number of employees, and full remit. Even those who work at its headquarters haven’t a clue as to the whole.

Perhaps that is just as well. Since 1952, the NSA’s most classified duty – known only to a small, insular body within it – has been to monitor for signs of the “End Times,” as prophesied by alien gods, extra- and ultra-terrestrial intelligences, and their human (and half-human) worshippers. Reports of numerous encounters with the Mythos were painstakingly collected and cross-referenced by a faction of the famed Black Chamber after World War I. “Decommissioned” in 1929, the body’s secret work was shuffled back into the State Department, where it continued in the hands of a few, brave people until it found a better home in the NSA.

Today, the Black Chamber uses the Agency’s technology and techniques for its lonely, mind-shattering mission: collating and deciphering information, and spying on the ultimate enemy. Where possible, they have pockets of activity annihilated; mostly, however, they take a “wait and see” approach, knowing too well that the End Times are coming and there may be little they can do about it. Still, they remain hopeful.

This article presents the secret history of the Black Chamber. Also included is a description of what the Chamber “knows,” how it does its business, and what steps it takes to fight “the enemy” when it can. The Black Chamber should be useful in any horror games that permit inspirations and possible sourcing from H.P. Lovecraft’s Cthulhu Mythos. The secret group could be a campaign patron, an anonymous (and dangerous) sponsor

or enemy, the bloody end of a long trail of bodies, or purely background for such campaigns.

Assumptions of the Black Chamber

This article is assumed to take place in the world of H.P. Lovecraft’s Mythos, and any books that provide information or details on those works can be used as the threat the Black Chamber fights against (especially, of course, the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG). However, there is nothing so integral to its concept that these references cannot be replaced with other Things Man Was Not Meant To Know. As such, by changing the names and natures of its enemies, the Black Chamber can be inserted into various games, such as *Delta Green*, *Conspiracy X*, *GURPS Horror*, *GURPS Black Ops*, *GURPS Cthulhupunk*, and many others.

BLACK CHAMBER, BLACK FILE

The Army and State Department created the Black Chamber as a joint entity after World War I, using techniques and personnel its forerunner, MI-8, had cultivated during the conflict. The war had proven that America needed peacetime code-breakers, but at the time, America regarded espionage as something done only begrudgingly. As Henry L. Stimson famously (and facetiously) remarked, “Gentlemen do not read each other’s mail.”

Determining standard gear for agents can be a big time saver. As a potential starting point, check out GURPS Loadouts: Monster Hunters.

The Black Chamber was originally headed by Herbert O. Yardley, a well-regarded, intelligent fellow who had competently run MI-8 during the war. Its public façade was as a commercial code company in New York City, where it secretly decoded diplomatic messages from other nations while providing legitimate business services. During the Washington Naval Conference of 1922, it gathered intelligence that helped America's government in its tense standoff with Japan over the Pacific, resulting in its biggest public success. Many of its other activities are still secret, decades later.

It stumbled upon the biggest enigma of all in March of 1925. Chile was in massive turmoil, having just undergone a counter-coup that could have given Japan an "in" with that country. While monitoring communiqués between Chile and other Pacific Rim nations, agent Franklin G. O'Connor learned that one of President Alessandri's inner circle had sent a strange, rambling warning of "the waking darkness in the water" to his comrades before shooting himself in the head.

The Outside, Looking In

What O'Connor and his allies in the Black Chamber discovered were the climactic events of H.P. Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu." They simply saw it from the outside, from a slightly more worldwide, secret, and detached view. It would be years before they could piece together a closer, more horrific understanding of what took place, and even then, they got a lot of it wrong. But they learned enough to know that there was *something* down there, deep under the Pacific, and it wasn't content to stay down there forever.

It was possible the man broke from stress, but O'Connor dug further. He discovered strange goings-on, almost unnoticed in the upheaval: ocean-side villages disappearing; ordinary people slipping to insanity in their sleep; and well-regarded artists creating strange, otherworldly works before succumbing to madness or committing suicide.

Correlating the events with news from other nations nearby, he learned that what was happening in Chile was happening elsewhere in South America. Worse, it had similar but smaller reflections all over the world, all dating from a horrific sea-storm and earthquake in the Pacific on March 1, 1925. Uncertain at what he was seeing, he took his findings to Yardley, but his superior chided him for wasting his time with "worthless coincidences" instead of monitoring communiqués.

O'Connor kept an eye on the "coincidences," though, and was somewhat relieved to see them stop on April 2. Then, reading a copy of the April 18 *Sydney Bulletin*, he learned that a ship bound for Chile had discovered an uncharted isle on that very day, and lost almost all hands to something the sole survivor – later found adrift at sea – did not wish to talk about. Later searches for the island proved fruitless; it seemed to vanish as abruptly as the plague of madness.

Still not certain of what he'd uncovered, O'Connor didn't dare go back to Yardley, instead confiding in three other men he felt he could trust. They revealed that they, too, had seen similar news in that time. The person who monitored the East Coast had his own interesting stories to tell, especially about certain degenerate goings-on in New England: unsettling dreams, vanished seaside towns, and seemingly contagious insanity.

The four men decided to band together to collate such materials, which would be placed into a "Black File" only they would know about. Over time, they might have enough conclusive evidence to show Yardley that they were onto something – a threat possibly bigger than Japanese influence in the Pacific. But until then, they would merely monitor the situation, and meet to discuss what they'd learned once a month, unless an emergency happened.

THE BEGINNING FROM THE END

O'Connor and his co-conspirators worked for the next four years, carefully piecing together the evidence that they hoped would change Yardley's mind. But in 1929, two days after the Black Tuesday stock market crash that marked the beginning of the Great Depression, the Black Chamber was ungraciously ended. Neither the Army nor the State Department wished to fund the body any longer, as some of its methods were anathema to people who thought genteel law and order trumped the need for discovering secrets.

Herbert Yardley, perhaps justly upset at his treatment, went on to publish the highly embarrassing book *The American Black Chamber* in 1931, but he did so having no idea that his subordinates were still at work on it. Franklin O'Connor and his three colleagues had learned that the end was near, but rather than let Yardley know, they instead went over his head to Secretary of State Henry L. Stimson. They showed him the evidence in the Black File, hoping he might listen; after all, its latest entries included accounts of the massive government raid on the degenerate town of Innsmouth, as well as strange and gruesome things that had happened in Dunwich, in the same state.

To say the Black File was a revelation to the secretary was an understatement: He was aware of certain aspects of the Innsmouth operation, but had no idea of the background or its possible connection to other events. Within an afternoon, the four men had convinced Stimson that there was an enemy at work a hundred times worse than Imperial Japan – an enemy with agents already within America, and able to coordinate strange, unpredictable attacks on the world.

Stimson made it so that the four of them could continue their vigil, putting them into a relatively obscure corner of the State Department, their true purpose known only to him. They would report any significant developments to him, directly, and he in turn would sanitize them for Hoover's ears and make appropriate suggestions as to what to do.

Two important questions for the GM: How many agents are there total on the heroes' side, and what is the rate of turnover (because of death, insanity, etc.)?

Stimson knew the new president would not care for spooky stories about alien creatures under the sea, but the Commander in Chief could be convinced to take quiet action against spies, international mobsters, Reds, and other “dangerous elements” operating on American soil.

Over the next four years, the Black Chamber continued to collate and correlate information; they also tried to decipher what few genuine communiqués they could get their hands on. They then presented possible long-range problems to Stimson, who tried to find some way to have them dealt with quietly, using “deniable” assets who had no idea what they were doing. It made for hair-raising work, but the men labored on, knowing that the fate of America – and indeed the entire world – might rest on their abilities.

Stimson left along with Hoover in 1933, but such was his skill at hiding the Black Chamber that they continued their work unabated. However, he didn’t inform President Roosevelt’s chosen Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, about the operation. He felt the man wouldn’t be receptive to the Black Chamber’s work or trusted to do the right thing.

Instead, the former secretary brought a new player into the mix: a mysterious colleague because of the intelligence. Stimson referred to the person only as “the Old Man.” O’Connor never met the fellow directly, but Stimson vouched for him highly. After a very spooky three-way telephone call, O’Connor was convinced that this “Old Man” knew the stakes and could make things happen when they needed to. The Black Chamber had a new patron.

The next 16 years saw the Black Chamber refining its techniques further, gaining a better perspective on the enemy they’d uncovered. They learned that there was not one force at work but several. While those forces might not always act together, their servants agreed that an “End Time” was swiftly approaching, and they were willing to do anything to bring it about.

However, the years after World War II were hard on the group. The horrors of Nazi Germany were not directly attributable to the enemy’s influence, but the realization of what depths humanity could sink to on its own only reinforced the need for their work. They lost two men to exhaustion, madness, and suicide, and O’Connor’s remaining partner was making veiled threats about not being too sure about him, anymore. If the Black Chamber was to continue, something would have to change.

Fortunately, the Old Man had an answer:

No Such Agency

The year was 1949, and, acting on information that the Old Man had given, O’Connor surprised the new Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, by showing up in his office completely unannounced. Before he could be thrown out, he handed Acheson a letter of introduction written by the Old Man, himself, and the contents – whatever they were – made the man’s face go red, then pale. O’Connor then revealed not only the Black File, but the lengths they’d gone to in order to keep working on it, including the highly refined techniques and extensive networks they’d used to gain information.

The Old Man

No one knows who the person who runs the Black Chamber is or what he looks like. His name and age are uncertain, as are his habits and whereabouts. If he has an office, no one’s seen it. He may not even leave the building, possibly maintaining an apartment somewhere within the Puzzle Palace, itself.

He does not attend meetings in person. The Black Chamber meets with him daily via closed-circuit videoconference in their conference room. He sees them and presents information over his screen, but they do not see him.

The agents use the conference to present their findings to the Old Man, make recommendations based on them, and receive orders. Matters of discipline and control are handled at this time as well; agents who fail are gently shamed in front of the group, and others assigned to help clean up the mess.

It’s also the time when it’s announced that a new agent has joined them to replace a sudden “vacancy,” though he never elaborates on what happened to one being replaced by the new agent. No one ever asks, either.

Between the letter and the file, Acheson didn’t need much further persuasion. However, he asked to *not* be kept in the loop. He instead offered to pull strings and place them within a quiet corner of the newly formed Armed Forces Security Agency, which would give them access to new powers and methods of intelligence gathering. Acheson said that the Old Man could see to the operation from there on out, without any help from him. Then he respectfully asked O’Connor to get out of his office and never come to see him again.

O’Connor was puzzled at the meeting’s resolution, but he was grateful for the chance to keep working. However, surprises awaited him: His old office at the State Department had been ransacked in his absence, and all that was left was a note in the Old Man’s handwriting, telling him where to report the next morning. When he got there, he found not only their old files and equipment, but also a new staff of 20 agents . . . and no sign of his remaining, mentally unstable partner.

O’Connor wasn’t happy to have no information about his colleague – now possibly more dangerous than ever – or to train a bunch of handpicked “amateurs.” But he found his new associates to be highly motivated and almost pathologically scared of failure. The Old Man had apparently rescued them from very bad situations throughout the American intelligence community, and they seemed to owe him their lives. As a result, they performed remarkably well under duress.

The Black Chamber stayed aboard when the AFSA was changed to the National Security Agency in 1952. The new organization’s very existence was a closely guarded secret wrapped within several layers of secrecy and deniability, which suited the super-clandestine body just fine. The new areas of responsibility that the NSA’s remit called for pleased them even more, as they had access to additional avenues of intelligence gathering.

If the rate of turnover is high, then the players will understand that their characters have a good chance of dying.

In 1965, after years of exemplary service and leadership, Franklin G. O'Connor vanished. No one is certain why or how. Those who were with the Black Chamber at the time knew he had been very worried about something, but would not confide the reasons why. Then came a Monday when his office was cleaned out, his things were gone, and everyone had a letter from the Old Man politely informing them that he was now in charge, according to O'Connor's express wishes.

No further explanations were required.

Imperfect Understandings

Readers well-acquainted with "the enemy" will have noted that the Black Chamber's understanding is rather flawed. This is due to the fact they have never having actually read any works of the Mythos, or gotten direct, first-hand intelligence from a cultist. Everything they have was given to them by those who were on the outside looking in, usually by those too late to the crime scene to know exactly what had happened. That said, they don't need to have all the details right to know what they're looking for, to listen in, and to dispatch assets accordingly. Maybe it's better that they don't have an accurate view, at least for the sake of their own sanity.

THE BLACK CHAMBER TODAY

The Black Chamber's role when it started out was surveillance of a specific, perceived threat to humanity as a whole, as evidenced by the approaching "End Times," with actionable information being passed up to someone else to deal with. That role has changed dramatically since it joined the NSA; the surveillance is now joined with taking steps to disrupt the enemy's plans, and to keep the rest of the American government from uncovering the situation. Their tools have also changed with the times: Initially they were reading letters and diplomatic mail, but now they also have access to high-tech snooping devices and disposable warriors, and they use them with precision.

The group classifies "the enemy" as a small but deadly collection of conspiracies that are working to bring about the end of Human life on Earth – "The End Times." The chief instigators of these conspiracies are mostly terrestrial entities ("T"), which are humans or other things native to the planet, aided or led by extra-terrestrials ("ET") and ultra-terrestrials ("UT") which are god-like creatures. The enemy has been living and working on Earth for at least as long as humanity has existed, and possibly even longer, but the fact that they have yet to destroy people is regarded as a positive sign that they can be beaten, or at least stymied in their goals.

The Black Chamber's general tactics state that terrestrials and extra-terrestrials can be monitored and fought directly,

preferably through deniable and disposable assets. However, ultra-terrestrials should be monitored only; it's better to watch, suborn, and destroy a "god's" support networks than try and fight a powerful – possibly immortal – alien entity. The pay-back might not only be hell, but it might be worse than anyone can imagine.

The enemies the Black Chamber definitely "knows" about include:

- Dagon (UT), his submerged island city, his servant Cthulhu (UT), and his worldwide human cult;
- the Deep Ones (T), their human accomplices and breeding partners, and their worship of Dagon;
- the long-lost Ancients (ET) and the ruins of their Antarctic base;
- the Great Ones (ET), their human cult, and ability to project their minds through time into other bodies;
- the Yeti (ET) and their habit of kidnapping people and taking their brains;
- Yog-Sothoth (UT) and his horrid, half-human spawn;
- a dangerous person codenamed "the Black Pharaoh," who is either coordinating the chaos on behalf of the others, or playing them against each other on behalf of an as-yet-unknown, ultra-terrestrial entity.

They know that isn't the whole picture, but they remain cautious in making gross changes to how they see the enemy.

The Black Chamber remains a small division, well-hidden within the Agency's many-layered bureaucracy, and answering to no one but the "Old Man." It employs 20 people at any time, all of whom are relatively young but driven experts in the fields that the Chamber needs. They were selected for inclusion because they proved themselves to be highly dedicated to the Agency's mission but willing to forgo personal relationships, currying favor, and being liked – while getting the job done. Each one was on the cusp of being fired (or worse) when the Black Chamber took them in; not only are they highly loyal to the group for saving them, but no one's looking for them, either.

Most of what the Black Chamber's members do is listen and read: phone conversations, text messages, e-mail and web-based chats, radio transmissions, satellite feeds. Thanks to the massive snooping program the NSA employs – commonly known as ECHELON – any electronic means of communication can be scanned for certain words and phrases, and flagged if they're found. They're then sent to an agent for review, comparison with previous communications from that source, and possible follow-up. Occasionally they can slip information to other parts of the NSA, as they'll find things of interest to other areas. More typically, what they discover is put into their Black File, and seen by their eyes only.

ENGAGING THE ENEMY

Ideally, the agents will catch a problem before it starts: a church just turning to the enemy, a backwoods town becoming an inbred slaughterhouse for obscene "gods," etc.

*If more agents are available, the heroes might try to "call in the marines" more often. If this is a problem, the GM can take a cue from **GURPS Action 1: Heroes** (pp. 24-25): Frequent calls for help grow less likely to succeed.*

The Horror, the Horror?

Considering that Black Chamber agents very studiously avoid going into the field, you might wonder how the madness starts to creep into the lives. Where is the horror in sitting at their desks, poring through intelligence, and sending people off to kill or be killed? Worse things happen every day at “real” secret agencies, surely.

It's true that there is a level of disconnection from the source of the horror. But it's also true that the *kind* of material they're wading through is really awful and nasty stuff, for much the same reason that Mythos tomes are so terrible. It's not just the concepts they are dealing with, but the dark, horrible, and mind-shattering truths that lie below it. They are handling evidence that we are not alone in the world, the things that coexist with us want us dead, and many humans are willing to take hideous actions to help them. And the mindset of the people who've provided that evidence is a truly terrible thing to encounter.

In an average year, a Black Chamber agent reads dozens of crime scene reports, each one more gruesome than the last. He looks into numerous cases of mass suicide, serial killings, mass murder, group insanity, torture, cannibalism,

religious deviance turned abusive and deadly, inbreeding, gross sexual abuse, extreme body modification, and other things too gruesome to describe. He hears phone conversations between insane individuals about what they plan to do to the people they just captured and how they'll dispose of the bodies later. He sees shaky home movies of what takes place at their invocations to depraved gods, thirsty for human blood. Sometimes he even sees the entities that appear to accept it.

He receives the panicked, last cell-phone calls and e-mails of good people who came across something they couldn't understand and never would. He sends people out to kill and destroy those things responsible for the horror, knowing that he might have to kill those people, in turn, if they learn too much about what they actually did. And all he has to look forward to is being lucky enough to “vanish” before the End Times actually arrive, thus condemning another fresh-faced agent to suffer this in his stead . . .

The horror is there, always. It takes place in the mind and the conscience, and is gathered, layer upon layer, until the agent's soul drowns in it.

They will flag the situation for further monitoring to make sure it only goes so far and, more importantly, not alert the enemy that they've found them. However, sometimes enemy nests get too large, situations spiral out of control, and actual emergencies flare up, at which point they can justify direct action against it.

To that end, they use a system of deniable and disposable operatives and assets to destroy the enemy. The operatives may come from American agencies, or possibly foreign ones; they must be the sort of people whose work exposes them to the possibility of sudden death at any time. They must also be in the habit of receiving weird orders at odd times and not questioning them.

The assets are usually mercenaries and private armies, as they are the best suited for this kind of work. They might also be drones and other technological options, foreign militaries, urban vigilantes, or “handled” serial killers. Some sense of proportion is maintained: they wouldn't send an unmanned drone to destroy an apartment block in St. Louis if they only need to kill one cultist on the fifth floor; nor would they send a single assassin into a corrupted town. The only other requirement for assets is that they cannot be directly, departmentally connected to the American government, thus making them ultimately deniable.

The standard procedure for an operation is to hand the chosen operative “intel” that turns out to be believable lies, and order him to hand it over to a particular asset. The operative will not know who has handed him the package or the details of its recipient – only that it's something that has to be done as soon as possible with no questions asked. The asset will then be given the mission brief by the operative, which almost

always has him utterly annihilate the situation; no one and no *thing* is to be spared, no exceptions.

Ideally, the asset will have no idea what he was actually facing, and can be left alone at that point. However, if the asset starts developing a conscience, asks too many questions, or reveals to the operative too many incongruities between the intelligence and what was found, that operative is under orders to report back about the problem. The Black Chamber then hires a third party to eliminate both the asset *and* the operative, and destroy any files or information trails they may have left behind, so the closed matter will stay closed. And hopefully the third party won't ask questions, either.

BEING USED BY THE BLACK CHAMBER

To make a campaign based *within* the Black Chamber more interesting, provide the heroes with something more to do than look through information, correlate data, make presentations and recommendations, and go slowly insane. It can also be exciting to use the Black Chamber as a plot device, an interested party, or an enemy.

Who's Watching?: The characters are Black Chamber agents with overlapping areas of responsibility. As they go about their unnerving business investigating the Mythos, they become aware that someone is watching *them*. Weird phone calls and trails become common, as are the feeling someone's been in their apartments or vehicles, but their attempts at counter-tradecraft are anticipated and blocked at every turn.

If you're designing your own super-secret agency, a nice mood-setting “factoid” is its motto.



Then they all get the same note on the same day: “You will die for what you have seen. Start running.” Someone else gets the same note and goes to the Old Man with it, but vanishes the next day with no explanation. So what will *they* do, now?

Hung Out to Dry: The adventurers are a mercenary outfit that was contracted by a third party to destroy what was supposed to be a well-armed terrorist training camp in Asia. Their orders were to totally overwhelm the enemy, kill everyone, and burn everything, which suited them fine. But partway through the op, it was discovered that the target wasn’t a well-trained army of terrorists, but a rag-tag band of cannibalistic idol-worshippers who’d scored some heavy arms but probably didn’t know how to use them. Requests for confirmation on the now-annihilated target were met with silence, and when the team showed up at the drop to be paid, they and their handler were fired upon. With his dying breath, the handler gave them a clue, and now the survivors want answers . . . and payback.

Tonight We Murder: The characters are a team of criminal profilers assigned to help catch a serial killer who calls himself the Superstitionist: a brutally efficient slayer of those who practice religions he doesn’t like. Recently, he’s been at work in the

New England area, murdering religious leaders and their flocks in small communities, and then burning their meeting places down. In the course of the investigation, the team uncovers badly charred evidence that these groups were up to some troubling, bloody business: obscene rituals and human sacrifice done in the name of weird, alien-sounding gods. It soon becomes obvious that the Superstitionist’s victims are worthy of profiling themselves, and that he may actually be doing law enforcement a left-handed favor. It also becomes clear that someone may be providing him with targets, but whom?

This is a Test: The characters are NSA agents who, unbeknownst to them, have been tipped for a chance to join the Black Chamber, due to risks they’ve taken and interagency enemies they’ve made. They have been brought together under false pretenses and given a task by self-erasing media: to locate the Black Pharaoh, using a limited amount of information and departmental resources, and without letting anyone outside the group know what they’re up to. Success brings “potential advancement” while failure means they’ll probably be fired. During their research, they begin to discover things about “the enemy” that test their sanity and souls, but that pales in comparison to the real shocker – the Black Pharaoh not only knows he’s being tracked, but may actually be monitoring the NSA itself, or even working within it! Is this just a test by their mysterious handler, or has the Agency been compromised by a threat from beyond time, space, and sanity? As dark revelations mount, and those who lag behind meet with “accidents,” it becomes clear that no one may live to see promotion . . .

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J. Edward Tremlett is an unspeakable and squamous presence, lurking in the dark, dripping corners of a bookstore, where he poses as a mere clerk . . . until it’s *too late!* His bizarre lifestyle has taken him to such exotic locales as South Korea and Dubai, UAE. He’s been the editor of *The Wraith Project* and has seen print in *The End Is Nigh* and *Worlds of Cthulhu*. He’s also part of the *Echoes of Terror* anthology. Currently, he writes for Op-Ed News, and lives in Lansing, Michigan, with his wife and three cats.

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BLACK OPS
 FIND THE TRUTH — AND KILL IT

BY JEFF KOBE
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STEVE JACKSON GAMES

THE BRICKS OF MARÛ-DÛ

BY STEVEN MARSH

I fell asleep in the lab. Again. I had a report to file. I awoke to a sound I couldn't pinpoint. A slamming door? Not at this hour. A moaning wind? Not two miles below the surface.

I thought some more, distractedly biting the flesh below my fingernails. Again. My lips tingled, numbing, as if I'd tasted lead. I thought back. I know I had washed my hands since I last handled the Brick. Patterns and perfectly symmetrical structures danced in my head. I had a report to file. I'm no closer to knowing the truth than when I began weeks ago. They would be disappointed. I was sure to be passed over for a promotion. Again.

These results aren't expected. I had a report to file. Nothing's working out. I could get yelled at by my superior. Again. I have read the Brick. I could summon something dark. I had a report to file. Again. I could summon something dark. Again.

A cause to clash was born of fire and clay, at a time much closer to the birth of humanity than to our era. Today two sides have reason to amass as many of a specific mystical item as they can: One side might save us *from* the darkness and one might serve us *to* the darkness. This is the foundation of a mighty modern-day conflict that was laid millennia ago. And, as everyone knows, foundations are often made of Bricks.

DESCRIPTION

Each Brick of Marû-Dû is unique, but they all share similar properties. They all measure slightly larger than 9.25 inches by 4.25 inches by 3.25 inches, with minor variations. Each weighs about nine pounds, although there are variances by as much as two pounds in either direction. Otherwise appearing dull gray, Bricks have a slightly lustrous quality, akin to ore deposits. The entire surface of a Brick is covered with unusual writing that looks somewhat like ancient Sumerian, although all scholarly efforts at comparison between the two languages have resulted in no breakthroughs in understanding the script. The text pressed into the Brick's surface somewhat resembles cuneiform, although with edges and fine detail much sharper than can usually be produced via traditional clay impressions.

The Bricks of Marû-Dû are more resilient than regular fire-forged masonry but less durable than steel; throwing a Brick at the ground might chip it, but it is very difficult to get one to shatter. However, sufficient damage to a Brick will potentially reveal an odd aspect of its creation: Given enough time, it will

regenerate to its original form. Minor cosmetic wear – such as chips on the surface or sanding damage – will be repaired in a year or two. More serious damage – such as 25% of its area being removed – will be repaired within three to four years. The most extensive damage – say, being rendered to complete sand – will repair fully in *exactly* seven years.

When a Brick repairs, it does so in a fashion similar to a chameleon; that is, the Brick repairs according to the largest portion of itself, treating that as the “whole.” For example, if a Brick were broken in two such that 40% of its mass existed in one piece and 60% in another; then it would treat the 60% portion as its essence and regenerate from there (taking about five years to do so); the remaining 40% would disintegrate in roughly the same time period. If, after a period, that 60% portion were divided in half, then one of the two halves would be chosen as the “full” brick and begin regenerating from there.

The non-regenerating portions of the Brick deteriorate, as if they were rusting or rapidly succumbing to the ravages of time. Eventually all that remains is a dark-gray course sand. Again, this disintegration takes roughly the same amount of time that the “healthy” portion of the Brick would take to regenerate (with the time frame determined at the time of the original damage).

Because of the Bricks' regenerative abilities, the inscribed text is – barring recent damage – always as crisp and sharp as if the Brick had just been created.

Attempts at scientifically analyzing the ancient objects have so far come up inconclusive. Electron microscopes reveal the Bricks seem to have a semi-crystalline arrangement akin to some glass-like ceramics, but the structure behaves chemically akin to a polycrystalline form such as is found in many metals. Iron, in particular, seems to be a significant portion of its composition. No scientific reason behind the Bricks' ability to heal themselves has been found.

HISTORY

Despite some incorrect claims, no one is certain of the exact origins of the Bricks of Marû-Dû. The name itself is of uncertain origin; it seems to have arisen in the 19th century, apparently deriving from a bastardization of a Sumerian phrase that means “slow build” (or perhaps “fat build”). However, this term appears on no known bricks, and there is little direct evidence that ties the Bricks to the Sumerian civilization.

The motto for the CIA is “And Ye Shall Know the Truth and the Truth Shall Make You Free” (John 8:32).

The Writing on the Bricks

The symbols on the Bricks have resisted all efforts at direct translation or comprehension. However, someone who possesses the Brick for a period of time – usually between a week and a month – will understand what the text on the Brick says. Or, perhaps more correctly, he will *believe* he knows what the Brick says: Although the possessor will be able to restate the contents of the Brick's text consistently, attempts at pointing to individual characters to indicate specific words or ideas will vary, baffling efforts at understanding the text in any more encompassing way.

Nevertheless, the message conveyed by each specific Brick seems to be constant. If different people come into

possession of the same Brick at different times, they will generally agree on what the Brick said, although there may be some discrepancies in interpretation. For example, one person might think the Brick says it contains a ritual for opening a portal to another world, while another believes it says it contains a spell for summoning an ally; they could both be correct.

Even if the Brick is taken or lost later, possessors retain information of the Brick they held, although – again – that doesn't seem to lead to any real-world understanding of the Brick's language itself. Additionally, someone who owned a Brick previously would be able to recognize the writing if he were to see a photograph or rubbing.

Nevertheless, the popular belief is that the Bricks originated in a (now-lost) city north of Assur and south of Nineveh, roughly equidistant from both. (This belief likely originated from a large number of Bricks located in that region, despite the lack of other evidence that any extensive civilization called that area home.) Attempts at dating the Bricks have placed them at roughly 1500 B.C., which would (curiously) put it after the fall of Sumer and before the world's first known iron-working.

Although scattered reports of unusual activity has been retroactively attributed to the Bricks, especially a series of strange events near Constantinople around the ninth century A.D., the first definitive recorded knowledge of the Bricks arose in the 15th century, when a few Bricks were used to construct a monastery in Cologne. Within a couple of years, the monks living there had descended into debauchery and depravity; the wines they sold seemed to have a similar effect. According to sealed Church records, it took the better part of three years for an Inquisition investigation to resolve the matter fully.

Most other reports of the Bricks follow a similar pattern: Someone finds one or more of the Bricks and utilizes the arcane knowledge contained in the writing, uses the Bricks as artifacts themselves, or builds them into a masonry project. Sorrow follows.

The Bricks can be found throughout the world, with no continent devoid of them. Those with archeological training wonder how this could be. One somewhat popular – if fanciful – theory is that the Bricks were incorporated into some horrific project that was in some fashion utterly destroyed, which, in turn, scattered the Bricks used in its creation throughout the world. Another theory, equally lacking in evidence, is that the Bricks' holders coveted them and carried them in their travels throughout the world.

THE USE OF BRICKS

The Bricks of Marû-Dû can be used in many ways, most of them unsavory. Each Brick seems to contain some dark knowledge or power in the writing on its surface. This writing could

reveal a ritual, spell, formula for making a weapon or potion, or other lore. Alternatively, or perhaps in addition, some of the Bricks have abilities of their own. In some cases this power stems from the Brick directly; for example, one Brick is capable of sharpening a bladed weapon such that wounds caused by it do not heal properly.

Still other Bricks have abilities that require their use in masonry or other ritualistic fashion. For example, one Brick – when placed as part of a larger Brick circle – might provide a means of teleporting without fail to a location exactly 14.7 miles due west. Another Brick, when incorporated into the wall of a small room, might provide that area with a foolproof protection against scrying or surveillance.

Bricks always perform their functions in a fashion that the sane think of as “creepy” or “disturbing” (at best). For example, using the teleportation Brick results in a sensation that feels akin to being pushed through jelly, while relying on a sharpening Brick results in the weaponsmith hearing what sounds like mad-demonically gleeful martial chanting in an alien tongue. It is believed that continuing to use even the most “mundane” of special abilities will eventually take its toll on the user's sanity.

Some Bricks seem to function entirely as augmenters for other Bricks. For example, one might amplify the area of the anti-scrying Brick's effect tenfold if incorporated into the same wall. A very few Bricks seem not to have any special abilities on their own, but serve as the key to larger, more grandiose abilities. The writing on these Bricks refer to themselves as Keys. Keys are very rare; so far, only two have been found.

The Two Keys

The first known Key – the Single Step – describes how to construct a small path using nothing but Bricks. The pattern called for by the Key's writing is seven Bricks followed by six Bricks, continuing in a seven/six pattern. (The first row marks the beginning of the path; the Key is to be used as the middle Brick.) The Key proclaims that, if such a path is created, one who walks along it will find himself stepping through normal space and coming to a door (or perhaps portal; accounts vary).

Remember that if the adversaries successfully make their kiln from the Bricks of Marû-Dû, they still haven't won.

Interactions with that door will enable one to cut off the Bricks' power to this world forever (presumably if one is successful at resolving whatever challenge the door presents). The Brick is unclear what other options are available at this door, but it seems to imply that there might be other uses; one common accounting of that portion is, "There is a chance to close the door. The door may be opened most fully, if the time of endings has awoken the need. Or the door may be sealed forever more, if the time of endings has ended in time. The door will explain."

The second known Key – the Plan of Flame – describe in detail how to use Bricks to make a kiln. The Bricks of Marû-Dù are intermixed with regular bricks, in an unspecified ratio (although the Plan of Flame cautions to use "enough"). Approximately 6,000 bricks are required to make the kiln. According to the Plan of Flame, when the kiln is completed, it can be used to forge *new* Bricks of Marû-Dù. The Plan of Flame is very specific: Once the kiln is operational, ordinary unfired bricks can be placed therein, and they will become imbued with the power of the Bricks, and presumably acquire new writing at that time. The Plan of Flame promises amazing new powers for anyone who can complete the kiln, and – once enough Bricks are forged – the "awakening" of a new era.

How Soon Is the Future?

The Keys each require a number of Bricks to succeed in their task, although how many Bricks is left nebulous to the reader. In fact, the number of bricks required to complete either the path or the kiln is not predetermined. Rather, increasing the number of Bricks improves the chance of success. In *GURPS* terms, anyone attempting to follow a Key's instructions must succeed at an Occultism roll, with a penalty dependent on the number of Bricks used in the construct.

Number of Bricks	Modifier to Roll	Can Attempt
less than 100	Cannot succeed	–
100-150	Critical success required	once a year
151-170	-10	once a year
171-190	-9	once a year
191-210	-8	once a month
211-230	-7	once a month
231-250	-6	once a month
251-270	-5	once a month
271-290	-4	once a month
291-310	-3	once a week
311-330	-2	once a week
331+	-1	once a day

No special abilities or bonuses can be used in this roll. It is simply a test of the ritualist's raw ability to understand and complete the ritual precisely.

The GM should not share specifics – neither side should know the details of this chart! Participants may understand that more Bricks will make the ritual easier, but they won't know exact numbers.

In other game systems, simply alter the skill/ability used and the modifier. Fewer Bricks makes the task impossible or nearly so, while more increases the chance of success.

If a ritualist fails in completing the formula required by the Key, he is driven completely insane, having touched the source of whatever darkness the Bricks of Marû-Dù access. He might eventually regain some sense of his sanity – after many, many years of careful care – but he will never again be able to attempt the Key ritual.

How Many Bricks?

The number of Bricks of Marû-Dù is left mostly nebulous, so that the players (and agents) can't do number-crunching on how many (or few) are out there. However, the numbers used in this articles have been calculated with an eye toward 343 Bricks, which is seven cubed. Seven figures prominently in other facts relating to the Bricks. Obviously, the exact number of Bricks can be adjusted based on the needs of the campaign, but if a significantly smaller number is used, it's necessary to adjust the values of the table.

Like Attracts Like; Hate Attracts Hate

Besides the regenerative abilities and the strange powers and rituals they incorporate in their carved surfaces, the Bricks of Marû-Dù have other unusual properties. Possession of the Bricks will occasionally lead to glimpses of where other Bricks are, or – more often – a vision of how a new Brick might be acquired.

Example: Someone who possesses a Brick might receive a vision of a tiny Boston bookshop. The Brick may not be actually there (although it might be). Rather, information about the location of one of the Bricks might be contained in one of the rare volumes.

The same visions often erupts at a given time among those who possesses Bricks. Thus, it is not uncommon to find two (or more) groups vying for the same prize.

To a certain extent, the more Bricks that are at a broad location (approximately the size of a city block), the more likely it is to trigger stronger visions, which may yield stronger clues or more specific information. Thus, if four Bricks were used to make up a wall in a church in Peru, then that will trigger a stronger vision than if only two Bricks were in the same place. This doesn't have much affect, except those skilled or knowledgeable with the glimpses can start to categorize them: "There's more than half a dozen Bricks there," or "This was a three-Brick vision." Curiously, although the visions get stronger the more Bricks there are, *useful* information stops being provided once 14 or more Bricks are in the same place. The effect is like trying to pinpoint one specific cell phone on a table filled with more than a dozen other ringing ones; you know they're making a lot of noise as a group, but getting any specific information about them is impossible. Having more than one Brick doesn't seem to increase the strength or frequency of visions.

The heroes probably have some time after the kiln is made to track down the enemy before the end times.

In addition, possession of a Brick (or even being within approximately a city block of one) will lead to strange dreams, paranoid thoughts, and general irrationality; anyone who is near a Brick long enough – especially if he knows about it – will receive visions of the great and powerful things he could do with that Brick. This has no specific game effect (although it might trigger various psychological rolls in those who are susceptible), but working with the Bricks long enough will take its toll on sanity.

Mysteries, Madness, and Masonry

From a game standpoint, the Bricks of Marû-Dù have been designed to encourage a covert war. In particular, the inability of the factions to detect larger masses of Bricks (including, presumably, the base of operations on either side) means that most battles between the two sides will be over smaller caches of Bricks. Both sides will probably need to take steps to make sure the whereabouts of their respective stashes are not compromised if agents are captured or coerced, but this is the same as any “traditional” espionage game. Moreover, both sides will receive stronger visions as the number of Bricks their opposite acquires increases. This fact means that it’s possible to know how successful the enemy is, without knowing where they are.

Of course, if the Bricks are used in an ongoing series, the climactic battle will probably be a direct assault from one side versus the other.

USING THE BRICKS OF MARÛ-DÙ

The most obvious campaign focusing on the Bricks of Marû-Dù involves (at least) two sides to the struggle, each in possession of one Key Brick and probably a number of additional Bricks. The heroes are expected to have acquired the Single Step, or work for those who do. Ideally this will be an agency or organization of some sort; locating the Bricks requires an inordinate amount of globehopping, and the resources needed for that alone will be considerable. The heroes will want to gather enough Bricks to complete the ritual that enables them to seal off the door to this world.

The other side is expected to be in possession of the Plan of Flame, and – again – a number of other Bricks. Their goal is to acquire enough to build the kiln that will aid in building new Bricks and, presumably, allow the darkness the Bricks represents full access to the world. Unlike the heroes’ side, the adversaries are expected to have enough cultists or agents dedicated to the cause to risk the dire consequences of failing the ritual.

Most other details are left up to the GM’s imagination, depending on the needs of the specific group and setting. Obviously, the more Bricks either side starts with, the greater a chance that side will be able to complete its goal (and the less time it will take). The campaign may begin with the well-hidden antagonists acquiring their 100th Brick, enabling them to attempt to build the kiln with some degree of success. In this case, the heroes will have little choice but to become involved,

since those who serve darkness will no doubt become lucky and succeed in their ritual some year.

Furthermore, if the antagonists possess at least 100 Bricks, then this is also a good reason for the heroes to accumulate their own. It is no longer an option to merely destroy any Bricks that the heroes acquire – say, by firing them via rocket into the sun – since the adversaries have enough to eventually succeed in their ritual, regardless of whether they get any more. The invocation of the Single Step might be the only way for the heroes to win – or at least a very strong Plan B.

The most straightforward way to use the Bricks in a long-running campaign is to start out both sides with a reasonable number of Bricks, then have each adventure revolve around acquiring between one and six Bricks. The numbers can be tweaked however is appropriate, but having each side start with a hundred Bricks and acquiring three per game session means that they should all be found within 50 game sessions, which is about enough for a year of game time.

Since the number of Key Bricks is unknown, and since having 14 or more Bricks renders one effectively invisible to the visions the Bricks provides, it’s possible there might be other agencies that have found one of the Key Bricks and enough Bricks to shield them; in this case, these groups could serve as “spoilers,” mixing up the action by providing differing adversity. (“Since when did the cultists start having access to helicopters and rocket launchers?!”)

If the GM desires a shorter adventure series, he can incorporate the tail-end of the “chase” for the Bricks. In this case, start the adversaries with 200 or so, have a couple of adventures where the heroes can acquire a dozen or so Bricks each, and then have the climactic adventure occur when the heroes are able to use their espionage abilities to track down the enemy’s location.

ADVENTURE POSSIBILITIES

From a gaming standpoint, each Brick is designed to serve as its own adventure possibility. Almost any existing adventure calling for an arcane scroll, formula, or ritualistic item can utilize a Brick in that role. Here are a few more ideas for how they can be used in a game.

History Assaulted: The heroes learn that a major historic monument (perhaps from their own country) incorporates one or more of the Bricks in its foundation. Are they willing to risk damaging or destroying such a place? This can be especially challenging if the agents’ organization and true purpose is secret . . . and doubly so if the heroes find themselves needing to protect the monument from enemy forces.

A Lure’s Death: The heroes are entrusted with 13 of their agency’s Bricks, and told to take them off-site to a new location some distance away. (Thirteen Bricks is, of course, the largest cache that can trigger followable visions.) The hope is that the enemy will be lured to their location, ideally bringing with them powerful or high-level forces that can be captured and interrogated.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven Marsh is a freelance writer and editor. He has been the editor of *Pyramid* for nine years. For more details, read his *Random Thought Table* in this issue.

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RANDOM THOUGHT TABLE

WHEN SHADOWS COLLIDE

BY STEVEN MARSH, *PYRAMID* EDITOR

Spies and horror go together like peanut butter and jelly. (I think this means one of those genres causes deadly allergic reactions in some folks.) Espionage in the real world is often difficult to make exciting, since so much of what happens in spycraft – as far as the real world is concerned – doesn't have much in the way of spectacular real-world ramifications. It has been said that the most devastating information a spy can acquire is a list of the Other Side's spies . . . which lends a certain futile flavor to the whole affair.

Horror is about the unknown, deriving its power from the conflict of mystery with the downfalls of comprehension. In other words, in horror adventures, you're usually better off having never gotten involved . . . sure, the world may succumb to evil and everyone dies, but at least you'll die ignorant, which in some ways is better than dying from a mutant hellbeast sucking out your soul.

So what do you get when you mix the two together? Let's look at what each brings to the other.

WHAT HORROR BRINGS TO ESPIONAGE

Espionage is one of the oldest genres for gaming. The original *Top Secret Roleplaying Game* came out in 1980, and the genre has been a popular one itself or mixed with other genres ever since. But what can a "straight" spy game get from horror?

Moral Clarity

One of the problems with many espionage tales is that it's often hard to tell the good guys from the bad guys. If you're trying to track down some enemy agents who've stolen your side's death-ray blueprints, it leaves the door open for a heroic-minded spy to ask, "Err . . . why were we working on a death-ray in the first place?" Real espionage is dirty work; while there are heroes and heroic deeds even in the most realistic of spy

dramas, too often the questions are complicated and the answers are unsatisfying.

But when one side consists of secret agents and the other side consists of brain-eating horrors from beyond time and space, then the moral high ground becomes a lot clearer. Even if the heroes' side does a lot of dark, questionable things, it's almost certainly not as bad as the gibbering terror.

A Good Enemy

Another problem with espionage gaming is that it can be hard to come up with an enemy that seems worthwhile. Most real-world first-world espionage agencies have tremendous budgets, and their cinematic and gaming counterparts often take that to even greater extremes. (Only in a super-spy world does a permanently flying helicopter-like aircraft carrier get funding.) The problem is that it's hard to come up with a logical enemy that can withstand such massive resources. If you do, it leads to *Austin Powers*-esque absurdities: "Why are we holding the world ransom for a billion dollars?! All this stuff is worth 10 times that."

But horrific entities often have resources utterly incomprehensible to the real world, which allows them to step outside realistic limitations without raising other questions. Enemy spies with portable jet-pack technology feels silly – why not patent that and *buy* whatever world change you're hoping for? – but mad creatures with the ability to move instantly by stepping into the Void Between Worlds feels much more logical, despite the *increase* in ability that provides over jet-packs.

A Reason to Shoot

Finally, horror gives the heroes a reason to shoot without guilt. The movie *Goldeneye* presents a moral conundrum as our hero, James Bond, shoots his way out of a Russian prison, protesting his innocence at having killed someone else while blowing away guards (who are just doing their jobs).

Nothing says "espionage" more than an acronym. For best results, start with the acronym and work backward.

The needs of the spy's mission with the messiness of reality can provide some uncomfortable moments for conscientious heroes (and players).

But horror sidesteps a lot of messy moral elements by giving not only a reason to act against the darkness, but to do so by just about any means necessary. Killing first and asking questions later is easier when the enemy is a mindless vampire, rather than someone who merely shares the wrong ideology or picked the wrong temp agency to work for.

Even better, all the moral elements that are "excised" by introducing horror – especially the ability to shoot first and ask questions later – can be reintroduced in the *interest of horror!* For example, the heroes might conclude early on that shooting infectious zombies on sight is an acceptable use of force, which would start to inure the heroes to any horror it provides. But what about blowing up a school bus full of infected kids? Or what about blowing up a school bus of kids, of which 75% are infected and the other 25% are pleading for help? *That's* horror.

WHAT ESPIONAGE BRINGS TO HORROR

With the arrival of the *Call of Cthulhu Roleplaying Game* in 1981, horror has continued to be one of the most popular and enduring genres in the gaming world. So what does this venerable story type gain by adding horror?

A Reason to Gather

One of the biggest problems with a horror campaign is coming up with reasons not only to get together in the first place, but also reasons to *stay* together throughout adventures. Sure, anyone can concoct that first adventure where our plucky heroes – a research librarian, a defrocked priest, a former war veteran, and a paper-boy – stumble into each others' paths and manage to thwart an evil plan (or, perhaps, mitigate the worst aspects of that plan). But why would those four stick together to form any kind of cohesive team? And if you assume that first adventure unified the group, how do you allow for any kind attrition to the group that will inevitably happen as the campaign progresses? ("Yes, we four continue our fight against the darkness, as we have since the beginning. Well, except we're missing the priest and the kid, who got eaten weeks ago. Oh, and the librarian, who's still insane. But we did pick up a few more well-marbled strangers who are willing to go along with us . . .")

Having ties to an agency – practically required to call oneself a spy – neatly solves both problems from a gaming standpoint. Why is the hero fighting the darkness? Because he was hired to do so. What happens if he dies? The agency hires someone else. (Sure, it's possible to increase the level of motivation and group ties beyond that, but it's not a requirement.)

A Method to Start, Method to Continue

There are two problems horror campaigns often face. First, it can be hard to justify the beginning of an adventure. Second,

it's quite possible to get stuck down a plot dead end, with no easy way to get back on track. Both these problems are neatly solved by the introduction of espionage. While ordinary horror settings often rely on happenstance to keep the adventure moving, it still can be hard to justify the fifth dying stranger who staggers into a hero's home, holding a blood-dripping paper-wrapped package. This isn't a problem in espionage games. It's entirely possible to hand-wave away the impetus of an adventure (or the on-track clues) as being something the heroes aren't cleared to know. ("The situation in the remote nation of Plahtpointistan is dire, and there are unusual rumors that seem to tie into the Darkness Protocol." "How do we know that?" "We can't tell you that." "Let me guess: Dying stranger staggered in holding a blood-dripping paper-wrapped package?" ". . . Report to Office 66.")

A Net Against Failure

Finally, another problem horror campaigns often face is that the stakes are quite high. Part of the fun of horror is that the fate of the world – or at least wide swaths of it – can hang in the balance. Since the consequences of failure are significant, it's difficult to come up with a way to structure an ongoing campaign that allows the heroes not to succeed, while still leaving a world for future adventures.

Consider: "If the Zombie Opera concludes, everyone at the Opera House will be turned into brain-eaters!"

Compare: "We failed! Now the city will be overrun by infectious zombies!"

Versus: "We failed! Now the Agency needs to come in and make a bunch of zombies disappear; our future missions are going to be a lot more complicated, and we'll no doubt be yelled at by Mr. Shade. *Why couldn't the zombies kill us?!*"

SHADOWS JOINED

Thinking about the ways that horror and espionage complement each other can lead to interesting ways to use both facets. If horror augments espionage by giving spies something to shoot, then what happens if their guns are taken away, or their weapons don't work? If espionage gives horror games a focus and nucleus, what happens when that "safe haven" erodes away? ("You mean the Brightness Project has been using us to fight the darkness to clear the competition for *its own* cosmic horror?!")

Both horror and espionage require the GM to keep thinking about aspects of the game world and concocting new plots and secrets. By combining the two, the possibilities grow into two groups of shadows willing to eat the other . . . with the heroes in the middle of the action.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

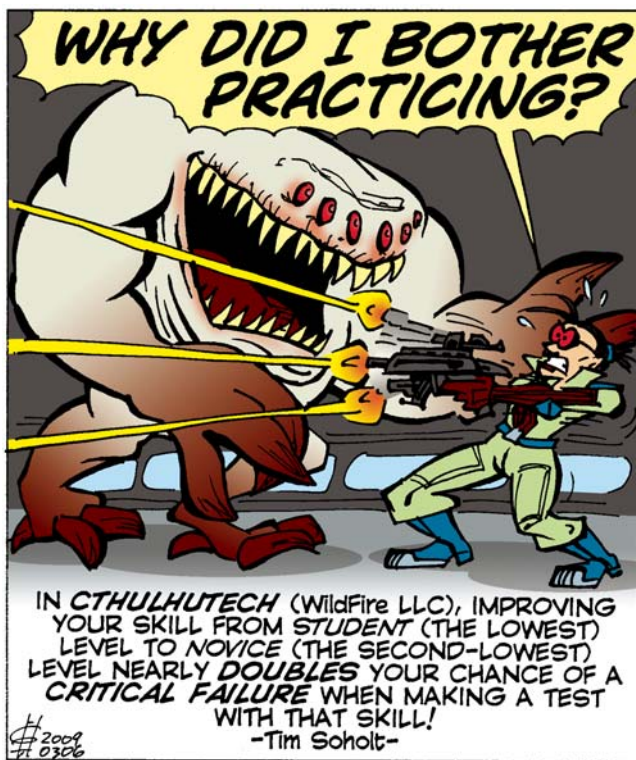
Steven Marsh is a freelance writer and editor. He has contributed to roleplaying game releases from Green Ronin, West End Games, White Wolf, Hogshead Publishing, and others. He has been editing *Pyramid* for almost nine years; during that time, he has won four Origins awards. He lives in Indiana with his wife, Nikola Vrtis, and their son Sam!, who is a two-year-old force of nature entirely worthy of his exclamation mark.



ODDS AND ENDS

MURPHY'S RULES

BY GREG HYLAND



Got a *Murphy's Rule* of your own? Send it to murphy@sjgames.com

EASY PROPS

In addition to the *Code Word* pages (pp. 16-21) in this issue, here are some more ideas for quick props.

- Make ID badges for each agent. Wallets, color printouts, and lamination can come to less than five dollars total. (Many entertainment establishments, such as Chuck E. Cheese's, feature machines that take a grainy black-and-white photo and put it on a randomly selected preprinted plastic card. You may need to put in a few tokens to get the right version, but you'll end up with something that looks snazzy. As a bonus, you'll have some "fake" IDs for your player character.)



- Burn a mini-CD with the documents or information that you want to ensure the heroes (or players) always have on hand. If the players have ID wallets, mini-CDs can often fit inside.

- Give players e-mail addresses using a free service. Send updates and orders through there. Create an e-mail address for the "Mr. Big" of the agency, too.

- It might be possible to generate a "home page" for the agency, using readily available services such as LiveJournal, Facebook, or MySpace. You can also employ it as a campaign resource, putting adventure summaries or calendar events on there; entries can be tagged according to whether they're in game or out of game.

More Campaign Ideas

- The heroes start as mundane secret agents, perhaps even undergoing a few non-horror adventures. Then they discover the beginnings of a horrific adversary and are put in charge of putting together a sub-agency to battle it.

- As a twist on the above, what if the heroes start out in an espionage/horror campaign, but learn at some point that there is no horror? (It's all a conspiracy or hallucination or lie or whatever.) Of course, this "revelation" might

be merely another trick by the forces of darkness to make the agents doubt themselves . . .

- The fledgling heroes go through a few adventures: acquiring artifacts, killing "bad" people, etc. Then they discover they've been (unknowingly) working for the wrong side. Do they switch, or stay in the evil organization to try to destroy it from within?

RECOMMENDED READING

EXPOSING THE SPIES AND THE HORRORS

BY ANDY VETROMILE

Spies and horror: Two genres that have a lot in common. Both work better when the action happens secretly or in isolation; neither wants to be exposed to scrutiny; the question “hunter or hunted?” always arises; and no one believes the truth in either case. Paranoia is the GM’s friend, and while the actual *game Paranoia* may be too far over the top as a mechanic, there are many other goodies to bring one’s game up to A-level.

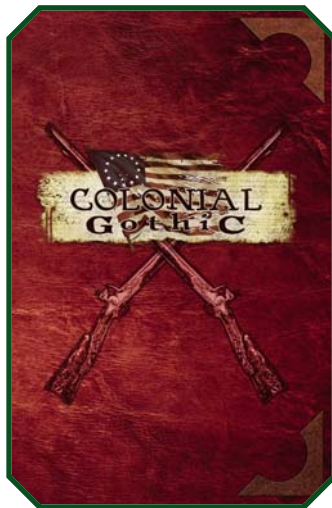
One of the original “Let’s throw down with the supernatural” roleplaying games was *Stalking the Night Fantastic* (\$12.95 to \$19.95 depending on edition, Tri Tac Games, tritacgames.com). It’s been around for more than two decades, even though the system isn’t the most intuitive device around (there’s also a *d20 System* version available). This game presents a colorful world in which the weird and mystical aren’t simply hunted by agents and eliminated; they must be investigated. Bureau 13 would prefer to assimilate strange cryptids into the ecology rather than just execute unfamiliar critters. Some dangerous things still demand liquidation, but the heroes are expected to find some way to fit them into the natural world so they cannot do harm or be harmed, if possible. The brass strives to keep humanity from finding out vampires and yetis lurk just around the corner (depending on where on Earth that “corner” is), but their employees aren’t simply trained to be high-powered killing machines.

Espionage brews best during periods of war and political upheaval, and *Colonial Gothic* (\$24.99 for a physical copy or \$9.99 for a PDF, Rogue Games, rogue-games.net) offers both

with a supernatural twist. Not only can it be the center of a horror-and-spies game, it can set the tone for a centuries-spanning campaign. New eras bring new horrors (or recall Old Ones), so the GM could have his group face off against a series of terrors set against various historical backdrops. If the heroes are as long-lived as their unearthly foes, the same agents could face new challenges from the changing world as well as the opposition.

Spies never know who to trust, and neither do victims of horror when shapeshifters start pursuing them. That ought to put any game that involves trust at the top of a player’s list. Overt examples like *Shadows Over Camelot* (\$60, Days of Wonder, daysof-wonder.com) and *Battlestar Galactica: The Board Game* (\$49.95, Fantasy Flight Games, fantasyflightgames.com) represent this category well – mistrust, fear, and loathing are cultivated in spades – but the products have an involved motif all their own. Unless the gamers are playing spies in his majesty’s court or detectives in some far-flung future, the connection may be pretty thin. Fantasy Flight Games’ *Android* (\$59.95) doesn’t have the same undercurrent of suspicion regarding one’s fellows, but at its heart it’s an attempt to uncover who’s behind a murder and possibly tie it to one of several corrupt groups.

Depending on the needs of the horror-and-spies gaming group, it might be possible to utilize games that aren’t direct fits. For example, *Inkognito* (\$19.95 normally yet often on sale for \$5 online and in stores, Fantasy Flight Games) turns four players into spies vying for the same prize.



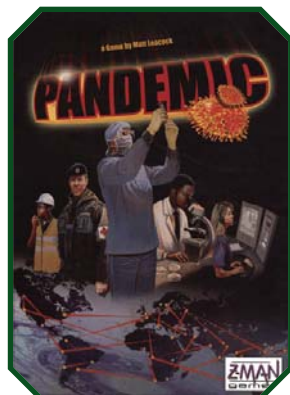
As a good turning point in a campaign, have the heroes survive the destruction of their agency by the horrific side.

Spies and horror: Two genres that have a lot in common.

Better still is *Shadow Hunters* (\$29.99, Z-Man Games, zmangames.com). Here the number of players increases to eight, and it's closely tied to the supernatural world. Each person becomes a different supernaturally themed being or participant – such as a vampire, a shapeshifter, or a templar – and no one knows who any of the others are. Only by playing cards that narrow the choices down (“I bet you’re a Shadow”) or by witnessing someone use their macabre power can someone’s identity be established. This makes it perfect for simulating those Victorian drawing-room mysteries that become thornier (and bloodier) as tempers and the body count rise.

Pursuit is another issue. The heroes may be going after an enemy, or they might be the targets of something more powerful than themselves, making flight the best option for one side or the other. *Shear Panic* (\$30, Mayfair Games, mayfairgames.com) is an interesting – if unintuitive – choice. A herd of sheep must proceed through a series of fields, each with its own rules on how to score. Arranged in a three-by-three pattern, the flock is manipulated by the players, pushing and shoving each other in all directions. They only have a limited palette of maneuvers with which to do this, however, and as the last field approaches sheep are culled from the group for good. It may look like a pretty silly game on the face of things; to better fit a horrific espionage theme the group might want to replace the cartoonish sheep figurines with saltshakers or double-A batteries (in addition to the usual “serial-number filing” necessary to incorporate these kind of games). But there are examples of both spy and horror stories that involve the cast being whittled down one by one until the real agent/mole/superhuman axe murderer is exposed, so this is one way to duplicate those stories; if the GM relinquishes control, he may not even know who the next victim is!

Cinematic spies span the globe, so taking the action around the world could depend on a travel game. The heroes might be trying to achieve a goal while (conveniently) limited to a single country or continent. In this case, the *Ticket to Ride* series (around \$50 depending on the map, Days of Wonder) lets agents crisscross the United States, Germany, and others, and could lend a *Murder on the Orient Express* flavor to the pot. Since the game demands that players complete a certain number or combination of train routes between cities, success within the adventure could depend on how well the players do against a couple of “dummy” players operated by the GM. The better their margin of success, the more in-game advantage they enjoy on the role-playing side of the equation. Perhaps each travel ticket the heroes’ side completes earns them a piece of the overall puzzle, or custody of a witness whose testimony can narrow down a mystery. A similar effect could be achieved using the *Ten Days* games (\$24.99 each, Out of the Box Publishing, otb-games.com). Far simpler (and faster) than the “TTR” entries, one must arrange a set of travel and destination cards in order,



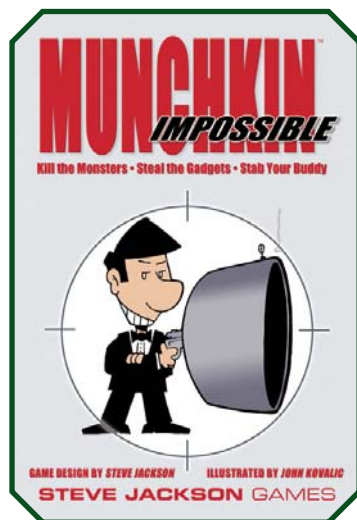
so as to complete a travel itinerary over the game’s chosen landmass. Finding relevance won’t be a problem: The series includes a version for America, Europe, Africa, and Asia – all the best scenic hangouts for players in the Great Game.

To save the GM from having to come up with a reason why the team is doing all this traveling, *Pandemic* (\$34.99, Z-Man Games) comes with a built-in mission to tackle: stopping the spread of disease. Our heroes must race against the clock to track down the vectors of plagues as they pullulate worldwide. Fast, exciting, and altogether too realistic in some ways (losing happens, big time), it can be tweaked and made harder or easier as the GM likes. Use the board to simulate a toxic

release by a rival spy organization, a burgeoning zombie population, or a nanomachine infestation.

And if the group simply wants old-fashioned 1960s theatrical spycraft with all the trimmings to rule his roost, he can turn to *Mwahahaha* (\$34.99, White Wolf Publishing, white-wolf.com). Three to five players become the same mad scientists they usually fight against, each armed with his own

world-dominating plot and bizarre henchmen. The GM can set his players to playing the game one week; the winner’s character, plot, and organization become the enemy du jour for the agency over the next few sessions of gaming. So long as camp has run away with the game, add *Munchkin Impossible* (\$24.95, Steve Jackson Games, sjgames.com) to the mix and use it as a walkthrough at the campaign’s equivalent of Q Division – when you come down to it, the spy devices are hardly so much more outrageous than some of the gear shown in the big-screen bonanzas. Let players draw a few



cards and choose from them (or whatever the GM lets slide as analogous) as part of their hero’s loadout before setting out on the task. As far as the horror element is concerned (and here it’s “horror” with quotation marks), the *Munchkin* line offers its take on the Cthulhu Mythos and vampires (among others), and all are built to enjoy some sort of cross-compatibility. And once the game has come off the rails with these products . . . well, the sky’s the limit.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy Vetromile is a freelance writer and editor with an insatiable taste for games. He’s been reviewing them for over 10 years and still can’t wait for the next release. He has also edited several *GURPS* books.

RECOMMENDED READING

ESPIONAGE +

HORROR =

CONSPIRACY

BY MATTHEW POOK

If a game combines the two genres of espionage and horror, then it is sure to add a third: conspiracy. Once you have that trio, a varied mix of weirdness and pop culture elements cannot be far behind. Roswell, Area 51, alien Greys, MKULTRA, the Templars, the Masons, the assassination of the good and the bad, strange sciences and suppressed technologies, and the idea that humanity is ruled by Secret Masters or a New World Order. Take your pick, blend, and savor, because there is plenty to choose from.

Certainly the RPG classics of this trio draw from this well, in particular, *Conspiracy X 2.0* (\$39.95, Eden Studios, Inc., edenstudios.net) and *Delta Green* (\$39.95, Pagan Publishing, tccorp.com). In fact, *Conspiracy X 2.0* draws heavily from this source, mixing a supernatural and paranormal plethora with the U.S. government's secret involvement with the Greys plus the Atlantians and the Saurians. In this RPG the heroes are agents of AEGIS, an agency dedicated to investigating this weirdness. In gaming terms its most notable feature is its rules for creating AEGIS cells, each a ready-made party base the players contribute to and create during character generation. In comparison, *Delta Green* only draws slightly from said well, but still enough to use it as a highly effective veil behind which lies various elements of H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos. *Delta Green* is a modern updating of the classic horror RPG, *Call of Cthulhu* (\$34.95, Chaosium Inc., chaosium.com), in which fearless (and/or foolish) investigators confront earthly forces insane and evil enough to want unfathomable and uncaring gods to re-inherit the world. The largest of these cults span the globe and are conspiracies all of their own, as seen in the game's (and arguably the hobby's) best campaigns: Pagan Publishing's *Walker in the Wastes* and *The Realm of Shadows*, and Chaosium's *Masks of Nyarlathotep* (\$22.95 PDF) and *The Tatters of the King* (\$27.95 softcover).

Unfortunately, *Call of Cthulhu* is dated by today's standards for "modern day" games; there is not yet an update of its 1990s setting, and *Delta Green* remains the best approach to gaming the Mythos in the here and now.

To this list of classics one should also add Robin D. Laws' *The Esoterrorists* (\$19.95, Pelgrane Press, pelgranepress.com), wherein the heroes are the esoterrorists, part of a worldwide government-sanctioned conspiracy dedicated to stopping the activities of the Ordo Veritatis, which wants to bring magic into the world. Its GUMSHOE System mechanics are specifically designed to make the investigative game easy to run and play, with the esoterrorists having to clean or cover up the magical mess once the investigation done.

*You shall know the truth, and
the truth shall make you mad.*

– Aldous Huxley

Now that we have discussed the classics, it's time to go somewhere new, to see different treatments of the espionage and horror blend. The espionage and horror blend can be transplanted to wholly different genres, such as fantasy and superheroes. The self-published *Conspiracy of Shadows* (\$21.99, Bob Goat Press, 2004) describes the continent of Polian, a human-centric setting much like the Eastern Europe of our Middle Ages. This is an evocative world where everyone knows their place, categorized by ethnicity, culture, society, and faith.

Do the (former) agents give up or fight against the darkness after their agency is destroyed . . . without the resources?

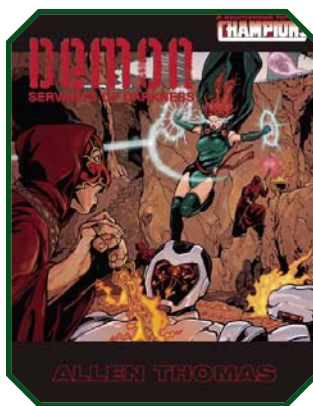
Several ethnic and cultural groups are given, corresponding roughly to the Huns, Poles, Russians, and Slavs. The Church also maintains a strong place in the social order, corresponding to Christianity, but is split between two different faiths: the Orthodox Albinican Church and the Amdati Church. The latter religion represents a schism akin to the Albigensian Heresy (perfect for those that want the Cathars in their conspiracy). Heroes are lightly described from a numerical standpoint, but heavily described with descriptors for both attributes and skills, such as “Stalks his prey unseen” for the Survival skill. A player must also decide his character’s Drive and Passion, Trigger, what set him against the Conspiracy, and the Cover behind which he investigates the Conspiracy; just as with *Conspiracy X*, the player group comes up with the assets of the Cell they form together. Such assets can be affiliations, artifacts, contacts, magical rituals, mentors, retainers, and so on, and are as much story elements as they are resources. Whether describing the innate powers of the Witchblooded or the rituals of sorcerers and shamans, magic in this setting is low key in nature but effective because of the widespread belief in the supernatural; however, the use of magic makes you susceptible to madness and the Taint of the infernal. What *Conspiracy of Shadows* does *not* include is a conspiracy inherent to the setting. Instead, it is up to the GM to create one, whether a cabal of nobles plotting to unseat the king or a shadowy group planning to incite a religious schism. The GM is helped by advice on involving the conspiracy with the cell and on running a campaign, which – like other self-published games – is intended to be short.

For superhero settings, the challenge represented by the horrifying conspiracy has to be of a magnitude that at least matches the heroes’ powers, if not dwarf them. The threat described by *DEMON: Servants of Darkness* (\$24.99, HERO Games, herogames.com) certainly provides that. This is primarily an organization book for *Champions*, HERO Games’ detailed – if numbers heavy – superhero RPG that uses *The HERO System 5th Edition, Revised* (\$49.99), a generic rule set also from HERO games. Thought to have been operating since the 1930s to those in the know, DEMON is simply an overly ambitious Satanic cult. To those *really* in the know, DEMON is much more than that. It is in fact a global organization with branches and offices (or Demonhames) in all major cities where it hides its foul rites and beliefs behind another faith, such as the worship of the Aztec gods in Mexico City and of Kali in Mumbai and Kolkata. Each Demonhame is semi-autonomous, but its inner circles are definitely working towards something, and discovering this will take no little effort upon the part of the heroes. But time is running out, and their plans are due to come to fruition very soon . . .

This supplement describes DEMON in full detail. At the tip is its Inner Circle comprised of the avaricious Coin Collector (who really does have the 30 pieces of silver in his collection); the Dalang, a shadow puppeteer; Demoiselle Nocturne, nightmare personified; Herr Doktor Pandemonium, whose voice

awakens ancient racial terrors in the listener; and Dyer vander Bleek, master of demonic magic. Toward the bottom are DEMON’s ordinary members, represented in character packages such as Born-Again Satanist, Satanic Toady, and Working Joe Satanist. Two Demonhames are described in detail along with the cult’s magic and regalia. Also discussed is how DEMON fits both into the *Champions* universe, covering the game’s Pulp, Silver, Bronze, and Iron Ages; and into other HERO system genres and settings, such as *Fantasy HERO* and *Dark Champions*. The wealth of detail presented in *DEMON: Servants of Darkness* (along with the detailed stats) makes it suitable for the superhero RPG of your choice and quite possibly any game in which you really want a big arcane conspiracy.

Finally, we return to the original approach to the genre, with the more recent *Apocalypse Prevention, Inc.* (\$24.95, Third Eye Games, thirdeyegames.net). A mix of *Hellboy* and *Men in Black*, but with demons from other dimensions rather than bug-eyed aliens, the employees of the titular Apocalypse Prevention, Inc. (API) are tasked with keeping the supernatural world hidden from humanity; if that means fighting fire with fire, then so be it. Humans, Burners (Fire Demons), Changelings, Lochs (Fish People, almost extinct due to bio-terrorism), Spectrals (Ghosts), Taylari (Vampires), and Wolf People are available as playable characters; other demons are unavailable as PCs because they are illegal on Earth. Heroes can utilize cybernetics, magic, and psionics (the last two use the same mechanics and are nicely handled, each spell or psionic ability being easily customized). In the past, API’s successes included preventing the spread of the Black Death, minimizing the Y2K bug, and stopping a demon from bringing the Moon to the Earth in the 1930s. But now the company works as immigration for demons (enforcing the API Registration Act) as much as it does looking into miracles, prophecies, and the like. The setting is otherwise much like our own, though possibly too fanciful . . . the United States’ “right to bear arms” has been reformed and gun ownership greatly tightened. Another questionable aspect of this game is the fact that API agents must sever contact with their families, which limits story possibilities. Although describing itself as “An Action Horror RPG . . . with a twist of humor,” not all of these elements are as strong as they could be. It needs a more detailed Fear/Insanity mechanic for the horror, whilst the humor will have to come from both GM and players. The rules handle the action well though, and hopefully more horror and perhaps some humor will come with new setting material and scenarios.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew Pook resides in Birmingham, England with the requisite pair of black cats and a perky Goth (not obligatory, but fun nonetheless), plus more games than he can eat. A pedant and proofreader by day, a reviewer by night, he has been gaming for nearly 30 years. He has been saying mostly good things about those games for almost 10 of those years now.

LAST WORD

WITH ELOY LASANTA

For the *Last Word* in each issue of *Pyramid*, we chat with someone in the game industry known for his work in the topic field. This month we talk with Eloy Lasanta, CEO of Third Eye Games and chief architect behind *Apocalypse Prevention, Inc.* (reviewed on p. 39).

PYRAMID: So, Eloy, if you're cleared to release this information: What is the Last Word on . . . Horror and Spies?

ELOY LASANTA: Reaction.

Interesting! Who's reacting to whom?

Well, you can take it from a few different aspects. You can't invoke horror in a character in a game, story, or anything unless you have the ability to get a reaction out of him. No matter how large, hairy, grotesque, smelly, or evil a monster appears, there's no horror unless the subject's reaction is correct.

In a roleplaying game specifically, this also applies to players, as they get to delve into their characters' psyches and decide how exactly their characters would respond to something. It can be a lot of fun in many ways.

Reaction.

– Eloy Lasanta

How do the reactions of those who deal with horror professionally differ from the typical horror-gaming mundanes (if at all)?

Good question. Just like many big horror fans, one does begin to become desensitized to the generic "Oh I have big teeth" or "You shot me and I didn't fall! Oooo. Aren't I scary?" over time. So, as a writer, you have to continually search for different things to scare people with. The first measuring stick to use is: Does it scare you personally? It takes a lot for me to get scared, but I do enjoy getting reactions from my players/readers.

Horror seems to work best when the full truth isn't known, but spycraft revolves around learning the truth; is it possible to remain true to the reactions and expectations of both genres, or does there need to be a compromise?

I struggled with some of the same questions when writing *Apocalypse Prevention, Inc.* How do you balance the knowing with the not knowing? I find that the two extremes feed off of and pour into each other without really trying. In my experience, it's all about pacing. If an agent's job is to find out the truth behind a mystery, how you reveal it can cause a great deal of horror; thus commanding a certain reaction . . . especially if the information they find, for instance, points to

his best friend being a traitor. The best aspects of horror are when they are personal to the hero. People get scared very quickly when their nice, protective, "nothing will ever happen to me and mine" bubble gets popped.

*What's the best in-character reaction you've gotten from players while working on *Apocalypse Prevention, Inc.*?*

One of my players created a Taylari (living vampire) who signed up with API specifically to hunt down Taylari Mortus (dead vampires . . . savage and animalistic hunters) for the company. We played quite a few sessions and he (and his group) took out two of them. Then, on the third, they tracked down the monster creeping in the dark. He rushed in take it out, just like all the others, and then noticed that it was his mom. Again, making it personal automatically enhances the horror. The player got very mad at me; I just couldn't believe that I set him up for the rule of three.

"Rule of Three" equals "Do something three times, but on the third time spring the trap"?

Yeah, it's actually an old movie trick that works *really* well for telling stories.

Apocalypse Prevention, Inc. was released a few months ago . . . what's in the works for Third Eye Games?

Yes, we just passed three months of it being available online. We recently released *API Worldwide: Canada* as well just a couple of weeks ago. We're currently entering the editing phases for the second *API* sourcebook *Demon Codex: Lochs* (due out in April) and are in the developing for a brand-new setting as well, guaranteed to make a lot of our fans very happy.

And just an additional note, the *Apocalypse Prevention, Inc.* core has been available exclusively online since its release, but it is currently available for order through all major gaming distributors as well. So let your Friendly Local Game Store know you want it!

If you were a member of API, what would your final fate be?

I'd become so awesome that they'd promote me to Elite agent, letting me tell everyone else what to do. Then I'd eventually be killed by a rabid Wolf Person, but the company'd yank me back from the Bright Lights to continue serving the company.

*Information about *Apocalypse Prevention, Inc.* and Third Eye Games' other plans can be found at thirdeyegames.net.*



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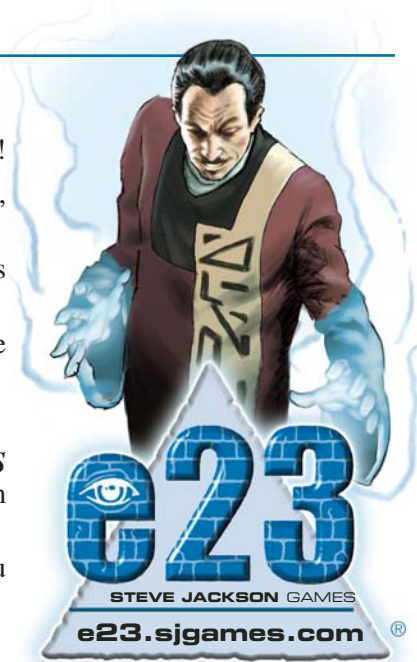
Errata. Everyone makes mistakes, including us – but we do our best to fix our errors. Up-to-date errata pages for all **GURPS** releases are available on our website – see above.

GURPS rules and statistics in this magazine are specifically for the **GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition**. Page references that begin with B refer to that book.

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