

# PYRAMID<sup>®</sup>

Issue 3/81 July '15



## HORRIFIC CREATIONS

**IRAQI IRRUPTOR BLUES**  
by Jason "PK" Levine

**TOO SIMILAR, TOO DIFFERENT**  
by Michele Armellini

**ALTUS BRAT**  
by Nathan Milner

**HELLBLADE**  
by David L. Pulver

**BELL, BOOK, AND CANDLE**  
by J. Edward Tremlett

**ANATOMY OF  
A CROSSROADS BARGAIN**  
by Jon Black

**STEVE JACKSON GAMES**

Stock #37-2681

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Secrets can lurk in any shadows, waiting to be uncovered . . . or waiting to strike. Do you dare risk tapping the power of horrific creations? Do you dare *not* to investigate? This issue of *Pyramid* has a plethora of possibilities for all dabblers in darkness.

What happens when you discover teammates have gone missing and history is about to be literally rewritten? You get the *Iraqi Irruptor Blues*. Let Jason “PK” Levine – *GURPS Monster Hunters* mastermind – lead you on a thrilling adventure for *GURPS Horror: The Madness Dossier* as you chase down monsters unleashing toxic memes and psychotronic munitions upon the world.

Worse than any gory, life-sucking Thing Man Was Not Meant To Know are those monsters that seem somehow related to humanity and yet are *Too Similar, Too Different*. From Michele Armellini – author of *GURPS Locations: St. George’s Cathedral* – learn about methods for creating human hybrids, relevant *GURPS* traits, and four new templates, including the predator in disguise and the tragically tainted.

It’s easy to lose yourself when mastering a new weapon. That threat takes a very literal twist with the temptation of the *Hellblade*. *GURPS Bio-Tech* author David L. Pulver reveals the secrets of this mysterious weapon in this month’s *Eidetic Memory*, including the abilities it grants its wielder and what it does to the souls of those it kills. Included are *GURPS* stats for the sword’s demonic inhabitants and a map of its pocket dimension.

A surge of creativity. Revenge. The wishes of those who would bargain with darkness are varied, as you’ll learn once we unpack a classic superstition and examine the *Anatomy of a Crossroads Bargain*. Discover a brief history of temptation, key *GURPS* traits (including how to add “escape clauses”), and tips for adding bargains into any campaign.

Mysteries unfold as you call upon the dead, using the power contained within the classic triad of the *Bell, Book, and Candle*. You can add these enigmatic (yet systemless) tools to any campaign involving modern occult or monster hunting, or set during any high-magic quasi-historical world’s Renaissance or Age of Reason.

If you decide to use the *Altus Brat* to bring back someone from the dead, are you willing to deal with the consequences? Find out what magic dealers don’t want you to know about this special bread, including *GURPS* stats for its three forms.

This issue seals its dark secrets with a Random Thought Table that fully unleashes the laboratory of ideas to help devise horrific creations. Whether you’re creating a hybrid army, selling your soul, swinging a sword, or raising the dead, this issue of *Pyramid* harbors some of our most horrific creations yet!

## ARTICLE COLORS

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

*Pale Blue:* In This Issue

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

*Green:* Columnist

*Dark Blue:* *GURPS* Features

*Purple:* Systemless Features

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# FROM THE EDITOR

## I WILL SHOW YOU FEAR IN A HANDFUL OF DICE

Perhaps the great thing about horrific creations is that they can be added to just about any campaign world – even if there is *no desire* to turn it into a horror campaign. Perhaps the best example is the One Ring, which I talk a bit about in my column this month (pp. 36-37). It's a terrifying object, and it has truly scary effects on one's soul, but it doesn't really infest the underlying flavor of the rest of the setting. Even with Peter Jackson's slime-orcs, I don't think Middle Earth would top most people's top 10 list of Most Horrifying Settings.

If horrific items, beings, and even *places* can be included in a campaign without radically altering the overall feeling of the setting, then that makes them good choices for a change of pace in a more sedate campaign. After all, "horror" isn't a genre so much as a *flavoring* for other genres. If you're looking to add a new challenge for those meddling heroes, feel free to insert a scrap of spookiness, a scary adversary, or someone who made a deal with darkness. It even works in a

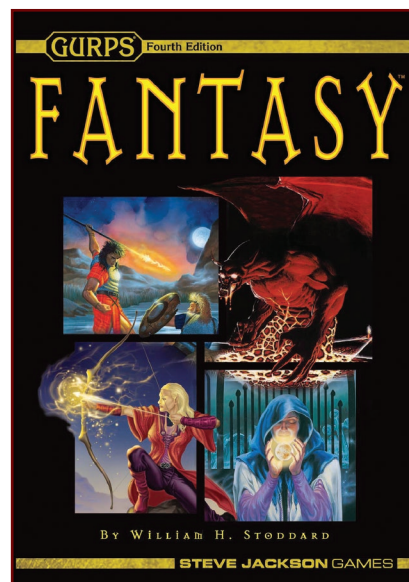
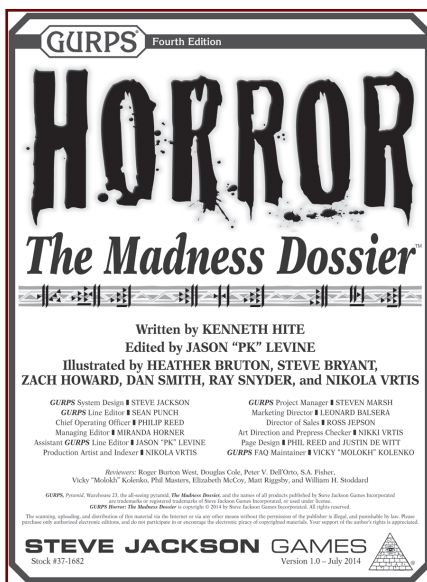
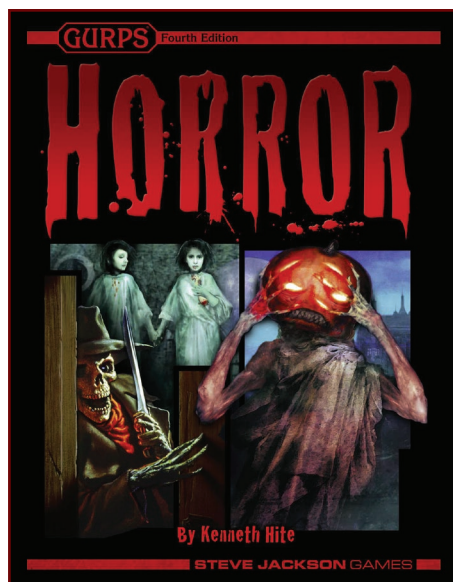
setting without explicit supernatural darkness; heart-stopping aliens could lurk around the darkest corners in a science-fiction campaign. Even in a "realistic" world, unsettling realities could lurk anywhere. (The orphan-mangling contraptions of the Industrial Revolution are examples of the corruptive possibilities of tempting devices.)

Of course, if you have a bona fide horror campaign, then it has a limitless appetite for new and terrifying wonders. (The battle depicted in the pages of *GURPS Horror: The Madness Dossier* seems never-ending.) In that case, this issue of *Pyramid* should be even *more* applicable to your interests.

Regardless of how you unleash your inner demons, we recommend reading this issue of *Pyramid* with the lights on . . .

## WRITE HERE, RIGHT NOW

So how unsettling was this issue? Did our scientists seem more disgruntled than mad, or did any of our experiments seem even creepier than you expected? Tell the gremlins privately at [pyramid@sjgames.com](mailto:pyramid@sjgames.com), or join the unusual suspects who gather publicly at [forums.sjgames.com](http://forums.sjgames.com).



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# IRAQI IRRUPTOR BLUES

BY JASON “PK” LEVINE

A SANDMAN team just went dark and the PCs are the closest backup. When they arrive, everyone is either missing or dead. To save the survivors and shut down the irruptors' horrific invention, they'll have to travel into the heart of a subduction zone, deal with a toxic meme that's spreading at a terrifying rate, and fight through a war zone that nobody else can even see.

This adventure for *GURPS Horror: The Madness Dossier* makes a few assumptions about the path the PCs are *likely* to take, but includes enough information about what's going on for the GM to tackle things in any order. Statistics for Sandmen, cultists, araddin zombies, and irruptors can be found in *Madness Dossier*; treat random civilians as having attributes of 10 and skills in the 8-12 range.

Players can safely read “The Mission,” “The Hillah Team,” and the full “Chaldean Babylon and Etemenanki” box. Everything else is intended for the GM only.

## THE MISSION

The PCs are urgently summoned to the nearest military base with a SANDMAN presence. The highest-ranked Project officer (here assumed to be Air Marshal Artimus Felt) will explain the situation to the team.

Project SANDMAN keeps a rotating team of personnel permanently stationed in Hillah, Iraq (53 miles south of Baghdad), monitoring the nearby subduction zone. Felt will summarize *Chaldean Babylon and Etemenanki* (p. 5) – or the GM can hand the information to a PC with good Archaeology and History skills and let *him* explain it. Felt emphasizes how stubborn the Chaldean subduction zone is: They close it, only to see it open again within months.

The current Hillah team is a detachment of nine commandos, all attached to a nearby U.S. Army base as consultants. They keep an eye on the Chaldean zone – using a mix of satellite imaging, local news, clandestine foot patrols, and sitting on their hotel roof with binoculars – in three shifts of three. As well, a handful of other Sandmen (mainly anthropologists and archaeologists) typically are present, taking measurements and trying to figure out how to destabilize the zone.

Two days ago, an unexpected reality temblor occurred in Karbala, 35 miles west of Hillah. The two reality archaeologists took three of the commandos with them to recon and contain the temblor. The two teams touched base hourly via radio, but one hour ago, all radio transmission from the

Hillah team (below) ceased. It could be technical difficulties, but the Project considers this an emergency. The Karbala team is still hard at work and cannot get away to check on the others.

Regardless of their actual distance from Hillah, the PCs are *effectively* the closest backup team, thanks to the fueled-up BAe 125 fast-transport jet (522 mph) waiting for them. If they're more than 1,000 miles away, the Project has even arranged for an emergency mid-air refuel over a friendly country so they can make it there in one trip. The jet has a secure connection to SANDMAN's data cloud. The team will find that local maps, personnel records, intel on the zone (*The Truth Will Subduct You*, p. 5), and tach-scripts for Area Knowledge (Hillah) and the Arabic and Akkadian languages have already been pushed to their mobile devices.

“Head into Hillah, find out what happened to the eight Sandmen there, and get us answers. Keep in contact and keep any Anunnaki techniques you use *local* and *focused*. That clear?”

## THE HILLAH TEAM

With part of their team in Karbala, the eight Sandmen below were left stationed on the third (top) floor of the *Sayf-Rih* hotel, in northern Hillah. The plan was for the commandos to switch to just *two* shifts of three soldiers each (Derek/Mort/Lars and Faustine/Lillian/Paul), with the two “civilians” alternating schedules to spot them as needed.

- Faustine Herman, Sfc. (29, F)
- Derek Alberts, Sgt. (31, M)
- Lillian Navarro, Sgt. (26, F)
- Mort Forde, Cpl. (26, M)
- Lars Lindsay, Cpl. (24, M)
- Paul Amos, Spc. (24, M)
- Margaret Stoltz, applied anthropologist specializing in Babylon history (31, F)
- Henry Buck, neurologist specializing in modern Arabian memes (55, M)

The six commandos are all American citizens and members of the U.S. Army, with cover stories as military advisors to the Iraqi forces; miles of red tape keep anyone from realizing that they have no commanding officer. Margaret and Henry are British civilians, with covers as husband and wife here to assist Islamic Relief (a local humanitarian group).

The PCs land at an ad-hoc Army base five miles south of town, with a cover story as “cultural consultants” here studying local traditions. Major Darryl Falk will meet them on the tarmac; he is their point of contact and will offer them anything they need (within reason). The sun is setting as they drive into Hillah, but the hotel will still be happy to check them in if they want a room.

## WHAT’S GOING ON?

Three weeks ago, commando Lars Lindsay met Amira al-Asadi, a local 20-year-old living with three other ladies of the same age (all “war orphans” with no male family and thus “permitted” by society to live together). He began spending much of his downtime at her apartment; his teammates Derek and Mort knew but took no issue with it.

Four days ago, a kulullû and some gir-tabullû were retrocreated by a surge in the Chaldean zone, which also expanded to include Amira’s apartment. The strength of this subduction zone and the tenacity of its cult (p. 8) meant this retrocreation reached far back – as if the irruptors had been here for *weeks* working on something! That something was a powerful meme (p. 6), tailored to the subduction zone’s mesh of modern Hillah and Chaldean Babylon.

Yesterday evening, the kulullû finished encoding the meme into audio of “an in-class presentation by Mr. Ali, a student at the University of Baghdad” (difficult to trace, as that could describe thousands of students). It uploaded it to **kturm**, a website that pays its users a modest sum for accurately transcribing audio files, adding keywords to draw Hillah users.

At 4:00 a.m. today, Amira logged into **kturm**, which she used to supplement her brick factory income. She took the bait, downloaded the audio file, and began transcribing it – until interrupted by Lars, who had carved an hour out of his city patrol to visit her. As they rested in her bed, the audio file looped at barely audible levels. Amira woke as a full araddin zombie, and placed headphones upon a sleeping Lars. Something about the clash of the Chaldean-specific meme and his attempt to resist it formed a perfect storm of Anunnaki insanity. The subduction zone flexed . . . and an êkimmu was born within Lars.

“Lars” and Amira cranked the computer volume and then plotted as they drove to the *Sayf-Rih*. Lars lured his shiftmates Derek and Mort (one at a time) into the hotel basement, where Amira attacked with a shovel and Lars shot them with a silenced pistol. After hiding the bodies, Lars used a gas grenade on the other three commandos in their sleep and then easily overpowered Margaret and Henry. Before dawn, the two used a laundry cart to move the hostages (and their gear) to a stolen car, drove to Amira’s, and then rendezvoused with the other irruptors at the canal monitoring station (pp. 8-9).

Now the Sandmen are all dead or missing, Amira’s roommates have become araddin zombies and are working on infecting their entire building, Lars has the cultists on high alert for Sandmen, and the PCs have no way (yet) to know that something terrible is happening at the monitoring station.

## CHALDEAN BABYLON AND ETEMENANKI

Chaldean (“kal-DEE-un”) Babylon was a brief stage in the life cycle of the Babylonian empire. This dynasty began when Nabopolassar threw off Assyrian reign in 626 B.C., made Akkadian the official language, and inspired a peaceful renaissance of building, city development, and agricultural technology. In 604 B.C., he was killed in battle and his son, Nebuchadnezzar II, reigned for the next 42 years. Nebuchadnezzar consolidated and improved Chaldean Babylon in many ways, including restoring the ziggurat Etemenanki (“House of the Frontier Between Heaven and Earth”) associated with the Temple of Marduk. Marduk was a winged man, first worshiped as a water and agriculture god, but later “promoted” to the head of the Babylonian pantheon. His Etemenanki ziggurat was originally seven stories high and gilded in precious metals. A century later, Chaldean Babylon fell to Persia; three centuries later, Alexander the Great’s successor Antiochus had Etemenanki destroyed.

### *The Truth Will Subduct You*

Chaldean Babylon is almost certainly a retrocreation to explain away inconsistencies in the historical record. The utopia of Chaldean culture is actually an Anunnaku lie: Marduk was the head šedu there, and Etemenanki was their base of power.

Because of this, the area around the ziggurat and temple ruins (on the northern outskirts of Hillah) is a massive subduction zone which refuses to stay closed; its borders vary drastically every time it reopens. Project SANDMAN’s data on the zone indicates an anti-technology bent; modern devices become “glitchy” within. Also, large-scale use of Anunnaki methods (like a huge crowd being exposed to a glyph or meme) cause effects that tend to mutate and “go viral.” These issues were among the things being studied by the Hillah team.

## AT THE HOTEL

The PCs may take any of a *wide* range of approaches to gather intel, so this describes what they may discover, rather than giving specific rules on how to find it.

*The Rooms:* The Sandmen in Karbala left their three rooms (301-303) tidy. The other three are well-used. In 304 (Lars’ team), no useful evidence can be found; Mort and Derek left voluntarily. In 305 (Margaret and Henry’s room), Henry’s glasses broke as he struggled; some of the lens pieces remain. And 306 (Faustine’s team) has residue from the gas grenade plus small fragments from its casing. Bodies were dragged from 305 and 306 down the hall, though once they hit the stairs, it becomes difficult to tell where they went. Most of the useful gear is missing. Amira’s fingerprints appear sporadically; the Sandmen will have to fingerprint an entire room to find her few out-of-place ones.

*The Lobby and Cameras:* The hotel has two cameras in the lobby: one pointed at the door and one at the check-in desk (from behind). The former shows Lars and Amira entering at 5:01 a.m. It was disabled by Lars at 5:47 a.m. and is still down, though no one has realized this yet (there's no display at the desk). Someone looking for the right clues *may* notice wheeled indentions heading outside (from the laundry cart) and realize that this hotel doesn't have luggage trolleys.

*The Basement:* This is where the industrial washers and dryers are; the whole place smells *strongly* of bleach, due to it being used on the floor recently (to quickly remove the blood). In the corner rests a shovel with Amira's fingerprints and small amounts of blood and hair on the blade. Behind the washers lie Derek and Mort's bodies, stunned by a shovel blow to the head and then killed with a close shot to the heart . . . using the exact same Project-issued ammo that the PCs have.

*Outside:* A single *Sayf-Rih* laundry cart can be found in an alley at the end of the block (where Lars stole a car). There are hairs, traces of knockout gas, etc., making it clear that the Sandmen were in here.

*Police Reports:* The car (a 2002 silver Ford Mustang) has been reported stolen. Legal Enforcement Powers or hacking may reveal it on traffic cams driving to Amira's apartment (so Lars could burn a CD of the memetic audio to play in the car, loud enough for the Sandmen in the trunk to hear). Unfortunately, cameras deeper in the zone are too glitchy to track the car further.

*Taisher ESP:* A taisher can tell that the subduction zone is flaring up and (on a sufficiently high analysis roll) that there are a few irruptors within it . . . somewhere. Even Detect (Precise) won't let him get a perfect lock on their location, due to the psychotronics they're using.

Most likely, the PCs will come away with Amira's fingerprints, picture, and/or address and decide to investigate there.

## AMIRA'S PLACE

Amira Al-Asadi lives on the third floor of a four-story apartment building, a mile northwest of the hotel (currently within the Chaldean zone), with her three roommates: Farrah Al-Rawi, Sanaa Al-Tamimi, and Shatha Al-Hussein (all 20 years old).

The Anunnaki virus has turned all three into araddin zombies, and they're trying to infect more people. They prefer inviting neighbors in and letting the audio do the work, but will also eagerly start conversations: "Have you ever thought about how rich our culture truly is? Why, if you look back to humanity's early days . . ."

Right now, Farrah is on the phone with Radio Sawa (see *Concealed Danger*, below) while Sanaa and Shatha are in the hallway recruiting neighbors. The meme-laden audio is cranked up as loud as Amira's speakers can handle; fortunately, it doesn't reach the street.

### The Meme

This linguistic virus draws upon the parallels between Chaldean Babylon and modern Hillah, infecting the hearer with a powerful longing to find a voice from those ancient times (and to spread the meme, of course). Its goal is to turn listeners into potential cultists; in seeking out knowledge, they'll

likely run into established cultists who can finish indoctrinating them. And meeting an actual irruptor will be a transcendent experience!

Within the Chaldean zone, the meme is Power 7 and it takes effect *quickly*. Just 30 seconds of exposure (necessary to memetically analyze the audio by ear) is enough to trigger a roll against Will-5; two minutes makes this Will-6; and five minutes or more requires Will-7. (These values include the penalty for Power.)

Failure costs the listener 2d levels of Will, only for the purpose of resisting Anunnaki influence. If 1/3 of Will is lost this way, he gains Obsession (as above) (12); if 1/2 of Will is lost, this becomes Obsession (9); at 2/3 of Will lost, Obsession (6); and at Will 0 or worse, Obsession has *no* self-control roll. If the listener continues to be exposed, he must make *another* resistance roll every hour until he succeeds.

Outside of the zone, it is only Power 3, which means that the resistance rolls listed above are at +4, and the meme only removes 1d-1 levels of Will. Everything else remains unchanged.

Fortunately, the rapid onset of this meme also means that it heals relatively quickly. Will recovers one level per *week* (once removed from exposure), and treatment restores 1.5x as much Will as normal (round down).

*The Chaldean Babylonians  
worked hard to create a new land  
reminiscent of the one ruled by  
the great Hammurabi more than  
a millennium earlier.*

*– John Davenport,  
A Brief Political  
and Geographic History  
of the Middle East*

### Concealed Danger

Smart Sandmen will recon before charging in, but even then, remember that none of these threats are immediately obvious!

*The Meme:* Anyone hearing the classroom audio long enough to risk infection may *also* roll against Connoisseur (Audio Arts), Public Speaking, Propaganda, or Teaching to realize the danger. If successful, a *follow-up* Expert Skill (Memetics) roll reveals details. If the Sandman's resistance roll failed, however, both rolls take a penalty equal to the levels of Will lost.

*The Infected:* Almost the entire third floor – some 10-30 people, depending on how hard the GM wants to make it – are araddin zombies. Getting past them safely means avoiding infection (easy with noise-canceling earbuds, but only if the threat is known) while keeping them happy. The latter requires an Acting roll, at -3 if the Sandman is effectively deaf and -3 without Cultural Familiarity (Middle East).

Success gets past (margin of success)×2 zombies, minimum 1. Failure prompts an immediate “potential combat” reaction roll at -6 or the degree of failure, whichever is worse!

*Reaching the Masses:* Farrah has decided to call the nearest Radio Sawa news station and leave a meme-laden message on their answering machine. (Their budget doesn't cover voice mail.) The PCs learn about this *after* she's deposited her dangerous payload, and will have to race to the local station to steal or destroy the machine before anyone has a chance to listen to it and spread it on-air. (This “side quest” can be cut if the GM wants to shorten the adventure.)

## The Result

If the team gets to Amira's computer, they'll see the download screen from **kturm**. Getting the audio off of the website will be difficult unless someone thinks to call Project SANDMAN; this is *exactly* the kind of thing they can take care of easily.

In addition, anyone getting into **kturm** can find the IP address from which the file was uploaded. It shows that it came from northern Hillah, somewhere between Etemenanki and the canal. (If the GM wants to *really* speed things up, he may even narrow it down to the canal monitoring station specifically; this way, the PCs don't have to interrogate any cultists, though they'll still have to *face* them.)

The three roommates, if deprogrammed, can tell the PCs that Amira and Lars have been dating (on the sly) for three weeks. They know nothing about cultists, SANDMAN, irruptors, etc.

## HIGHWAY TO THE DANGER ZONE

The center of the Chaldean zone is a 30-minute drive (due to crowded streets) or one-hour hike to the north. The canal monitoring station (once the PCs know to head there) is a further 15 minutes (driving) or 30 minutes (hiking) north. But this won't be a fun trip.

As the team heads deeper into the subduction zone, the air begins to feel hot and thick with dust – perfect stillness, punctuated with the occasional howling gust that lasts only seconds. Sunlight or moonlight seems to diffuse through the air, rather than beaming straight down, creating the uncomfortable sensation of a world without shadows. No matter the time, the streets are full of people walking around anxiously, motivated by the subconscious feeling that something is *wrong*. Everyone's on edge: -2 to all reaction rolls, and the PCs feel the public's eyes on them. The GM should actively mislead anyone with Paranoia, giving false warnings of potential hostility.

Anyone wearing glasses, contacts, goggles, a visor, etc., is at -2 to Vision, as the surface becomes glazed and weirdly refractive. In addition, modern technology (TL7+) becomes less reliable, gaining a Malfunction number (p. B407): Malf. 17 for TL7, Malf. 16 for TL8, and Malf. 15 for TL9+. For most

equipment, malfunction means a glitch until someone makes an operation or repair roll at +4; on a natural 18, however, the GM can be *malicious*.

Determine who is navigating. Once every 15-30 minutes of travel, this person must make a successful Area Knowledge (Hillah), Hidden Lore (History B), Navigation (Land), or IQ-4 roll; Absolute Direction gives +3 (yes, that means it counts *double* for Navigation). Failure on this roll means that the zone has warped space enough to confuse the travelers, wasting 15 minutes of travel time. Critical failure dumps them directly into the waiting arms of machine-gunning cultists (*Please Ignore These Bullets*, p. 8), who get a free “surprise” turn before the Sandmen even get a chance to resist the glyph!

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

To help the GM keep everything clear, here are all of the important people in this adventure along with the status of each as the PCs arrive.

### Sandmen

*Lars:* A commando possessed by an êkimmu. Currently at the canal monitoring station (pp. 8-9).

*Derek and Mort:* Killed by Lars and Amira. Their bodies are in the *Sayf-Rih's* basement, behind the washing machine.

*The Others (Faustine, Lillian, Paul, Margaret, and Henry):* Being held prisoner at the canal monitoring station.

### Locals

*Amira:* Araddin zombie. With Lars at the canal monitoring station.

*Amira's Roommates (Farrah, Sanaa, and Shatha):* Araddin zombies, doing their best to contaminate their apartment building. Farrah may eventually decide to call the Radio Sawa news station.

*Many Cultist Thugs:* Spread throughout Hillah, heavily in the subduction zone, lightly elsewhere. True believers, not araddin zombies.

### Irruptors

The êkimmu living in Lars' mind, one kulullû, and *N* girtablullû are in or around the canal monitoring station – where *N* equals half the number of PCs (round up) plus one.

## Hide and Seek

Lars knows that SANDMAN will send a team, and has been directing the cultists in ways to spot the PCs. Initially, they do so on a 12 or less, but get a cumulative +1 for every 15 minutes the Sandmen spend moving about the zone, and from +1 to +3 every time the PCs do something particularly flashy or attention-getting. Roll once when the team enters the zone, and then again every time the target number improves. If the Sandmen are trying to avoid attention (which means no speeding!), they can resist this with Shadowing or (if on foot) Stealth.

Once the cultists have spotted the PCs, they'll pass along the information via radio. They will not confront them; that's what the machine-gun nests are for. However, if the Sandmen and cultists erupt into open battle, assume that the formerly incognito cultist thugs have 9mm Glocks and Guns (Pistol)-12.

## Please Ignore These Bullets

Four machine-gun nests have been set up at strategic street corners within the zone, with a huge GU.SHUB (Neglect) banner above. Each is manned by three cultists; one works the .50 HMG (p. B281) while the other two wield AK-47s but focus on using binoculars and radio to locate the Sandmen.

The heroes will have to pass by at least one such nest, and possibly more if they get turned around (see above) or otherwise end up meandering around the zone (GM's call as to when that's the case). How this plays out depends *heavily* on whether the cultists have already spotted and identified the PCs; if not, the binocular-wielding cultist may make one roll at +1 upon seeing the Sandmen.

If they spot and recognize the team, the cultists will open fire with everything they have. The crowds will panic at these "bullets from nowhere" and begin running through the street, making defensive driving nearly impossible (-4 to Driving) but also soaking some of the damage from the bullets. Roll 1d-3 (minimum 0) to see how many bystanders get in the way of each shot; each provides cover DR 10.

If the group remains incognito, they can drive right by . . . or double back to take out the cultists from behind, though if done *openly*, this counts as an "attention-getting act" for *Hide and Seek* (p. 7).

## The Cult of Marduk

The simplest way to get detailed information is to grab a few cultists and scare, beat, or brain-hack it out of them. Most have Extreme Fanaticism, for an effective Will 12 to resist these methods. Of course, the players may come up with *other* ways to obtain this intel.

*The True Order of Marduk* has existed for 27 years, though it claims a heritage dating back centuries. It experiences

significant peaks and lulls in its activity and membership (tied to the subduction zone, though few are aware of this). They actively worship the irruptors as avatars of the gods, and meet behind "hidden doors" (covered with a GU.SHUB glyph) that they learn to find with their eyes closed.

Currently, most of the cultists (about 50-80 in total) are out on the streets of Hillah, looking for their enemies (the Sandmen) – with the rest (15-25) at the canal monitoring station. The cultists know that the irruptors are holed up there, but not why.

## THE MONITORING STATION

Hillah's water comes from the *Hillah Canal*, an artificial branch of the Euphrates River. The small monitoring station, at the far north edge of town, sits on the south bank of the canal and tracks its flow and quality. It is two stories, with a "basement" below the water line, which houses the water intakes and test equipment. Project SANDMAN can easily obtain blueprints, but will warn the PCs that they have no way of knowing if the interior has been altered, whether via construction or subduction-zone weirdness (GM's call).

The north third of the station is *in* the canal. To the west is its parking lot, to the east is a muddy bank (-2 to all DX-based rolls, -1 to all defenses), and to the south is the main road.

## Nearby

One of the girtablullû is hiding atop a different building, protected by a SANGUSH (I belong here) glyph. It is in contact with the kulullû and will radio immediately if it sees anyone entering the station grounds. Depending on the end-game (*What's in the Box?*, p. 9), it may also be ready to swoop in, capture someone or something, and then fly off across the canal.

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## Parking Lot

The cultists have closed the chain-link gate here. It's easy to ram a vehicle through, but this will set off one of their buried land mines: 5d×8 cr ex, triggered by 220+ lbs. The vehicle will likely be destroyed; for dividing up internal damage among the passengers, see *Occupants and Vehicle Damage* (p. B555).

Three work vans in the parking lot provide cover if a fire erupts here (they're filled with enough equipment to block rifle fire); the nearest is 15 yards away from the building.

## Second Floor

The top floor of the station is used for offices and storing paperwork. Half of the cultists in the building are here, looking out the windows for threats and intruders. They will attack with AK-47s, taking aimed shots if necessary to hit distant targets. They have one RPG (6d×6(10) cr ex linked to 7d×2 cr ex, Acc 2, Range 2,300, Minimum Range 10) that they're reserving to deal with helicopters, tanks, etc.; it has a water-based "backblast" and is thus safe to use inside.

## First Floor

This holds the main entrance (on the west side, facing the parking lot) and most of the administrative offices. It also contains the remaining cultists, most of the girtablullû, and several strategically placed glyphs, including IGI.NU.GAL (Blind), NAM.HILI (Fascinate), and SHEG (Obey and agree). The windows on this floor have been boarded up, but with peepholes left; the cultists here rely heavily on intel from those on the top floor.

## Processing Floor

This level is below the water line, reachable via stairs in the middle of the first floor. Industrial water-processing equipment dominates the space here, leaving only narrow paths between massive pumps, tanks, and so on. Lars, Amira, the kulullû, and any remaining girtablullû are here (see *Dramatis Personae*, p. 7, for scorpion-men headcount).

The kulullû has removed all outer and inner covers from the intakes and stays near them. With a single Ready maneuver, it can open an intake, which will eventually flood this floor. Doing so allows the fish-man to dive into the water and escape. Anyone following must overcome the inbound current: -5 to water Move, or roll ST at -5 to pull yourself out via handholds.

If these threats are insufficient for the group, the GM decides whether any abductees have been infected by the meme. If so, the infected are shooting to kill, while the PCs hopefully attempt to incapacitate their brainwashed allies.

At the back of the processing floor, after navigating the maze of narrow paths and gaps, the team finds all of the remaining abductees strapped standing to boards, their brains hooked into a LED- and tube-festooned box. This psychotronic device, somehow empowered by the minds of the Sandmen, is what prevented any tashers from drawing a bead on the irruptors (*At the Hotel*, pp. 5-6). However, the horrific creation of the Anunnakku serves an even more sinister purpose . . . see *What's In the Box?* (below) for a multiple-choice approach.

## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

The irruptors' endgame is the most important part of this adventure – which is precisely why this decision is left up to the GM. Choose the option that best fits your players, their characters, and the events of the campaign so far . . . or come up with something new! If a previous adventure left a "MacGuffin" hanging, then bring that into play here – either as the box itself or as the thing that the box is attempting to *locate*.

*Cerebral Normalizer:* The simplest option is that the victims are being simultaneously brainwashed and telepathically drained of secret knowledge. Whether they're in a state to fight their former friends is up to the GM, but in addition to trying to save them, the PCs need to keep the knowledge in that box out of Anunnaki hands.

*Minion Synchronizer:* The raw skill and talent of the victims is being funneled into the cultists, who wear earbud "receivers." For simplicity, treat this as +4 to all attributes plus knowledge of ASL and Danbe. This is best for games that focus on action and fighting rather than the bizarre setting and moral dilemmas.

*Psi Hunter:* The box isn't just protecting them from tashers, it's *locating* them. The irruptors know the threat of ESP and want to experiment on tashers to uncover its secrets. This option works best if a tasher is in the group; the hidden girtablullû will grab him and flee if he's outside, otherwise the kulullû will.

*Reality Asserter:* The device locks onto cross-history manifestations (which mainly means reality shards) and forces them back into alignment with History B. This changes the shard's abilities drastically while within range of the box (the specifics are up to the GM) and forces a roll on the *Reality Quake Table* (*Madness Dossier*, p. 58) every 1d hours, at +1 for every shard currently affected. (This is dangerous even if *no* reality shards are present!)

*Sanity Knife:* The victims' worst fears are weaponized. Lars or the kulullû (or both!) wields the "projector" end of this, which acts as Terror (-5 to Fright Checks) in a 10-yard by 3-yard cone. This works best if *Oh, We're All Mad Here* (*Madness Dossier*, pp. 50-52) is in play.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason "PK" Levine still considers *Madness Dossier* one of his favorite RPG supplements of all time, and runs a monthly campaign. He's previously supported this world with *Expanded Psi for Sandmen* (from *Pyramid* #3/69: *Psionics II*) and looks forward to the day when his wonderful Anunnakku finally rise up and slaughter those evil Sandmen PCs. In History A, he lives in Chattanooga TN with his wonderful wife. In History B . . . well, you'll see.

# Too Similar, Too Different

BY MICHELE ARMELLINI

*The Jermyns never seemed to look quite right – something was amiss . . .*

– H.P. Lovecraft, “Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family”

A GM might imagine a creature that resembles a giant lobster. He might imagine it’s got an appetite for human flesh. He could add any gory touch he can dream of.

Now, his players would certainly find this creature a threat to the survival of their adventurers, and they might find the details horrible. Nevertheless, they would never think that the creature is a threat to *who their characters are*. Their identity as persons would not be threatened, much less their identity as members of humankind. They might find the giant lobster a “monster” in traditional roleplay parlance but it’s possible they would not be really horrified.

However, to many players werewolves are more fearsome than that. Possibly, not so much because they are half-beast, but for the other 50% – being *half-human*. Undead once were humans like us, and even though death should be the ultimate “not-one-of-us” factor, vampires can still be terribly attractive. A changeling is not one of us, yet he lives among us. Rosemary’s baby was loved by his mother even after she discovered the terrible truth about his father.

All of these are threats to our core, our very identity. That part of them which is like us often makes it difficult for us to recognize them as alien, and that’s all the more unsettling.

*A creature too close for comfort.*

This is the case with the half-human, half-beast crossbreed, a staple of horror fiction and the perfect addition to horror campaigns.

## BLURRING THE LINES

Unlike totally alien entities, the crossbreed has much in common with us. At the same time, it is – often subtly but unmistakably – different. Some people might find that creepier than anything else, possibly for the same reason why android-shaped robots that look too much like humans (but not enough to deceive anyone into thinking they are human, too) are found repulsive by some. Other people – and that might be the most horrific thing – are unconsciously attracted to the creature.

This has been the topic of some classic horror fiction, such as *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, and some short stories by H.P. Lovecraft. Michael Crichton introduced creatures like these in his early fiction, but brought them eerily closer to us through the genetic engineering developments of *Next* (2006). *Splice*, a 2009 movie by Vincenzo Natali, entirely revolves around this theme.

The line between human and nonhuman is not the only one blurred. Such a creature strikes several of the chords described in Chapter Two of *GURPS Horror*. It represents fear of nature, because of its animalistic aspects. Depending on how it came into being, it might be reason to fear science, or magic.

Because of its potential for corrupting someone’s perception of what defines him as a human, it evokes the fear of taint. Finally, it may be linked with fear of sex, because of the way in which it can be created *and* because of what might happen with it.

These creatures can indeed be at the same time terrorizing and uncannily attractive. They can coexist with us one moment and then prey on us the next.

## A CREATOR’S HOW-TO

Several theoretical or fictional methods for creating hybrids are possible, making this concept suitable for many campaign settings. However, this creature would be a true horror in a scenario where it is barely conceivable, a real shock to the PCs. A present-day horror adventure or a somewhat realistic historical setting (with no magic and no half-ogres) are the best choice for this creature to really have an impact.

### THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY

Hybrids come regularly into being through the mating of two animals of different species in the same family; sheep and goat can mate, although they are not even of the same genus. Breeders can play a role in this; mules, the offspring of a male donkey and a female horse, are intentionally bred.

This method is the only one available at low-tech levels, if magic doesn't exist. However, the thought of deliberately embarking on such a project involving humans and, almost certainly, apes is worth a shudder of horror.

Actually achieving a hybrid in this way is extremely improbable, not to mention that like most hybrids, the creature would be sterile, a one-off curiosity. Another issue is that it would take years or decades to achieve the first viable pregnancy and have it grow to an adult specimen. Having a whole population of a stable, fertile crossbreed would take centuries. Those problems can be conveniently ignored in a horror campaign, however. A good GM can work this out, establishing that "the horror" had actually begun in a distant past, before the present day, as was the case with Lovecraft's story of the Jermyn family. This also might be a good opportunity for designing a long-lived cult or dynasty of breeders, who keep a race of hybrids for their own dark purposes.

Another advantage of this method is that it can work in any setting. Even if magic or genetic engineering are available, and may be more effective and quick, the old, slow way still can be used by the truly deranged.

## MAGIC

Magic can do essentially anything, and several of the specialized spells described in *GURPS Bio-Tech* can give rise to this kind of creature. Another way is to use Create Animal (*GURPS Magic*, p. 99). If the Creation spells allows the advanced mage to create a simple servant or a natural animal, why couldn't a fanciful and wicked wizard be able to make a living being that is not entirely human? Create Mount (*GURPS Magic*, p. 99) also provides for the possibility of a *permanent* conjured animal.

A permanent creation borne of magic is no longer magical itself; it is an animal like any other. By using Creation spells, a mage can get any number of adult beings straight away. Unlike with biological reproduction, where the animal species should be genetically close to human, with magic, anything can be thrown in!

Although the Create Animal spell (*GURPS Magic*, pp. 89-99) specifies that the caster can produce only existing animals that are well-known to him, the description adds that rare variations of the spell could be designed to create bizarre creatures. This explanation is perfect for a spell known only to some powerful, evil mage.

Magic is the hallmark of fantasy settings. These routinely include multiple sentient races and crossbreeds (half-orcs, half-elves). If the GM wants this creation to be in another league, he should highlight its origin through dangerous, powerful, and possibly black, magic. He should point out how evil the mage who cast this spell was. And, naturally, he can give the creature some very unsavory features and a wicked heart.

## POWER

It would be theoretically possible to change an existing living being into a wild mix of anything simply by using very high-powered advantages and enhancements found in the

*Basic Set* and *GURPS Powers*. This would be the way to go in a supers campaign getting a touch of horror.

One possibility is to design a new ability called *Transform into a Chimera*. It is an Affliction that bestows Morph (p. B84), customized with Unlimited and probably Cosmic. The bestowed advantage (so to speak) also includes Improvised Forms, so that any feature can be thrown in, and Once On, Stays On (see *GURPS Powers*, p. 75, for these special enhancements). The creator isn't limited to any existing racial template, he can freely mix and match.

The point cost for this is prohibitive, which is not a bad thing; the GM may wish to reserve this frightening ability for the likes of Zeus or some elder demon. The result can be a total freak, which is probably what it takes to scare supers anyway!

The peculiarity of such a way to conjure a hybrid is that the creature will have existed as something else, probably something "right" (in his mind or in the minds of the PCs), before. He will probably have as his overarching goal to go back to that condition. This may be a useful plot device for the GM.

*Whether you see the world  
as emergent, or deteriorating.  
We have long known that some  
people favor innovation and look  
positively toward the future while  
others are frightened of change  
and want to halt innovation.*

*– Michael Crichton, Next*

## BIOTECHNOLOGY

This realistic and up-to-date option is suitable for present-day horror adventures and futuristic setting. *GURPS Bio-Tech* covers this in detail, but a few tips for making a horrific version of engineered creatures may be useful.

In a world of engineering, a human-bestial crossbreed might seem nothing particularly fearsome. The typical beings in a setting like *GURPS Transhuman Space* are either "adapted" humans or "uplifted" animals. The former have a strange shape, but they still have human minds. The latter are more intelligent and useful, but they're still animals. The crossbreed blends those lines.

Additionally, *Transhuman Space* and similar settings feature *successful* beings. If the GM wants a horror story about this being, he needs to portray this as a failed experiment. Normally, these would be terminated, but maybe there was a lab accident or a mad scientist. *GURPS Bio-Tech* aptly calls these things "Frankensteins."

# GAME CHARACTERISTICS

Use the following tweaks to existing **GURPS** traits to make crossbreeds really come into their own.

## ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

Several traits deserve special attention.

### *Appearance*

see p. B21

Normally, an appealing Appearance is an “always on” advantage for members of *the same race* as the character. But in the case of a crossbreed creature, it’s a good idea to use the Accessibility limitation (see p. B110). A creature having, for instance, Appearance (Beautiful) gets the +4 reaction bonus from humans attracted to its sex – as long as they think it’s human. It loses the bonus once they perceive it is not. A GM might make exceptions for characters failing to control their Lecherousness or Xenophilia. The limitation is worth -20% if it’s easy to detect the creature isn’t really human; otherwise, it’s -10%.

The GM may also rule that a person initially misjudging the creature as a member of the human race will then automatically have a negative reaction to it.

Naturally, the above goes for a positive Appearance. It is entirely possible that humans simply find a crossbreed creature Unattractive or even Monstrous.

### *Modular Abilities*

see p. B71

A particularly dangerous being might develop unexpected capabilities, even beyond what its maker tried to give it. These may be represented by this advantage. It is barely possible to rationalize this if the being isn’t just a natural crossbreed but rather a rich, artificial cocktail of “dormant” genetic features. A limitation like Preparation Required (see p. B114) might be necessary. If desired, add the +100% enhancement for Mental *and* Physical Abilities.

### *Odious Personal Habit*

see p. B22

This disadvantage is something that the character “always” does, or, alternatively, it’s something for which the race the character belongs to is notorious. (Ogres are known for eating sentient beings, so, even when an ogre isn’t actually doing that, everyone tends to react badly.) However, this creature usually won’t belong to an established, well-known species! Even when everything seems to be going well, human researchers or casual observers may be unexpectedly treated to nonhuman and repulsive behavior. On the one hand, this should be represented by a limitation, Accessibility, and reduce the value of the disadvantage. On the other hand, the sudden appearance of the habit implies something of a shock factor, and it may force anyone witnessing it to reroll their

reaction, at a penalty. Thus, the GM might want to handle the disadvantage in a slightly different way, but the point value can remain the same.

*Example:* A crossbreed’s normal diet is mice and small birds, eaten alive. This is worth -2 to reactions, but only when people witness it. Humans might initially react positively to the creature (“Well, it’s almost human”) – until they see it feeding, at which point they would certainly reassess their reaction, with the penalty.

### *Secret*

see p. B152

If Unnatural Feature is not evident at all, then the creature might be able to keep the terrible truth about it a secret. If discovered, the being would have to flee or risk being detained [-20].

### *Short Lifespan*

see p. B154

This is a common plot device in fiction involving unusual offspring! It skips those boring years of early childhood.

### *Social Stigma*

see p. B155

A hybrid is likely to have more than one Social Stigma, if recognized for what it is. If it’s a lab specimen, its freedom is heavily restricted and it’s considered Valuable Property. If it’s at large and perceived as dangerous, it’s a Monster. Even if not dangerous, it might be seen as Vermin (see **GURPS Fantasy**, p. 133), both in the lab and outside it. Uneducated also is a possibility.

### *Sterile*

see p. B165

This is extremely common for real or vaguely realistic hybrids. It may be much more interesting (as in, horrific) if the being is, on the contrary, fertile.

### *Stress Atavism*

see p. B156

This is nearly a must for a human-animal crossbreed, unless he already has Bestial (see p. B124). Note that a wild mix of genes might mean several possible behavior patterns, once the creature goes back to animal impulses.

### *Unnatural Features*

see p. B22

By default, these apply to the common appearance of a character’s own race. In this case, they should apply to the normal, dominant species the creature deals with. If it’s humans, then fur all over the body is unnatural, but if the creature lives among apes, the contrary would be true.

Most hybrids should have at least one level of this disadvantage, so that people, sooner or later, will realize that it's not human.

## Unusual Biochemistry

see p. B160

This disadvantage is common with this kind of creature. The weirder the mix, the more likely it is that ordinary drugs won't work correctly.

*The creatures I had seen were  
not men, had never been men.  
They were animals – humanised  
animals – triumphs of vivisection.*  
– H.G. Wells,  
*The Island of Dr. Moreau*

## RACIAL TEMPLATES

The best way to treat various possible archetypes of the dangerous human-animal crossbreed in **GURPS** is by way of racial templates.

### The Predator in Disguise

29 points

A cross between a human and a carnivorous predator, this type of hybrid is presumably the result of an experiment gone awry, and it's out there, free and dangerous.

It can pass as a dull human, if clothed and hiding its teeth, fingers, fur, and vestigial tail. However, it's actually more like a ghoul, with a marked preference for human flesh, even though it can eat any kind of fresh, raw meat. It lives at the fringes of society, as a homeless man doing occasional, menial jobs at night. Its baggy, secondhand clothes notwithstanding, it can look very dangerous.

This crossbreed is suitable for any setting, being conceivable as the creation of an evil wizard, mad scientist, or foolhardy genetic engineer.

**Attribute Modifiers:** ST+2 [20]; DX+2 [40]; IQ-2 [-40].

**Secondary Characteristic Modifiers:** HP+1 [2]; Will+2 [10]; Per+3 [15]; Basic Move+1 [5].

**Advantages:** Acute Taste and Smell 2 [4]; Claws (Blunt) [3]; Combat Reflexes [15]; Enhanced Dodge [15]; Fearlessness 3 [6]; Night Vision 3 [3]; Perfect Balance [15]; Teeth (Sharp Teeth) [1].

**Perks:** Fearsome Stare; Fur; On Alert. [3]

**Disadvantages:** Bloodlust (12) [-10]; Callous [-5]; Loner (12) [-5]; Local Language (Accented/None) [-4]; Odious Personal Habit (Eats sentient beings) [-15]; Restricted Diet (Fresh raw meat) [-10]; Secret (Man-eating abomination) [-20]\*; Stress Atavism (Mild) (12) [-10]; Unnatural Features 1 [-1]; Wealth (Poor) [-15].

**Quirk:** Alcohol Intolerance. [-1]

**Features and Taboo Traits:** Sterile; Vestigial tail; Taboo Traits (Cowardice, Pacifism).

**Skills:** Brawling (E) DX [1]-12; Climbing (A) DX [1]-12†; Intimidation (A) Will [2]-10; Jumping (E) DX [1]-12; Stealth (A) DX-1 [1]-11; Tracking (A) Per [2]-11.

\* If the Secret is revealed, it should be replaced by Social Stigma (Monster) [-15] and one or more Enemies.

† Includes +1 from Perfect Balance.

### The Genetic Danger

123 points

This creature is a monumental failure of genetic engineering. Especially in a small space colony, it might be a significant threat to the gene pool of the main species. It can easily appear human, it can sway humans, and it's fertile. Its driving motive is to perpetuate its own genes.

What's more, its astounding genetic instability means that it can slowly morph a feature it needs – to escape from detention, for instance. Let it rest at the bottom of a well overnight, and

by morning, it will have developed bodily mutations to overcome the challenge. Clinging? Flying? Burrowing? It's impossible to predict what it will be able to do. A GM can be really creative with such a being!

**Attribute Modifiers:** DX+2 [40]; IQ-1 [-20]; HT+1 [10].

**Secondary Characteristic Modifiers:** HP+5 [10]; Per+2 [10].

**Advantages:** Appearance (Beautiful) (Accessibility, Only when considered human, -10%; Androgynous) [11]; Cosmic Power 15 (Limited, Advantages Only, -10%; Physical Only, +50%; Preparation Required, 8 hours, -60%) [120]; Hermaphromorph (Preparation Required, 8 hours, -60%) [2]; Indomitable [15].

**Perk:** Perfume. [1]

**Disadvantages:** Enemy (To be defined by the GM; Hunter; 9 or less) [-10]; Frightens Animals [-10]; Increased Consumption 1 [-10]; Local Language (Accented/None) [-4]; Obsession (Reproduction and survival of its own gene pool) (12) [-10]; Short Lifespan 2 [-20]; Stress Atavism (Mild) (12) [-10]; Unnatural Features 1 [-1\*]; Unusual Biochemistry [-5].

**Quirk:** Nosy. [-1]

**Features and Taboo Traits:** Shorter Gestation; Taboo Traits (Sexless).

**Skills:** Acting (A) IQ [2]-9; Brawling (E) DX [1]-12; Sex Appeal (Human) (A) HT+2 [1]-13†.

\* Unnatural Features may be worth more points depending on how radical the change is from a standard human appearance, after having used the Modular Abilities.

† Includes +3 from Appearance.

## The “Improved” Gorilla

27 points

The default assumption when one sees this creature isn't that it's a strange-looking human; it is that it's an uncannily intelligent gorilla. It has no Unnatural Features as a gorilla. Its creator probably made it as a watch-animal, using methods best left unspoken. The human side of it has not actually improved the animal, save by making it more fearsome for trespassers – and maybe for its owners, too.

The GM should customize the Sense of Duty. It's worth noting that the creature might feel that obligation toward a *territory* it will protect, instead of toward a group of people.

**Attribute Modifiers:** ST+4 (Size, -10%) [36]; DX+2 [40]; IQ-3 [-60]; HT+2 [20].

**Secondary Characteristic Modifiers:** Will+3 [15]; Per+3 [15]; SM +1.

**Advantages:** Arm ST 2 (Two Arms) [10]; Brachiator [5]; Damage Resistance 1 [5]; Sign Language (Accented) [2]; Teeth (Sharp Teeth) [1].

**Perk:** Fur. [1]

**Disadvantages:** Bad Grip 1 [-5]; Bloodlust (15) [-5]; Local Language (None/None) [-6]; Semi-Upright [-5]; Sense of Duty (To be defined by the GM) [-5]; Social Stigma (Valuable Property) [-10]; Wild Animal [-30].

**Skills:** Brawling (E) DX [1]-12; Climbing (A) DX+2 [2]-14\*.

\* Includes +2 from Brachiator.

## The Tragically Tainted

0 points

Although mostly a human, this hybrid has some great ape among his ancestors. The worst thing is that *he knows that*, and he really can't come to terms with this horrible awareness. He's unhinged and probably heading toward suicide. He certainly does not want his “tainted blood” to be passed along to a new generation.

This template is most suitable for horror stories focusing on psychological and social aspects, especially in a Victorian or Victorian-like setting. The poor hybrid is rather peculiar-looking and a recluse, but he could be a PC for someone up to the challenge of roleplaying him.

**Attribute Modifiers:** ST+2 [20]; DX+1 [20]; IQ-1 [-20].

**Secondary Characteristic Modifiers:** Will+1 [5]; Per+1 [5]; FP+1 [3].

**Advantages:** Brachiator [5]; Hard to Subdue 2 [4].

**Perks:** Good with Apes; Penetrating Voice. [2]

**Disadvantages:** Appearance (Unattractive) [-4]; Loner (12) [-5]; Low Self-Image (Accessibility, Only for intellectual tasks, -30%) [-7]; Nightmares (12) [-5]; On the Edge (15) [-7]; Phobia (Sex) (12) [-10]; Reputation -1 (Weird, savage-looking eccentric; All the time; To the few who know or meet him) [-1]; Stress Atavism (Mild) (15) [-5].

**Quirk:** Distinctive Features. [-1]

**Skills:** Climbing (A) DX+1 [1]-12\*.

\* Includes +2 from Brachiator.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michele Armellini lives in Udine, Italy, with his very understanding wife, Silvia. Michele makes a living out of foreign languages, but he loves dabbling with and studying the obscure and the uncanny – and trying to convert them into game mechanics! He has written for *Pyramid*, and he is the author of **GURPS WWII: Grim Legions**. He is the author or co-author (with Hans-Christian Vortisch) of several electronic products: **GURPS Locations: St. George's Cathedral**, **GURPS WWII: Their Finest Hour**, **GURPS WWII: Doomed White Eagle**, and **GURPS WWII: Michael's Army**.

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# EIDETIC MEMORY HELLBLADE

BY DAVID L. PULVER

The Hellblade is a magic sword that traps the souls of those slain by it. However, instead of devouring the souls immediately, victims find themselves reincarnated in bodily form and imprisoned in a pocket dimension contained within the blade. The dimension resembles a hellish dungeon overseen by demonic warders – the *dimachaeri*.

This diabolical artifact originally appeared as a major treasure for one of my horror-themed fantasy dungeons (see *The Horrific Dungeon* in *Pyramid* #3/36: *Dungeon Fantasy*). However, it can be easily inserted into any **GURPS Fantasy** game or deployed as a cursed item for use in a modern-day **GURPS Horror** or **GURPS Monster Hunters** campaign.

The information described in *Legends* (p. 16) represents various stories and rumors that ordinary research (e.g., an Occultism roll) might dig up. The true nature should be left for adventurers to discover after they acquire it or face a foe wielding one.

## HELLBLADE: THE TRUTH

This very fine thrusting bastard sword has a skull-shaped pommel with two ruby “eyes” (total value \$15,000). It has several enchantments, all at Power 20. The most potent is an exotic hybrid of Plane Shift Other, Create Gate, Sanctuary, and Soul Jar spells: If the blade delivers sufficient injury to a sapient being to result in his immediate death, it “takes the soul.” However, a victim’s soul cannot be taken if he has the advantages Digital Mind, Unkillable 2, Unkillable 3, or the Spirit meta-trait. The life energy of sapient entities with SM +2 or larger (like a big dragon) cannot be ingested by the blade; they are simply killed.

When a victim’s soul is taken, the sword-wielder will initially be unaware of it; the victim seems to die normally. However, his soul is now a prisoner in the Hellblade, for folded within the weapon is a tiny pocket hell-dimension, an infernal prison and torture chamber manned by demonic warders, the *dimachaeri* (p. 19). Any attempt to magically resurrect the Hellblade’s victim revives the corpse, but not the soul – the body is alive but comatose until the soul itself is rescued from the blade.

Souls do not linger in the blade forever. At the end of each year, the blade must devour one soul (usually the

longest-imprisoned) to sustain itself, by feeding the prisoner into the dimension’s furnace. If a soul is devoured in this fashion, it is destroyed, preventing any resurrection.

When the Hellblade is found the GM decides how many souls are in the blade. If the blade was regularly fed, it might be full; if had been, for instance, sealed in a dungeon or crypt for centuries, it might hold just a few souls, or none at all. It has room for up to 99 souls.

The Hellblade has a Limit enchantment on it – its “master” or “blade-wielder” is the most recent person who took a soul with it. Until a person becomes the blade’s master by doing so, he cannot use the Hellblade’s standard and boosted powers, nor will he be communicated with by the demons within it.

The Hellblade taps psychic energy from the souls imprisoned within it. As it accumulates imprisoned souls, the weapon grows in power! The number of souls determines the Hellblade’s current power. Standard powers apply all the time. The boosted power only applies if the blade-wielder has agreed to permit the demons to torture a being (for pleasure) in the last 24 hours (see p. 16).

<i>Tortured Souls</i>	<i>Standard Powers</i>	<i>Boosted Power</i>
1-12 souls	Accuracy (+1) and Puissance (+1)	Penetrating Weapon (2)
13-65 souls	Accuracy (+2) and Puissance (+2)	Penetrating Weapon (3)
66+ souls	Accuracy (+3) and Puissance (+3)	Penetrating Weapon (5)

The Penetrating Weapon enchantment gives the blade the specified armor divisor from (2) to (5). Accuracy adds to effective skill; Puissance adds to damage (see **GURPS Magic**, pp. 63-65).

## Visitation Rites

The Hellblade’s master has a psychic link to the blade and its *dimachaeri*. If at least one soul is imprisoned within the weapon, any time the blade-wielder sleeps with the sword within reach (two yards), he has a chance of visiting its dungeon in a dream. Treat this as Nightmares (9), except the user appears in a gloomy structure with rusty, bloodstained iron walls and floors. The nightmares are progressive.

## First Nightmare

In the first nightmare, the blade-wielder dreams he's moving through grim corridors and hears the sounds of gates and the clanking of chains. He sees the interior of what appears to be a prison: barred cells with naked prisoners held inside them, securely chained to walls, steel pillars, stocks, and crosses (a vision of the iron cells, p. 18). The GM may allow the dreamer to make a Per roll to identify any familiar faces of foes he has slain with the blade or anyone else he might know that was killed by the Hellblade.)

## LEGENDS

The Hellblade has born various names over the centuries. Those slain by it are said to have their soul sent to Hell! Further tales add that the more people the sword slays, the more potent it becomes, drawing strength from those it damned. Some claim a dark lord crafted it for an evil champion, forging the blade in hellfire, quenching its steel in the blood of 100 innocents and the dark waters of the underworld. Others say it's a living pocket of hell reshaped into a blade, granted by a demon lord to favored mortal servants. Most stories agree is a large sword of exceptional workmanship, with a skull-shaped pommel. But a few tales warn the blade is cursed, and wielding it can cost the user's own soul.

The Hellblade has cut a bloody path through history, periodically appearing in the hands of tyrants, dark sorcerers, anti-paladins, or ruthless killers. Some wielders, guessing the sword's evil nature, have committed mass executions or human sacrifices to "charge" the blades with souls. Others have only realized its dark power when the Hellblade began to whisper to them in dreams . . .

## Second Nightmare

The second nightmare is similar: a glimpse of a line of naked prisoners (or only one prisoner) manacled together by collars and leg irons, cut and bruised, shambling through dark passages, herded by humanoid shapes whose outlines are disturbing and demonic, with suggestions of spiked bodies, long talons, and glowing eyes.

## Third Nightmare

The third nightmare is clearer. The dreamer sees the vestibule (p. 18). Standing there, facing him, is a 7'-tall demonic humanoid with red eyes, a being of metallic armor, sharp blades, and spikes (see *Dimachaeri*, p. 19). Behind him, two similar monsters hold one of the prison's inmates (the most recent soul taken) in their grip. The monster addresses the dreamer:

*"Blade-Wielder, we salute you! We are your dimachaeri, the keepers of the steel dungeon, which mortals know as the Hell-Within-the-Blade. I am the Warden. Send us your foes, that they may suffer torments beyond death!"*

The creatures holding the prisoner will squeeze the victim with their claws, perhaps elucidating a scream (depending on who he is). Then the scene fades from view.

## Fourth Nightmare

The fourth nightmare is identical to the third nightmare (except if the wielder has killed someone else with the blade, it will be a different victim) but this time the warden seems inclined to converse. After repeating the declaration from the third dream, the warden says:

*"Blade-Wielder, we offer our service! By your command, we will question a prisoner most thoroughly! You may choose!"*

The dreamer now sees the ranks of prisoners held within the iron cells. The dream lingers on each one in turn, to allow the dreamer to make out individuals and recognize faces. The warden continues:

*"Ask what you would, and by blood and fire, we shall draw out their answers! It is our pleasure to serve in this manner. That is the iron law."*

The dream then shifts to an image of the Chamber of Needles – a horrific torture chamber (see pp. 18-19). The warden says:

*"Blade-wielder, by your command, we will torment a prisoner. It is our pleasure to serve. You may choose!"* Again, the dream shows the prisoners. *"In pain is power; with the screams of the damned, your steel will sing! Such is the iron law."*

What this means is that once each night, the dreaming blade-wielder may designate one prisoner to be tortured to answer a particular question or make a confession, or simply tormented for pleasure. If he chooses pleasure, the Hellblade feeds off the energy of the victim's suffering – the "steel will sing" and the weapon gain extra powers for 24 hours.

Should the wielder agree to either terms, he can witness (in the dream) the victim being selected, dragged off to the torture chamber, and questioned or tormented for 1d+1 hours of time (or at least until the sword-bearer awakens from the dream). If the results of an interrogation session are important, roll against the *dimachaeri's* Interrogation skill to see if the victim breaks (see p. B202); the creatures are Callous and use lengthy interrogation (a multi-hour session) and severe torture, giving the usual +9 to skill.

In either case, the victim winds up half-dead, mutilated or worse, and then is dragged back to his cell. Should a questioning session fail to get information, the warders will offer to "continue the following night." However, torture sessions occasionally prove severe enough that the soul discorporates in the process (due to the victim's mind breaking). Assume this event has a 1 in 6 chance of happening (or for a known victim, have him make a Will+2 roll to resist) after each session. If so, this destroys the soul.

*Know how sublime a thing it is  
To suffer and be strong.*

*– Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*



If the wielder doesn't agree to torture, tries to change the conversation, or asks for more details, the warden reiterates the above or responds as follows:

*"Blade-wielder, we ask questions. It is not the dimachaeri's role to answer them. Such is the iron law."*

However, the warden will answer one particular unsolicited question. If the wielder requests that a prisoner be released (or something to that effect), it will reply:

*"Blade-Wielder, we are charged to hold those sent here . . . unless bail is paid. Send us nine more souls, declaring as they die whose soul-price you pay. With the ninth payment, we shall release the soul of the one whose parole you seek. Such is the iron law."*

For example, if Agnes Harper's soul is trapped within the steel dungeon, the wielder must say something like "I pay this soul-price for Agnes Harper" when he slays someone. If so, the dimachaeri will honor their agreement and free the prisoner after nine souls. The freed prisoner is then carried up the Stair of Blades (p. 20) and forced through the Gate of Judgment (p. 20). His spirit body disintegrates, and he returns to his original body. If that has been resurrected or healed, he will be alive. If not, he awakens as undead (GM's option – typically as an animated corpse or as a ghost haunting his place of death, depending on whether he has an intact body left to return to).

### Subsequent Visitations

After the fourth nightmare, the wielder has the option, each time he sleeps, of visiting the dungeon dimension as per the fourth nightmare; a failed Nightmare roll will send him there automatically. He will appear in the Vestibule to be met by the warden, and again will be offered the choice of inspecting the prisoners, and selecting one to question or be tormented, or, if he asks for it, of making a bargain to free a prisoner in exchange for dedicating nine souls. If he is still paying for a particular prisoner's parole, he may not make a new bargain until the first payment is fulfilled.

*An hour of pain is as long as a day of pleasure.*

– *English Proverb*

### Bodily Visitation

The Hell-Within-the-Blade is a pocket dimension that can be visited in bodily form by means of planar travel. A party could physically occupy or cleanse the dimension, or release whomever they liked. The dimachaeri will fight any intruders – even the blade-wielder – and should they win, will incarcerate the attackers as if they were imprisoned souls.

Raiders can enter via a Plane Shift (or Plane Shift Others) spell specifically designed to reach the pocket dimension. Such might be found by researching ancient demonologies or scrolls related to the Hellblade's creation, or learned by a mage familiar with other Plane Shift spells who studied the

Hellblade. Plane Shift always transports the visitant to the vestibule (p. 18). If the caster is the Hellblade's owner halve the energy cost.

A World Jumper who touches the blade can use that advantage to access the Hell-Within-the-Blade as if it were an alternate world; the sword's location in our dimension "corresponds spatially" with the vestibule. Again, halve FP cost if the Jumper is the blade owner.

### Curse of the Blade

If the blade's master dies while holding the Hellblade, he must make a Will roll at a penalty equal to the blade's current Puissance (see the table on p. 15). If this fails, his soul is taken!

### Imprisoned Souls

Someone taken by the Hellblade becomes an imprisoned soul. Upon being slain, the victim reconstitutes an ectoplasmic body inside the Hellblade, appearing in the vestibule (p. 18). The body arrives in whatever state it was when slain, i.e., dead at some negative hit point total. In the case of decapitation, perhaps only a head may arrive! It appears fully corporeal while within the dungeon. However, the soul acquires the following meta-trait for the duration of their stay inside the Hellblade.

*Imprisoned Soul:* Doesn't Eat or Drink; Doesn't Sleep; Regeneration (Regular); Unkillable 2; Unaging. All have the Accessibility limitation "Only in Pocket Dimension."

Regeneration and Unkillable 2 mean the imprisoned soul rapidly heals to positive HP, after which he awakens, naked but seemingly alive again. Before that happens, the dimachaeri drag the body to one of the iron cells and restrain him.

A soul may need to make Fright Checks due to the trauma based on time spent and whether he was tortured. Some prisoners become insane.

### Destroying the Hellblade

The Hellblade is as breakable as any very fine weapon; if targeted by an attack, it's a Homogenous object with DR 6, HP 14, and HT 14, plus an additional DR 30 vs. burning damage. If destroyed, a Gate materializes where the blade was broken. It leads to the blade's pocket hell, opening in the vestibule (p. 18). It's open for 1d × 5 minutes until the dimension collapses (destroying all within). Any dimachaeri will notice the blade is destroyed and attempt to exit (leaving prisoners behind). If freed, they'll continue their proclivities, acting as serial killers.

## THE HELL-WITHIN-THE-BLADE

This "steel dungeon" is the pocket dimension within the Hellblade. Walls and floors are made of steel or iron, rusty and stained with blood. Ceilings are 9' high unless noted. Most internal doors are 1/2" iron (DR 25, HP 46). Cell cage doors instead have multiple 1/4" steel bars (DR 14, HP 38); reducing two bars' HP to 0 forms a hole large enough to escape. All doors have simple locks. Steel baton "torches" are scattered about in all rooms; they are actually magic items with red-glowing Continual Light spells.

A *master key* – a big steel key – is worn by the warden (on a neck chain). It can unlock any doors or manacles in the dungeon; spares are in each guardroom. These keys are also artifacts that connect their wearer with the consciousness of the blade-wielder, allowing mental communication via the dreams from within the steel dungeon.

## HELLBLADE ADVENTURE SEEDS

*Cursed Relic:* The party could find the Hellblade as a treasure. If it had been sealed away for a while, it may be empty of souls. Should they use the blade, they may be faced with a moral dilemma: Do they keep using the blade as a weapon, knowing every foe slain makes it more powerful, but also consigns the victim not merely to death, but imprisonment or torment?

*Quest:* An antagonist seeks the Hellblade for its dark powers or to rescue someone trapped within it. The party can learn of this, uncover legends of the sword, and try to get it first. If so, will they lock the weapon away, destroy it, or be tempted to use it?

*Dilemma:* A villain wielding the Hellblade slays a player character, one of their Allies or Dependents, or some other VIP. The party defeats the villain and acquires the weapon, probably observing it is a potent magic sword during the fight, but remaining unaware of its soul-stealing powers. They don't realize their friend's soul is trapped within! Should one PC keep the weapon and use it to slay someone, he will become the blade-wielder and experience nightmares, and, if he keeps it, communicate with the warden. The dimachaeri will offer the usual ransom: Nine more souls for the return of their friend . . .

*Multiple Blades:* What if a second Hellblade is made? Do both weapons feed the same prison, or different ones?

*Alternate Hellblades:* As a variant form of the Hellblade, perhaps accumulating 100 souls does not satiate the blade, but instead powers a great magical event, such as summoning a demon lord, materializing the dungeon into the real world, or transforming the wielder into a demon.

### 1. Vestibule

This is a hemispherical room 12 yards across with a corridor (2) at one end and a magical "skull gate" at the other. The gate is shaped like a giant human skull, flanked by two pillars carved to resemble upright swords, and forms bodies out of ectoplasm. New inmates are spat through the skull's mouth and end up on the floor. The skull gate is one-way; you cannot leave through it.

The floor slopes slightly, so that blood and guts will flow into gutters and out gratings in the floor. The grates lead to pipes that connect under the dungeon to the Sanguinarium (p. 19).

Three dimachaeri usually are on duty here, awaiting new arrivals. If a soul has just arrived, only one might be standing watch, as the others carry the body to a cell.

### 2. Passage

This corridor is two yards wide and 13 yards long. One end leads to the vestibule (1). The other ends in a heavy door opening into the upper guardroom (3).

### 3. Upper Guardroom

The seven-yard square room has three doors. One door leads to the passage (2). One door leads to the iron cells (4). The last leads to the stairs (6).

A pair of dimachaeri are usually on duty here, perhaps gossiping nastily in chalk-on-blackboard voices about the latest prisoners and their tolerance for pain, or speculating on what the newest blade-wielder will have them do. However, if torture is being conducted, they usually are in the furnace room (10) or Chamber of Needles (5) instead.

A steel table and three iron stools are in the room. A rusty metal box holds 2d tools (hammers, hand-drills, screws, nails, bucket, hinges, etc.) for minor repairs to internal fixtures; these might be used by escaped prisoners as improvised weapons. Hanging brackets on the walls hold a few spare lengths of chain and two whips. An extra master key hangs on the wall.

### 4. Iron Cells

The main cell block is a long corridor three yards wide, with 33 cells, 16 on one side, 17 on the other. Doors are located at either end. One door leads to the upper guardroom (3); the other to the Chamber of Needles (5).

The cell doors are staggered so a prisoner in a cell cannot see the cells to either side of him. Generally, two dimachaeri patrol the cell block. They enforce silence among prisoners: An inmate can whisper to someone in the same cell, but anything louder, and a dimachaerus will order the prisoner to be silent. If an inmate fails to obey, a demon enters the cell and takes him to a torture chamber for punishment. However, timing so the guards are at far ends of the cell block can allow a "prison whisper" to pass from cell to cell if all prisoners cooperate.

The cells are 2.5 × 2.5-yard rooms with barred doors, which allow someone walking outside to see within. Each cell has a set of manacles, iron collar, and chains bolted to three walls. About half the cages also contain steel pillories, X-shaped St. Andrew's crosses, or posts where uncooperative prisoners may be restrained. Otherwise, they are chained at the ankle or neck to keep them in their cells (restricting movement to about 5') or manacled upright to the walls.

The GM should decide how many cells are occupied, and by whom. When crowded, up to three prisoners may be held in the same cell. If necessary two cages can have the inner wall removed to create a larger cell.

### 5. Chamber of Needles

In this torture chamber, the air is often heavy with a coppery smell of fresh blood. The room is four yards square, with a low steel table in the center. Iron manacles hang from chains dangling from the ceiling. Sundry instruments of torture are kept on benches and shelves, including a large box of steel needles. In corners are other torture devices, such as racks or the (semi-mythical) iron maiden.

The room is empty unless torture is being conducted. Then guards from the upper guardroom (3) or the lower guardroom (9) will be performing it.

There are two doors. One leads to the upper guardroom. The other opens onto a flight of stairs (6). Drains in the floor allow blood to empty into the Sanguinarium (7).

## 6. Stairs

This three-yard diameter room contains a short flight of 24 stairs going down. A door here connects to the upper guardroom (3). The stairs lead to a lower landing of similar size and a door to the Sanguinarium (7).

## 7. Sanguinarium

This circular chamber is 10 yards in diameter. It contains a seven-yard-diameter, 6'-deep pool surrounded by a narrow catwalk. It's fed by pipes from drains in the Chamber of Needles (5) and the vestibule (1). There is a constant drip from slow tortures and the occasional gush of blood from amputations and eviscerations or recently arrived corpses. Its depth varies over time, but is a few feet deep due to centuries of accumulation.

The room's usually unoccupied. Occasionally, prisoners undergoing torment may be made to drink the blood, be drowned in it, or forced to battle one another in the slippery pool, with the victor receiving a reprieve from more severe torments, and the loser suffering redoubled agony.

There are two doors. One leads to stairs (6). The other to the lower corridor (8).

## 8. Lower Corridor

This corridor is seven yards long and two wide. At one end, a door opens on the Sanguinarium (7). At the other, a door opens on the lower guardroom and armoury (9).

## 9. Lower Guardroom and Armoury

This guardroom is quite warm (thanks to heat from the adjacent furnace room). A single dimachaerus is on duty here, unless assisting with torture or questioning.

There are two doors at opposite ends of the guardroom. One opens into the lower corridor (8); the other, the furnace room (10). The heavy iron door to the furnace room is hot to the touch.

The room contains a table, stools, a rack of additional implements for dealing with prisoner riots (five whips, more chains, a net) or assaults, and another spare master key. A rack of 10 thrusting bastard swords (fine quality, physically resembling the Hellblade but nonmagical) is also on hand for repelling assaults

## 10. Furnace Room

This room has a pit in the center. An everlasting Essential Flame (*GURPS Magic*, p. 75; +1 fire damage) burns here. The fire is further enchanted into a form of soulburner: It can melt the soul of a victim who is suspended in it for a full day – a sacrifice that must be performed once each year to sustain the

Hellblade's fighting powers at their current level. The furnace is also used for periodic disposal of gobbets of flesh or body parts that have been hacked off.

The flame illuminating the room flickers and raises the temperature to an uncomfortable 100°F. The room is usually empty unless guards are torturing or disposing of prisoners here.

There are chains hanging from the ceiling and implements for lowering prisoners into the flame on chains or in a red-hot iron cage, or roasting them on a spit. A selection of branding irons, tongs, and the like are also maintained here.

Two doors are in the furnace room. One leads to the lower guardroom (9). The other leads to the outer corridor (11).

## DIMACHAERI

The 10 dimachaeri, or dungeon keepers, maintain the Hellblade's prison dimension. Each dimachaerus is a lean 7-8'-tall humanoid demon with steel-colored armor-like skin and red-glowing eyes. They have sharp fangs, and their hair consists of coils of barbed wire. Their flesh is covered with small metal hooks and spurs. Each wrist has a semi-retractable blade-talon the length of a short sword that extends out of the arm, which the demon can use to fight with. Their voices have a horrid underlying sound, like fingernails on a chalkboard. If reduced to 0 HP, they crumble into metal powder.

One is warden and wears the master key; if killed, another will take that post. They are usually unarmed, but can take bastard swords or whips from the armory (9) if needed.

<b>ST:</b> 16	<b>HP:</b> 16	<b>Speed:</b> 6.50
<b>DX:</b> 14	<b>Will:</b> 12	<b>Move:</b> 6
<b>IQ:</b> 9	<b>Per:</b> 12	<b>Weight:</b> 180 lbs.
<b>HT:</b> 12	<b>FP:</b> 12	<b>SM:</b> 0
<b>Dodge:</b> 9	<b>Parry:</b> 11	<b>DR:</b> 3 (6 vs. burning)

**Sharp Teeth (16):** 1d cutting. Reach C.

**Long Talons (16):** 1d+2 cutting or impaling. Reach C, 1.

**Traits:** Callous; Dark Vision; Doesn't Eat or Drink; Disturbing Voice; Fragile (Unnatural); Sadistic (9); Short Spines; Unaging; Unfazeable.

**Skills:** Brawling-16; Broadsword-14; Interrogation-11; Intimidation-13; Wrestling-14.

## 11. Outer Corridor

This passageway is 12 yards long and two wide. One end of the corridor has a door that leads to the furnace room (and is hot to the touch). The other leads to a stairwell (12).

## 12. Stairwell

This hexagonal chamber is seven yards wide. One door connects to the outer corridor. In the center is a shaft leading upward, containing a spiral stairway – the Stair of Blades. Two dimachaeri are always stationed on guard duty in front of the stairs.

*The Stair of Blades:* This stairway leads up the Chamber of Judgment. However, each step consists of an array of rusty sword blades. The blades do 1d-3 cutting damage to the feet of anyone climbing the stairs (alternate damage to left and right feet every stair) or the hands and legs of anyone whose feet have been crippled and who is crawling up the stairs. Each step is about 6" high; there are 99 steps to climb to reach the top. Of course, if a person lets go or slips, he falls down to the base of the staircase.

### 13. Chamber of Judgment

The Stair of Blades terminates in a domed chamber six yards in diameter. A steel altar is in the center of the room, resembling an anvil. At the far end is a demonic fresco (resembling a giant dimachaerus) with a gaping mouth filled with red mist – the *Mouth of Judgment*. An imprisoned soul who passes through is released from prison (albeit as undead, unless their body was already resurrected or otherwise healed). Living visitors exiting are returned their home plane.

### ABOUT THE COLUMNIST

David L. Pulver is a Canadian freelance author. An avid science-fiction fan, he began roleplaying in junior high with the newly released *Basic Dungeons & Dragons*. Upon graduating from university, he decided to become a game designer. Since then, David has written over 70 roleplaying game books, and he has worked as a staff writer, editor, and line developer for Steve Jackson Games and Guardians of Order. He is best known for creating *Transhuman Space*, co-authoring the *Big Eyes, Small Mouth* anime RPG, and writing countless *GURPS* books, including the *GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition, GURPS Ultra-Tech*, and the *GURPS Spaceships* series.

#### Scale

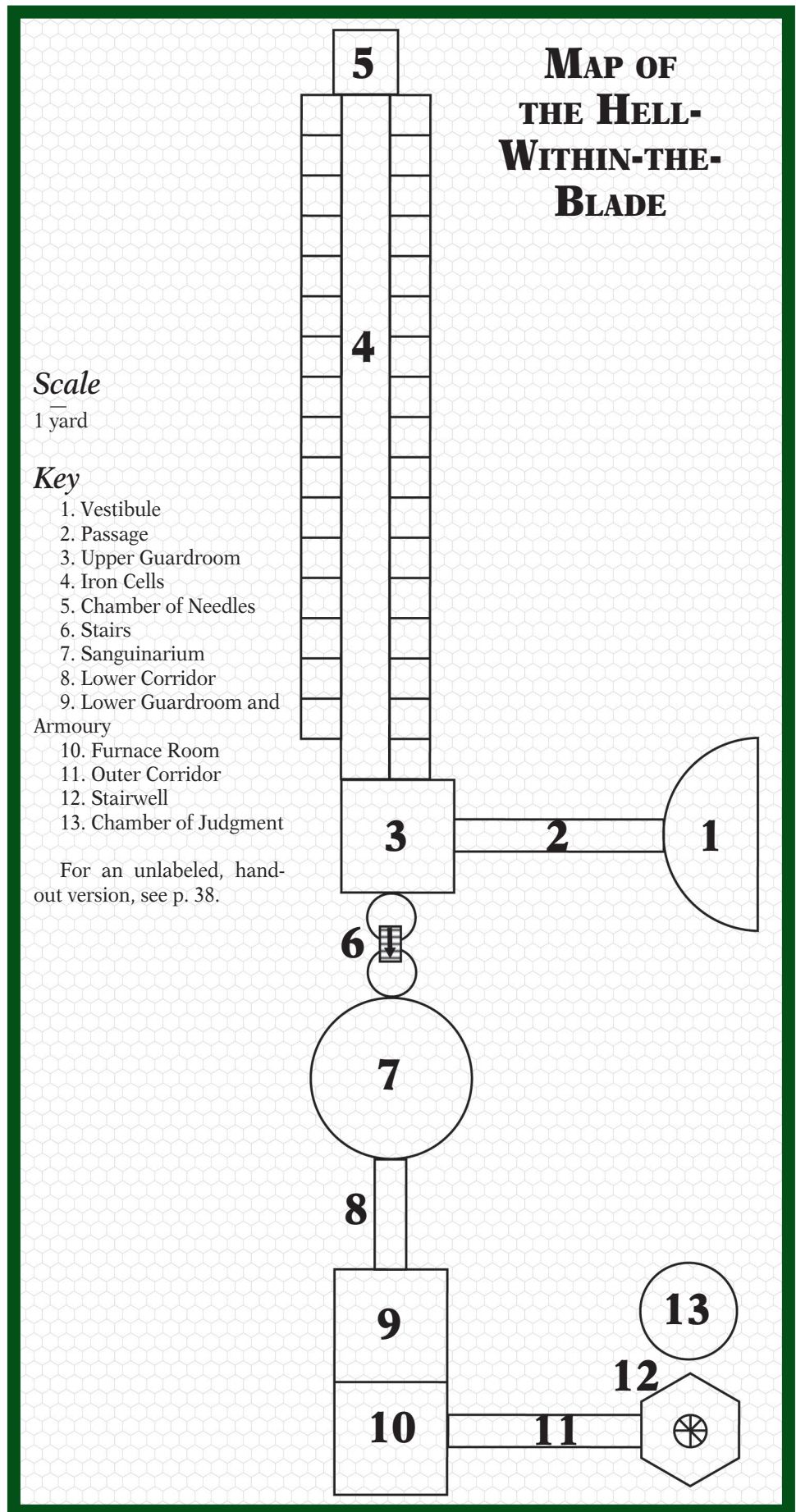
1 yard

#### Key

1. Vestibule
2. Passage
3. Upper Guardroom
4. Iron Cells
5. Chamber of Needles
6. Stairs
7. Sanguinarium
8. Lower Corridor
9. Lower Guardroom and Armoury
10. Furnace Room
11. Outer Corridor
12. Stairwell
13. Chamber of Judgment

For an unlabeled, hand-out version, see p. 38.

## MAP OF THE HELL-WITHIN-THE-BLADE



# ANATOMY OF A CROSSROADS BARGAIN

BY JON BLACK

*... you take your guitar and you go to where the road crosses that way, where a crossroad is ... a big black man will walk up there and take your guitar, and he'll tune it. And then he'll play a piece and hand it back to you.*

*– Ledell Johnson, describing how his brother Tommy became a successful Delta bluesman*

In literature and popular culture, tales of crossroads bargains and supernatural deals grab attention. Historical figures, especially those who were both unconventional and successful, were often targeted by rumors of infernal dealings. Perhaps such stories fascinate because they invite reflection on how far we would go to achieve our dreams.

Crossroads bargains and other supernatural deals offer fertile ground for roleplaying. Blending temptation, ambition, and consequence, they provide opportunity for serious character exploration. Such bargains can offer a rapid increase in abilities, a path to fame and glory, or even a last-ditch miracle to save a noble cause, making them potent lures for PCs and NPCs alike.

While there are many ways to sell a soul and many potential buyers, the iconography and conventions of the crossroads bargain are among the best known and have become a staple of horror in recent years. For those reasons, this exploration of the concept focuses on the roleplaying dimensions of crossroads bargains in horror-flavored campaigns. Anyone interested in expanded game mechanics of selling a soul in *GURPS* or examining such transactions in other genres are encouraged to check out *How Very Tempting* by Christopher Rice in *Pyramid* #3/67: *Tools of the Trade – Villains*.

To keep terminology from becoming repetitive, a PC or NPC selling his soul also will be referred to as a “petitioner,” while the buyer, whether a crossroads devil or something else, also will be referred to as a “supernatural agent.”

## THE HISTORY OF A TEMPTATION

Pacts with supernatural entities are as old as recorded history and probably older. Coinciding with the ascendancy of Christianity in Europe, a new wrinkle appeared. Because the

concept of Satan represented an independent supernatural powerbase opposed to God’s divine order, individuals could traffic directly with infernal agencies for power. From the beginning, the price for such power was the petitioner’s soul.

Respect for the accomplishments of individuals discussed in this section demands a disclaimer. With one exception, no good evidence exists that they made, or believed they made, deals with the Devil – ample evidence exists to the contrary.

An apocryphal story about Theophilus of Adana, a real sixth-century saint, represents the earliest known reference to a deal with the Devil. According to legend, Theophilus sold his soul to become a bishop. Eventually, he regretted his bargain. After years of penitence, confession, and direct intercession by the Virgin Mary, his soul was restored on his deathbed.

The name of Johann Faust, natural scientist, astrologer, and alchemist became synonymous with infernal bargains and inspired great literature. By the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the historical Faust was known, at best, as a braggart and con man. At worst, he was called a necromancer and diabolist. Faust died in an explosion after a botched alchemical experiment. Because his corpse was more mutilated than burned, some whispered the Devil had claimed him personally.

In the American South, mythology took a unique turn. Despite social segregation, regional folklore was porous. European tales of deals with the Devil blended with African-American memories of Legba, a Yoruba deity associated with crossroads and who controlled travel, trade, and crafts. From this mixture emerged stories of crossroads deals and devils. Legba also survives in Vodou and, as Eleguá, in Santería. In both, he acts as a gateway figure controlling spiritual and earthly crossroads.

No alleged crossroads visitor is more celebrated than Robert Johnson (no relation to Tommy Johnson, another successful musician). The bluesman’s life appears uniquely supportive of such stories. A below-average musician and nuisance on stage during the 1930s, Robert disappeared for six months. He returned displaying musical prowess that impressed the likes of “Honey Boy” Edwards and Son House. When Johnson died in 1938 outside a Mississippi juke joint, he was crawling on the ground, barking, and snapping his teeth. Some say it was the Devil taking his due.

During the early 1930s, John “Funny Paper” Smith cultivated a sinister image, reflected in lyrics that influenced Robert Johnson. After a prison stint for murder, Smith vanished from history. Peetie Wheatstraw promoted himself as the Devil’s Son-In-Law and High Sheriff of Hell until his death in a freak auto accident.

Bluesmen were not the first American musicians accused of dark bargains. The Scotch-Irish fiddlers of 18th- and 19th-century Appalachia were sometimes rumored to have sold their souls for musical prowess.

In 16th- and 17th-century Italy, violinists were often the subject of whispers. (The Devil, it seems, is partial to stringed instruments.) Three in particular match anything Delta folklore offers. Suggestions of Arcangelo Corelli’s infernal dealings were boosted by his libertine lifestyle and resentment of jealous peers, but they were complicated by Corelli’s outstanding oeuvre of religious music. Refusing last rites on his deathbed did nothing to discourage gossip about the state of Niccolò Paganini’s soul. He remained unburied for four decades and was later exhumed for a bizarre public viewing. Giuseppe Tartini claimed his masterpiece, “Devil’s Trill Sonata,” was revealed by the Devil in a dream. A technically demanding work, it was said (erroneously) Tartini could perform it only because he had six fingers on his left hand.

Among other historical figures suspected by contemporaries of selling their souls, many offer roleplaying possibilities. Bavarian painter Christoph Haizmann boasted of having sold his soul to the Devil. Following exorcisms and pilgrimages that Haizmann believed negated this pact, he became a monk. Jonathan Moulton was an 18th-century soldier and adventurer from New England rumored to have sold his soul for gold. Faust has many counterparts, including Pietro d’Abano, John Dee, and Nicholas Flamel.

### *Truth Can’t Ruin a Good Story*

Time and research have exonerated most of these figures. Discoveries about Robert Johnson render him more impressive while removing the need for supernatural assistance. During Johnson’s missing half year, he practiced under a brilliant and idiosyncratic yet entirely human mentor named Ike Zimmerman. Regarding Johnson’s storied demise, congenital syphilis, liver failure from chronic alcoholism, and poisoning by a cuckolded juke joint owner all offer plausible mundane explanations for his final agonies.

Ledell Johnson’s stories are filled with wild claims and unlikely events. His assertions regarding his brother Tommy should be taken with prodigious grains of salt. Delving deeper into “Funny Papa” Smith and Peetie Wheatstraw uncovers

not infernal minions but clever marketers and self-promoters. Exculpatory evidence continues down the line, even for painter Haizmann; many modern scholars see more indication of mental illness than diabolic dealings in his autobiographical materials.

Yet, as Robert Johnson exemplifies, no matter how often claims of supernatural bargains are refuted, they always reemerge. The image of the musician or other creative or desperate figure selling his soul at the crossroads stays with us. On some level, society *wants* to believe it. The question of why is best left to the likes of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell.

## **LET’S MAKE A DEAL!**

By convention, the terms of crossroads deals are usually specific and pragmatic. In roleplaying, however, the advantages and positive effects of a bargain are limited only by character imagination and GM approval. Meanwhile, disadvantages can represent the downside of selling one’s soul. Both folklore and fiction have given a wealth of consequences for making such deals, consequences that are easily represented by **GURPS** disadvantages.

### *Key Disadvantages*

While any disadvantage could conceivably be part of a crossroads bargain, many appropriate traits fall into two categories.

*Coping Mechanisms:* In the conventions of horror, forfeiting a soul through a crossroads bargain is a traumatic event for the petitioner. Individuals often develop negative and self-destructive behaviors to cope with the decision. Several standard disadvantages are plausible responses to having sold one’s soul. These include Addiction [Varies], Alcoholism [-15 or -20], Chronic Depression [-15\*], Chummy [-5 or -10], Cowardice [-10\*], Gluttony [-5\*], Impulsiveness [-10\*], Incurious [-5\*], Indecisive [-10\*], Laziness [-10\*], Lecherousness [-15\*], Loner [-5\*], Manic Depressive [-20], Nightmares [-5\*], Obsession [-5 or -10\*], On the Edge [-15\*], Paranoia [-10], Phobia [Varies], Pyromania [-5\*], and Social Disease [-5].

*Supernatural Taint:* Through association with or affliction by supernatural agents, characters may acquire conditions that are diabolic, unwholesome, or otherworldly. Excellent candidates include Bad Smell [-10], Dependency [Varies], Disturbing Voice [-10], Dread [Varies], Draining [Varies], Frightens Animals [-10], Nightmares (genuine visions of the eternal torment awaiting the individual) [-5\*], Phantom Voices [-5 to -15], Supernatural Features [Varies], Unhealing [-20 or -30], Unluckiness [-10], and Weirdness Magnet [-15].

*I went to the crossroad and fell down on my knees.  
Asked the Lord above, have mercy. Now save poor Bob  
if you please.*

*– Robert Johnson, “Cross Road Blues”*

The following disadvantages warrant additional comment or offer new variations pertaining to crossroads bargains.

**Compulsive Warding** [-5\*]: The individual is obsessed with protecting himself against the bargain's consequences. The character may cover every available surface with icons of saints, pour salt and goofer dust behind all doors and windows, constantly recite from the Quran, or whatever his culture believes keeps dark powers away.

**Cursed** [-75]: Must be mitigated to exclude benefits explicitly contained in the terms of the bargain. The GM should determine the mitigation percentage based upon the bargain's specifics.

**Delusions** [-5 to -15]: In a secular age, an individual claiming to have sold his soul to the Devil will be treated as delusional. Even if true, the person will experience the disadvantage's consequences. For an interesting twist, a character in a mundane world could suffer delusions of having made an infernal bargain while actually succeeding through hard work and talent.

**Destiny** [Varies]: As long as they don't explicitly conflict, a crossroads bargain may contain Destiny as both an advantage and a disadvantage. Someone destined to become the generation's greatest martial artist may also be fated to ruin the lives of loved ones.

**Enemies** [Varies]: One Enemy of special note is the hellhound, an infernal minion often charged with collecting on deals. For a worthy challenge, hellhounds should be built on at least 150% of points [-20].

**Secret** [-5 to -30]: Based on the time, place, and specifics of a campaign, any value of Secret is appropriate for making a bargain. In Robert Johnson's 1930s South, for example, it is worth -5 (for a musician or ne'er-do-well) or -10 (for a minister or pillar of the community).

**Reputation** [Varies]: An individual who is open about having sold his soul may acquire one or more Reputations. Again, these depend on time, place, and specifics. In the 1930s South, -2 among respectable folks and +1 among music fans, thrill seekers, and Bohemians is reasonable.

**Terminally Ill** [-50 to -100]: Putting a very final time limit on bargains is common in contemporary fiction. The Terminal Illness disadvantage models this perfectly. If preferred, the name can be changed to something more thematic, such as Borrowed Time.

## Removing Advantages

To ensure players truly feel the impact of character bargains, buying off an advantage or two may be more effective than adding disadvantages. Jealous Allies may desert the bargainer, Acute Smell may be compromised by the constant aroma of brimstone, and so on. The discretion of the GM is important to avoid removing advantages fundamental to player enjoyment of the character.

## Sample Crossroads Bargain #1

0 points

Guitarist Jackie Terraplane is tired of playing small clubs for drinking money. Remembering her blues history, she hops down to the nearest crossroads.

**Advantages:** Charisma 1 [5]; Musical Ability 2 [10]; Voice [10].

**Disadvantages:** Alcoholism [-12]; Enemy (Hellhound; Hunter; 6 or less) [-8]; Reputation -2 (Corrupter of youth; Parents; All the time) [-4]; Uncongenial [-1]. All bargain-related disadvantages have Mitigator, Escape Clause, Defeat Supernatural Agent in Contest, -20%.

## Sample Crossroads Bargain #2

0 points

Godoric the Dwarf's family stronghold has been overrun by a dragon. Swearing vengeance, rather than rounding up some cousins and a diminutive burglar, he cuts a quick deal with dark forces.

**Skills:** Axe/Mace (A) DX+5 [20]; Occultism (Dragons) (A) IQ+1 [4].

**Advantages:** Damage Resistance 5 (Limited, Burning, -40%) [15]; Language: Draconic (Native) [6]; Luck [15].

**Disadvantages:** Callous [-5]; Frightens Animals [-9]; Obsession [-5]; On the Edge [-14]; Secret (Made a deal with the Dark One; Possible Death) [-27]. All bargain-related disadvantages have Mitigator, Escape Clause, Atonement and Piety, -10%.

## Sample Crossroads Bargain #3

0 points

Streetwise tough Mickey Miller encounters a problem fists can't solve – his nephew, and dependent, has been diagnosed with a rare disease and given less than a year to live. Mickey is at a loss, but he recalls the rambling tales of an old man down at the bar . . .

**Advantages:** Buy off dependent's Terminally Ill (Up to one year) [75].

**Disadvantages:** Appearance (Unattractive, Sallow complexion and bags around the eyes) [-3]; Destiny (Die with his deeds unrecognized) [-4]; Nightmares [-4]; Terminally Ill (Up to one year) [-53]; Weirdness Magnet [-11]. All bargain-related disadvantages have Escape Clause, Defeat Supernatural Agent in Combat, -30%.

## Escape Clauses:

### Fire on the Mountain, Run, Boy, Run

In fiction, the true joy of a crossroads bargain is typically not the deal itself but a protagonist's struggle to escape its consequences. In roleplaying, many players delight in weaseling out of agreements with NPCs. Crossroads devils should be no exception. *How Very Tempting* provides a straightforward and flexible mechanism for dealmakers who rethink their decision (see *Pyramid* #3/67, p. 18). But the folklore and genre conventions of crossroads bargains offer several other mechanisms for petitioners to get out of the terms of the deal. These *Escape Clauses* could be treated as Mitigators to the cost of a bargain's disadvantages. The GM will need to assign the mitigation value based on specifics, but suggested percentages are provided below. Escape Clauses fall into four general categories.

*Atonement and Piety* [-10%]: Very similar to the pathway presented in *How Very Tempting*, this is the safest (and admittedly, duller) way out. Characters must buy off the bargain's disadvantages or, with GM permission, replace them with suitably pious disadvantages. The bargain's advantages must also be repurchased or a vow taken to abstain from using them.

*Defeat Supernatural Minion in Combat* [-20%]: Commonly, this means destroying the hellhound sent to collect the bargainer's soul. The GM can also design minions appropriate to other settings. The minion is an Enemy (see p. 23), with the special effect that vanquishing the creature exonerates the person from his pact.

*Defeat Supernatural Agent in Contest* [-20%]: The classic escape clause of crossroads folklore. This contest must be relevant to the bargain. A doctor who bargained to become a great surgeon cannot challenge the Devil to a knitting contest. To make the challenge significant, the supernatural agent's relevant skill should begin at least three to five levels higher than the character's. This requires serious commitment to improving the skill and scheming to increase effective skill level for anyone to have a real chance. The supernatural agent may appoint a champion for the contest (ideally, the damned soul of someone the agent claimed long ago). If the petitioner wins the contest, he gets his soul back and escapes the bargain. If the supernatural agent wins, he claims payment immediately, and it's time to generate a new character. In case of a draw, the GM should get creative.

*Defeat Supernatural Agent in Combat* [-30%]: This is the big one. Again, the supernatural agent may appoint a champion. The agent or champion should be built on at least 200% of points and the GM is justified in going much higher. Taking on infernal powers is not supposed to be easy or pleasant.

*The demon code  
prevents me from  
declining the rock off  
challenge. What are your  
terms? What's the catch?*

*– Satan, in  
Tenacious D in  
the Pick of Destiny*

## BARGAINS DURING PLAY

Building a crossroads bargain during character generation is easy. But what if someone wants to make deal during the course of a campaign (or the GM wants to tempt the party)? If the GM allows such deals, answering a few simple questions beforehand helps everyone get the most from the experience.

### 1. With Whom Are Characters Dealing?

Are the protagonists dealing with the Prince of Darkness himself? If not, a devil responsible for all crossroads would still be a powerful figure in the infernal hierarchy. A devil responsible for only one crossroads, however, would be a minor functionary with a distinct personality ranging from sarcastic slacker to bitter bureaucrat.

### 2. Honest or Malicious Broker?

It is important to decide if the supernatural agent is an honest broker or a malicious one. An honest broker is not necessarily benevolent or well disposed to petitioners but, unlike a malicious broker, does not actively seek to harm. In Southern folklore, Legba is an honest broker while the Devil is a malicious one. Elsewhere, someone seeking to cut a deal with faerie would likely find the Seelie Court honest brokers and their Unseelie counterparts malicious.

### 3. Are There Preconditions?

Can a supernatural agent be contacted at any crossroads, or must it be a particular kind of crossroads or even a specific location? The intersection of Highways 61 and 49 in Mississippi is often cited as "The Crossroads." But by the early 20th century, it was a well-traveled path ill-suited for diabolic dealings. Simply finding the right location could be the subject of an adventure.

Are there other preconditions? Is there a specific time the entity must be contacted? Midnight is traditional, but is that correct? Must petitioners do anything to prove they are in earnest about making a deal? Playing the guitar, bringing gifts of rum and moly flowers, or sacrificing a chicken are a few plausible ideas. How will the adventurers discover what is expected of them?

### 4. How Much Roleplaying?

Some groups may want to jump straight to the mechanics of the deal. Others will enjoy playing out the bargaining process. For the latter, two quick rolls provide useful parameters.

First, make a reaction roll for the supernatural agent toward to the petitioner. For an honest broker, a poor reaction might disincline him to deal at all or even turn the agent malicious. On a very positive reaction, an honest broker may offer small but useful bits of advice. For a malicious broker, both very poor and very good reactions could have interesting and unpleasant consequences.

Second, a contested roll against Law (Esoteric Contract) – see p. 25 – gives a general feel for the negotiation. How closely does the petitioner come to getting exactly what was wanted? Who had more input on what was given up for it? In a horror campaign, any supernatural agent should have Law (Esoteric Contract) at 18 or higher. Because petitioners are unlikely to possess the specialty, negotiations are biased in favor of the supernatural agent. The compassionate GM may also allow a roll against skills such as Fast Talk, Occultism, Public Speaking, Sex Appeal, or Theology at an appropriately sobering penalty.

Realistically, a malicious agent would try to negotiate negative-sum deals. In the interests of game balance and player happiness, the GM may wish to consider that crossroads bargains made during play be zero-sum agreements, with the values of advantages and disadvantages canceling out.



(See p. 23 for some examples.) The GM (and supernatural agents) are also free to reject spurious propositions, such as selling one's soul for a really good rhubarb pie.

## 5. How Will the Players React?

Player issues also need to be considered. If one character makes a bargain, other players are likely to express interest. Keeping track of multiple deals quickly gets overwhelming. This can be addressed in three ways. First, the GM can limit bargains because of logistical issues. Second, a party can be required to bargain collectively, everyone acquiring the same advantages and disadvantages. If neither option satisfies the group, the GM can disallow in-game dealing.

## EVERYBODY WANTS SOMETHING

The external trappings of crossroads bargains can be adapted to fit any setting or TL. Those Italian violinists could have gone to an abandoned Roman road high in the Apennines. Folks in the British Isles can seek out members of the Seelie or Unseelie Courts along the nearest Faerie Trod. And, of course, spacers whisper about a mysterious extra-dimensional entity lurking around the solar system's Lagrange points. Consider, for example, placing a crossroads devil into an otherwise orthodox TL9 interstellar exploration campaign. Watching players' surprise and enthusiasm at being confronted by such an unexpected challenge can be very gratifying.

## RESOURCES

*Crossroads* (Walter Hill, 1986). The story of a Julliard music student and an elderly bluesman questing for a lost Robert Johnson recording. It gets much of the lore wrong, but gets it wrong with feeling.

*Ghost Rider* (Mark Steven Johnson, 2007). An adaptation of the Marvel Comics character, the film captures the temptations and pitfalls of selling a soul with noble intentions.

Johnson, Robert. "Cross Road Blues," "Hellhound on My Trail," "Me and the Devil Blues," and "Preaching Blues (Up Jumped the Devil)" (1936-37). Often cited as "proof" of

## Law (Esoteric Contract)

see p. B204 and *Pyramid* #3/67, p. 19

This specialty covers verbal contracts between crossroads devils or other supernatural agents and their petitioners; actual contracts with such beings; and other eldritch bargains. The GM decides the skill of participants, as appropriate. Suggested defaults for the skill are IQ-6, Hidden Lore (appropriate specialty)-4, Law (Criminal)-4, or Law (Liturgical)-2.

Johnson's occult leanings, these four songs are atmospheric and often listed among the finest recordings of Delta blues.

*Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?* (Joel and Ethan Cohen, 2000). This magical realism-influenced retelling of *The Odyssey* set in the Depression-era South features Tommy Johnson as a reoccurring character.

*Supernatural*, "Crossroad Blues," episode #2.8 (Steve Boyum, 2006). This episode of the popular TV series incorporates a lot of contemporary lore regarding crossroads bargains and, better yet, unfolds much like a roleplaying campaign.

Tartini, Giuseppe. "Devil's Trill Sonata" (1713). This impassioned, richly toned, and technically demanding composition was once used as evidence of Tartini's infernal bargaining.

*Tenacious D in the Pick of Destiny* (Liam Lynch, 2006). Jack Black and Kyle Gass star in this comedy highlighting the potential of supernatural bargains in a silly campaign.

Wald, Elijah. *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (Amistad, 2004). Arguably the definitive examination of Johnson as both man and myth; in the process, it also illuminates why crossroads myths are so persistent.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jon Black is your basic "absinthe and BBQ" guy from Austin, Texas. An internationally published music journalist and music historian, he focuses on blues and country but has written about everything from punk to classical to klezmer. Jon may even have looked for the crossroads once or twice himself (out of professional curiosity, of course). While he has enjoyed roleplaying games for more than 30 years, and **GURPS** for more than 20, this is his first foray into writing about them.

*You upheld your end of the bargain. It's time I take back the power of the Ghost Rider. You get your life back. The love you've always wanted. You can start a family of your own. There are more deals to be made. More people willing to give their souls for what they desire. Let someone else carry this curse. You're free now. After all . . . a deal's a deal.*

– Mephistopheles, in **Ghost Rider**

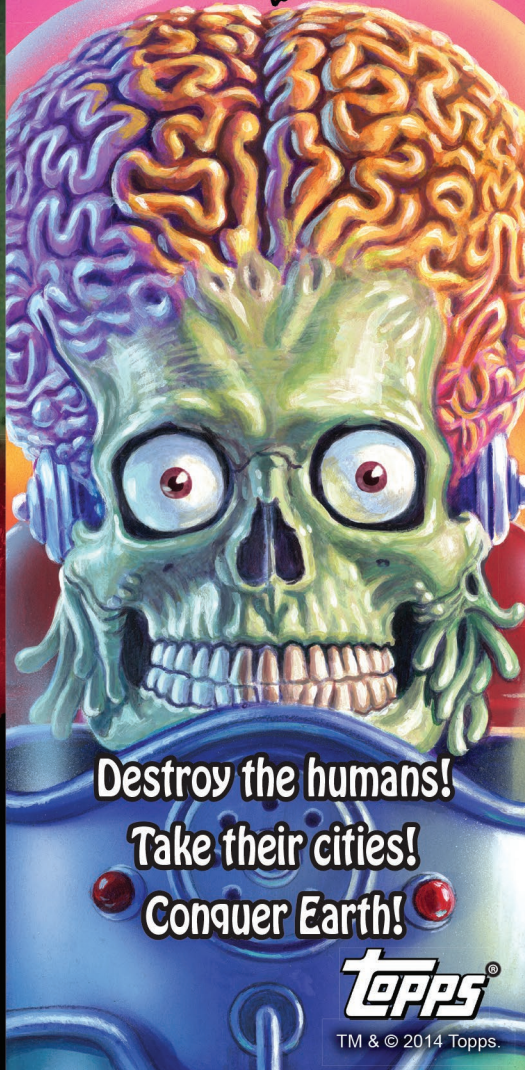
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# BELL, BOOK, AND CANDLE

BY J. EDWARD TREMLETT

Death is one of the oldest and most terrible forces that humanity has dealt with. Our fear of it has spurred on the urge to study and explore its vicissitudes, which has in turn led to dark, antinomian magical arts meant to hold it at bay, utterly cheat it, or use its energies for other means.

But death will not be denied forever, and the ultimate price for meddling with a realm set apart from our own for good reasons is often higher than a mortal could ever conceive. Even those hoary necromancers of old knew that they strode upon very weak floorboards every time they danced with such powers, and that the ground might fall out at any moment. In the end, their reward was rarely worth the risk, and the consequences to their sanity, safety, and souls were catastrophic.

Not all traces were lost in their fall, however. These foolhardy souls left twisted legacies in their wake: puzzling clues to point the way, eldritch tomes to explain their methods, and dangerous but oh-so-enticing tools to aid in the search for power over that eternal, all-encompassing adversary that awaits us all, in time.

This catalog systemlessly presents three of the most powerful necromantic artifacts still extant: a bell, a book, and something to burn on a candle. They are listed from most to least dangerous, and their descriptions, means of employment, hidden dangers, and possible uses are given.

As written, they could make excellent MacGuffins for campaigns involving modern occult or monster hunting, or set in high-magic Renaissance to Age of Reason worlds. The items could easily be adapted to fantasy games by changing their histories. They can be things to deny to the enemy, or “treasure” to confound and contort the PCs. Entire campaigns could be built around stopping someone from getting hold of them, and either using them as part of a demented and evil plan, or as is.

They should *not* be mere trinkets to pull from the modern sorcerer’s black bag of perilous artifacts, though – these things are bad news. Death walks alongside those that own them, the spirit world snaps at their heels, and the Devil is rarely far behind.

## BELL: THE CORPSE CALLER

No one is really sure where this small, eerie, brass handbell came from, much less how it was ensorcelled. Some say it was created by the court magicians of Peter of Castile – better known as Peter the Cruel – so his torturers could continue to

interrogate prisoners after their unfortunate demise. Others say it was crafted by the infamous “Plague Priest” of Gyor, who led entire congregations of the dead around Hungary during the Great Plague of 1738, preaching to them of the “Second Heaven” they might attain after this new life was over. All that is certain is that it can be used to command the dead – both singly and by the hundreds – but that no one ever uses it for too long.

### *Product*

The Corpse Caller is a small handbell, made of one piece of oddly dull brass. It’s engraved with a scene from what at first seems like the Final Judgment, with the dead arising from their graves. Closer scrutiny reveals that the dead are clearly rotting corpses, and the angels are horrifying beasts with bats’ wings, all blowing horns made of contorted human beings.

The bell is 13” tall. A 0.5”-thick, 6”-long handle runs down into a 7” bell that expands to 10” in diameter at the base. It has a small clapper made of what is clearly a grotesquely elongated human finger bone, attached by a cord made from a human tendon. When the bell is dipped in blood, for activation, the clapper becomes so cold it steams in the air.

The tone and loudness of the bell depends on whether it’s rung quickly or slowly. If the bell’s rung swiftly, it’s high-pitched – almost to the point of causing pain – but only goes so far as a normal bell. However, if it’s rung slowly, the tolling is mournfully deep, and the sound carries for up to a full mile, even if other, louder sounds are competing with it.

### *Procedure*

The bell has two “settings”: single and widespread. To command a single body, it must be used upon a relatively fresh, or at least decently preserved, corpse. It must be completely submerged into a measure of the corpse’s blood for at least 10 minutes, and then rung briskly, 10 times, next to the ear of the corpse.

When this is done, the empty brain will once more course with electrical life, and the corpse will awaken as an intelligent zombie. It will then answer any questions put to it, and obey commands, but only for a certain amount of time. It’s not the real soul – merely a quickening of electrical impulses through a spiritually empty brain – so asking questions about the afterlife is a waste of time. But anything the body knew or could have done in life is available to it now.

There is a time limit to the body's usefulness: each point the zombie had in their stat that governed intelligence represents a minute that the zombie can remain (with negative modifiers for decay and brain trauma). When control is lost, the body will just want to behave in an animalistic fashion – crying and terrified at best, angry and brain-eating violent at worst. Such now-useless zombies are best disposed of with time-tested methods, such as destroying the brains.

For the widespread setting, the necromancer needs only ring the bell three times, very slowly. Any dead bodies within earshot of the bell will rise, becoming unintelligent but suggestible zombies. They will obey the commands of the one who rang the bell so long as he continues to hold onto it, and will serve until either they are destroyed, or control of the bell is lost. At that point, they become an aimless, shambling mob, and will attack or ignore their former master as circumstances befit.

## *Punishment*

Given its loudness and power, the bell must be used *very* carefully. If rung quickly within earshot of other corpses, it will raise them as well, only they won't be intelligent – they'll go straight to animalistic, tending toward the more violent end of the spectrum. Using it in morgues, graveyards, or war zones almost guarantees an outbreak of angry and aggressive zombies.

While ringing the bell doesn't actually summon ghosts, its use still angers the spirit world; the former owners of the bodies animated in this way feel everything that happens to them, up to and including the pain of the second death. As revenge, every time the bell is used, there's a 5% cumulative chance that the next time it's rung, fast or slow, the invocation will be interrupted by something nasty. It could be anything from a poltergeist to a demon, but the being will do its best to kill the user and stop the noise.

Another side effect, which affects both those who use the bell and assist in its use, is an eerie sharpening of the senses. Each time the bell is used, the PC gets a cumulative 5% in an uncontrollable ability to overhear the spirit world. The GM rolls this for the PC during suitably inconvenient moments, enabling that person to eavesdrop on the dead speaking among themselves for 2d-1 turns. Hearing this undead chatter is never a good thing and halves all the PC's abilities for the duration.

Then there is the lingering danger that affects those who use the slower, mass-calling powers of the bell – unless steps are taken to provide the bell with the life force of others, it slowly leeches the vitality of its user. For every 50 zombies the bell raises in this fashion, reduce one of the user's physical statistics by one. The loss matches the "living rot" of necromantic lore: weight drops, muscles wither, skin goes sallow and peels, and fingers and limbs slowly blacken and fall off due to poor circulation. At the end, the owner of the bell may be barely distinguishable from the zombies he raises.

## *Possibilities*

In the hands of the sinister, the bell can become a horrible tool. Imagine knowing that, if a person won't talk to the interrogator, the victim will just be killed and brought back with the artifact, at which point he'll say all he knows. Or visualize

a world where, with a few slow swings, entire graveyards, necropoli, and corpse-strewn battlefields can vomit forth undead armies, ready to obey. Most heroic PCs would scramble over themselves to get their hands on the bell just to keep it out of the hands of such persons.

As for using it themselves, the initial applications of the single setting are fairly obvious. Who wouldn't want to be able to ask a murder victim who killed them? Or ask a dead criminal what his gang's plan was, or where to find their hideout? What if a doomsday plot was known only to one person, and he's dead? Such knowledge would be of great help to the PCs, provided they didn't mind the side effects.

The mass calling should be a tough sell for the virtuous and sane – especially if they see what that use has done to their enemies. That said, if they ever need to raise an army to fight off a horde of zombies, or worse, it might be worth one of the party losing a few years of his life if it saves everybody in town a fate worse than death.

*Though it be in the power of  
the weakest arm to take away life,  
it is not in the strongest to deprive us  
of death.*

– Thomas Browne

## **BOOK: O LIVRO ASSOMBRADO**

When those learned in certain esoteric arts speak of Xandinho Heliodoro de Matos, they do so with a measure of dread and a quick gesture to ward off the evil eye. The 15th-century Portuguese sorcerer was notorious for mixing his necromancy with diabolism, so as to achieve what he called "the Ultimate Forbidden Art." He supposedly lived to be 300 years old, and some say he lives still as some leathery, undead thing – endlessly stalking the undercity of Guimaraes and striking down from afar any who dare speak his name.

*Arte Proibida Final* produced a number of impressive and terrifying artifacts. The silver hook he used to hoist the damned up from Hell like fish on a line. The conical skin hat that let him walk into the pagan underworld of Mictlan and parlay with the gods of death. The mask of teeth he used to drain the vitality of ghosts, shades, and the souls of the damned. But the work that truly set him up above his contemporaries was *O Livro Assombrado* ("The Book Haunted by Shadows"), a cursed tome with blood-red pages that allowed him to collect the worst souls Hell had to offer, and then unleash them upon the world when he needed their services.

## *Product*

*O Livro Assombrado* is a folio, bound in the blackened leather made from the skin of a man possessed by a demon at the time of his flaying. Its surface is studded with milky opals soaked in his blood, bile, and phlegm. Its cover is decorated with a demented mosaic made of his facial bones, floating ribs, and phalanges.

The paper is specially made from shredded, defiled funereal shrouds – soaked in water mixed with the blood of innocents killed expressly for this purpose. This material was left to moulder at night, during the dark of the moon, and then pressed under the weight of a tombstone over three human lifetimes old. The dried sheets were sized in water boiled with human skin and offal, and lovingly rubbed smooth with the clavicle of the person whose skin and bones were used to make the cover.

A little over half of the book's red-tinged pages are filled with the small histories of various contemptible individuals. All are written in the first person, in unique hands, and none are over two pages long. These histories run the gamut from merely awful to utterly horrifying: murderous thieves, blood-soaked torturers, ignoble traitors, and ghastly tyrants proclaim their sins without a smidgen of shame. Sometimes the writing moves when read, as if the pages were breathing.

### Procedure

The book contains the souls of damned beings – summoned up from Hell to take their place within its pages. Once the soul's inside the book, its owner can then summon the spirit and send it out into the world to do his bidding for a time. These imprisoned souls have no choice but to obey, but cunning spirits can find ways to subvert their instructions.

Bringing the dead up from the pit can be done by any means, but binding them into the book requires a lengthy ceremony, conducted from sundown to sun-up during the dark of the moon. A truly evil man – who needs have no direct tie to the summoned soul – is tied to an altar and has the book placed upon his chest, open to a blank page. Throughout the night, his blood is slowly leached into the thirsty tome, and the damned soul's history gradually writes itself on both sides of the open page, in the soul's handwriting. As soon as the sun begins to rise, a horrendous shriek echoes out as the sacrifice dies, and the ghost is bound into the book.

The damned spirit will henceforth reside in the spirit realm within *O Livro Assombrado* – a strange, shifting prison made of the memories and dreams of those condemned to its pages. These spirits can fully interact with one another in there, and time passes at a normal rate for them. They don't degrade, as ghosts sometime do in the world, but their mental state may collapse over time as the horrors of this existence get the better of them. At times, the book's realm resembles an asylum with no cells, and no matter how many times the ghosts "kill" one another, they can never fully be destroyed so long as they're bound to the book.

At any time, the tome's owner can summon one or more souls from the book and have them act on his behalf. This requires two pints of warm, fresh blood per summoning – preferably taken from an evil person, but anyone's will do in a pinch. The soul can be brought out as an insubstantial ghost for a full day, a walking corpse for half a day, or a wraithlike creature that can shift between states for six hours. The time can always be extended, and states changed as needed, for another two pints of blood.

As soon as the time is over, the soul returns to the book, carrying anything or anyone it might have had at the time back into the realm with it. If the spirit is physically or magically destroyed while on an errand, it goes straight back into the book *unless* the damage done invokes the power of the divine, in which case the spirit is utterly destroyed – its history in the book vanishing from its page.

### Punishment

There are a number of hazards involved with using *O Livro Assombrado*. For one thing, the book is eternally thirsty. Anyone foolish enough to handle it with bare hands will be instantly but painlessly drained of a small measure of their blood – about 0.01 pints per minute. The truly naïve might be drained past the point of unconsciousness while reading it, and be found a dry sack of bones come the morning.

## TO DO A GREAT RIGHT, DO A LITTLE WRONG

One might wonder why on earth decent heroes would want to use any of the necromantic artifacts described here. Even the least powerful among them is likely to drive them mad and maybe even get them killed. Is having the ultimate power really worth the ultimate risk to sanity, safety, and soul?

The argument can be made that, in order to combat the enemy, one must occasionally use their own tools against them. It can also be argued that, by taking control of a dire and powerful artifact, one prevents the forces of darkness from using it. If nothing else, having such objects in their possession can surprise their evil foes – overturning the balance of power in a crucial fight.

One should also consider that the PCs most likely have no idea how *bad* the artifact they got hold of actually is. Necromantic objects rarely come with instruction manuals, and even those who've made an in-depth study of them might not understand all the dangers involved. The

adventurers may think they've gotten a really wonderful thing, only to be driven mad or slowly slain by its unknown side-effects, to say nothing of the constant attempts by less-decent individuals to steal it away from them.

Such objects often work best if they're discovered as the main "treasure" of a scenario. The PCs find them, dust them off, and begin to explore their possibilities – slowly prizing their functions out of them, one experiment at a time. Once they have a working knowledge of the objects, and perhaps understand *some* of the dangers these items present, the GM can then institute some or all of their accompanying hazards as best fits the story.

If the heroes are careful and considerate with these items, their dangers could be left to mere chance. But if they start relying on them too much, or become callous or giddy with new power, the GM is within rights to remind the PCs just how dangerous meddling with the forces of death really is.

For another, the Devil is distinctly *not* happy to have some upstart human stealing souls from his domain. Thankfully, possession of the book imparts total protection against demons and devilish magic to the person who has the most contact with it. It does *not*, however, provide any safeguards against other humans who have truck with the pit. Whenever the book is used, there's a 5% cumulative chance that Hell's ruler will get wind of its whereabouts, at which point he'll have the nearest beholden coven try to kill the owner and destroy the cursed artifact once and for all.

There's also the matter of Xandinho Heliodoro de Matos, who is most definitely *not* dead. He has achieved a unique sort of lichdom, down in his labyrinthine undercity, and gladly divested himself of the book to avoid the attentions of Hell. That said, he's never happy to find out someone else is using his masterpiece, and will inevitably send trouble their way at some point. How bad the trouble actually *is* depends on how kindly the GM is feeling, but it can be anything from having a close friend and colleague ripped apart by a death spell, or being personally carted away by demons to Guimaraes, there to be used in one of the arch-diabolist's hideous experiments in necrophagy.

A final, more subtle danger lurks within the covers of the book. The souls are tired of being confined to the pages of this artifact, and have slowly begun to hatch a plan to escape. A few of their number were sorcerers in their own right, and, after centuries of observation and experimentation, they've found a way to get free of the book of their own free will. Such wraithly sorties can last no more than an hour, but it's enough time to get a few of the supplies that they need for a much bigger working – their return to life – and the souls they'll need to power it.

So far, they're resisting the obvious ploy of killing the book's owner, and hiding the book somewhere, for fear of their plans being discovered. But if they *are* caught in the act, they'll abandon all pretense of secrecy, and do everything possible to bring the scheme forward as soon as possible.

## Possibilities

At first glance, the book seems like a great find – who *wouldn't* want an undead army at one's command? The applications are many and varied, and all it will cost is the blood of people who aren't really worth the cost of imprisonment. It might also be an ideal prison for people the PCs don't trust to *stay* dead, provided they're willing to summon souls back from Hell to do it.

Another possibility: the pages of the book contain some of the most dangerous and infamous people that ever lived. They have ancient knowledge that may be useful, and secrets no one knows but them. They might be willing to tell what they know in exchange for being let out of their awful prison for a time; if the PCs promise to use divine magic to end their torment, they may do even more.

A more important concern is that hanging onto the *livro* will ensure that the wrong people don't get their hands onto it. Every "student," admirer, and would-be rival of De Matos is eager to find the book and reverse-engineer what he did to empower it. The thought of numerous such tomes in play is a true nightmare.

## CANDLE: THE CANDLE BURNER OF VAN CAUWENBERGHE

This highly tempting artifact was made in 1666 by the Belgian necromancer Hygin-Anatole Van Cauwenberghe. When used in conjunction with specially made candles, it can call up the shade of a specific person, so as to converse with him or her. Van Cauwenberghe hoped to use it to divine the true nature of life after death, but never got the answers he was seeking – in his lifetime, at least.

### Product

The burner is 1" tall and 2" thick, with a 1"-wide hole in the top to accommodate the candle's flame. It was made from silver dental work harvested from human corpses and mixed with the powder of their ground teeth and jawbones. After it had cooled, it was used to choke an annoyingly talkative man to death. The necromancer then buried that man in unhallowed ground, at the dark of the moon, with the burner still lodged in his throat. The following month, he harvested the burner from the putrescent corpse, and set about his true work.

To function as intended, the burner must be used in conjunction with special candles, made to work with its dark purpose. Each candle must be made of rendered human fat, mixed with a small measure of three gruesome ingredients: the blood of a child who was killed for no reason; the flesh of a murderer put to death for his crimes; and the hair of a person dying of an incurable disease. The candles must be at least 1' tall and thick enough so that the taper fits snugly in the burner.

*To die completely, a person must not only forget but be forgotten, and he who is not forgotten is not dead.*

– Samuel Butler

### Procedure

If the candle is lit in a completely dark room, the person who lights it can call upon the ghost of any one person. He must have the person's full and complete name, and must know what the person looks like. If he didn't know the person in life, then seeing a decent likeness of the person he's calling upon will do.

If the person's soul is available, he appears instantly. He is entirely insubstantial – unable to affect the world around him or leave the light cast by the candle. Within that light, he may speak and be heard, and will do so for as long as the room is in total darkness or until the person who lit the candle dismisses the shade by saying "(Full name), I dismiss thee from my sight!" in a language the ghost can understand.

The burner does not force the shade to speak at all, answer questions, or even answer them truthfully. If the user has any other means to gain or force the cooperation of the spirit, these may be used. It also does not make the ghost and the user mutually intelligible, but anyone else in the light may also ask questions, so as to provide translation.

## Punishment

A few dangers arise from using this method. The first is the candles. As they're made from human fat and other materials, they don't burn very well; they gutter and sputter quite ominously, and there's a 5% chance that, every minute the interrogation goes on, the candle might just go out. If it does before the user can fully dismiss the shade, the ghost is free. He may want to return to where he came from, but he could also choose to attack anyone in the room so long as it remains completely dark.

The second is the burner. The spirit world is not happy to be disturbed, and the user's intrusions into it leave a noticeable taint. Every time it's lighted, there's a chance that, the next time someone who had used the item is in total darkness, one of the less-pleasant ghosts he called up will come for a visit. (The more often a single person uses the burner, the greater the chance of this happening.) This could happen even to someone who got rid of the burner and completely abandoned any necromantic ways.

The ghost will have the power to attack until that victim is dead or the state of darkness is broken. At that point, the incorporeal being returns to the spirit world and never returns – even if summoned by the burner.

The burner has another, unfortunate burden. The spirit of the overly talkative man who was killed to give the thing its power still lives within it, and exerts a small amount of influence on the world around him. Whomever owns and uses the burner will find that he's a lot more loquacious than he'd prefer, even to the point of spilling unfortunate and incriminating secrets to complete strangers!

Legend says that, in the end, Van Cauwenberghe was condemned by his own careless tongue for his many crimes. Perhaps it was the delayed revenge of his most useful and yet most anonymous victim.

## Possibilities

The chance to summon and question any known shade is a powerful lure. Imagine what one could learn from such beings! Age-old enigmas could be solved, ancient secrets finally told, and the wealth of unknown history made plain.

On a more immediate level, questions that are bedeviling the PCs could be answered by those most likely to know: the ghosts of murderers and thieves can be called into account, and their victims can have their grievances heard at last. There is also the chance to learn how the afterlife truly works, or to gain news of what transpires in the pit of Hell, or other areas of interest.

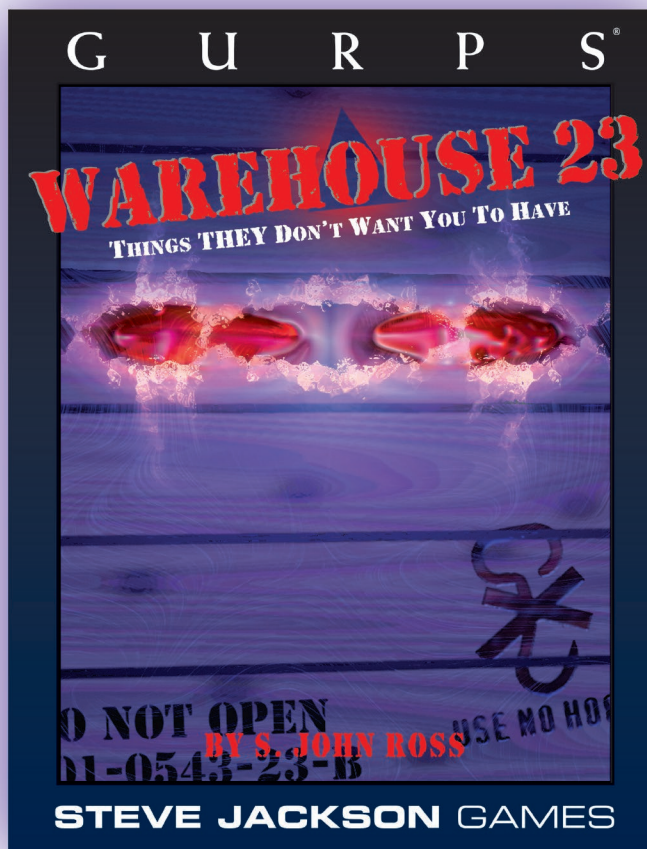
That said, the burner's user must be careful: spirits can and do lie and may

be seeking a way back into the mortal world. They may offer cooperation in exchange for errands, or favors to be done on this side, but doing these things may not necessarily guarantee they'll follow through on their part of the bargain. Hopefully the PCs are smart enough to employ other means to compel truth, or at least cooperation, from those they call up.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

By day an unassuming bookstore clerk, J. Edward Tremlett takes his ancient keyboard from its hiding place and unfurls his words upon the world. His bizarre lifestyle has taken him to such exotic locales as South Korea and Dubai, UAE. He is a frequent contributor to *Pyramid*, has been the editor of *The Wraith Project*, and has seen print in *The End Is Nigh* and *Worlds of Cthulhu*. He's the author of the fictional blog *SPYGOD's Tales* ([spygod-tales.blogspot.com](http://spygod-tales.blogspot.com)) and writes for Op-Ed News. He currently lives in Lansing, Michigan, with two cats and a mountain of Lego bricks.

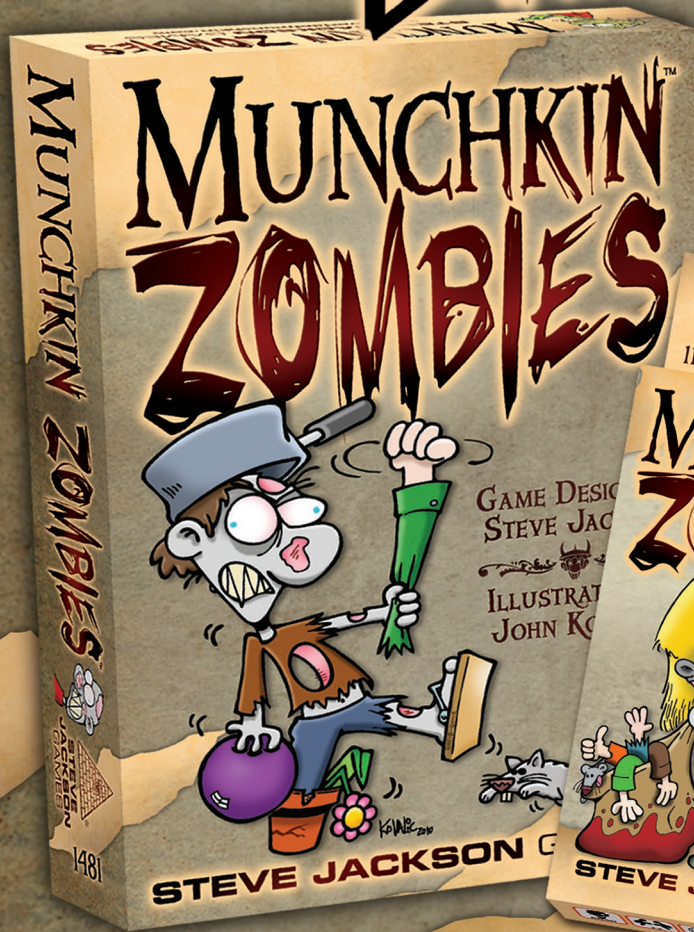
# BEWARE OF WHAT LIES WITHIN. . .



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# ALTUS BRAT

BY NATHAN MILNER

The name Altus Brat means “Old Bread” and comes from a baking technique in which a small crust of old bread is folded into new dough to enhance its depth of flavor and complexity. In its latent form, the Altus Brat is found as a wafer that, when inserted into the mouth of the recently deceased, restores them to a sort of life. However, this second life comes with side effects.

## ORIGIN OF THE ALTUS BRAT

Only legends survive of the origin of the Altus Brat. The most commonly told version of the story begins with a baker, who made the most amazing cakes, cookies, and breads. His creations were not only delicious, everything he made seemed possessed of the spark of life – cakes shaped like bears with shimmering brown fur, dragons with glinting white teeth. Requests for his services came from miles around, and his shop was never empty. Each morning, he woke before dawn, worked all day in his kitchen, came home at night, and went straight to bed to prepare himself for the next day.

One day, his lonely wife came to him and made a request of her own – she asked him for a child. The baker believed this could be his greatest challenge and his greatest triumph. He dropped all of his other orders and set to work molding their son. He rolled and kneaded the dough deep into the morning, making legs, arms, a heart, but something was missing. This time, his mastery was not enough. A child also needed a mother.

He carried the boy to where his wife lay sleeping, pushed a small hole into the chest of his boy, and with his sharpest knife, he made a small cut on his wife’s thumb. Her blood dripped into the boy, like the “old bread” he often used to give his dough extra flavor, and the boy’s fingers twitched. He made another cut across her palm, and more blood flowed into the dough. The boy opened his eyes. His mouth moved softly and wordlessly, but the one word his ragged white lips formed over and over again was clear enough – “more.” The baker cut his wife’s wrist and blood poured from it into their son until it ran dry.

It was then that the Altus Brat rose. Seeing his mother pale and motionless in her bed, the Altus Brat ripped a piece from his side and fed her. Slowly, fitfully, the baker’s wife moved again, though the baker could see that something had changed. The woman and the dough boy advanced on the baker. They would make the baker like them and make their family whole again. Just before they captured him, the baker managed to knock a gas lamp from the bedside table to the floor. By the time that the rest of the village awoke, the baker’s home was burned to the ground. Local village children sifting through the rubble found a perfectly baked bread the size and shape of

a small boy within the ruins of the home. The children tore the bread boy to pieces, each taking a piece for themselves.

The Altus Brat is now typically found as a small wafer. It is indistinguishable from common bread aside from a small streak of pink that can be seen running through the Altus Brat, which is said to be the blood the woman shed for him.

*Every tiny part of  
us cries out against  
the idea of dying,  
and hopes to live  
forever.*

– Ugo Betti

## USAGE

Shops that specialize in the sale of magical artifacts (particularly dark magic) may carry the Altus Brat. The price is high but not unreasonable because the side effects of the Altus Brat are widely known among the patrons of these establishments. Nearly any established magic user keeps an Altus Brat on hand just in case a situation should arise in which it is needed.

The Altus Brat can be used to revive a recently deceased character. It is applied by inserting the wafer into the person’s mouth. Within a few minutes, the recipient will move, slowly at first, and speak. Talk to this character, and he will answer. He will retain most of his memories and personality. Depending upon his personality, he might be quite unhappy to find himself revived! Some formerly dead persons might initially grapple with the situation they find themselves in before adopting a reckless attitude with less fear of injury or re-death. Revived people often become more motivated, aware of the limited time they’ve been given, eager to accomplish tasks and make the most of a second life.

Once the person been revived, the Altus Brat will begin to grow within him. As the Altus Brat grows, memories fade.

At first, the Altus Brat will only intervene when its host is preparing to take an action that would somehow injure the creature itself – jumping into a fire, for example – or seems so likely to destroy the body of its host as to jeopardize its chances of fully gestating. Later, the revived person develops increasing difficulty focusing and moving with coordination. His thoughts will be guided and then taken over completely by the Altus Brat. He might find himself taking actions he had not expected or intended.

Depending upon the time it takes for the Altus Brat to gestate, the victim's companions might get several hours to spend with a creature that very closely resembles the person as he lived, or they might get only an hour or so with a character only slightly more communicative and tractable than a zombie. See *Potency of the Altus Brat* (below) for details on how long this process takes.

## POTENCY OF THE ALTUS BRAT

The potency of the Altus Brat can vary. The stronger the dosage, the more quickly the creature overtakes its host and the less effective time friends get with the revived person.

The longer someone has been dead, the less effective the Altus Brat will be. Anyone dead longer than 48 hours cannot be revived by the Altus Brat at all; not enough heat is left within the body to support its growth. For those dead for less than 12 hours, roll 3d on the table below. For 12-24 hours, roll 3d-2. For 24-36 hours, roll 3d-3. For 36-48 hours, roll 3d-4.

**3-4:** The Altus Brat fully consumes the recipient in *two hours*.

The person is revived with the following attribute modifiers: ST-2; DX-4; IQ-4; 1d HP.

**9-13:** The Altus Brat fully consumes the recipient in five hours.

The person is revived with the following attribute modifiers: ST-1; DX-3; IQ-3; 1d+1 HP.

**14-17:** The Altus Brat fully consumes the recipient in eight hours. The person is revived with the following attribute modifiers: ST-1, DX-3; IQ-2; 1d+3 HP.

**18:** The Altus Brat fully consumes the recipient in 12 hours.

The person is revived with the following attribute modifiers: DX-1; IQ-1; 2d HP.

Any skills and secondary characteristics based on ST, DX, or IQ are likewise affected and should be recalculated.

Should a living person ingest the Altus Brat, the creature begins to grow as it would in a deceased body. However, the living have the ability to potentially stave off possession by the Altus Brat. Healthy characters' natural defenses generally render the Altus Brat ineffective. Badly injured, poisoned or otherwise seriously sickened characters are more susceptible to falling into a full possession. A living person can stave off the Altus Brat with a roll against HT. Apply -1 for any physically weakened state as well as disadvantages like Overweight and Unfit. Apply +1 for advantages like Fit, Injury Tolerance, and Resistant.

If the parasite isn't immediately nullified, healthy characters will feel physical discomfort and stomach pains during the early stages of the creature's growth. If the hosts realize what's happening, they can try to eliminate the Altus Brat from their body prior to full possession, such as through regurgitation (to expel the parasite before it can fuse with the person) or drinking alcohol in excess (to create a stomach environment toxic to growth).

An X-Ray or MRI can reveal the parasite, but the process does not injure it. The Altus Brat can be removed by surgery; the success of the procedure requires a roll against HT with the above modifiers along with an additional HT-1 for each hour the parasite has been gestating. Magic can be used to replicate or augment any of the above approaches (using a Retch or Nauseate spell to force regurgitation, or a Vigor spell to boost HT before attempting surgery). However, abilities cannot be used to remove the parasite directly without harming its host.

As the creature grows, the victim loses 1 HP per hour until dead. At that point, possession proceeds as if an 18 had been rolled on the above table.

Certain outward signs signal the final stages of the possession. The victim's speech becomes very slurred and loses formal syntax. His eyes lose focus and even move freely of each other as the optic nerves are severed during the creature's progress toward the brain. His stomach may appear distended. Soon after, the eyes sink into the sockets and are replaced with pale, uncooked dough. The body becomes very swollen, with dough beginning to ooze out of orifices. At this point, the victim has no control over his actions.

The Altus Brat might continue to use this shell, doing its best to appear helpful and amenable to suggestion, until it finds an opportune moment – when other characters are sleeping or otherwise disposed – to slip free from the husk of the revived person. It then seeks to attack those nearby and infect them with pieces of itself.

*Our life is made by  
the death of others.  
– Leonardo da Vinci*

## FIGHTING THE ALTUS BRAT

Once the Altus Brat has grown enough to reanimate a body, attacking or destroying the body, other than by fire, will not harm the creature. The host body continues to move and act even as limbs are mangled or removed until HP reaches 0. At that point, the creature is left without a host. If the creature is fully gestated within a corpse, it sheds the host's body to emerge as a mature Altus Brat. Otherwise, an immature Altus Brat slithers forth. An immature Altus Brat seeks a new host through smell or vibration as quickly as possible, but it can be harmed by traditional attacks until it finds one.

A mature Altus Brat is less susceptible to traditional attacks because of the malleability of its body. The most effective attack against either version of the Altus Brat is fire or burning.

A mature Altus Brat that has been "baked" can be checked for usable fragments. At most, a defeated Altus Brat could produce two to three pieces suitable for re-use; those pieces can be kept for later applications or sold to an interested merchant. An immature Altus Brat can produce no suitable fragments.

The Altus Brat understands that its looks can be disturbing, so it prefers to move at night.

## IMMATURE ALTUS BRAT

Cast from its host only half-made, the immature Altus Brat looks like a shapeless mass of blood-soaked, uncooked dough. It moves like an amoeba, pulsing slowly across floors, walls, or ceilings. Aware of its vulnerability, it prefers to move under cover of night and seeks dark, confined places to hide until it sees an opportunity to creep up on and infect a new host. It will crawl into the mouth of a sleeping victim and gestate quickly, killing its host from within.

**ST:** 9      **HP:** 9      **Speed:** 4.00  
**DX:** 6      **Will:** 6      **Move:** 4  
**IQ:** 6      **Per:** 6      **Weight:** 5 lbs.  
**HT:** 10      **FP:** 10      **SM:** -2  
**Dodge:** 7      **Parry:** N/A      **DR:** 2

**Parasitic Decay (14):** 2d toxic + follow-up 1d-2 toxic (six 10-minute cycles).

**Traits:** Blindness; Clinging; Mind Control; No Fine Manipulators; Possession (Parasitic); Vulnerability (Fire x4).

**Skills:** Camouflage-11; Climbing-14; Jumping-12; Stealth-15.

## MATURE ALTUS BRAT

The mature Altus Brat takes on the size and shape of an adult man. It has some ability to change its shape, including growing multiple limbs and turning those limbs into stabbing or slashing weapons, but it cannot significantly reduce or increase its size beyond the mass of which it is made up. It encircles its foes and then either batters, stabs, or slowly constricts the life out of its victim.

Due to its lack of speed, the Altus Brat, when attacked, will make an initial attempt to bind its attackers in a bear hug. It then generates additional arms while maintaining its hold to pummel its opponent. Its appendages can also take the shape

of swords for slashing and sharp points for stabbing. The creature inserts pieces of itself (at full potency) into deceased or weakened characters to create additional minions.

**ST:** 22      **HP:** 22      **Speed:** 5.75  
**DX:** 7      **Will:** 8      **Move:** 5  
**IQ:** 8      **Per:** 8      **Weight:** 100 lbs.  
**HT:** 16      **FP:** 16      **SM:** 0  
**Dodge:** 8      **Parry:** 11      **DR:** 4

**Arm Club (16):** 2d+2 crushing; Reach C, 1.

**Arm Slash (11):** 2d cutting; Reach C, 1.

**Arm Stab (11):** 2d-2 impaling; Reach C, 1.

**Binding (16):** Targets a 2-yard radius; Reach C. No damage, but treat as Binding 22 (Engulfing) with DR 4; see p. B40 for details. Any injury done to the binding is applied to the Altus Brat.

**Traits:** Damage Resistance 7 (Ablative); Extra Arms (up to four arms); Regrowth; Shrinking 10 (Full HP); Stretching 1; Vulnerability (Fire x2).

**Skills:** Brawling-16; Stealth-10.

*Bad grain can only produce bad bread.*

*– Dutch proverb*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nathan Milner spends his days slogging through a minefield of hashtags, social media engagement, and actionable insights as the director of technology for an interactive marketing firm. In his free time, Nathan, his wife, and two daughters enjoy the real world in and around Northeastern Pennsylvania.

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# RANDOM THOUGHT TABLE

## THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE SCARY

BY STEVEN MARSH, *PYRAMID* EDITOR

There's an amusing video from 2009 on the website Funny or Die entitled "The Button." (If you want to watch, it's at [funnyordie.com/videos/44b3d8f432](http://funnyordie.com/videos/44b3d8f432).) The video is a sendup on the 1970 Richard Matheson short story "Button, Button," which itself was turned into an episode of the 1985 series of *The Twilight Zone*. It was also the basis of the 2009 film *The Box*, starring Cameron Diaz.

In the Funny or Die video, two people are talking in front of a box with a button:

"If you push this button, two things will happen. One: Someone, somewhere in the world who you don't know . . . will die. And two –"

And then the other man pushes the button.

The original story presented a moral quandary, a meditation on doing an amount of evil for which you (presumably) won't need to face the consequences, for a monetary reward – \$50,000 in the original short story. The Funny or Die version takes the premise at face value, but posits that the person to whom the offer is made *just doesn't care* about the dilemma being presented. (The viral video goes on from there; it packs a fair bit of amusement in its two minutes.)

I was reminded of "The Button" as I thought about the notion of horrific creations. And, as I'm wont to do, I started dissecting my thoughts. Here, then, are the results of my terrifyingly abstract autopsy.

### GET WHAT YOU WANT

Most horrific creations have to give you something you want. This also applies to living constructs. Even if you're trying to create your own race of mole-people, you probably want them to *do* something: conquer the world, obey your every whim, handle telemarketers . . . *something*.

Fortunately, the array of human wants is seemingly limitless, so coming up with something that someone desires is pretty easy. Some options include:

- Offensive (harming others, whether up close or afar).
- Defensive (protecting yourself or loved ones from physical damage, magic, mind-reading, poison, animals, etc.).
- Communication (from afar, mental, silent, with the dead, with those in the past or future, etc.).
- Information (knowledge that's lost or difficult or time-consuming to acquire).
- Any other skills (be a better driver, conversationalist, pickpocket, etc.).

### *An Anti-Barfoo Potion*

In the realm of gaming, one common boon granted by horrific objects is the ability to overcome limitations placed by the world itself. Thus if the campaign only allows necromantic abilities to speak with someone who's been dead a week at most, maybe a Bone of the Beyond allows the holder to speak with someone who's up to a *year* gone. Or if a campaign doesn't permit spellcasters to wear armor, maybe the Warrior-Blood Armor can be donned by magicians without affecting their magical abilities.

It's possible to add these limitations after the campaign starts. Perhaps all mana in the world changes to be incompatible with existing magical techniques . . . but quaffing the now mysteriously available Potion of Potential allows these old methods of spellcasting to be viable the 24 hours the potion lasts. (If you go this route and tone down abilities that had existed previously, it might be best to refund some character points for those who had invested heavily in abilities that no longer function.)

### *Specifics, Specifics*

Most horrific creations do best with *specific* boons. That helps give them their flavor. Sure, you *could* have a sword that increases all combat abilities, but it's more flavorful to have it increase sword-fighting abilities when used under moonlight (with abilities amplified by the *quantity* of moonlight).

Sure, you could have a book that has all knowledge in its pages . . . but what if the book was devoted to just *one* person, exhaustive in its details on that sole life? Or this strange homunculus *could* speak and comprehend all languages, but it's more intriguing if it can only speak languages its owner can't (which makes it impossible to relay information without an intermediary).

Obviously, most specifics make the creation less useful than a more broadly applicable construct, but that helps make it possible to protect various niches while providing a plethora of opportunities. The sword that makes anyone better at all combat shuts down a lot of other possible items, but the Moonlight Sword can exist concurrently with the Second-Chance Blade or the Souljoiner Dagger or . . .

## BEWARE WHAT YOU WISH FOR

The flipside of most horrific creations is that they come with some kind of drawback. It's possible to get *very* creative with this aspect.

### *Tied to the Boon . . .*

Many horrific creations have downsides that are tied to the offered benefit in some fashion. For example, it would be logical if the Warrior-Blood Armor needed to be fed the blood of a warrior (*not* the spellcaster) every so often to continue to function.

Perhaps the Moonlight Sword "eats" moonlight, making it noticeably dimmer outside when used, inducing sight penalties, naturally limiting the bonus that can be gained (once all ambient moonlight is eaten, the sword stops bestowing bonuses), and generally scaring people. Or maybe each time the Moonlight Sword is used, the moon's phase *doesn't* change . . . which is good news for lycanthropes, creepy, and potentially a portent of something celestially nasty.

Maybe the book that provides an impossibly in-depth examination of one person – say, the Big Bad Guy – has to be read in "real time"; learning the secrets of a particularly important year takes one year from the reader. If you don't want it to disrupt the campaign, perhaps it simply "consumes" the years; the researcher feels the entirety of spending the year reading the book, but only a few moments pass in relation to the rest of the world. (In this case, it would probably be best from a design standpoint if the book somehow "binds" to the reader.)

### *. . . Or Not*

However, it's not essential for the drawback to be directly related to the ability granted. The Potion of Potential might imbue its drinker with delusions that increase with the number of times drunk, and withdrawal symptoms that increase with the number of days *not* imbibed.

It would be logical if the homunculus that can translate any unknown language has a penchant for lying and manipulating those it "translates" for. But it could be at least as interesting to have to feed the thing living mammals (which slowly escalate as the bond between it and the owner grows). Or maybe the frightening creature requires human-style nurturing, with swaddling in blankets and "nursing" . . . on blood.

*We all  
desire  
something.*

## THE BALANCE

*Chris: Hey, birthday dude! You want some ice cream?*  
*Stewie: Yes, but no sprinkles. For every sprinkle I find, I shall kill you.*

– *Family Guy*, #1.3

Perhaps the hardest part of creating horrific creations is balancing the utility of the boon with the magnitude of the drawback. A magic sword that gives a small bonus to combat but deals mortal wounds to one's companions would never get used. A weapon that could instantly kill any foe but causes paper cuts to appear on the inside of the wielder's toes would not be very horrific (although it would be *very* annoying).

Balancing the good and bad elements is more guesswork than exact science. This was the humorous juxtaposition of "The Button," where the supposed drawback – someone somewhere dies – was not a detriment to the recipient of the box.

One of the best tips to enhance the horrific potential is to start small with the bane and then amplify it as the heroes (and players) grow accustomed to the boon. The Warrior-Blood Armor needs a drop of warrior blood to function? That's not so bad; we'll get the party's fighter to prick his finger. Oh, now it needs a tablespoon of blood? We can supply that. A pint of blood? I guess we'll need to kill warriors – evil or otherwise – to fuel this thing . . .

Arguably the most horrific aspect you can introduce is the element of choice. A parasite that burrows itself into you – making you eat twice as much and vomit daily while also making you immune to poison – is pretty horrifying, but the lack of choice robs it of some of its potential. It's either horrible enough to want to rip out (making it a curse), or it's useful enough to leave alone and stock up on snacks.

The element of choice is what made the One Ring from the *Lord of the Rings* so terrifying; sure, each use could potentially corrupt, but when the Nazgûl are closing and the choice is between losing your soul or your life, then the choice is as obvious as it is gut-wrenching. (As an aside, the One Ring is a good example of the boon and bane not having much to do with each other; the link between "turning invisible" and "turning into a single-minded covetous immortal" isn't obvious . . .)

So, yes, each use of the Moonlight Sword may alter the skies of the world and make the wielder a hunted person, but if the choice is that or risk getting slain by a dragon, it's both an easy yet impossible decision. Or if the mad inventor believes that the only way to beat the ravages of time are to implant his brain into a golem that can only experience sensation in ever-escalating experiences, it's obvious that choice will lead down the path of destruction . . . but it's also obvious that the element of free will remained, giving it its horrific spark.

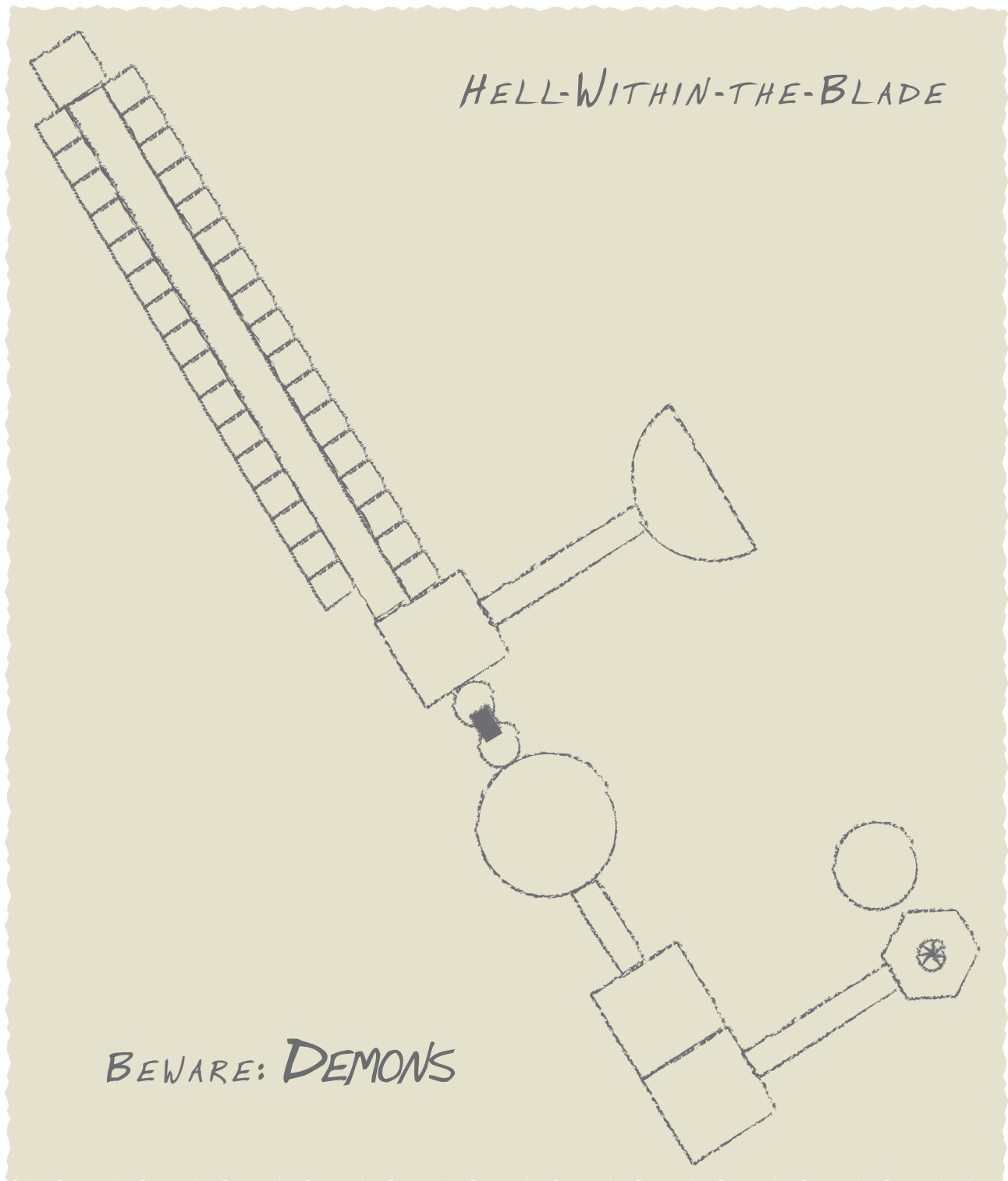
By making the good focused, the bad flavorful, and both balanced, you can make your own horrific creations with ease. In fact, it will be so easy, it may be impossible to stop . . .

## 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, Hoghead Publishing, and others. He has been editing *Pyramid* for over 10 years; during that time, he has won four Origins awards. He lives in Indiana with his wife, Nikola Vrtis, and their son.

# ODDS AND ENDS

This unlabeled, "hand-drawn" version of the Hell-Within-the-Blade map for *Eidetic Memory: Hellblade* (pp. 15-20) can be used as an in-game prop or as a tactical aid for the players or GM.



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