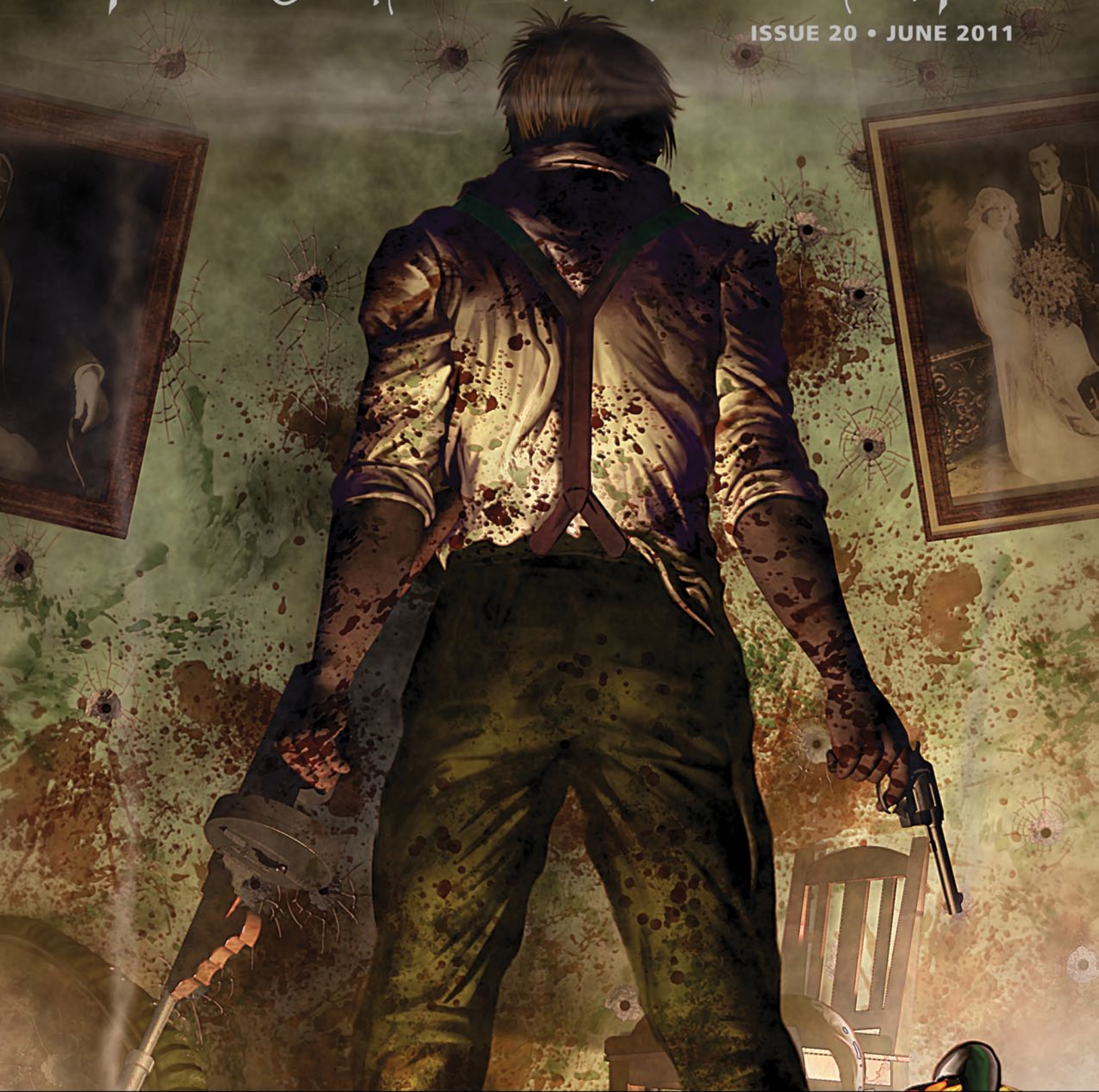


THE UNSPEAKABLE OATH™

ISSUE 20 • JUNE 2011



A DIGEST OF ARCANE LORE FOR CTHULHU MYTHOS ROLEPLAYING GAMES

THE UNSPEAKABLE OATH™

ISSUE 20, JUNE 2011

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THE DREAD PAGE OF AZATHOTH

By SHANE IVEY

Combat in *Call of Cthulhu*. It's an evergreen controversy. Whether you're playing modern-day Delta Green or Victorian gentlemen occultists, sooner or later the players want to use all those gun stats that are teasing them from the rulebook. And nothing can shatter a carefully laid atmosphere of cosmic horror and dread like gunfire at the wrong time.

But it certainly has its place.

Violence haunts in the works of H.P. Lovecraft. The narrator of "Pickman's Model" blazes away with a revolver when the ghouls come. "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" ends with a massive government raid. Wilbur Whately is brought down by a guard dog's fangs. Akeley's letters in "The Whisperer in Darkness" describe late-night firefights with the alien intruders and their servants (and once again guard dogs prove their mettle!). Great Cthulhu himself is stymied, if only for a moment, by the impact of a ship's prow.

So it shouldn't be any great surprise that combat scenes punctuate many Cthulhu Mythos roleplaying games. It's not just because the original, *Call of Cthulhu*, had its start in the heroic fantasy game *RuneQuest*. And it's not just because the fictional combat of a roleplaying game is suspenseful fun. Violence, as Lovecraft knew, is a natural human response to the horror of the the unknown.

Of course, in a game about horror and wonder, combat poses unique challenges. It's easy to handle it poorly, and—there's no getting around this—when handled poorly it can ruin the mood of the game. But it's possible to make combat a valuable part of the horror. In fact it's not hard to use investigator violence itself to drive home the themes of the Cthulhu Mythos.

Combat has to be paced skillfully. If you spend too much time on attack and damage rolls, a Cthulhu RPG starts to feel like just another game about killing monsters and taking their tomes. And—taking a cue from Graham Walmsley's excellent *Stealing Cthulhu*—remember that this is a horror game: Don't end on a big battle if you can end with the investigators running for their lives.

Pacing takes forethought by the GM. You have to consider which locations and events are likely to lead to a fight. And you have to think of alternate ways to present things if you'd rather not have a fight when the players seem intent on one. All of that requires learning flexibility and subtlety, so you don't fall into the trap of railroading the players and turning their game into your personal story-time.

Just as importantly, everyone at the table needs to buy in to the risks. Cthulhu Mythos roleplaying games tend to be unflinchingly lethal. Every combat that an investigator



joins means one more chance to take a hit that nobody can survive. Sooner or later, the odds work against you.

That's not a problem for just the players. Like every roleplaying game, Cthulhu Mythos games thrive on long-term play, where characters evolve and become well defined and—this being horror—eventually spiral into madness. If the players get into too many fights, it's tempting for the GM to nudge the results a little in their favor so they don't die too soon. But that in itself can lead the players to overestimate their chances and to get into even more dangerous encounters. Again, you need to be savvy to recognize when to pull punches and when to let the blood fall where it may. And you need to make sure all the players understand, before the game starts, that they're playing a game that can kill their characters quickly if they're not careful—and sometimes whether they're careful or not.

But if you're canny with the pacing, and you don't let it get too easy, combat can be crucial. It's a way for characters facing an impossible task to strike back in a way anybody can understand: It may be useless but it's cathartic.

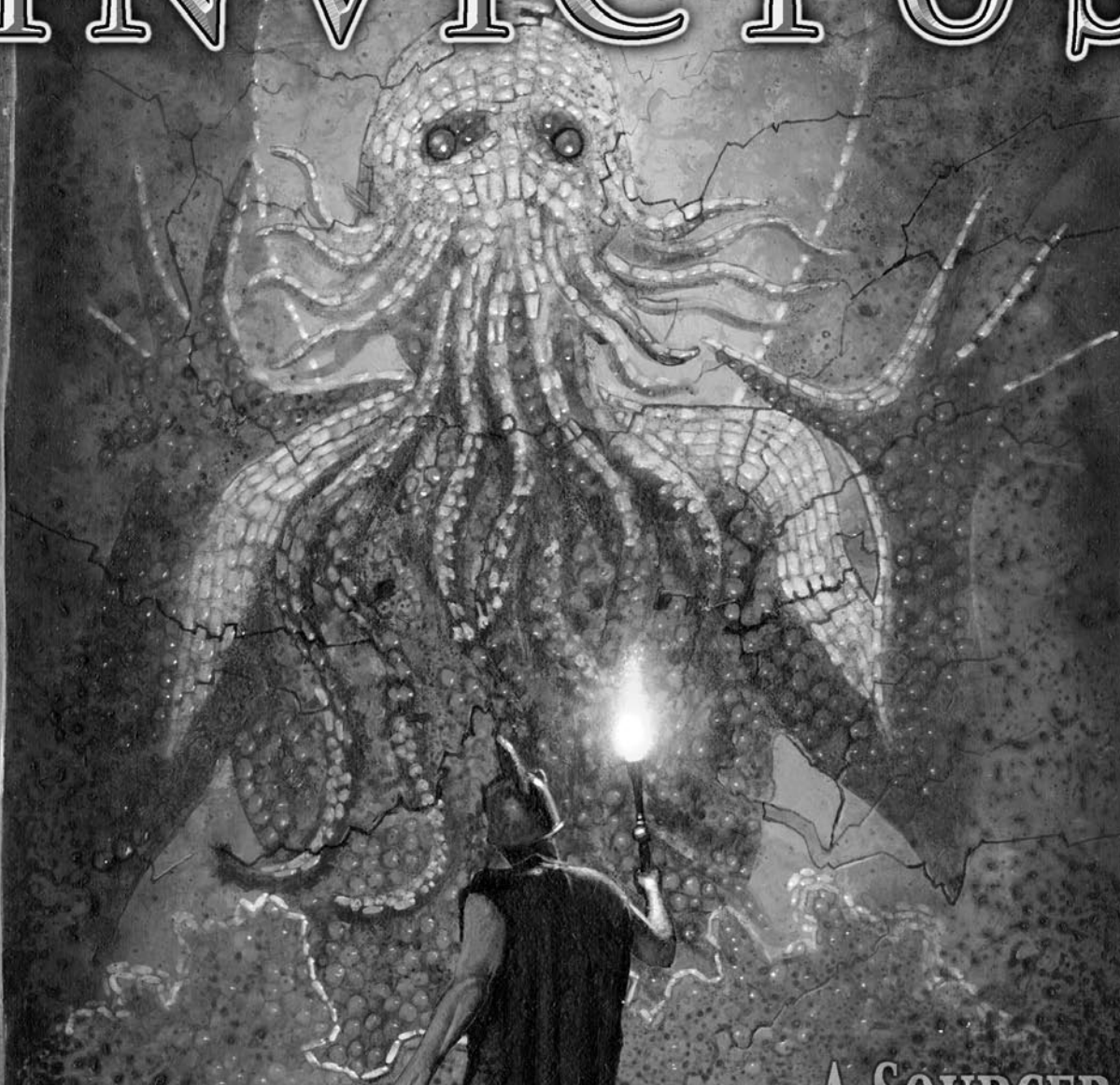
And the need to hide their violence or escape its consequences is a way to ground the players in the world that their characters trying to protect—a world that frowns on unexplained bloodshed.

It doesn't have to turn a horror scenario silly. If you handle it right, combat is a very quick way to drive home the horrors that the investigators face. Most of the monsters of the Cthulhu Mythos are incredibly dangerous, and even their more killable human servants can have terrible weapons, tools, or shockingly ruthless fanaticism on their side. Combat in Cthulhu games is a quick way to insanity and death.

Since any combat can kill a player character, every combat is potentially a tragedy and a terrible sacrifice. But even when the players come away from a battle victorious—with an alien monstrosity dead on the ground and evaporating into the higher-dimensional aether—they should be thinking about what else is out there, about how difficult it was to deal with this single threat, and the whole universe of horrors waiting to pounce just as soon as you get their attention. The players may have won a single skirmish, but does the other side even know there's a war?

When it's the players' turn to go after the ghouls or the mi-go with guns blazing, don't discourage them out of hand. Use it as a chance to explore the depths of otherworldly terror and the toll that it takes on humanity. Let them fight it out. And leave them feeling more frightened than ever when the smoke finally clears.

CTHULHU INVICTUS



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A TALE OF TERROR: THE PLOT THICKENS

BY ADAM GAUNTLETT

The investigators have succeeded! The cult's been routed, their plans foiled, and now there's little left to do but pick through the rubble. Amongst the debris is a document, a list of prominent local citizens, some of whom are marked with a cross and some with a triangle. What does this mean?

(The word 'cult' is used only for the Tale's sake. The victory could as easily have been against a vampire, a pack of ghouls, or whatever best fits the plot.)

OPTION 1: EXTORTION

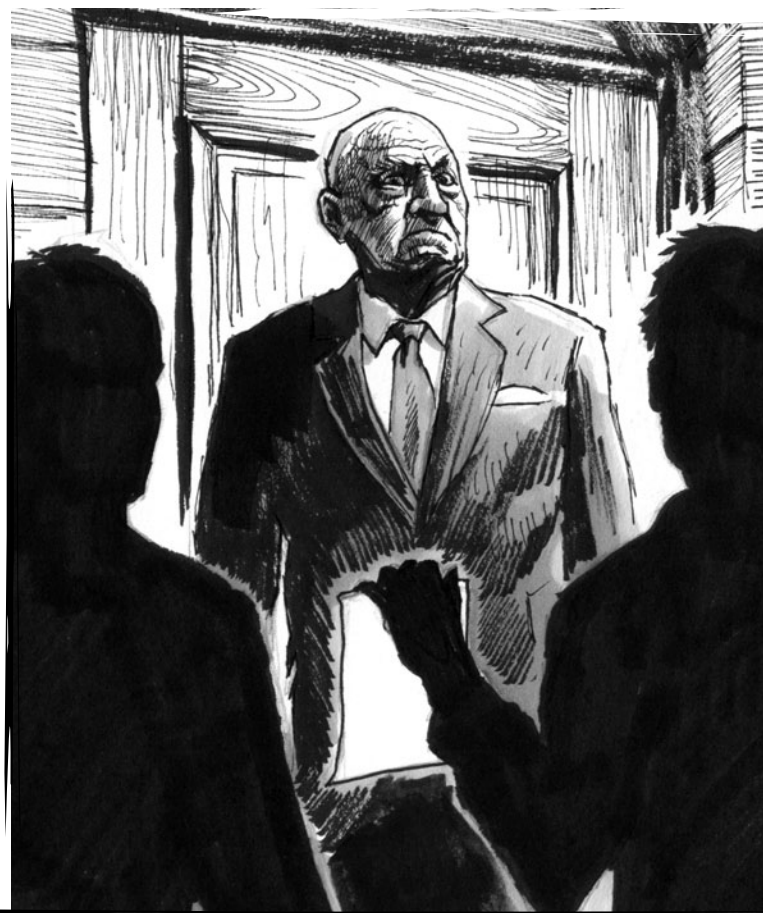
The cult was blackmailing many important people. The cross marks those who had already been targeted, while the triangle indicates those who have not yet been approached. The blackmailed citizens are very worried that their dark secrets may be revealed, and won't react well to investigators who start babbling about strange lists. The incriminating material must be hidden somewhere; the blackmailer's targets believe that the investigators have the evidence. Or at least know where it can be found. Frightened extortion victims may do anything, even commit murder, to keep their secrets hidden. This could get complicated if someone else shows up claiming to have the evidence. Will the victims believe that the investigators have nothing to do with this extortionist?

OPTION 2: ARISEN

The cult has been slowly infiltrating society by murdering prominent citizens and using the Resurrection spell on them. These unhappy souls are then forced to do the cult's bidding, under threat of being returned to essential salts, or worse, being resurrected as ye liveliest awfulness. The cross indicates those who have already been turned, while the triangle indicates future targets. While the victims are relieved that their enemies are no more, they begin to wonder whether the investigators won't just carry on where the others left off. Possible alternate scenarios include: the resurrection requires regular supply of X (e.g., human blood, a special chemical, bugs) to be effective; the resurrectees are living parts of a larger ritual that is still ongoing; complications involved in the process mean that the victims eventually become ye liveliest awfulness anyway, over time.

OPTION 3: RIVALRY

The cult has long been in conflict with a rival organization, but as yet they weren't sure who their enemies were. They were convinced that the prominent citizens on the list were somehow involved, and were slowly working their way through the list of suspects when the investigators intervened. The cross indicates people who have been cleared of suspicion, while the triangle marks those who had yet to be tested. In fact, the town has been infiltrated by the Mi-Go (or whichever entity best fits the plot), and some (but not all) of the prominent citizens are enemy spies. They're relieved when the investigators do their dirty work for them, but are less happy if the investigators follow up on that list. Perhaps it's time for an unfortunate series of accidents—eldritch or otherwise. This may escalate to a direct encounter with a Mythos entity.



THE EYE OF LIGHT & DARKNESS

BY VARIOUS CULTISTS



FRAGMENT

BY MUSICA CTHULHIANA, €16.40

WWW.CTHULHUMUSIC.COM

REVIEWED BY BRIAN M. SAMMONS

This collection of original creepy compositions is perfect for setting the mood of any horror role playing game, be it *Kult*, anything from the World of Darkness, or even a little thing called *Call of Cthulhu*. The two-disc, limited edition version of this CD offers 25 delightfully eerie tracks of, to use the creators' own words, "dark-ambient, doom-jazz, horror-electronic and strange noises." This means that while you probably won't be grooving to these tunes on your iPod on a daily basis, it will go a long way in added spine-tingling factor to your next CoC game. If that's what you're looking for (and what Keeper isn't?), then I highly recommend these moody tunes for a number of reasons.

First, these spooky sounds are suitably subtle. Too many soundtracks designed to accompany RPGs are far too bombastic. They forget that the most important part of the game is what the players and GM are saying and doing, not listening to their terror tunes. They forget background music should...gasp...stay in the background, enhancing the mood, and not have to be shouted over. Musica Cthulhiana has mastered that fine art better than any mood music I can remember.

Another thing I really like about this CD is the lack of camp and blatant name dropping. In some Cthulhu-centric soundtracks there will be a song called something like "Diving with Deep Ones" and it will have croaking frogs. Another might be called "Cthulhu's Hoedown" and have a bunch of wet, squishy sounds because, you know, that's funny. With plush Cthulhu all over the place, and the big bad C Diddy even showing up on *South Park*, it is inarguable that Lovecraft's original icon of cosmic horror has become a bit defanged (de-tentacled?). However, when I run *Call of Cthulhu* I want to promote a feeling of mystery and dread, not unintentional hilarity. Musica Cthulhiana does that perfectly.

Lastly, it's a little thing, but the individual tracks blend

Reviewed items are rated on a scale of one to ten phobias:

1-3: Not worth purchasing.

4-6: An average item with notable flaws; at 6 it's worth buying.

7-10: Degrees of excellence.

seamlessly with one another. That's not to say that they all sound the same, just that there are no jarring moments between one song and the next that will pull people's attention away from the game. Once more this illustrates that music masters Gotz Muller-Durholl and John Alexander knew exactly what they were doing and didn't just whip up a bunch of horror-themed instrumentals and toss them on a CD.

Now don't worry, you crazy kids out there, firmly cemented in the digital age, who look at CDs the same way I look at LPs—*Fragment* is also available for download. You can get it in MP3, OGG, AAC, FLAC, WAV, and countless other initials I have no clue of what they mean. You can also get it through iTunes and Zune Music. So no matter what your preferred music medium, you can get Musica Cthulhiana's *Fragments* and have it add some appropriate ambiance to your next *Call of Cthulhu* game. For pure game enhancement, this CD gets 8 phobias.



CTHULHU'S DARK CULTS

EDITED BY DAVID CONYERS

CHAOSIUM INC, 2010; 239 PAGES; \$14.95

REVIEWED BY BRIAN M. SAMMONS

Cthulhu's Dark Cults carries on that grand tradition of authors playing in the nightmarish world first dreamt up by HPL. Is this new anthology from Chaosium, the publishers of the *Call of Cthulhu* role playing game, up to the challenge of carrying the guttering torch of the Cthulhu Mythos a few more feet down the dark and

winding path of horror literature? Grab your Elder Sign and let's go investigate these bloodthirsty cults devoted to the Great Old Ones.

Credit for this anthology first and foremost goes to David Conyers, who pulls double duty as not only the editor but also as author of one of the best stories in this book. I have come to expect great things from Mr. Conyers, and with "Sisters of the Sands" he has once again impressed me greatly. I won't say that it is the best of the book because there are so many great stories to be found here, but it would be on my short list if I had to choose one.

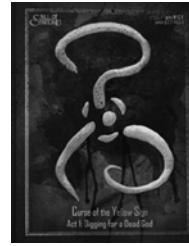
"The Nature of Faith" by Oscar Rios is another great tale and one that took me by surprise on a few levels. The greatest reason for my happy surprise was that in a book all about nasty evil cults, this story tackles that subject from a refreshingly different angle. The other reason was my own ignorance of Mr. Rios' writing. While I knew he had penned scenarios for the *Call of Cthulhu* game, I wasn't familiar with his fiction. I now hope to rectify that as quickly as possible.

In a similar vein, Penelope Love's "The Whisper of Ancient Secrets" gets big points from me for daring to have a protagonist with a different POV on the subject of evil cults. "Perfect Skin" by David Witteveen, while more traditional in theme, is nonetheless a cracking tale that could easily appear in any non-Lovecraft-inspired anthology. Hmm, both of these authors are Australian, as is Mr. Conyers. I will have to thank him for opening my American eyes to some truly great terror talents from the land down under.

That is not to say the North American authors fell short with their tales. But since I already knew that they wrote well, I was less surprised when reading their fine tales. Cody Goodfellow, John Sunseri and John Goodrich are all established masters of the Cthulhu Mythos, whose stories "The Devil's Diamonds," "The Eternal Chinaman" and "Captains of Industry" didn't disappoint.

If I have one gripe with this book, it would be the setting. This anthology is meant to have strong ties to the *Call of Cthulhu* role playing game. Because of that, all the tales are set in the 1920s and 1930s in order to have connections to the RPG, which is also largely set in that era. While that historic time worked for most tales, others seemed much more modern and almost shoehorned into their assorted years. I would much rather have had stories set in whatever era best allows them to tell their tales. But this is a minor misstep at best, and one easily overlooked when you take into account the quality of the majority of stories this book collects.

If you are looking for some *Call of Cthulhu* flavored tales or you just want to add a little cosmic dread into your daily life, then *Cthulhu's Dark Cults* is the book for you. I give it 7 out of 10 phobias.



CURSE OF THE YELLOW SIGN - ACT 1: DIGGING FOR A DEAD GOD

28-PAGE PDF

By JOHN WICK

\$5; WICKED DEAD BREWING COMPANY

REVIEWED BY MATTHEW POOK

It is no surprise that John Wick, the author of *Play Dirty*, an advice book on how to be a "fair" GM, asks much of both players and Keeper in his first scenario for *Call of Cthulhu*. Not the least is asking the players to roleplay Nazis, replete with the prejudices and dogma that went with Nazism. The first part of the *Curse of the Yellow Sign* trilogy, *Digging for a Dead God* is a one-shot for six players set on the eve of World War II.

This not a traditional scenario. It has just three events. The Nazis discover a door. The Nazis unlock the door. The Nazis suffer the consequences. In between these events, what happens to the characters is entirely up to the players. It takes place in the summer of 1939, the Nazis having secreted a clandestine team, led by several members of the SS, into British sub-Saharan Africa and begun a mining operation for diamonds. They have commandeered the inhabitants of a small village to work the mine, but all is not going well. When the natives report that they have uncovered something strange, everything gets worse.

With no NPCs and no events to talk of, there is very little to this scenario. There is a region to explore, a small sandbox for the characters to investigate and react against as they make strange discoveries. It is primarily up to the Keeper to make the most of both the strangeness of these discoveries and the reactions of the characters to them. Together with the characters' interlocking backgrounds and dark agendas, this forces both players and Keeper to be more proactive than in other *Call of Cthulhu* scenarios. The Keeper even has his own role within the scenario, a prodding, pushing figure whispering ills into the characters' ears.

Much of the PDF is devoted to advice from the author. This covers his approach to *Call of Cthulhu*: that it is a horror movie rather than dark fantasy (the comparison being between *Alien* and *Aliens*); staging advice, from running it by torchlight to how to address each character; and events that occurred when he ran it. This advice imparts the horrific alien feel to *Digging for a Dead God*, a feel born of the self rather than of an Outer or Elder God; that mankind, when driven from



SHE JUST COULDN'T STAY AWAY (No, No)

MANSPERGER

A MODERN-DAY SCENARIO FOR CALL OF CTHULHU

BY JEFFREY MOELLER

Dorothy “Dotty” Stotz is a depressed, agoraphobic, senile old woman who lives alone in a slum. Her house is piled high with rotting garbage, dead animals and other unsavory matters. It is also home to innumerable semi-feral cats, which are the only things she cares about.

Dotty was once a globetrotting archaeologist, and her hovel is full of things that “ought to be in a museum”. This includes an ancient artifact she found in the jungles of Burma. The *Black Scroll of Atmox* describes the rites of Aforgomon, “God of the Hours and Cycles”, and how to corrupt them in order to relive the past.

On Day -7, Dotty had a particularly bad day. At dawn, a city code enforcement officer served her with a 10-day condemnation notice: her house was so filthy that they would be evicting her and her furry friends and demolishing it as a nuisance. Dotty hit him over the head, knocked him cold, and drug him inside. She tied him up and put him in her basement closet while she thought through her panic.

Dotty became increasingly distraught throughout the day, but her cats came first. At 7:40 P.M., she let her favorite cat, Penny, out the back door as usual. Penny ran down the block, around the corner, out into the street, and was promptly killed by a passing car.

To have one last day with her beloved Penny, Dotty dug through her trash, found the *Black Scroll*, and sacrificed herself to twist the fabric of time in her immediate vicinity. Why this awful day? Because she is senile and cannot clearly remember another. Now she continuously relives that day in a pocket universe, beginning with the condemnation notice and ending with her sorcerous self-sacrifice at midnight. Things continue normally outside of Dotty's house, but inside Dotty's house, it is always sometime on Day -7.

Dotty's hermitage cannot be, or remain, truly isolated. Penny must be let out at 7:40 P.M. Someone must report her death to Dotty shortly thereafter. Penny appears in the main timeline every day at 7:40 P.M., and must be killed shortly thereafter.

The interacting timelines are not sustainable. Their collisions are putting a lot of pressure on the fabric of reality—and it is about to rend.

INVOLVING THE INVESTIGATORS

Bob Plunkett, a respected local councilman, calls the investigators on the morning of Day +1. Private investigators or forensic engineers might be retained by Bob Plunkett's attorney, or (in the case of a Delta Green cell) Bob Plunkett is a "friendly" and needs help. The precise date and location are unimportant, as long as there is a slum.

Plunkett is in a psychiatric ward following an incident on the evening of Day 0. Initially, he tried to claim that he lost control of his car and accidentally ran over a cat. The police then confronted him with surveillance footage that made it appear as though he acted deliberately. Plunkett then changed his story and began claiming that his car swerved off the road on its own, chased a cat down a sidewalk, and killed it. This version of his story landed him in the psych ward. Plunkett tested clean for booze and drugs and wants to clear his name.

Plunkett's defense attorney has obtained a copy of the incriminating surveillance camera footage from a nearby convenience store, Smith's Groceries (Investigator Handout #1).

INVESTIGATOR HANDOUT #1, SMITH'S GROCERIES SURVEILLANCE VIDEO CLIP, TIME-STAMPED 7:45 P.M. THE PRECEDING EVENING.

The surveillance video shows a large, disheveled, tortoise-shell cat begin to cross the street, headed toward the store. A BMW sedan slows, apparently to let it pass. Suddenly, the BMW peels rubber, veers onto the sidewalk, and flattens the hapless cat. The car backs over the cat, runs it over again, backs over it again, and then runs over it again. Disturbing, but no SAN loss.

Digitally enhancing the tape (Computer Use) shows the driver frantically trying, but failing, to control the car. At one point, the wheel turns itself to home in on the cat. In addition, the car seems to be glowing or smoking in a chain-shaped pattern across its wheels when it initially lurches forward. SAN loss 0/1.

THE TIME BUBBLE

This scenario adheres to a proposed principle of physics known as the Novikov Self-Consistency Principle ("NSCP"), which says that paradoxes are impossible—more on that in a minute. This scenario also takes an extremely purist view of its inspiration story, "The Chain of Aforgomon" by Clark Ashton Smith. Both the NSCP view of time travel and Smith's literary themes and resulting treatment of Mythos deities deviate from the *Call of Cthulhu* norm—or at least some prior treatments of the topics. So some exposition is appropriate.

The NSCP posits, "What happened, happened." Say one travels back in time to kill one's own father. Whatever one does in the past actually happened; history is immutable. You will not succeed in killing your father, *unless* your father actually, historically died at that moment. If you kill the man you thought was your father, though, you will still somehow be born: he was not actually your father (because someone else is, such as yourself); or your mother was already pregnant with you. The protagonist learns later (on his return to his own time) that everything he did is consistent with history and no paradoxes have been created. But occasionally in these stories, if the universe is about to be backed into a corner too difficult to escape from, madness results as crazy things happen to reconcile the time traveler's

imminent actions with the historical record or avoid a change to history.

In this scenario, at midnight at the end of Day -7, Dotty Stotz casts *The Unlawful Sacrifice* and creates a time bubble/pocket universe for herself in which things are stuck at Day -7 within the boundaries of her house. *This happened*, and so madness will result if something is about to disrupt matters in a way that requires major “coincidences” to put things back on schedule for Dotty Stotz’s day. The universe will desperately try to manipulate events to make sure that Dotty kills herself at midnight, in her house, by committing *The Unlawful Sacrifice*, notwithstanding any investigator interference. We don’t know everything that happens before that, or what happens immediately after that, while the spell is taking effect.

Also, when Dotty lets Penny the Cat out of her house at 7:40 P.M., Day -7, Penny *will* go down the street (now in “normal time”), around the block, and *will* promptly be killed, perhaps in a very implausible fashion. If Penny’s demise does not happen, then Dotty cannot relive her last day—so it does happen, even though this forces an event to occur outside of Dotty’s house.

Note that it is Day -7 only inside Dotty’s house. Outside, it is whatever day it really is. Penny the cat ventures forth from a house stuck at Day -7 at 7:40 P.M. each evening (Day -6, Day -5, etc.) and to course correct for the fact that Penny died on Day -7 at 7:45 P.M. as best it can, Aforgomon kills her again. And again. And again.

Visualize the movie *Groundhog Day*, but with people able to leave and go back into the repeating day some time later. Cat remains are piling up.

As you run the scenario, keep these basic principles in mind and apply them rigorously:

- Known things that happened really happened, like it or not.
- Events will conspire to make sure that they do happen.
- Aforgomon may have to resort to causing implausible coincidences to keep things on schedule. When it does, SAN losses occur. (See below discussion about what, if anything, “Aforgomon” really is).
- Time flows differently inside Dotty’s house than it does outside. Let the investigators notice this. Every time the investigators enter the time bubble, it is later than when they left with one important exception. So if the investigators show up five times in succession at Dotty Stotz’ house trying to impact the course of events, they will appear five times in succession during Dotty’s day and Dotty will wonder why they are back (if she remembers them). If they drag her outside, when she eventually returns to her house (as she will) it is still Day -7, just some time later that day. If the investigators go

to Dotty’s house on Day +1 in the morning, they will arrive (if they go inside) at some dramatically appropriate time on Day -7. When they exit, it will be Day +1 again, with the amount of time that they spent inside being variable. It might be the 20 minutes that they were inside, it might be a couple hours, it might be very little time at all—whatever you think will most mess with their heads. If they next return on Day +2 in the evening, they will arrive sometime on Day -7 later than their prior visit. SAN losses on the order of 0/1d3 should be applied when they realize that time flows differently inside vs. outside.

- The exception is this: as Day -7 gets later, the elapsed time between visits compresses. Ultimately, if they have been there at 11:59 P.M., they come back in immediately, since they cannot come back in earlier during Day -7. Sequentiality is maintained as much as possible but since it is always Day -7 inside, eventually the investigators will start coming back at the same point. Sooner or later they will bump into themselves at the end of the day when re-entering, which should provoke a 1/1d6 SAN loss. See *The Endgame* description for more details on events circa midnight.
- If the investigators are about to do something that will irreparably disrupt the fixed course of events during Day -7, they might (optionally) get some warning signs before they succeed. The author strongly recommends both doing so and making it obvious that they are about to screw up. “Irreparably” means that you, as Keeper, cannot conceive of an amusing way to keep Penny’s death and Dotty’s midnight suicide on course, given what the investigators do. The primary problems in these regards would be killing Dotty Stotz (wildly implausible escapes are easy to arrange) or killing Penny early.

BACKGROUND ON THE XEXANOTH/ AFORGOMON MYTHOS

This scenario might, at first glance, make Aforgomon sound like some semi-beneficent being, concerned with the orderly, clockwork functioning of the universe. Well, Aforgomon is not beneficent and whether it is a “being” at all is subject to debate. Rather, things that alter the laws of time through sorcerous means cause violent course corrections, and those backlashes might be interpreted as the actions of a “being”. “Aforgomon” is the label that wizards and those who worship “it” as its priests have put on discernible patterns of these course corrections.

This scenario draws on “The Chain of Aforgomon” by Clark Ashton Smith, published in the December 1935 issue of *Weird Tales*. It strives to be a purist interpretation of that story, frankly eschewing some of the limited subsequent treatments of Aforgomon. This story (and the rest of Smith’s weird fiction) is available online at the Eldritch Dark website:

<http://www.eldritchdark.com/writings/short-stories/21/the-chain-of-aforgomon>

The story concerns an explorer recently returned from Burma, where he discovered how to send his consciousness back through time and revisit his past lives. One prior incarnation, an ancient priest of the “time-god” Aforgomon, has bargained with a dark wizard, Atmox, for the secret of how to relive a bygone hour. Despite dire warnings against perverting nature in this fashion, the priest performs a corrupted ritual self-sacrifice to Aforgomon, which is accepted by Aforgomon’s counterpart Xexanoth, the Lurking Chaos. The corrupted rite is described as “the unlawful sacrifice.”

The priest relives one hour with a beloved whom the march of time stole from him, but he seems to end up brutally punished by Aforgomon: mystic chains burn him in place and ultimately, erase him from the universe. When the narrator mystically revisits these events, Aforgomon seems to punish him as well, lest the prior crime against nature be remembered.

Some later works have treated Aforgomon as an avatar of Yog-Sothoth concerned with access to time, but a purist view would differ. In the story, Aforgomon is an insubstantial, deified concept of natural order, but one that only interacts with the world as a backlash to fundamental disruptions of reality. Aforgomon “the entity” is what happens when someone successfully invokes Xexanoth, the

chaos principle, and things violently settle back into order.

In this scenario, the burning chains, apparitions, event interference, and other things associated with Aforgomon are particularly violent counterbalancing manifestations as chaos reorganizes itself, the corrective yin to that yang. The chain associated with its backlashes is then a myth symbol of chaos being restrained and refocused, as perceived by limited human minds.

The author also believes that this approach is a more purist interpretation of the Clark Ashton Smith Mythos stories in general. This story, “The Charnel God,” “The Weird of Avoosl Wuthoqqan” and several others posit man as the author of his own destruction when he insists on toying with basic forces (death, time, mysteries) that should be left alone. The protagonists are given a chance to turn back but if they do not, they are inexorably doomed, and others perhaps learn a lesson.

Other published scenarios have taken a different view of time travel: one can (in effect) change history by going back in time, rewriting the course of future events by interacting with them. Dotty has not time travelled, exactly, with respect to the rest of the world. Rather, she has tried to segregate herself (and only herself) in one fixed period of her past life while the rest of the universe marches on. This is simply not sustainable; the universe will course correct and Dotty Stotz will pay.



MANSPERGER

THE DAY -7 TIMELINE (FIXED AND IMMUTABLE PORTION)

5 A.M.: Inspector Larry Finch goes to 1802 Stratford and posts condemnation notice on front door. Dotty is asleep.

5:05 A.M.: Having (unlawfully) let himself in to check on the resident, Finch startles Dotty and she knocks him cold.

5:10 A.M. Dotty shoos cats away and panics.

5:30 A.M. Dotty manages to get Finch bound, gagged, and into basement closet; trash moved back in front of basement door.

5:31 A.M. Dotty is distraught and sits in kitchen watching morning television with Penny on her lap, unless and until disturbed. (Investigators might make their initial appearance after this point).

Noon: Dotty calms down and (due to senility) honestly forgets about Finch for most of the remainder of the day, even if asked.

7:40 P.M.: Dotty lets Penny out the back door.

7:45 P.M.: Penny is killed.

7:50 P.M. Someone shows up with the sad news of Penny's (Day -7) demise.

Sometime thereafter: Dotty remembers Finch in her basement, panics anew, finds the *Black Scroll of Atmox*, and brings it to her kitchen. It lies out in the open, in her kitchen, until midnight.

Midnight: Dotty commits suicide while casting *The Unlawful Sacrifice*.

RESEARCH

Research is critical in this scenario. If the investigators do not do their homework (including Mythos research into time bubbles or time loops), they may fail to understand the danger of overtly derailing the time bubble and thereby being erased from the universe. Steer them toward doing their homework. Use the leads to emphasize that people are suffering as a result of whatever is afoot.

INTERVIEW: BOB PLUNKETT & AUTOMOBILE INSPECTION

Plunkett can add little to what is on the videotape. The car just took off on him, like it had a mind of its own, and he has nothing against cats. He tried to avoid it, and the car just took off as soon as he did.

Plunkett's BMW displays no mechanical abnormalities. The only odd things are certain chain-shaped scorch marks on his tires and hubcaps, for which he has no explanation.

The one important thing that Plunkett can add is that he is tired of seeing cats killed on that stretch of road. Another cat—that looked just like the one he ran over—was hit and killed just the other day.

RESEARCH: PRIOR INCIDENTS

Penny the Cat will have died for the eighth consecutive day when she runs afoul of Plunkett's Aforgomon-influenced BMW. The prior deaths, and how the investigators might learn about them, are detailed below. "Local news" refers to information that can be gleaned from talking to reporters, reviewing newspapers and/or reviewing television news reports. "Local police" refers to information that can be gleaned from reviewing public police reports for the area and/or talking to officers from the nearest police precinct. The police are reluctant to discuss the events of the past week, except with other law enforcement officials with a demonstrable need to know.

Day -7: Hit by car (before spell is cast). Interview at Smith's Groceries; possibly a local resident who reported it to Dotty Stotz (see below).

Day -6: Dog mysteriously slips its leash. Smith's Groceries or animal control.

Day -5: Stray bullet. Smith's Groceries, local news, local police.

Day -4: Hit and run by car. Smith's Groceries.

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Day -3: Meteorite strike. Smith's Groceries, local news (Investigator Handout #2).

Day -2: Teenager with cat allergy saw cat and had violent mental breakdown (local police).

Day -1: Same teenager (who avoided arrest the previous day) loses her mind when the exact same cat appears at the exact same time as yesterday. Smith's Groceries; local news, local police (Investigator Handout #3).

Day 0: Plunkett's BMW is possessed.

INTERVIEW: ASHLEY CLARK

Law enforcement officials will be permitted to interview the teenaged girl (under light sedation at the same mental health facility as Mr. Plunkett). Others can role-play their way into an interview. Ashley Clark is a 17 year old high school student. She has bad cat allergies, and hates cats, but no history of mental illness or violence. Everyone is befuddled. The investigators may suspect that her parents have abused her, as she has some chain-shaped burn marks on her head, but she will (truthfully) deny this, as will her parents.

Ashley doesn't understand why this has happened to her. The only reason that she walked that way to begin with was because she got a horrible, burning headache when she tried to walk another route. She tried to run away the second day

when she saw the same cat, but the burning pain in her head was incredible and only abated when she killed the cat.

RESEARCH: CANVASSING THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Anyone who witnessed any of Penny's demises can talk about the general direction from which she came: down the sidewalk and around the corner directly across the street from Smith's Groceries. People generally familiar with the neighborhood can attest that there is a derelict, largely abandoned neighborhood down that way, and that there are a lot of feral cats in the area.

Some shoe leather and knocking on doors with a picture of the dead cat can, in addition to provoking a number of hostile reactions, and perhaps a couple of false starts, lead the investigators to Dotty Stotz' house as a possible source for the cat.

Ms. Stotz is little known to those in the area. They know her name, that her house is filthy and overrun with unlicensed, semi-feral cats, that she has lived there for over 50 years, and that she has no known friends or relatives, but that is about all.

Whether or not someone from the area of Smith's Groceries is able to identify Penny with certainty as Miss Stotz' favorite cat, and point out her house, requires some



INVESTIGATOR HANDOUT #2, SUMMARY OF LOCAL NEWS REPORTS FOR PRECEDING WEEK

On Day -5, around 7:45 P.M., an armed robbery occurred at Smith's Groceries. No injuries were reported, except for a cat that was killed when the robber's handgun accidentally discharged. News footage shows Smith's Groceries, and animal control officers across the street removing a small bag.

On Day -3, at 7:45 P.M., a small meteorite struck a sidewalk in a run down section of town. No injuries were reported, except for a cat that was hit dead on. News footage shows a small, smoking crater, which looks like a hot piece of chain had burned into the pavement, directly in front of the same Smith's Groceries.

On Day -1, around 7:45 P.M., police arrest a distraught, struggling, screaming, teenaged girl in front of the same Smith's Groceries. The teenager confesses on camera to having killed "the same damned cat" two days in a row. Her name is withheld and her face obscured because she is a minor. She keeps shrieking: "It's the same cat! It's the same damned cat! It won't leave me alone!"

INVESTIGATOR HANDOUT #3, SUMMARY OF INTERVIEWS WITH OR REVIEW OF POLICE REPORTS FOR PRECEDING WEEK

Publicly available records confirm the arrest of the juvenile on Day -1 and of Mr. Plunkett on Day 0.

The animal control officers would have conducted an investigation into, and collected the remains of, any animals killed on a public street.

There was an armed robbery at the same Smith's Groceries whose camera recorded Mr. Plunkett's incident, on Day -5, in which a cat was (apparently accidentally) shot. The police have no leads.

The police have no plans to conduct ongoing surveillance, as they see no evidence of a crime being committed.



Keeper planning. It is fun to make the investigators part of the Day -7 events, by having them show up later in the scenario at Dotty's door and be the ones who tell her that beloved Penny is no more. (Indeed, with planning, they can be the ones who accidentally hit her in the first place on Day -7). Dotty will have heard a cat yowl in the distance, and will assume that the next person who knocks is some sort of police officer there to give her bad news. If you want to send things this way, then no one the investigators can find will know who told Dotty Stotz the bad news on Day -7. Otherwise, a neighborhood child disobeys her parents' instructions and knocks on the crazy cat lady's door to bring the bad news. Note that the news bringing only "really" happens on Day -7 and will only be observable by those inside the house at the time.

Distressingly, the places where the cat has met its end each of the preceding eight days are within 10 yards of one another. In each instance, there are odd chain-shaped burn marks in the pavement. SAN loss 0/1.

RESEARCH: SMITH'S GROCERIES

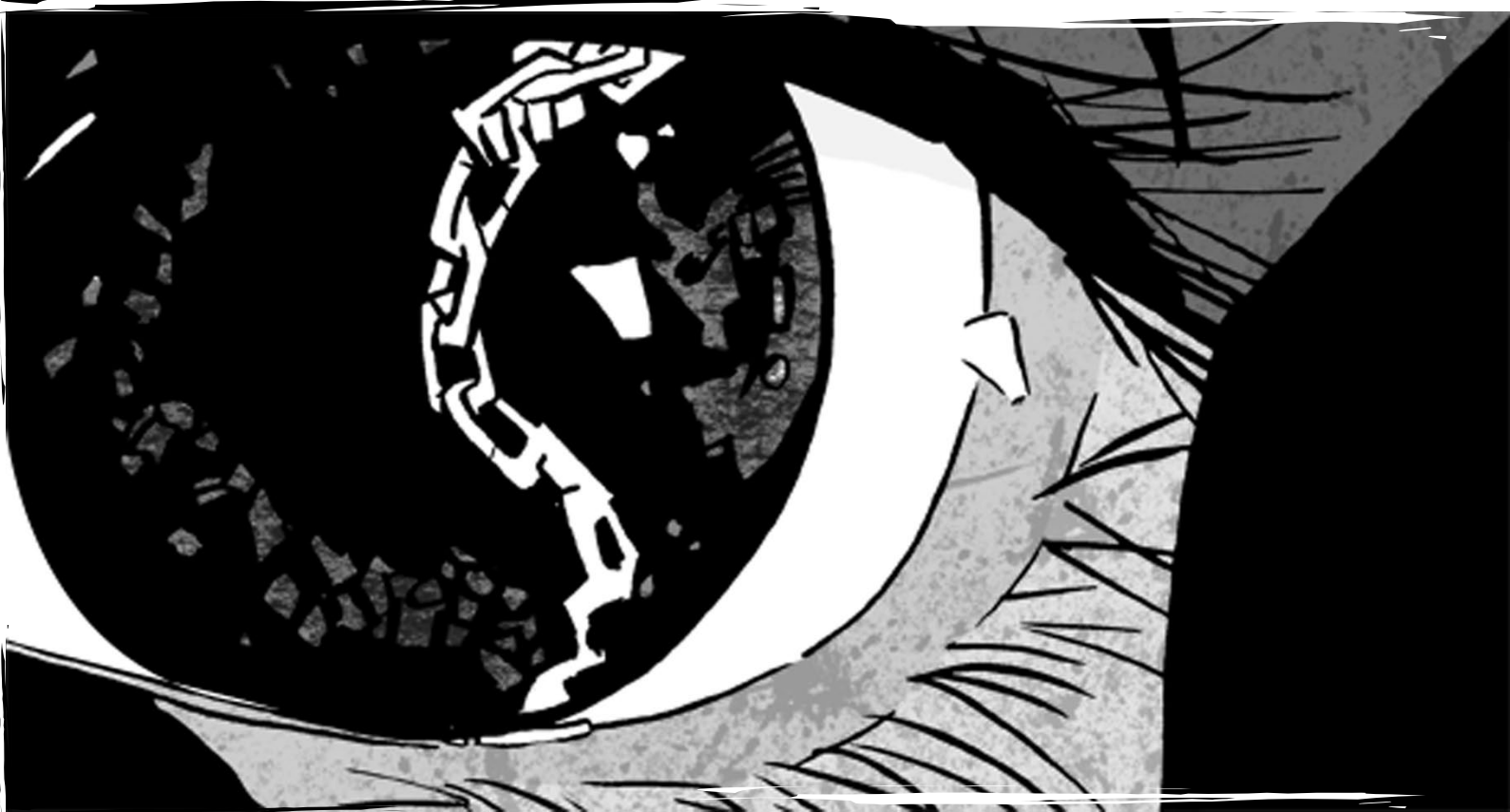
Smith's Groceries has surveillance footage of every single incident, available for review by law enforcement on request or by subpoena. The evening clerk, Jim Milwarp, can also talk about his weird past week. Watching all of the footage is good for a 0/1 SAN loss. The cat is to all appearances *exactly* the same; it comes around the corner

at *exactly* the same time each evening; and it dies at exactly the same time. Odd, chain-shaped glows appear in the area of the cat every day *except* Day -7.

RESEARCH: ANIMAL CONTROL

This is a branch of the municipal health department, and the officers are charged with enforcing all municipal health and safety codes, including both building safety and animal welfare. They have the (now, eight) tortoise-shell cat bodies in cold storage pending incineration on Day +2. If the investigators act quickly, they can have the unpleasant experience of viewing the remains. They are all completely identical—even down to DNA if tested. But testing is not necessary—they all have the same distinguishing features, scars, ragged left ear, *etc.* SAN loss 1/1d3. Most are flattened, a few are otherwise dead, but all are very dead indeed. (The timeline does not require that Penny die any particular way, just at 7:45 P.M., so there is some flexibility).

Suzette Smith, one of two code enforcement officers for that neighborhood, is quite disturbed by the fact that very similar looking cats have been killed for the past eight days at basically the same place. She has more details about the Day -6 incident. A pit bull was responsible; no one has come forward to claim the dog. However, it was on a chain lead, which had curiously melted and snapped.



MANSPERGER

Suzette's partner, Inspector Finch, is single, has no family, and is on vacation (and so has yet to be missed). His last day of work was Day -7. He is not expected back until after Day +4. His cell phone goes to voice mail.

RESEARCH: MYTHOS, DOROTHY STOTZ

Library or Internet research (*Library Use*) into an archaeologist named Dorothy Stotz leads to a plethora of information. In the 1940s-1950s, Dorothy Stotz was part of a world-renowned exploratory archaeology team operating out of the University of Vermont. She was the only survivor of an expedition to interior Burma in 1955 that disappeared under unknown circumstances.

Any half-hearted efforts at *Cthulhu Mythos* research into burning chains and/or isolated pockets where time is stuck at a past day or hour always lead to the same place. They are the result of someone conducting blasphemous rites to "Xexanoth, the Lurking Chaos" to relive a portion of their own life. Changing or physically reliving the past is strictly forbidden—even the part of the past that involved "defiling the stream of time" in the first place. Aforgomon, "god of the hours and cycles," will eventually punish all perpetrators by "chaining them in time and erasing them from history." Such people are doomed; all sources agree that there is no help for them.

All writers also warn about ever invoking Xexanoth, not only because the invoker is doomed, but because innocents will likely be harmed as the universe resorts to drastic means to re-right itself. Paradoxes in particular must be avoided, because in the few instances where such have been reported, the universe corrected itself violently to eliminate the paradox.

FUTURE INCIDENTS

No matter what the investigators do, Penny will come out of the back door of Dotty's house at 7:40 P.M., return to the scene of its demise at 7:45 P.M. on Days +1-+3, and something happens to kill her. Efforts to observe this chain of events are smart investigation. Again, the investigator's tasks are exploration and damage control.

Aforgomon will cause bizarre coincidences if it must to keep this chain of events on track. Among the less outrageous things that might happen are investigators tripping, losing sight of the cat, it somehow managing to escape from what seemed to be a secure trap, brakes failing, guns going off, or it dying of fright when they grab it. Investigator interference ideally actually contributes to killing the cat.

Among the more outrageous things that might happen (justifying SAN checks in the 0/1 to 1/1d6 range,

depending) are sudden natural disasters (sinkholes, lightning strikes, tornadoes), mad bombers, planes falling from the sky, or people going inexplicably berserk. But happen they will if they must, and if they do, strange, chain-shaped scorch marks, rattling sounds and burning flesh smells inevitably accompany them.

Some play-testing groups needed more of a kick in the pants to delve into why the cats keep getting killed than others, or wanted more overt horror. Suggestions follow.

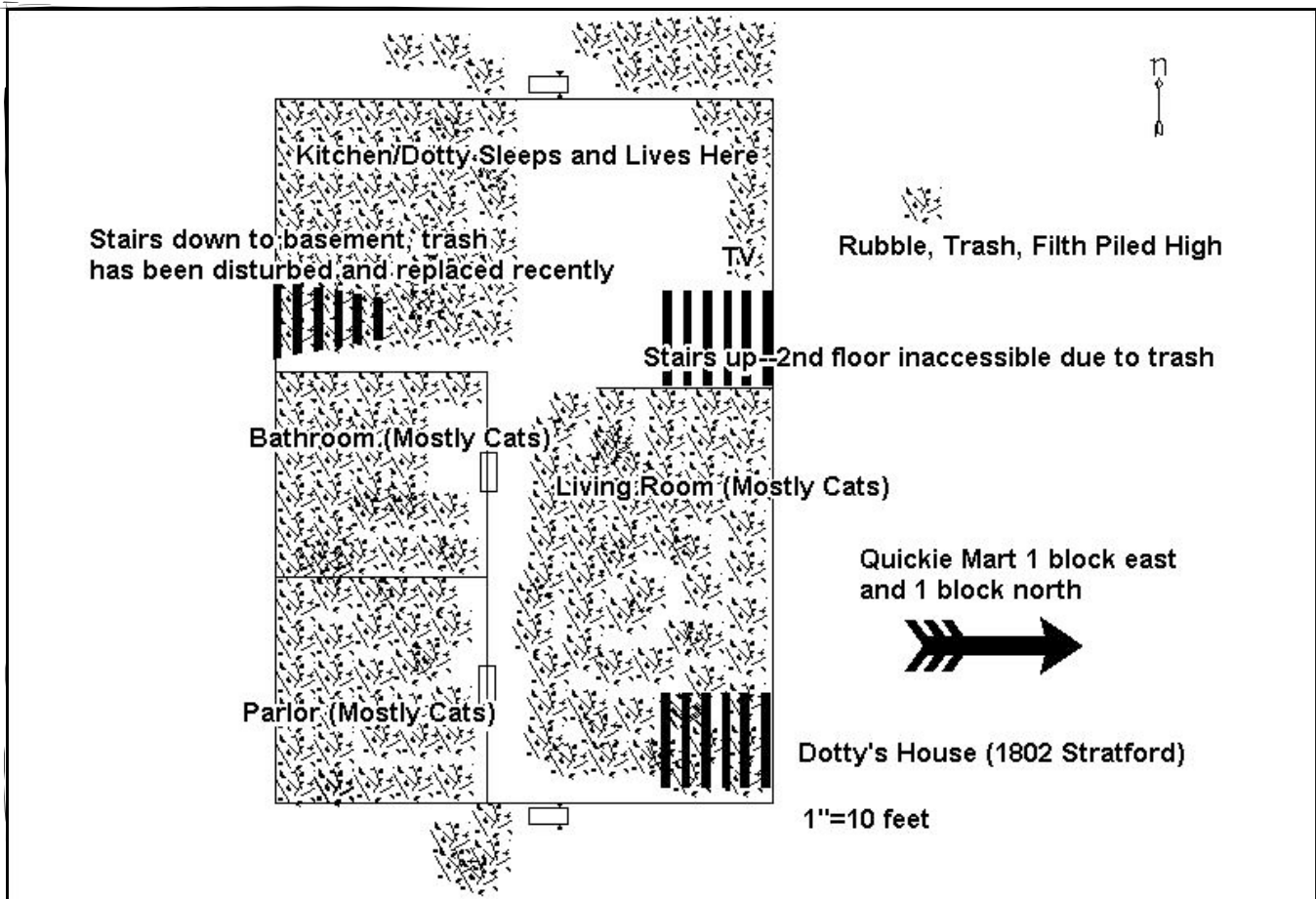
- Like Ashley Smith, an investigator surveilling the scene might get overtly pressured (via burning pain, losing control over their car, etc.) into killing the cat themselves. Preferably one to whom such a thing would be anathema.
- If they have been questioning locals and/or Jim Milwarp, a group of camera-wielding rubbernecks might gather to see if it happens again. When it does, in a very implausible way—perhaps even involving a collateral human death—imposing a 1/1d6 SAN loss on the group should get the investigators moving.
- Or worst of all, have a kind, well-meaning NPC seemingly succeed in saving Penny, ignoring supernatural warning signs, only to be blotted out by Aforgomon in plain view of the investigators. Penny is then immediately killed in a very implausible way. This gets their attention, ups the horror quotient, and gives them a valuable research lead.

ENCOUNTERS AT 1802 STRATFORD

1802 Stratford, home to Dotty Stotz and 100+ cats, is a dilapidated two-story home, with a front door, a back door and a basement. The windows are boarded up. Trash, feces, and hoarded belongings pile up to the ceiling, with only narrow trails allowing access to rooms. There are many dead animals under layers or behind piles of garbage. The stench is nauseating, and the inside of the house is so bad that it requires a 0/1 SAN loss. All actions inside are at -20%, and movement is quartered.

KNOCKING ON EITHER DOOR

It's locked, and no one answers. A condemnation notice from the Dept. of Code Enforcement (Inspector Finch) advises that the place will be torn down on Day +4 at 8 A.M. and lists dozens of health code violations. It advises that social workers will also remove the homeowner, Dorothy Stotz a.k.a. Dotty Stotz, at that time. (*Law* roll or appropriate inquiry: this notice period is required by municipal code, and extreme legal maneuvers would be required to immediately seize someone for mere city code violations).



BARGING IN

It is Day -7 inside; television programs are appropriate to that day (including the wrong day's news on in the kitchen), and it may be an entirely different time of day than it is outside. Allow the investigators to notice this. SAN loss 1/1d3.

Dotty comes to investigate any forced entry in about five minutes. A horde of filthy, feral cats prowls the home. Dotty will be angry and threaten to call the police (despite having no phone).

ENCOUNTERS WITH DOTTY

Dotty in the morning is confused and distraught, but behaves appropriately to the situation. She will not leave, however—she “knows her legal rights” and she has until Day +4 to get out or remedy the violations. She knows nothing about any time distortions or recurring cat deaths (“Penny’s right here, silly”), and has no interest in leaving her home to find out. To her, it is simply the appropriate time on Day -7, and the investigators are nuts if they suggest otherwise. Penny is fine (until 7:45 P.M.), and that is that. Efforts to get local law enforcement to remove her sooner should fail, since she has until Day +4 to challenge the citations or remedy the violations—getting them to help sooner is unlikely to happen.

After noon, Dotty remembers nothing that happened before noon. Her behavior is more polite up until the knock comes on her door about Penny’s death around 8 P.M. She then becomes weepy and despondent, and insists that everyone must leave. She goes berserk if she has to deal with anyone refusing to leave, until her suicidal ritual at midnight. She remembers visitors from earlier in the afternoon, but not from the morning.

She might talk about her past as an archaeologist, but if the investigators hint at Mythos knowledge, she wants them out of her house. Odd knick-knacks from her past might be spied in the rubble, including an antique sundial in the kitchen. Later in the evening, the *Black Scroll of Atmox* will be out in plain sight in the kitchen. If needed, drop hints in the form of Mythos-suggestive knick-knacks in the clutter.

The trash in front of the basement door (*Spot Hidden* if looking) has been recently shifted.

DIALING IN OR DIALING OUT

There is no phone service across time—no one called out from the house on Day -7, especially not into the future. But within the house, phones work with each other. Calling Finch’s cell phone from inside Dotty’s house causes it to ring from the basement closet (*Listen* check if upstairs).

////////////////////////////////////
DOROTHY "DOTTY" STOTZ, AGE 82

Nationality: American.

STR 8 CON 8 SIZ 9 INT 18 POW 25

DEX 8 APP 5 EDU 14 SAN 0 HP 9

Damage Bonus: none.

Education: M.A., Archaeology, University of Vermont.

Skills: Anthropology 45%, Archaeology 45%, Cthulhu Mythos 15%, History 45%, Library Use 90%, Listen 25%, Natural History 40%, Occult 75%, Persuade 50%, Spot Hidden 25%.

Languages: English 90%; Latin 25%; Greek 25%; Burmese 25%.

Attacks: None above base.

Spells: Create Elder Sign; Enchant Knife; Powder of Ibn-Ghazi; The Unlawful Sacrifice.

Indefinite Insanities: Agoraphobia, Senile Dementia, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (Hoarding).

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WINNING

The investigators should figure out that a time bubble exists in Dotty Stotz' house and that, since it is Day -7 all the time for Dotty Stotz, she is at the heart of it and

something happened to cause it on Day -7. The problem is obviously localized, as they will discern from entering and exiting the home and, in effect, shuttling between timelines. From there, the investigators need to do two things: 1) their research and 2) set and pursue a realistic goal of minimizing collateral damage. The only realistic goals are saving the captive health inspector and (maybe) cleverly undoing—vs. preventing—*The Unlawful Sacrifice*.

The research (history and Mythos) should make two things clear: the cat dying outside the house is necessary to continuity inside the house (otherwise, it would not keep happening) and altering continuity inside the house equals doom. At the same time, there is a condemnation notice on the door for the morning of Day +4. The cat will not come out of the house into the normal timeline once the house is torn down (*Idea* roll if nothing else), and then a paradox results. And that, the research clearly suggests, is a very bad outcome.

Investigators may try to disrupt the time bubble directly, by forcibly removing or killing Dotty Stotz, or preventing Penny from going to her (appointed) doom, or stealing the *Black Scroll* of Atmox. These direct efforts should fail if at all possible: Dotty is released on bail and makes it home in time; she slips her bonds; the police prevent the investigators' interference; Penny escapes from a cage. These are not realistic goals.

What should happen if the investigators back things into a corner (preparing to shoot Dotty or Penny) is a philosophical matter. In a Smith-themed story, someone who tries to mess with a force of the universe often gets a warning, and if they persist, meets their doom. A



warning might come as a prophetic vision, a glimpse of glowing, rattling chains and the smell of burning flesh, a cold chill down one's neck. Anyone who nonetheless continues to do something that will irreparably disrupt Dotty's day (vs. supplements the known events) is doomed. The resulting paradox must be messily avoided, and the offending party is disintegrated by what appear to be eldritch chains (SAN loss 1/1d6). This happens only to the extent necessary to reinstate progress (e.g., prevent someone from shooting Dotty). Over the course of the next few days, the offender(s) is inexorably erased from history. Any records naming them disappear or alter themselves to refer to someone else. The surviving investigators can remember the events of this scenario that they observed, but not the name of, or anything else about, anyone blotted out.

The investigators' cleverest ploy is to be on hand when *The Unlawful Sacrifice* is made and let it happen. They can then intercede in its immediate aftermath. There will be a transition period during which the house will visibly, gradually begin to regress to the beginning of Day -7: the sun suddenly comes up, the morning news comes on, etc., and the investigators (who were not there at that time) gradually move back to normal time, finding themselves outside of the house. Prompt resuscitation (*Medicine, First Aid*) efforts during the transition might (and for dramatic effect, should) be allowed to revive Dotty Stotz, and she can be hauled out of the house. Since self-sacrifice is necessary for *The Unlawful Sacrifice*, the pocket universe still was created (making the NSCP happy) but was then reversed, so it stops. If they come back after seeing the sacrifice, they arrive shortly before it happens, however many times are needed for them to try different things, like reloading a video game at a save point. They may even run into themselves (SAN loss 1/1d6). (This cleverly takes advantage of the fact that, to the extent possible, the sequence of the investigators' own events is maintained). Aforgomon hates this though, so they had better act quickly at that point.

Any other reasonable approach might also be permitted, as long as it does not stop *The Unlawful Sacrifice* from happening. What happened, happened.

They might even find and take the *Black Scroll of Atmox* outside, hastily read it, understand that the sacrifice is necessary, and go back in to *post hoc* resuscitate Dotty. They might (and probably should) notice it, steal it and read it "earlier" in the evening, learning what will happen, which is fine as long as it gets back in the house by the time it is needed.

Dotty's house rejoins the normal time line when her sacrifice is "later" undone, and paradox does not result when it is torn down. She relived her day, and what happened, still happened, but the spell was then undone. Aforgomon, at a suitable time later, still comes down on Dotty Stotz like a ton of bricks, leaving only chain-shaped scorch marks and a pile of ash in her hospital bed, padded cell or jail cell.

Failing that, the investigators can at least get Finch out of the house, saving his life before the wrecking ball swings and obliterates all memory of him from existence.

Finally, if the investigators' resuscitation of Dotty Stotz happens to occur sometime when, outside, it is between 7:40 P.M. and 7:45 P.M. on Days +1, +2 or +3—while Penny is out but not yet re-killed—Penny survives as the house rejoins the timeline! (Of course, cynical ironists might have her hit by a car anyway, right in front of Dotty's house). (Remember, it may be midnight on Day -7 inside Dotty's house, but that does not control what time it is outside of her house, and time flows differently). So, the Keeper might wish arrange events to have it be midnight "inside time" when the investigators enter the house at 7:41 P.M. on Day +3 "outside time".

DAY +4 AT DAWN. AN INESCAPABLE PARADOX

The city sends out a wrecking crew (and some social services workers) to 1802 Stratford on Day +4 at dawn to execute the condemnation order and forcibly remove Dotty from her house. They go in and find whatever is there to find at the end of Day -7. This probably includes Dotty's body, many cats, and the dead body of Inspector Finch in the basement closet (barring his prior rescue). They spend several hours clearing out bodies and cats, and then down comes the house. The ball swings, and if the spell has not been broken, a paradox results (since Penny cannot come out of the flattened house any longer). To purge the paradox, Aforgomon is forced to manifest (or, at least, there is a violent, mind-shattering course correction accompanied by what human minds perceive as burning chains, rending sounds and other indescribable visuals). SAN loss 1d3/1d20. The equipment operator and the entire house are burned and gradually blotted out of time. SAN loss 1/1d6.

REWARDS AND REPERCUSSIONS

Heaven only knows what treasures lie beneath the filth. The investigators can take possession of the *Black Scroll of Atmox*, but they are best off burying it somewhere.

If the investigators resolve the time bubble before the wrecking ball swings (with attendant collateral damage), award 1d6 SAN. If Penny survives in the end, award 1 SAN. If Aforgomon manifests to resolve a paradox, the SAN lost is its own punishment. If the investigators do nothing, they lose 1d6 SAN when they hear about the carnage—before they (and everyone else) forgets that it ever happened.

All proceeds from this scenario will be donated to the Cleveland Animal Protection League. Thanks to Chad Bowser for feedback.



THE BLACK SCROLL OF ATMox

This is a short scroll, engraved on thin, flexible silvery metal and inked with some sort of protein-based ichor (demon's blood) that defies further analysis. The scroll resists the passage of time and all but the most extreme efforts to destroy it. It consists of an annotated transcription of certain rites propitiating "Aforgomon, God of the Hours and Cycles." The author, one Atmox of the Great City of Kalood, describes how these rituals can be twisted to relive a portion of one's life. Distressingly, it appears to be written in the reader's own native language—whatever that might be (SAN loss 0/1 if noticed).

It discusses Atmox's dealings with a disgruntled priest of Aforgomon, Calaspa, who pays him to violate the laws of time, so that Calaspa might spend one last hour with his departed beloved. Atmox teaches him to reverse the propitiation rites, thereby invoking the chaos god Xexanoth, but only at a terrible price. Atmox clearly warns that anyone who attempts to relive or alter history risks the destruction of all existence, and guarantees his own doom.

The scroll requires 2 hours to read, +2% to Cthulhu Mythos, -1d6 SAN, and has one spell available: *The Unlawful Sacrifice*.

The Unlawful Sacrifice costs 5 or more POW, plus ritual suicide. At the end of a long, twisted, mocking version of a prayer to Aforgomon, the caster impales himself on a sundial. For each POW over 5 that is spent, the caster can relive one hour of his life, of his choosing. If that happens to be the time period leading up to the spell, however, a personal time loop is created for the caster. In addition, Aforgomon eventually blots the caster from all memory and existence.

MYSTERIOUS MANUSCRIPT

THE MONONGAHELA CARVER CIPHER

By DAN HARMS

Over the summers of 1970 to 1973, the bodies of five women washed up on the shores of the Monongahela River, just east of Pittsburgh. Each victim was local and in her twenties, but no other common ties between them could be found. Death was by multiple stab wounds, inflicted with at least five sharp instruments per victim, showing that the killer had taken them to a secluded spot to do his work. The perpetrator was never caught.

The police never released to the media one other fact about the killings: Each woman had row upon row of letters, each half an inch high, carved into her left thigh. The carvings were made post-mortem and displayed a great level of precision and cutting skill. Their arrangement implied a cipher, a code that was never broken.

In 2010, the horror began again as another body was found, this one out of the Chenango River just north of Binghamton, New York. The modus operandi was the same as the Pittsburgh killings, down to the letters on the thigh. The FBI quickly took over the case and confirmed that it must be the work of the same perpetrator. In this case, however, advances in cryptology could be brought to bear on the cipher. Initial analysis did not yield a solution but did reveal that the five messages were, in fact, a single one broken into five parts, and that it was likely—though by no means certain—that the message was in English.

Hamilton Meyer, the head of the FBI task force, has exhausted most of his leads, and is seeking help outside Quantico for his investigation. He hopes that new perspectives will break the deadlock on the cipher and save lives.

DECIPHERMENT

The decipherment requires ten separate Cryptography rolls at -60% each, with a period of one month between them. These rolls require close work with the crime scene photographs, costing 1/1D3 SAN per month whether the Cryptography roll succeeds or not..

Outside experts can contribute with skill rolls to reduce the Cryptography penalties for the remainder of the project, thereby speeding the decipherment. Each expert's work takes a month and suffers the same SAN penalty.

- *Halved Knife or quartered Medicine:* Identical characters made with different cutting strokes actually serve as different characters (10% taken from penalty).
- *Halved Medicine or Forensics:* Bruising around the thighs is used to highlight particular passages (10% taken from penalty).
- *Halved Occult:* Some of the text relates to particular astrological events and other concepts (10% taken from penalty).
- *Psychoanalysis:* Examination of the details of the crimes (0/1D2 SAN) can reveal likely phrase patterns for the decipherment (10% taken from penalty).
- *Cthulhu Mythos:* Some passages that do not correspond to English word frequencies might be in the Aklo tongue. The investigator is able to provide a few sample passages. (10% taken from penalty.)



THE BOOK

Flint, copper, bronze, iron, steel! Slice, rip, chop, cut, tear, cleave, hack! You call to all, O Father, and those who take up Thy sword shall come into Thy kingdom.

The book's contents are a litany to a being known as the Father of Knives, patron of blades and all those who kill with them. The author casts himself as the mythical figure of Cain, driven to slay his brother Abel. Through actions pleasing to the Father, he hopes to bring favor upon himself and expand his circle of initiates. An Anthropology roll turns up veiled references to mythology, ranging from the Celtic smith Weiland to Shango, the Santeria spirit of iron and thunder. A Cthulhu Mythos roll made after reading finds that the Father of Knives is an avatar of Nyarlathotep.

The Monongahela Carver Cipher. *English. SAN loss 1/1D3*; Cthulhu Mythos +1 percentile; Knife +2 percentiles; average 3 hours to study and comprehend. Spells: Contact Deity / Nyarlathotep (Father of Knives)**.*

* Temporary insanity causes the person to black out and journey in a fugue state to the site of the nearest undiscovered murder victim. Indefinite insanity causes the person to become obsessed with learning the cipher's spell.

** A variant of the Contact Deity / Nyarlathotep spell that requires the sacrifice of an unwilling human victim in a slow manner, using at least four different blades (costs 1D3/1D10 SAN to carry out, in addition to the SAN cost of the spell).



ARCANE ARTIFACT: THE EYE OF DAOLOTH

By DION CLARK

The Eye of Daoloth is an artifact so horrific and baleful that its very existence is recorded only in the *Necronomicon* and in one other manuscript known as *The Opticum*. An Occult roll on encountering the Eye or even a detailed description of it points to those sources of information.

A successful History roll reveals that the present-day *Opticum* must be the result of many centuries of copying:

The Opticum is written in Linear B, which was the language of the Mycenaean Greeks from the 17th to 11th centuries B.C. Most of the original manuscript has been copied into an illegible scrawl, but with a successful Other Language (Linear B) roll, the *Opticum* contains the following information:

In Ancient Thrace, in the time of sorcerers, before men threw off the chains of the Lizard-men, there was the star-worker Ioannis, whose crime was to stab Uranus. Forth came Daoloth the unending, god of dimensions, seer of worlds, time traveler, the self-aware, the all-being. Before Gaia and Uranus were eaten by Daoloth, Ioannis bound the unending one in ice and took it to the king of the Lizard-men, who knelt before him, giving him riches of orichalcum, gold and myrrh so that they would be spared. Ioannis mutilated the lizard king and his people, and sent them in exile to the sea, from where they did not return.

The Eye itself is nearly one foot long, three inches in diameter, and roughly cylindrical in shape. The eye, along with small rods of what look like metal and plastic, is contained within a block of block of solid (magical) ice. The iris stares dimly through the ice at one end, and fixes its horrific gaze on nearby creatures. The far end of the eye ends in a grisly mass of nerves which has been cleanly cut into a perfectly flat surface. Blood can be seen moving through the severed far end, disappearing into nowhere.

Meeting the Eye's gaze causes horrible, nauseating vertigo and visions of incomprehensible dimensions. No telepathic or verbal communication with Daoloth is possible through the ice, but all who stand within 10 yards will feel an apocalyptic hatred, outrage, and hunger for release. This costs 1/1d10 SAN points.

It is apparent to any sane, casual observer that the ice is incredibly delicate. A successful Cthulhu Mythos or Occult roll reveals that any attempt to pierce, drill, melt or otherwise destroy the ice will release the Outer God Daoloth as if it had been summoned.

A crate full of insulating material will prevent the ice from melting for roughly three days. In the full heat of summer, the ice will melt in roughly 30 minutes.

The Eye has been kept in freezing conditions for years, decades, millennia; what brings it to the unsuspecting outer world is up to the Keeper to decide. The Eye has been an object of contention throughout the long centuries. Sorcerers, governments, scientists, religious organizations, cultists, and the minions of elder gods will stop at nothing to acquire it.

Characters might discover the eye in a vault, temple, deep cave, or other secret, cold, and protected place. The Eye might also be found when a completely

unremarkable ice truck is stalled and overheated on a blistering summer day. The driver in this case would be quite desperate to get The Eye to its intended destination, and would betray himself with all sorts of suspicious and potentially violent behavior.

The magic that Ioannis used to capture and preserve The Eye has long since been lost to history; investigators looking for ice spells are out of luck. Written instructions on the crate ("KEEP FROZEN!") might encourage investigators to keep it on ice long enough for them to research it, and for its seekers to track them down.

If Daoloth is released, it expands relentlessly at a rate of 8 meters per round, transporting everything it touches to strange dimensions. No normal human being can run fast enough to escape it for very long, but vehicles might. On the other hand, apocalyptic, sanity-devouring Outer Gods have a nasty habit of causing traffic jams.

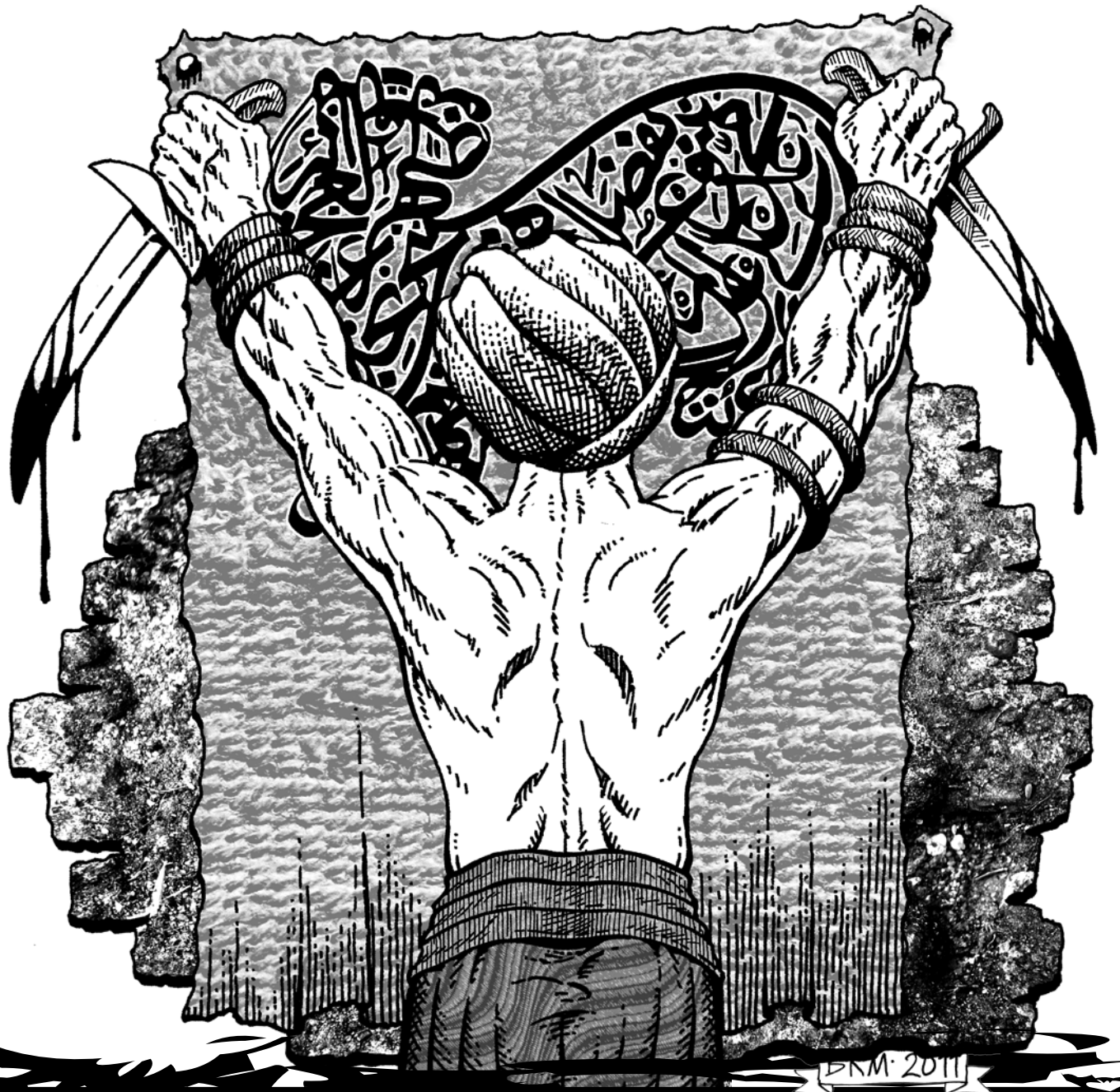
The horrible expansion continues until Daoloth is appeased. This might require the lives of the characters or the sacrifice of everyone in a building, a city, or the entire planet; gods are fickle creatures. Spells such as Create Scrying Window, Create Time Gate, and Contact Deity may fix things (or may lead to further complications!)

Long-dead Ioannis might be contacted for sorcerous aid. The ancient Greeks were much more accustomed to dealing with gods than modern man. Ioannis might know a way to recapture, appease, or lure the angry god away, but doubtless he will demand a high price. Alternatively, a merciful Keeper might decide that being caught by Daoloth transports the characters to dimensions that are not entirely hostile to human life.

The very presence of the Eye weakens the barriers between dimensions. The number of magic points required to cast Summon/Bind spells is reduced by 2 for anyone standing within 1,000 yards of it. Every spellcaster who knows such a spell and is within Daoloth's zone of effect automatically senses the sudden ease of their magic.

The Eye may also grant a bonus to scrying spells, as well as other spells that manipulate time and space, at the Keeper's discretion.

Wise investigators will ensure that the Eye quietly returns to some remote and uninhabited locale. Even if Daoloth is kept on ice, a sudden influx of monstrous creatures and fanatics could tear a city apart.



THE ASSASSINS

BY DAVID A. HARDY WITH ADAM SCOTT GLANCY

“During the king’s stay in Acre envoys from the Old Man of the Mountain arrived to see him. . . . In his clenched fist {the emir} held three knives, with blades that each fitted into the handle of another; these, if the emir’s proposals

were rejected, he was to present to the king in token of defiance. Behind this young man was another, who had a stout roll of linen wound round his arm, which he was to present to the king as a winding-sheet for his burial if he refused the Old Man of the Mountain’s demands.” —Jean de Joinville, *The Life of St. Louis*

Thus the seneschal of King Louis recorded a meeting between the French Crusader-King and emissaries of the enigmatic Muslim sect known as the Assassins. For over one hundred and fifty years the Assassins spread fear among the rulers of the Middle East, sending their killers to slay those who opposed their divine summons. Tales of their fanatical devotion mixed with strange stories of wild debauchery, hashish madness, and secret gardens that gave the faithful a taste of Paradise. Although modern scholars have dismissed much of what was said of the Assassins (including the very name Assassin) as hostile slander, the truth is strange enough. The Assassins showed how a policy of terrorism carried out by militants willing to sacrifice themselves could hold the mightiest powers of Europe, Asia, and Africa at bay for decades. They made the word “assassin” synonymous with murder.

ISLAMIC ORIGINS

The Assassins originated in the Ismailis, an Islamic sect that split off the Shi'ites. The Assassins developed a uniquely powerful and long-lasting secret organization and perfected the art of political murder. However, they were not the first to do either of these things. Their precursors were almost as colorful as the Assassins themselves.

Islam's unity began showing cracks immediately after the Prophet Mohammed's death in 632. A strong faction (*shi'a* in Arabic) supported Mohammed's son-in-law, Ali, as the Prophet's successor (*kalifa*, or caliph) and thus the political and religious leader of the Islamic community and its growing empire. Ali was eventually selected caliph in 656. His caliphate was brief. In 661 a Kharijite fanatic expressed that sect's opposition to dynastic privilege by stabbing Ali to death. In 680, Ali's son Hussein and his family and supporters were massacred by troops loyal to the Umayyad Caliph Yazid at Karbala, Iraq. The violent deaths of Ali and Hussein sharpened the Shi'ites' sense of the holiness of martyrdom as well as escalating political violence in Islam.

At the core of the conflict were differing beliefs about the nature of leadership in Islam. The orthodox Sunnis accepted an elected caliph leading a decentralized religion. The Shi'ites demanded that the caliph be a descendant of the Prophet through his daughter Fatima and her husband Ali. This leader would be an Imam, a divine teacher, and only his authorized teaching was true. Some insisted that the succession to the office of Imam was divinely guided as well. The Imam's heir would have an explicit, divine appointment to follow his predecessor, or *nass*.

Among Shi'ites there is also a strong belief in the Mahdi, a messiah who would bring Allah's rule to Earth, righting all wrongs. The expectation of the Mahdi was



linked to a concept of the “Occult (or Hidden) Imam.” Sometimes the Imam and his heirs found it expedient to hide. Sometimes they simply disappeared, seemingly for good. In such cases spiritual leadership fell on a subordinate who was mystically guided by the Occult Imam's spiritual knowledge.

In 747 the Abbasids overthrew the Umayyads and established a new line of caliphs. Despite initially supporting Shi'ite hopes, the Abbasid caliphs adopted an orthodox Sunni position. An increasingly bitter struggle ensued between the Sunni majority and various groups that rallied to the Shi'a cause. The Kharijites had already established murder of rival leaders as a method of advancing their cause. A Shi'ite faction in Iraq, the Mansuriyya (led by Abu Masnur al-Ijli) made a point of strangling their foes. Other non-Sunni groups adopted unusual religious innovations. A rebel leader in Persia known as al-Muqanna, “the Veiled One,” proclaimed himself the Mahdi and wore a veil to protect his followers from his divine radiance.

The Shi'ites repeatedly splintered into factions, often over the question of who was the rightful Imam. The sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, disinherited his son Ismail (though possibly Ismail pre-deceased his father; the historical sources are not clear). Some Shi'ite legitimists insisted that *nass* was not subject to human tampering. When al-Sadiq died in 765 one faction insisted on Ismail's right to be Imam. They became known as the Seventhers, or Ismailis, and from them would emerge the Assassins.

THE RISE OF THE ISMAILIS

The Assassins had two major precursor groups, the Qarmatians and the Fatimids. The Qarmatians were a powerful but limited guerilla force. The Fatimids founded an Ismaili empire.

The Qarmatians began as an underground Ismaili organization in Iraq. They were also known as *Batinis* for their stress on esoteric (*batin*) interpretation of the Koran. The Assassins were also sometimes called *Batinis*. The Qarmatians emphasized the oneness of all religions. In practice this meant that membership in the sect was open to anyone wishing to overthrow the caliph, regardless of their religion. The Qarmatians developed and refined the tactics of secret organization and systematic murder employed earlier by the Kharijites and Mansuriyya.

The Qarmatians managed to set up an independent state in Bahrain around 900. From their Persian Gulf base they launched bandit-style raids on the pilgrim caravans going to Mecca. These religious outlaws even managed to pillage Mecca itself and carried off the Black Stone from the Kaaba.

Meanwhile, in North Africa a new force emerged. In 909 Abd Allah al-Mahdi openly proclaimed his descendant from Ismail and thus Ali and Fatima. He founded an Ismaili state with himself as Imam and caliph. The Fatimids, as al-Mahdi's dynasty was known, were based in Tunisia and later in Egypt. Ismailis now had an official champion and recognized leader. Or at least one that was mostly recognized. The Qarmatian gangsters held on to the Black Stone until the Fatimids paid a hefty ransom.

The Fatimids were not content to sit still and reap the wealth of Egypt. The Ismaili goal was no less than the regeneration of Islam. Their movement was the *da'wa*, often translated as preaching, but literally a call or summons. Throughout the Islamic world, *da'is*, summoners, looked for converts to the cause. These men operated in a strict hierarchy. From the rank and file (*rafiqs* in Persian) to the *hujjas* who oversaw entire provinces, they were all ultimately answerable to the caliph in Cairo. Ranks, duties and jurisdictions were strictly marked out. The Ismailis were organized for war by the word or the sword.

HASAN I SABAH AND THE EAGLE'S NEST

In the 1080s a young da'i named Hasan i Sabah appeared in Persia. His career would rock the empires of the Middle East. According to his autobiography (preserved by the Persian historian Juvaini), Hasan i Sabah was born in Persia around the year 1050. Legend has it that Hasan

was a schoolmate of the poet Omar Khayyam and Nizam al-Mulk, who later became the first Assassin victim. According to the story the three boys pledged to support one another in their future success. Nizam reneged on his part and Hasan paid him back with Assassin daggers. Unfortunately for legend, Nizam al-Mulk was about thirty years older than Hasan i Sabah. Whether Hasan knew Omar Khayyam is a matter of conjecture.

Hasan's family were conventional Shi'ites, but at age seventeen he encountered a da'i named Amira Zarrab. The da'i's forceful arguments brought the young man into the Ismaili da'wa. In 1078 he reported for duty in Cairo. His stay was not a happy one. Hasan later wrote that Badr al-Jamali, the *Amir al-Jaysh* (commander-in-chief) and vizier, took a dislike to him because of his loyalty to the caliph's heir apparent, Abu Mansur Nizar. Hasan was ordered to take up a position as a da'i in North Africa in 1080. However, the ship he was travelling on was driven ashore in Syria and Hasan returned to Persia. From 1080 to 1090 Hasan was active as an Ismaili da'i throughout Persia.

Increasingly he focussed his attentions on Daylam. This area lies southwest of the Caspian Sea. It is quite mountainous and tends to be barren except for some fertile river bottoms. The people are tribally distinct from other Persians. They were also noted for their fierce resistance to the Arabs and Islam.

In 1090 Hasan achieved a coup that would alter the course of Ismaili history. Ismaili supporters smuggled him into the castle of Alamut. Soon the charismatic da'i had won over the garrison. The commander of the place was told he could depart. In payment for his castle, Hasan gave the man a draft for 30,000 dinars, payable by the da'wa. Hasan is said to have never once left Alamut from his entry in 1090 until his death.

Alamut means "eagle's nest" in Daylami. It is aptly named. It perches on a barren crag over the Rudbar valley. The terrain made it quite difficult for a medieval army to operate for long in the area, much less to reduce this formidable stronghold. For all its inaccessibility, Alamut was still reasonably close to the major population centers in Persia, Iraq, and Syria. Soon Hasan was directing the vast network of underground Ismaili loyalists from Alamut. The Assassin legend was about to begin.

The principal enemy of the Ismailis was the Seljuk Sultanate. The Seljuks were an ambitious tribe of Turkish nomads who worked their way up from mercenaries to masters of an empire that stretched from Syria to Central Asia. The Abbasid caliphs were their clients and the Turks were zealous foes of heresy.

The enclave in Daylam expanded to other castles and Ismaili agitators initiated a successful rebellion in the province of Quhistan in eastern Persia. Sultan Malik Shah sent his forces to besiege Alamut. They made little headway and while the siege was in progress the Sultan died. The Seljuks followed their standard practice of immediately fighting one another for power. Hasan knew exactly how to help them complete their slide into chaos.

The Seljuk vizier was the very capable Nizam al-Mulk. Nizam regarded the Ismailis as enemies of religion and authority, “who aimed to abolish Islam, to mislead mankind and cast them into perdition.” According to Juvaini, Nizam “strove his hardest to excise the pus of Sabbahian rebellion.” Hasan called for a volunteer from the rafiqs. A man named Bu Tahir came forward. He was the first of the *fidai's*, or devotees, the men who carried out political murders on behalf of the Ismaili cause. Disguised as a Sufi (a religious thinker and mystic) he approached Nizam as the vizier was being carried in his litter. But Tahir stabbed Nizam with a dagger and thus carried out the first Assassins’ assassination. When Hasan heard of it he said, “The killing of this devil is the beginning of bliss.”

In 1094 Ismailism reached a watershed. The Fatimid caliphs had been little more than puppet rulers since 1074, when Badr al-Jamli had carried out a coup that consolidated his power over civil and military affairs. He was succeeded by his son al-Afdal who retained his position as *Amir al-Jaysh* and vizier. But in 1094 Caliph al-Mustansir died. Instead of recognizing Nizar, who had the nass, al-Afdal appointed Nizar’s younger and more compliant brother, al-Mustali, as caliph.

Nizar refused to go quietly. He made a vain attempt to seize power and was put to death. In Alamut Hasan refused to accept the new order and declared his irreconcilable opposition to al-Afdal and al-Mustali. For a religious movement founded on the inviolable right of succession, al-Afdal’s coup was heresy. Hasan assumed control of the new da’wa with the title of *Hujj* (“proof”), while he declared Nizar’s heirs to be occult imams. From then on the ‘Nizari Ismailis’ were mortal enemies of the Fatimid caliphate.

Hasan was still engaged against the Seljuks and he used their civil war to its fullest. The Assassins strengthened the enclave in Daylam by taking more territory. Hasan may have had a secret pact with Berkyaruk, Malik Shah’s son. In any case the *fidai's* concentrated their efforts on Berkyaruk’s rivals. The Assassins were always ready for an expedient alliance.

By 1100 the Seljuks were united again and all-out war resumed between the Turks and Nizaris. Revolts, wars, and massacres racked Persia. The Assassins constantly

worked to seize castles and initiate rebellions in major cities. The *fidai's* plied their daggers on Seljuk officials at all levels, from the emirs who held military commands to the qadis who presided over trials of Ismailis to religious scholars who condemned heresy. They also targeted the lesser run of informers, turncoats, and spies. No one in authority was safe.

In turn the Seljuks used intense repression against the Nizaris. In some cities there were anti-Ismaili riots and pogroms. The Seljuk authorities did not hesitate to slaughter men, women, and children in their drive to extirpate the Nizari sect. The da’i Ahmad ibn Attash commanded a castle near Isfahan. When the Seljuks stormed the castle, his wife put on her finest jewels and leapt from the battlements. Ibn Attash was taken prisoner, paraded through the streets of Isfahan, and skinned alive.

Hasan i Sabah was truly a stern fanatic. The Nizari enclave in Daylam was governed by *shari’a*, Islamic law. Like the Taliban in modern times, Hasan banned wine and music. His manner of living was noted for its simplicity and piety. The Hujj’s family life was less happy. He executed both his sons. One son was condemned to death for murdering a da’i, but the accusation was later proven false. The other son was executed for drunkenness. Perhaps Hasan junior had a reason to drink. When Hasan died in 1124 leadership fell to his chief lieutenant, a Daylami named Burzug Umid.

RASHID AL-DIN SINAN, THE OLD MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN

Assassin efforts were not limited to Persia. They occasionally carried out actions in Iraq. But that region was dominated by Sunni orthodoxy and Iraqi Shi’ites rejected violent revolution. On the other hand Syria proved fertile ground for the Assassins. They sometimes allied with the Druze, another Ismaili splinter sect who claimed the Fatimid Caliph Hakim was the Mahdi, and the Alawites, a sect that mixed Shi’a style Islam with Christianity and Zoroastrian beliefs. Existing Ismaili networks declared for the Nizaris. Soon the *fidai's* were eliminating enemies in Aleppo, Homs, and Mosul.

Syria was also a convenient base for launching attacks in Egypt. In 1121 the *fidai's* caught up with the man who had shattered Ismaili unity, al-Afdal was stabbed to death in Cairo. The Fatimid Caliph Amir (who may have been behind Afdal’s death) made overtures to the Nizaris, but they would have none of it. The Fatimids responded by tightening security. Foreign visitors and knife sellers were subject to background checks.



Intense investigations were carried out in Cairo. Soon hundreds of suspects were rounded up. They included army officers and even the tutor of the caliph's children. Despite the precautions the *fida'is* got through. In 1130 Caliph Amir perished under their knives.

With Hasan i Sabah gone the *da'wa* lost some of its intensity. His successors struggled less to overthrow the existing order than to hold their ground. However, the conflict with the Seljuks continued, first under Burzug Umid, then under his heirs. The *fida'is* terminated some notable victims during this era. The Abbasid caliph al-Mustansir and his son al-Rashid were killed in 1135 and 1138 respectively.

The Syrian Assassins were without any secure base for a long period. Finally, in the 1130s they managed to seize several castles in the border area disputed by the Crusaders and the Syrian emirs. They pursued an independent course of both alliance and hostility towards the Crusaders, depending on what would best serve the Assassins' circumstances. But in 1162 the Syrian Assassins were in serious trouble. A murderous feud had broken out between rival factions battling for leadership of the group.

The new *hujj* in Alamut, Hasan ibn Mohammed had survived a ruthless purge of his followers by his father. Hasan II, as he is known, was about to embark on a policy of radical change in religious doctrine and power consolidation. He needed a loyal man in Syria. Hasan II found one in Rashid al-Din Sinan. The *hujj* ordered Sinan to take control of the situation. Sinan acted quickly, arresting and executing the faction leaders. He led the Syrian wing of the Assassins for over thirty years and came to be known as the "Old Man of the Mountain" (*Shaykh al-Jabal*), a title his successors carried for decades after.

Meanwhile Hasan II carried out his plans to reshape the Assassins. He announced that he was actually the heir of Nizar, descended from a royal offspring smuggled from Egypt to Alamut. Thus Hasan II promoted himself from *hujj* to Imam. He took a more radical step in abolishing Holy Law, proclaiming the *qiyama* or Resurrection had come. The assembly in Alamut prayed facing away from Mecca, broke the Ramadan fast, and drank wine, celebrating the Apocalypse in style. Some Syrian *rafiqs* took the new revelation as a signal to celebrate with heavy drinking and wild sex. Sinan brought them to heel by seizing their castle.

Sinan faced bigger problems than wild parties. There was a new power in Syria. In the 1170s Saleh ed-Din, better known as Saladin, had consolidated power in Syria and Egypt, replacing both the Seljuk and Fatimid rulers. This ambitious Kurdish warrior was the emerging champion of Sunni Islam against the Crusaders. He was no friend of the Ismaili heretics.

Therefore Sinan sought an alliance with the Crusaders. While they were perpetually disorganized, they had strategic advantages in the hard-fighting Templar and Hospitaller military orders and there was always the potential for European reinforcements. For their part the Crusaders needed to counterbalance Saladin and welcomed the alliance.

The *fida'is* were a potent weapon, but two attempts on Saladin's life failed. Eventually the Old Man of the Mountain and the Lion of Islam came to an understanding. In 1192 two *fida'is* disguised as Christian monks struck down Conrad of Montferrat, the King of Jerusalem and titular head of the Crusader kingdom. Typically for these murky affairs, both Conrad's enemy Saladin and his ally King Richard of England were blamed for instigating the murder.

THE MONGOLS AND THE END OF ALAMUT

Neither Sinan nor his alliance with Saladin survived long after Conrad's murder. Sinan's successor received the new King of Jerusalem, Henri of Champagne, as a guest. In Persia, new leadership had come to the fore. Hasan II was long gone, murdered by his brother-in-law in 1166. New powers were on the rise. The Seljuk threat had vanished and the Sultan of Khwarezem had built a new empire in Central Asia. The Mongols were making their bold and bloody entry into world history.

The Assassins pursued a wavering course towards the Mongols. Initially they had tried to establish friendly relations. The Mongols had smashed the chief threat to Assassin power when they destroyed the Sultanate of Khwarezem. However, the Mongol threat was indiscriminate. The Assassins still had their base in Qhistan dating back to the 1090s. The da'i there provided substantial relief for refugees from the Mongol invasion. Despite overtly friendly relations, tensions rose. An embassy from Alamut to the Khan was turned back in 1240, the Mongols being suspicious that the envoys were really fida'is targeting the Great Khan.

In the year 1255, the Assassin Imam Ala ad-Din was drifting toward war with the Mongols. Already Mongol forces had attacked Assassin castles. At home Ala ad-Din had serious problems. He was intensely suspicious of his son, Khwushah, and had even tried to revoke his nass. This provoked a strong reaction from Nizari purists. Ala ad-Din was isolated at home and abroad and many feared he would soon kill his son and other disloyal elements. Khwushah made plans with various Nizari leaders to depose his father, but events were moving fast. A lackey who had fallen from favor stabbed Ala ad-Din to death. Khwushah became Imam and took the name Rukn al-Din. The newly minted Rukn al-Din's complicity in his father's killing remains an open question.

In 1255 the Mongol Khan Hulegu marched into Persia intent on firmly establishing Mongol power. The Imam Rukn al-Din had no intention of going against a global empire, but the price of peace was high; the Assassins were required to surrender all their castles. In 1256 Rukn al-Din left Alamut and put himself, his family, and wealth in the hands of the Mongol Khan. Rukn al-Din ordered his castles to open their gates and admit the Mongols. A few believed the Imam was acting under duress and fought the invaders anyway, but eventually the Mongols won. With Assassin resistance at an end, the Mongols had no further use for Rukn al-Din. The Imam was killed along with his family and followers. Only one small son was spared.

Other battles, surrenders, and revolts followed. The Qhistan enclave held out a little longer and there were uprisings around Alamut as Mongol power waned, but the Assassin state was finished in Persia.

The Syrian Assassins transferred their loyalties to the Mamluk Sultan Baibars. Baibars repelled the Mongol assault on Syria and set about finishing off the Crusaders. He appointed his own man as Shaykh al-Jabal and recruited the fida'is as killers for hire. The men who once killed to establish Allah's rule on Earth and to make Paradise manifest now plied their daggers for pay. The era of the Assassins was over.

NIZARI DOCTRINE AND THE ASSASSINS

The core of Assassin ideology was their attachment to an Imam who acted as the one and only spiritual teacher. This belief was reinforced by the concept of a hidden or "occult" Imam, who was a mystical presence even when no one claimed the office of Imam. In keeping with their utopian and revolutionary ideals the Assassins looked for the Mahdi, the savior who would rule the world.

Hasan II drew together these eschatological trends in his period of rule in Alamut. He claimed not only that he was the Imam, but that the resurrection or *qiyama* had come. This was part of *batin*, the esoteric interpretation of the Koran. Thus as Imam, Hasan II could see the meaning encoded below the literal surface of the Koran. The Prophet Mohammed had promised that on Resurrection day the just would be exalted and live in Paradise, where perfected souls were above the rule of law prevailing on Earth. Hasan II stood this prophecy on its head and said his followers were perfected and thus free of formal law.

While modern Ismailis point to the *qiyama* as a declaration of spiritual maturity akin to Jesus' ending of Mosaic law, in practice some of the followers seemed to need formal law. According to Sunni sources some of the Assassins celebrated the *qiyama* with wine drinking, sex orgies, and even incest. Such accusations were a standard feature of attacks on religious separatists and political reformers of the day. However, in this case it might not have all been propaganda. Ismaili sources say that Sinan had to force some of the Syrian Assassins to give up the debauchery they had adopted after the *qiyama*.

A belief in the value of martyrdom was deeply woven into the mindset of the fida'is and their people. The fida'is' willingness to sacrifice themselves had a ritual aspect that affirmed the value of martyrdom and perhaps even atoned for the shedding of blood.



Ra'is Hasan's poem carries a warning for those who oppose Allah's commands.

"Every one who thinks of opposing the Lord of the Universe is punished by the fate of violent death.

The chosen prophets preached and warned people about this from the beginning, that such is the promised punishment.

"The king, who possesses more than a hundred thousand cavalry, would be frightened by a single warrior."

TACTICS

Assassin tactics were based on their military weakness and ideological strength. Although they held powerful castles that could withstand prolonged siege, they had a small territorial base with a small population. They could never hope to match the massive armies of Seljuks, Crusaders, or Mongols in the open. What they did have was a widespread network of believers who fully accepted the authoritarian teachings of the da'wa. Medieval Ismailis cultivated secrecy for protection, which could easily be turned to the offensive. The best response to attack was to strike enemies where they were weak, by killing their leaders and crippling them politically.

Little is known about how the fida'is were recruited. In 1175 a German who visited Syria wrote to Emperor Frederick Barbarossa that the "prince" of the Assassins chose sons of the peasantry to be reared in his castle. They were taught a variety of languages as well as indoctrinated to absolute obedience to the leader. If they obeyed him in all things, they would be rewarded with the joys of Paradise after death. This story may simply have come from the Syrian rumor-mill, but it does show that people believed the fida'is received special training to infiltrate their targets. Beyond any doubt Ismailism conditioned its followers to absolute acceptance of the commands of the Imam and his deputies.

The fida'is often made use of disguise to get close to a victim. The fida'is who slew the King of Jerusalem were disguised as Christian monks. Occasionally they disguised themselves as Sufis. Not surprisingly, fida'is often disguised themselves as soldiers. Thus they had an excuse to carry weapons and might even be able to enter a ruler's bodyguard. Fida'is disguised as Turkish soldiers killed the emir of Mosul.

A Syrian historian tells a story (possibly apocryphal) of how Saladin received a messenger from Sinan. The messenger told Saladin that the message was to be given in private and asked the emir to send away his mamluk guards. Saladin

Kemal al-Din, a historian from Aleppo in Syria recorded a story about the aftermath of an Assassin hit. Eight fida'is went to kill Bursuqi, the governor of Mosul. Kemal says what happened next:

"All those who attacked him were killed except for one youth . . . He had an aged mother, and when she heard that Bursuqi was killed and that those who attacked him were killed, knowing that her son was one of them, she rejoiced, and anointed her eyelids with kohl, and was full of joy; then after a few days her son returned unharmed, and she was grieved, and tore her hair and blackened her face."

Just as valuing martyrdom reinforced the practical aspects of Assassin tactics, the Assassins rewarded the fida'is by showing them honor. At Alamut and in the Assassin strongholds in Syria they kept rolls of honor that listed who the fida'is had slain and which fida'is had done the deed.

An expression of the Assassin belief in the rightness of slaying a tyrant can be found in a poem by Ra'is Hasan. Translated by W. Ivanow, the poem refers to the slaying of Kizil Arslan, the emir of Azerbaijan who was trying to expand his territories at the expense of the Assassins. Three fida'is ambushed him and his three mounted attendants, killing the emir and one other. Ra'is Hasan praised the fida'is:

"Praise, glory and thousands of benedictions be upon the three heroes, the brave swordsmen, capturers of Kings!

"Upon those victorious warriors on the path of the religion, out of fear and fright for whom the world prays for mercy!"

replied that those men were like sons to him and would stay. The messenger turned to the mamluks and asked if they would kill Saladin if Sinan ordered it. The soldiers drew their swords and replied they would. Saladin was astounded and hurried to make peace with the Assassins.

The fida'is could be dispatched from Alamut or other fortresses to infiltrate a ruler's court or a religious school, or simply to live in a city. Once there they would wait until orders came to strike a target. The killers of Conrad of Montferrat waited six months to strike him down. The historian Nasawi told how a fida'i from India told the vizier Sharaf al-Mulk, "I would have been able to kill you on such and such a day and at such and such a place; I did not do so because I had not yet received orders to deal with you."

While such stories may be apocryphal, they point to a basic truth of Assassin strategy. The fida'is were truly a terrorist organization. They killed relatively few, but frightened many more. Tales of their infiltration skills may have come from historians eager for a good tale, or they may have been deliberately spread by the Assassins to heighten their reputation.

Hasan i Sabah resorted to trickery against the Sultan Sanjar. Hasan was seeking a truce with the Seljuk ruler. The Assassin hujj bribed a eunuch at the court to stick a dagger in the ground beside the sultan's bed. Sultan Sanjar got the message and made peace with the people of Alamut.

An even more elaborate tale is told of Saladin and Sinan. After the second attempt on his life Saladin lived in fear. He strewed ashes around his bed at night so that any footprints would be revealed. Nonetheless, one morning Saladin awoke to an eerie sight. A poisoned dagger pinned down a note threatening the Sultan with death. Beside it was a plate of scones, marked with the Assassin insignia!

Often enough the fida'is served up something sterner than baked goods and threats. They almost always used the dagger. A knife was a very common instrument of death in the Middle Ages. Small ones could easily be concealed and many men wore them as a matter of course. But there may have been more to it than that. The Medieval arsenal was limited by modern standards, but crossbows, arrows, garrotes, maces, axes, and poison are all effective ways to eliminate a foe. However, all descriptions of assassinations by the fida'is say they got close to their victims and stabbed or hacked them down.

One historian of the Assassins, Bernard Lewis, speaks of a weapons cult among the Assassins. Lewis compares this use of the dagger in the cause of religion to the practices of the Mansuriyya. Abu Mansur's followers made a point of strangling their foes. They were said to beat a dog while

performing a killing so the animal's howling would drown out the victim's cries. Strangling wasn't just a hobby, it was a religious duty. Only when the Mahdi appeared would the Mansuriyya be permitted to use blades.

Daggers had a ceremonial role too. A dagger might be presented to a rival during negotiations as a reminder of the Assassin's methods. The French Crusader Joinville stated that the Old Man of the Mountain had a battle axe with a silver-covered handle and daggers attached to it carried before him in processions. It is not unreasonable to conclude that the dagger wasn't just a weapon, but a symbol for the group as a whole.

Fida'is often operated in groups of two or more. Occasionally a single fida'i would be employed, but the Assassins probably recognized the risks this imposed. As leaders became aware of the Assassin threat, they often went armored and accompanied by guards. A squad of fida'is could overpower guards and a victim. The attacks on Saladin were carried out by small teams of fida'is. They worked in pairs when they struck down the emir Buri and the King of Jerusalem. Eight fida'is were employed to kill the emir of Mosul. A full ten killed the Caliph al-Amir.

Ismailis, like other Shi'ites, held martyrs in high regard. Martyrdom had a practical side as well. The Assassins were not overly burdened with escape plans. They were also more fearsome in execution. Conventional tactics for deterring terrorism rely on an attacker's unwillingness to be captured or killed. If the attacker has no compunction about dying, he is not easily deterred. The modern world has been learning this lesson very painfully for the last few decades.

The Assassins could resort to other methods when they felt the need. Sinan sent fida'is to set fire to the marketplace of Aleppo as part of an ongoing struggle with the ruler there. When defending their castles the fida'is used conventional military tactics. Sometimes the Assassins sent out military contingents to support their Muslim or Crusader allies. However, they did not have strong enough forces to act on their own, except for very limited actions.

Assassin killings were linked to Assassin strategy. Their goal was to disrupt opponents by striking at their most vulnerable segment, their foes' leadership. When a Seljuk sultan died, a violent power struggle was sure to erupt. Even in more stable states the murder of rulers had the effect of dampening a monarch's enthusiasm for war with the Assassins. Killing a king's soldiers or even burning down his cities and making pyramids of his subjects' skulls was one thing. But for the ruler himself to die was quite an unacceptable cost!

The opposite side of the coin was that groups with very reliable means of succession to leadership tended to be immune to Assassin attacks. Joinville noted that while the Assassins demanded tribute from the Holy Roman Emperor, the Sultan of Cairo, and the King of France, the Assassins were content to pay money to the Hospitallers and Templars. If fida'is struck down the leaders of the military orders a new man would simply be appointed in his place.

That the Assassins had political relations with the Crusader-monks of the Hospital and Temple may seem surprising. The Assassins were not in the least bit loath to make or break alliances as it suited their broad strategic interest. They maintained good relations with the Crusaders when the Seljuks or Saladin pressed the Assassins hard. But when Muslim rulers had the upper hand in the struggle with the Crusaders, the Assassins gave them aid in expelling the Christian invaders. Periods of intense hostility toward the Sunni establishment alternated with periods of rapprochement when the Nizari Imam even exchanged friendly greetings with the Abbasid Caliph.

Above all, the Assassin leaders stayed true to their goal of maintaining independent bases, which could serve as a springboard for an Ismaili revolution. When they lost sight of that goal, they were finished as a revolutionary movement.



ASSASSIN SKILLS

Because of their emphasis on maintaining a cover identity, the fida'is skill package in *Call of Cthulhu* would likely include:

Conceal	Disguise	Fast Talk	Hide
Knife	Language	Persuade	Sneak

(From the Middle ages through World War I, language skills would most likely be Farsi, Arabic, and Turkish, perhaps with Medieval Greek, or Latin when it came time to pass among the Crusaders. After the Great War the Assassins would drop the Greek and Latin for the languages of the European colonial powers occupying their lands: French and English.)

Considering the symbolic and ritualistic relationship of the Assassins to the knife, it would likely be the preferred weapon skill no matter what the era.



ASSASSIN LEGENDS

As with any group as secretive and controversial as the Assassins, legends and propaganda are more prevalent than hard facts. They are also more interesting. A mere recitation of names and dates can not truly give a sense of fear, hatred, and curiosity the Assassins aroused. In large measure they are defined by their legends.

The very name of the Assassins is part of that legend. While the exact origins and meaning are disputed, most scholars agree that the word “assassin” derives from hashish, the potent marijuana derivative favored by medieval Middle Eastern drug users. Orthodox Muslim writers sometimes referred to the Nizaris as hashishiyya, hashish users. Muslim sources do not give specifics about drug use among the Assassins. Rather they simply lumped Ismaili heretics among other low-class rabble like hashish eaters. Modern Ismaili scholars such as Farhad Daftary reject this as an unfounded, partisan slur. Daftary notes that the fida’is needed top mental and physical reflexes to carry out their missions. Given Hasan i Sabah’s severity towards his son for drinking wine, it is difficult to imagine what he would have done to hashish eaters.

Still the legend is a potent one. It figured in the most famous Assassin legend of all, “The Hidden Garden of the Old Man of the Mountain.” The tale has its roots in stories told by European travelers to the Holy Land during the Crusades. Early versions associate the Syrian Assassin chief with a concealed garden where he trained his killers and promised them a place in Paradise if they did his bidding on Earth.

The Hidden Garden legend achieved its definitive form in the writings of Marco Polo. Polo may have received information from his Mongol patrons or Persians in their service. Polo said the Old Man of the Mountain planted a garden in a remote valley. In the garden he built beautiful houses, gilded and decorated with silken hangings. There were fountains that flowed with milk and wine. Beautiful women were sent there, dressed in the finest clothes. They were all expert singers and dancers. Conversation was always pleasant and there was an abundance of all pleasures. In short, Polo said the Old Man made “that garden like Paradise of which Mahomet had spoken to the Saracens.” But the route to the garden was blocked by the Old Man’s castle and the garden could only be entered by a secret way.

According to Marco Polo the Old Man kept a group of young men in his castle. When he needed an assassin to kill an enemy he would use the hidden garden to stir his youths to a suitable pitch. First he would drug them, “For he had opium to drink given them by which they fell asleep and as if half dead immediately as soon as they had drunk it.” Then they were taken to the garden. Polo continues, “when

the youths wake up and they find themselves in there and see themselves in so fine a place and they see all these things which I have told you, made just as the law of Mahomet says . . . they believe that they are most truly in Paradise.”

After some time in the garden, the women would drug the youths again and they would be taken back to the castle. When they woke, “The Old Man asks them whence they come, and those say that (by thy goodness) they come from Paradise. And they say indeed in the presence of all that in truth that is Paradise, as Mahomet told our ancestors in their law. . . .” It should come as no surprise that the young men were very eager to return to Paradise. Polo continues:

And the Old Man answered them, Son, this is by the commandment of our prophet Mahomet, that whoever defends his servant he will grant to them Paradise; and if thou art obedient to me thou shalt have this favour. Through this means he had so inspired all his people to die that they might go to Paradise that he whom the Old Man ordered to go die for his name reckoned himself happy, with sure hope of deserving to go to Paradise, so that as many lords or others as were enemies of the said Old Man were killed with these followers and Assassins, because none feared death if only he could do the commandment and will of the said Old Man, and they exposed themselves like madmen to every manifest danger, wishing to die together with the king’s enemy and despising the present life. And for this reason he was feared in all those countries as a tyrant.

While the tale of the Hidden Garden is only a legend, some aspects of it bear a relationship to actual Assassin beliefs. The Assassins do seem to have believed that death in the service of their religion earned them a place in Heaven. While they may not have expressed their hopes for the future as crassly as Marco Polo puts it, the Venetian’s description of the Old Man’s garden is very close to the description of Allah’s blessing in the chapter of the Koran titled “The Merciful.”

The Assassins’ absolute fidelity to their lord’s commands was a tremendous source of strength for a tiny sect that was outnumbered and outgunned on every side. An Assassin’s loyalty was his outstanding feature to medieval European observers. The dramatic nature of that loyalty was the basis for yet another legend about the Assassins. It concerns Count Henri of Champagne and his visit to the Old Man of the Mountain.

Despite the unfortunate end of his predecessor, Conrad of Montferrat, Count Henri was able to bring about a diplomatic *demarche* with the Assassins. The count and the Old Man had a summit meeting at Assassin headquarters. The crusader and the shaykh were discoursing on the nature of loyalty. The Old Man was quite ready to show his visitor just how loyal his fida’is were. It was also a not-too-subtle hint about who the count would be dealing with if he decided to start a Crusader War on Terror.



The Old Men sent a few fida'is up to a high tower. At a signal they leapt to their deaths. Count Henri was suitably impressed by his host's demonstration. Despite the sinister undertones of the entertainment, the Old Man wound things up in a friendly fashion by offering to kill any enemies Count Henri cared to name.

The ultimate Assassin legend concerns their very identity and purpose. Orthodox Muslims tarred most heretics

with similar accusations, calling them drug users, perverts and criminals. The Sunni theologian al-Ghazali took the process a step further. Al-Ghazali explained the Ismaili system of progressive ranks and stages of indoctrination. Their ultimate rank was *al-balagh al-akbar*. At that stage one learned the true doctrine of the Ismailis: They believed in nothing. The Assassins were not just bad Muslims, they were not Muslims at all. They were nihilistic enemies of all that is true and good.

NOTHING IS TRUE. EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED

The Assassins have left strange echoes in the popular imagination. As a group, they are tailor-made for thrilling tales in the Pulp genre. And while one can find some very thrilling tales of the Assassins they have also left their mark in avant-garde literature and even on modern fringe culture.

The fida'is made their appearance in popular literature very early on. In the medieval Egyptian Romance of Baibars the hero is assisted by gangs of fida'is, reflecting Baibars' role in ending the Syrian Assassins' independent enclave. In some tales from the Arabian Nights, such as "The History of the First Larrikin" and "The History of the Lovers of Syria," fida'is are depicted as no more than bandits or pirates rather than religious fanatics.

A modern example of this treatment is *Three Bladed Doom*, by Robert E. Howard. Though he is best known for his Conan stories and his horror and fantasy yarns that appeared in *Weird Tales*, Howard wrote many action-adventure tales, often set in remote parts of Central Asia. *Three Bladed Doom* features Howard's hero Francis Xavier Gordon, known as El Borak, "the Swift." El Borak discovers a hidden castle in the mountains of Afghanistan lorded over by a modern descendant of Hasan i Sabah. Using the wealth his family earned from oil deposits in Persia, this modern Shaykh al-Jebal has rebuilt a *Batini* castle and assembled an international crew of cutthroats and devil-worshippers from every corner of Asia. Mongol devotees of dread Erlik Khan mingle with Kurdish bandits, Cossack renegades, and *Hashishin* in an Arabian Nights setting. Swordplay and gun battles abound as daring Gordon and his bold Afghan friends save the day.

The image of bloodthirsty Assassin gangsters shooting it out with adventurers in the Hindu Kush is just one part of the literary Assassin legacy. There is another, very different one found in the experimental literature of the Beats. William S. Burroughs—junkie, wife-killer, and landmark of 20th century American literature—gave the Assassins their weirdest twist.

"Nothing is true-everything is permitted" are the last words of Hasan-i Sabah in *Nova Express*, Burroughs' 1964 experimental novel. The Lord of Alamut appears to warn Earth of the insidious designs of the Nova Mob, intergalactic parasites and gangsters, who are using us as their "human dogs." One might choose to interpret the Nova Mob as the conformist, corporate culture that dominated America in the 1950s. For Burroughs, the Assassins dared deny the truth of everything, thus opening the way for total liberation. But Burroughs, who knew a thing or two about destructive behavior, warned that Hasan

i Sabah's words are "not to be interpreted as an invitation to all manner of unrestrained and destructive behavior; that would be a minor episode, which would run its course." Burroughs' stand is an artistic one. It is art that is not real; when art achieves total liberation in un-reality, reality will dissolve. "Success will write 'apocalypse' across the sky." *Nothing is true, everything is permitted* is a dark and dangerous invocation of powerful forces, on par with *Cthulhu fhtagn*.

Other theorists have picked up where Burroughs left off. Hakim Bey is the mysterious Anarchist philosopher who created the concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone. Like the Assassin fida'is who mastered the art of disguise, Hakim Bey infiltrates the unlikeliest of circles, from cyberspace to Black Nationalism. He adopted the Assassins as a symbolic Anarchist order. To Hakim Bey, they created their Autonomous Zone at Alamut and defended it with threats, shadows, and misinformation. Inside, they found complete liberation, a true Anarchist Utopia.

Hakim Bey wrote of the Assassins with a lyrical quality. This passage from T.A.Z. has the orientaling quality of the best translations of the Arabian Nights.

"ACROSS THE LUSTER OF the desert & into the polychrome hills, hairless & ochre violet dun & umber, at the top of a dessicate blue valley travelers find an artificial oasis, a fortified castle in saracenic style enclosing a hidden garden.

"As guests of the Old Man of the Mountain Hassan-i Sabbah they climb rock-cut steps to the castle. Here the Day of Resurrection has already come & gone—those within live outside profane Time, which they hold at bay with daggers & poisons."

The knowledge of the Assassins is powerful, but it comes at a price. "True, in this myth some aspirant disciples may be ordered to fling themselves off the ramparts into the black—but also true that some of them will learn to fly like sorcerers."

Ultimately it is not power that Bey's Assassins want or murder that will achieve their ends. Theirs is a mystic kingdom of the mind.

"The Old Man flits like a ghost into tents of kings & bedrooms of theologians, past all locks & guards with forgotten moslem/ninja techniques, leaves behind bad dreams, stilettos on pillows, puissant bribes.

The attar of his propaganda seeps into the criminal dreams of ontological anarchism, the heraldry of our obsessions displays the luminous black outlaw banners of the Assassins . . . all of them pretenders to the throne of an Imaginal Egypt, an occult space/light continuum consumed by still-unimagined liberties."



THE ASSASSINS AND THE MYTHOS

So where does the Order of the Assassins intersect the Cthulhu Mythos? Just about any place one pleases! To begin with there is the *Al Azif*, better known as the *Necronomicon*, penned by the Mad Arab Abdul Alhazred. One can only speculate what possessed Alhazred to pen that masterpiece of repellent philosophy, but it is regarded as the wellspring of knowledge for the dark and loathsome cults that fester in lost corners of the world. Certain linguists have suggested that Abdul Alhazred's name may be read as "Servant of the Great Strangler," suggesting a connection with the bloodthirsty Mansuriyya stranglers who pre-dated the Assassins. After the caliph's forces

suppressed the sect, a survivor might well have found it expedient to use occult means to find the Mahdi. Instead of an Occult Imam, he could have found some loathsome entity that had no right to be found, or even to exist.

In fact the castle of Alamut had a large and rather comprehensive library. The Persian scholar Juvaini consulted it and made use of certain volumes, such as Hasan i Sabah's autobiography, in his history. The rest he consigned to the flames, piously denouncing their heretical contents. While Juvaini says the *Batinis'* doctrines were too heretical to repeat, perhaps he really meant they were too frightening to repeat. If their library had a copy of the horrid *Al-Azif*, why not the chilling *Pnakotic Manuscripts*, or the dread Commorian writings of Klarkash-ton?

In the 1930s Freya Stark, a noted British travel writer, visited Daylam and went to Alamut and other castles formerly occupied by the Assassins. In the lower level of the ruins at Alamut was a cistern and some rooms. People living nearby told her that there were seven black dogs that guarded a treasure hidden there. These hellhounds could breathe fire and fly. Could this have been a flawed recollection of the hounds of Tindalos? What was the treasure they guarded?

Orthodox Muslim historians considered the Assassins to be no more than deluded fanatics led by cynical atheists. While that was probably no more than slander, it does leave the door open for imaginative interpretations of the Assassins. Islamic heretics easily mixed Gnostic, Manichaeism, Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Christian doctrines. That certain groups would have come in contact with other, more fearful systems of belief and action is inevitable. If their leaders were nihilists, why not assume they tried to summon vile creatures from the Outer Void to smite their foes?

Even if one assumes the hujjas to have enforced some type of doctrinal purity, there might well have been factions within the Assassins that turned to other paths. The incident of the *qiyama* is a case in point. While Hasan II intended the *qiyama* to free men from the petty restrictions of formal law, others saw it as an excuse to do as they pleased. What if Sinan suppressed the erring Assassins, not because he found them drinking wine and reveling, but because they had turned to something more sinister? The senseless abandon of the *qiyama* is very reminiscent of Old Castro's description of mankind in the time of the Great Old Ones' return: "Free and wild and beyond good and evil, with laws and morals thrown aside and all men shouting and killing and reveling in joy. Then the liberated Old Ones would teach them new ways to shout and kill and enjoy themselves, and all the earth would flame with a holocaust of ecstasy and freedom."

The stories of hashish use may have been lies, but if one postulates an Assassin splinter group that worshipped evil deities then hashish is no stretch. Hashish use appears in the fantastic fiction of both H.P. Lovecraft and Lord Dunsany. In Dunsany's short tales hashish users have the ability to go beyond "the fields we know" to unguessed realms of magic and wonder. Likewise some of Lovecraft's characters access the Dreamlands in a similar way. Hashish-eating Assassins might well penetrate such lands. Encounters with the Ghouls, Nightgaunts, or the hideous Men of Leng would certainly follow. Assassins with access to one's dreams would be formidable foes indeed.

Even in their own day something of the occult hung about the Assassins' leaders. One Arab biographer described Hasan i Sabah as "perspicacious, capable, learned in geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, magic, and other things." While his knowledge of magic may be more a matter of unfriendly speculation, it is significant that Hasan i Sabah was believed to know of the occult arts.

Sinan was even more closely associated with the magical arts. Sinan's Ismaili followers collected many anecdotes about him that show he was not merely respected, but regarded as nothing less than miraculous. Sinan could know what was going to happen before it happened. His powers of observation were superhuman, on a level with Sherlock Holmes. Sinan was known to answer questions people had merely thought. When pursued by Saladin's soldiers, Sinan's magical force prevented them from approaching. It was Sinan who entered Saladin's tent to leave his warning, and though there was ash strewn about, the Assassin chief left behind no trace of a footprint.

Whether Hasan i Sabah and Sinan were benign trickster magicians or dark sorcerers may be left to one's imagination. But magic was never too far behind when the Assassins were about their business.

ASSASSIN SPELLS

Considering the Assassins' reputation for concealing their identities, they might have had supernatural help in this regard. Spells such as Body Warping of Golgorath, Control Skin, Graft Flesh and Transfer Body Part would allow an assassin to replace a trusted associate and gain access to their target. Consume Likeness is a less likely match since assassins don't have a reputation for surviving their missions and the magical guise would drop the moment the assassin took damage.

Flesh Ward, Deflect Harm or Skin of the Sedefkar would give an assassin the luxury of avoiding being cut down until he reaches his target. Bring Haroob and Create Mists of R'lyeh would serve well to throw enemies into confusion during an attack. Circle of Nausea might explain the difficulty gaining access to their citadels.

ASSASSINS IN 'CALL OF CTHULHU'

The Order of the Assassins can be quite readily accommodated in *Call of Cthulhu* campaigns set in the Dark Ages, the 1890s, the 1920s or the 21st century. The air of mystery that surrounds them, the legends that mix the silken exoticism of the Arabian Nights with ferocious bloodlust are exactly what the old-time pulp writers strove for. Don't be too hasty to pigeonhole the Assassins. The longer you stare at the fida'is, those medieval masters of disguise, the more they seem to change. They are the chameleons of secret societies.

The most obvious way to play the Assassins is as they have been represented in most historical accounts, bloodthirsty fanatics. They can be depicted as a set of medieval terrorists, killing in the name of God. The freebooting Qarmatians make a good model for this style of play. This could make for good, tense role-playing, with lots of violent encounters. Investigators would find it handy to have El Borak along when they clash with the efficient killers of the fida'is.

Bear in mind that the Assassins were not particularly anti-Christian. Their struggle was against other Muslims. Modern Islamic fundamentalists would consider them rank heretics. The historical Assassins' beliefs mark them as the mortal enemies of the modern Sunni fundamentalists who make up Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Whether using a secret sect of Islamic fanatics in a 21st century setting sounds a bit too much like a headline is up to the Keeper.

Keepers should remember that the Nizari Ismailis are still a large population in India and other parts of the world. Although they are sometimes still referred to as Assassins by Westerners, they reject that term and are most often called simply Ismailis or Khojas. They are not involved in terrorism or murder in any fashion and would be horrified by the thought of religious killings perpetrated by their brethren.

The Khojas are led by descendants of the child who survived the massacre of Rukn al-Din's family. The modern leaders are called the Aga Khans. The third Aga Khan, Sultan Muhammed Shah, was contemporary with Lovecraft. He was a well-known philanthropist, horse breeder, and statesman. He was active in gaining India's independence and represented India in the League of Nations. Given the history of factional splintering among the historic Ismailis, an evil incarnation of the sect might make the Aga Khan their number one target. In that case the investigators might need the help of some daring Ismailis. Calling them Assassins won't help win their friendship.

The obvious alternative is to suggest that the sect has somehow become warped to the service of foul Mythos entities. A Keeper might assume that the Assassins really were as nihilistic as their enemies said. They might be using black magic to invoke the power of monstrous beings. If that is the case, being stabbed by a fanatic is the least investigators have to worry about. Just as Sunni critics and Western travelers insisted that the fida'is were kept in ignorance or actively deceived by their leaders, the new Assassins might not know their cult truly serves some blasphemous being from the outer void.

A third way to use the Assassins is to assume no connection with the historic group. Whatever the truth of the real Assassins was, their modern image has become one of violence and fanaticism. Some degenerate moderns might have taken Burroughs injunction "everything is permitted" too literally. In Lovecraft's fiction artists are sensitive to "influences" and nihilistic mantras can be gateways to dark places. In Lovecraft's hands a character modeled on Burroughs (whose real life makes Lovecraft's fictional Henry Anthony Wilcox look wholesome!) would certainly come to a bad end. One could well imagine a group that constituted themselves in a make-believe image of the Assassins, with drugs, murder, occult secrecy, and all, only to ultimately find their way into the service of the gods of the Mythos.

There is one last (but not final; nothing is final with the Assassins!) option for keepers. Instead of bloody villains, the Assassins might be heroes. Consider for a moment that the Assassins regarded themselves to be acting defensively. While their enemies often used indiscriminate violence, the Assassins generally targeted leaders who chose to assault the Ismailis. What if the fida'is survived as an order of righteous Muslims, who use their daggers to right wrongs that the law will not or can not? They would be more likely to scare a foe with a dagger on his pillow, than finish him with one through his heart. From that perspective the Assassins might sound a bit like the investigators.

Or the Assassins might *be* occult investigators. Hakim Bey's concept of the Assassins is that of a group that uses secrecy to establish their freedom to explore the occult. Such an order might realize that not all magic is benign and that someone has to stand between the things that lurk at the fringes of sanity and a humanity that slumbers unaware. Alamut could be an imagined rendezvous for a virtual Order of Assassins who cloak their activities under a veil of sinister secrecy. Only by keeping the world at arm's length can the modern fida'is have the freedom they need to battle the forces of the Mythos.

The truth of the Assassins and their deeds seems to change with the eyes of the beholder. They have been

described as selfless freedom fighters and bloodthirsty fanatics, romantic outlaws and cynical nihilists. In a sense it does not matter too greatly who the Assassins really were, when one can imagine who they might be.

The Assassins carried out their missions in disguise and wrapped their actions in mystery. Even today disguises and mystery still guard the Order of the Assassins.

WHICH GOD?

If the accusation of nihilism were indeed true, Nyalathotep and Azathoth would make good patron deities of a Mythos-influenced Order of Assassins. Both Outer Gods represent the total meaninglessness of creation and the black joke that existence promises for humanity. But a Great Old One also suggests itself as the nihilistic patron of the Assassins: Great Cthulhu.

The Cthulhu cult's nihilism is evident in the soulless violence of its cultists as depicted in the original short story "The Call of Cthulhu," but the nihilism doesn't stop there. It is most evident in their pathetic attempts to comprehend the half-dreaming psychic mutterings of Cthulhu's hibernating mind. Whatever dread Cthulhu is actually dreaming it seems unlikely that it has to do with exhorting worshippers to commit bloody atrocities. Mostly likely, Cthulhu doesn't even know it has human worshippers. If anyone is truly worshipping nothing, it is the followers of Cthulhu.

The Order of Assassins also make a good match with the Cthulhu cult because Lovecraft states that the cult guards its secrecy with skilled and ruthless assassins. Diligent investigators might learn, to their great risk, that the Order of Assassins is an incarnation of that same gang of religious killers who murder Professor Angell in the short story.



BITS AND MORTAR

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ASSASSIN CHRONOLOGY

632: DEATH OF THE PROPHET. ABU BAKR SELECTED CALIPH. ORIGINS OF SHI'A-SUNNI SPLIT.

656: MURDER OF CALIPH UTHMAN. ALI SELECTED CALIPH.

661: ALI ASSASSINATED. Umayyad Caliphs take over.

680: 10th Muharram, Husayn (son of Ali) massacred by Umayyad forces at Karbala.

765: DEATH OF 6th Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq. He had disinherited his son Isma'il.

873: DISAPPEARANCE OF 12th Imam.

LATE 9TH C: QARMATIANS ESTABLISH SEPARATE REPUBLIC IN BAHRAIN AND PILLAGE CARAVAN ROUTES TO MECCA.

909: ISMAILI IMAM, ABD ALLAH AL-MAHDI, EMERGES FROM HIDING IN NORTH AFRICA AND FOUNDS THE FATIMID CALIPHATE.

969: FATIMIDS CONQUER EGYPT AND FOUND CAIRO.

1021: DISAPPEARANCE OF CALIPH AL-HAKIM. RISE OF THE DRUZE SECT.

1050: BIRTH OF HASAN I SABAH IN PERSIA.

1067: AMIRA ZARRAB CONVERTS HASAN TO ISMAILISM.

1072: HASAN IS INITIATED INTO ISMAILI DA'WA. HE IS ORDERED TO GO TO CAIRO.

1074: BADR AL-JAMALI CARRIES OUT MILITARY COUP AND BECOMES MASTER OF THE EGYPTIAN GOVERNMENT.

1078: HASAN ARRIVES IN EGYPT.

1081: HASAN IS ORDERED TO LEAVE EGYPT. DESTINED FOR NORTH AFRICA, HIS VESSEL IS SHIPWRECKED IN SYRIA. HE CONTINUES TO PERSIA.

1081-1091: HASAN CARRIES OUT HIS MISSION AS A DA'I IN PERSIA. HE INCREASINGLY OPERATES IN DAYLAM.

1091: HASAN TAKES OVER ALAMUT. EXTENDS CONTROL OVER RUDBAR VALLEY.

1091-1092: HASAN SENDS HUSAYN QA'INI TO ORGANIZE A REVOLUTION IN QUHISTAN.

1092: SELJUK SULTAN SENDS TROOPS AGAINST ALAMUT AND QUHISTAN. SULTAN MALIKSHAH DIES OF NATURAL CAUSES AND VIZIER NIZAM AL-MULK IS KILLED BY FIDA'IS.

1094: AMIR AL-JAYSH AL-AFDAL APPOINTS AL-MUSTA'LI AS 9th CALIPH, PASSING OVER NIZAR, HEIR PRESUMPTIVE. HASAN I SABAH SPLITS FROM FATIMID ESTABLISHMENT.

1096: HASAN SEIZES MORE CASTLES IN ELBURZ MOUNTAIN. ISMAILI RIOTS IN ISFAHAN AND OTHER CITIES.

1100: ASSASSINS THOROUGHLY INFILTRATE SULTAN BERKYARUQ'S MILITARY AND GOVERNMENT.

1101-1118: BERKYARUQ TURNS ON ISMAILIS. CONSTANT WAR, ASSASSINATION, RIOTS, AND MASSACRE THROUGHOUT PERSIA.

1103: SYRIAN FIDA'IS MURDER THE RULER OF HOMS.

1113: SYRIAN FIDA'IS MURDER SELJUK EMIR OF MOSUL, POSSIBLY ENCOURAGED BY THE RULER OF DAMASCUS. MASSACRE OF ISMAILIS IN ALEPPO.

1121: **AL-AFDAL MURDERED IN CAIRO BY SYRIAN FIDA'IS.**

1122-1124: **RAPPROCHEMENT BETWEEN NIZARIS AND FATIMIDS FAILS. EGYPT DEVELOPS INTENSE HOMELAND SECURITY MEASURES.**

1124: **DEATH OF HASAN I SABAH. SUCCEEDED BY BUZURG UMID.**

1126-1131: **RENEWED SELJUK-ISMAILI CONFLICT, FIDA'IS LIQUIDATE VIZIER MU'IN AL-DIN KASHI.**

1126: **SYRIAN ISMAILIS ALLY WITH TURKISH RULER TUGHTIGIN AGAINST CRUSADERS. THEY ARE ALLOWED TO OCCUPY CASTLES.**

1129: **SUCCESSOR OF TUGHTIGIN, BURI MASSACRES ISMAILIS IN DAMASCUS.**

1130: **FATIMID CALIPH AL-AMIR, SON AND SUCCESSOR OF AL-MUSTA'LI, MURDERED BY FIDA'IS.**

1131: **BURI KILLED BY PERSIAN FIDA'IS.**

1132-1140: **SYRIAN ISMAILIS SUCCEED IN SEIZING CASTLES FROM TURKS AND CRUSADERS.**

1135: **ABBASID CALIPH MURDERED BY ISMAILIS WHILE IN SELJUK CUSTODY.**

1138: **BUZURG UMID SUCCEEDED BY HIS SON MUHAMMAD. FORMER ABBASID CALIPH, RASHID, KILLED.**

1148: **ISMAILI-CRUSADER ALLIANCE IN SYRIA.**

1150'S: **MUHAMMED OF ALAMUT LIQUIDATES SUPPORTERS OF HIS SON.**

1151: **COUNT RAYMOND OF TRIPOLI MURDERED, FIRST CRUSADER VICTIM OF FIDA'IS.**

1162: **HASAN II BECOMES HAJJA. RASHID AL-DIN SINAN GOES TO SYRIA.**

1164: **HASAN II PROCLAIMS THE RESURRECTION. HOLY LAW IS SUSPENDED.**

1166: **HASAN II MURDERED BY DISSIDENT FACTION AT ALAMUT.**

1171: **SALADIN ABOLISHES FATIMID CALIPHATE.**

1174 & 1176: **ATTEMPTS ON THE LIFE OF SALADIN.**

1192: **FIDA'IS MURDER CONRAD OF MONTFERRAT, KING OF JERUSALEM. KING RICHARD OF ENGLAND AND SALADIN BLAMED. RASHID AL-DIN, OLD MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN, DIES SOON AFTER.**

1215: **JALAL AD-DIN HASAN ENDS THE RESURRECTION. INCREASINGLY ACCEPTED BY OTHER MUSLIM LEADERS, INCLUDING THE ABBASID CALIPH.**

1221: **JALAL AD-DIN'S SUCCESSOR, ALA AD-DIN RETURNS TO TRADITIONAL ISMAILI DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE. CONFLICT WITH THE SULTAN OF KHWAREZEM.**

1255: **ALA AD-DIN KILLED BY HIS OWN FIDA'IS.**

1256: **HULEGU KHAN BEGINS ATTACK ON ISMAILIS.**

1258: **IMAM RUKN AL-DIN SURRENDERS HIS CASTLES. HE IS EXECUTED AFTER ISMAILI RESISTANCE ENDS.**

1271: **SYRIAN ISMAILIS SURRENDER THEIR CASTLES TO MAMLUK SULTAN BAIBARS. HE USES THEM AS A CORPS OF CONTRACT KILLERS.**

ASSASSIN GLOSSARY

Amir, emir: Commander, a ruler or military commander.

Da'i: Summoner; preacher, propagandist.

Da'wa: Mission, preaching; the Ismaili sect.

Hashishiyya: Hashish user, used to describe the Ismailis.

Fida'i: Devotee; assassin.

Hudud: System of rank and hierarchy.

Hujj, hujja: Proof; senior da'i acting as leader over a jazira (qv).

Imam: Teacher, the supreme spiritual leader of the Ismailis.

Jazira: Island; jurisdiction of a hujj.

Kalifa: Successor, caliph, supreme leader of Islam.

Mahdi: Redeemer, savior.

Mustajib: Respondent; lowest rank of initiates.

Nass: The designation of a divinely appointed successor to the Imamate.

Pir (Persian): Elder; used of religious leaders.

Qiyama: Resurrection, the End Time; period when mankind can enter Paradise.

Rafiq: Comrade.

Shari'a: Holy Law.

Shayk (Arabic): Elder; same as Pir.

Shi'a, Shi'ite: Faction, partisans; Muslims who held that the caliph must be a descendant of the Prophet Mohammed.

Surah: Chapter in the Koran.

Taqiyya: Caution; maintaining secrecy of religious belief in the face of persecution.

Tawil al-Batin: Esoteric interpretation.

HUDUD

The Hudud was the system of rank in the Ismaili sect. It ensured total loyalty to the da'wa (preaching or movement) while allowing for tactical flexibility. The Ismaili hudud was admirably suited for both propaganda and guerilla tactics.

IMAM: Supreme leader and source of all spiritual teaching.

DA'I AL-DU'AT: Also called the BAB (gate). The administrative leader of the da'wa.

HUJJ (proof): Leader of a JAZIRA ("island"), a district under the control of hostile powers.

DA'I AL-BALAGH: Liaison between a HUJJ and headquarters.

DA'I: A preacher, the foot-soldiers of the propaganda war.

MA'DHUN: Licentiate, an assistant to a DA'I.

MUKASIR: Breaker, the lowest rank among DA'IS. A MUKASIR scouts potential recruits and breaks their ties to other religious views.

SHEIK (Arabic) or PIR (Persian): Elder, a term of respect applied to Ismaili leaders.

FIDA'I: Devotee, a regular member trained to act as a commando or assassin.

MUSTAJIB: Respondent, a regular member of the Ismailis.

RAFIQ: Comrade, another term for rank-and-file Ismailis.



LET'S LEARN AKLO!

A CLOSED TIMELIKE CURVEBALL FOR DELTA GREEN

BY JAMES HAUGHTON

Winner of the 2010 Shotgun Scenario contest on the Delta Green Mailing List.

THE CALL

This investigation will be easier to introduce if at least one investigator is from the FBI, Secret Service, DEA, ATF or other federal agency capable of claiming jurisdiction over local crimes under the right circumstances.

The Agents are contacted late one evening on their secure phones and given a crash-priority mission (“Sorry about dinner, hon . . .”). A multiple-casualty, possibly paranormal event occurred approximately 20 minutes ago in a community centre; local authorities and media—including Sam Misner, a Delta Green Friendly and fireman who phoned in the event—are on the scene. No further details are yet available.

Agents are to: Attend immediately; obtain jurisdiction over the event; secure all evidence and prevent all reports of paranormal activity; investigate the event; take whatever steps are necessary to reduce or contain harm from the event.

OPENING

The community center is a mid-1970s brick structure with a large hall and some meeting rooms and offices. It belongs to the local government and is hired cheaply to community groups, churches and charities for meetings, events and office space.

The street outside the center is stroboscopically lit by flashing red and blue lights, media spotlights and a flickering streetlamp. As the Agents arrive, a police captain is giving an interview to a camera crew; in the background, two paramedics wearing biohazard suits are carrying a closed body bag through the police-line-taped door to an ambulance; and members of a fire crew are drinking coffee with a security guard wrapped in a blanket.

A Spot Hidden roll sees a faint flash of blue light from the rooftop out of the corner of a character’s eye. Perhaps it was a reflection of the police light. If the Agents pursue it they may run into the temporally displaced (and insane) Navy SEAL, Anthony Nash—see “The Blue Man.”

THE INTERVIEW

Police Captain Kerr is a professional on camera, confirming that there have been deaths but refusing to discuss numbers, causes, identities, terrorism, Muslims, gun control, overheated political rhetoric, or any other questions “until a proper investigation has commenced and the next-of-kin have been notified.” He resents anyone attempting to cut him off, seize the camera or otherwise interrupt. Such behavior by the Agents may cause him to question (and investigate) their authority to take over the case.

Otherwise, when the interview is concluded, he is happy to cede “relevant aspects” of the investigation to the Agents “in the short term” if shown proper ID and given a reasonable rationale, “provided that my office is kept notified of the course and outcomes of the investigation.” He won’t negotiate or argue with the Agents on camera. (Kerr spent time in the fraud squad and has 65% Spot Hidden for identifying faked ID. He will arrest anyone presenting any, as soon as he gets away from the cameras.)

THE BODIES

The paramedics, named Monroe and Cauchy, are reluctant to open the body bags, and absolutely refuse to do so unless the person inspecting the bodies presents official ID and wears a gas mask and gloves. They believe the victims died of a new form of rabies, possibly weaponized, and have notified their hospital dispatcher of this. The dispatcher notified the hospital’s director, who has notified the CDC, who will soon attempt to join the investigation. This chain of events takes about four hours before a CDC team boards a plane from Atlanta. With two hours’ warning from the Agents, A-Cell can arrange for Dr. Grant Emerson, a CDC-based Friendly who can assist with the cover-up, to be in the CDC team.

Inspecting the bodies (six in total, three already in the ambulance, 0/1D3 SAN each up to a maximum SAN loss of 3 for all of them) reveals that all have bulging eyes and tongues, congested complexions, and frothing mouths, suggesting asphyxiation; they are also heavily bruised, slashed and scratched. Damage to their hands, teeth and fingernails suggests that they spontaneously attacked each other.

The paramedics strongly recommend that anyone entering the building wears a biohazard suit. They have two spares, one of which is currently being used by a police photographer inside the building.



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THE DISCOVERER

Richard Gott, the security guard, is in a state of acute stress, sweating, shivering, mumbling about bodies, and incapable of answering questions coherently. He is being looked after by the firemen (who were summoned by his panicked 911 call) until ambulance space is available to take him to hospital.

The firemen try to prevent Gott from being interrogated, explaining that the heightened stress could worsen his shock and cause fainting. He is unharmed, except for a slight bruise on the upper arm; this was caused by the paramedics giving him an anti-rabies immunoglobulin shot (“just in case”).

Sam Misner, the Friendly fireman, can describe the scene inside. He called Delta Green “because it just seemed like really creepy shit.”

INSIDE THE DOOR

The center’s booking schedule is on a notice board inside the front door. The only booking this evening is the “Inaugural Meeting of the Modern Languages School of America Aklo Speakers Association, [Localville] Chapter.” (Substitute your game’s town for “[Localville].”) An easy (+20%) Occult or Cthulhu Mythos roll confirms that Aklo is said to be an occult (possibly pre-human) language, frequently used to evoke paranormal phenomena (that is, cast spells). See the download of *Future/Perfect* Part 1, page 11 (at www.dettwillerdesign.com), for more on Aklo if the investigators follow this thread.

The Modern Languages School of America (MLSA) is a correspondence school which teaches foreign languages

via CD, textbooks and postal examination. There is no mention of Aklo in their catalogue (or anywhere on their website, except in the forum). They encourage students living in the same area to meet in “Chapters” to practice their language skills, and provide an on-line forum. Forum records reveal that seven people learning Aklo became active between 12 and six weeks ago, creating a few threads in which they discussed their language skills, personal lives, cats, holiday photos, etc., and arranged to meet. The space was booked and paid for by William Caulk, one of the victims.

THE SCENE

One of the meeting rooms is a vortex of destruction. Three bodies lie on the floor, being outlined and photographed by a police photographer in a biohazard suit. He doesn’t mind going outside and passing the suit to another investigator, if they think to ask. Three other chalk outlines are on the ground. There are numerous blood-splatters and glass shards; it appears that the victims attacked each other with shards from a smashed mirror. Other reflective surfaces, including the screens of seven scattered laptop computers, have also been smashed. There are four desks and some hand-written notebooks scattered around.

THE MIRROR

Close examination of the glass shards or a Spot Hidden roll reveals that the reflections in the mirror shards do not match the scene. If the mirror is reassembled, it shows the room as it was in the past—and it continues to show, in reverse, the history of the room until the 12-week mark



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is reached, at which point it becomes a normal mirror. If reassembly is done quickly, the investigators may get a glimpse (1D2/1D4 SAN) of the seven participants (another Spot Hidden to count them successfully) sitting at the desks talking to each other, prior to putting their laptops in their bags and walking backwards out of the room. Realising that the mirror is in some way journeying backwards through time costs 1/1D3 SAN.

Further continuous watching of the mirror (an Idea roll can provide the notion to set up a camera taping what the mirror shows) will, at some point several days in the future (that is, in the past seen in the mirror), show a man-shaped blue blur wandering around the room, seemingly unnoticed by anyone else in the scene from some earlier public function.

THE BLUE MAN

After their initial investigation of the scene, the investigators begin to catch fleeting glimpses (Spot Hidden or Tradecraft rolls) of a glowing, flickering blue human shape which is apparently following them around. The shape moves with great stealth, but does not seem to take account of its own glow. Whenever it stops moving, the glow largely dies down, replaced with a camouflage-colored blur which is very difficult to focus upon.

This is the time-displaced, incurably insane Petty Officer Hash, who is following the investigators in the hope and fear that they know what is going on. He is capable of communication only by gibbering in Aklo, which means very little communication at all.

Hash has only three possible reactions: If simply confronted he attacks, appearing to fire beams of blue light that turn into all-too-real submachine gun bullets when they strike. If addressed by name and spoken to gently, he drops his weapons, curls into a ball and weeps. If addressed in Aklo or shown or played objects or recordings connected to the case, he flees.

It's possible that one or more investigators may find themselves displaced into the past, as well. If that happens, one of them might turn out to be one of the encounters with a blue shape.

THE COMPUTERS

The laptops are the personal possessions of the victims. The laptops are all different, but all have built-in CD burners and microphones. Their screens and cases are smashed. In addition, their circuitry and hard-drives have damage similar to that caused by a low-level electromagnetic pulse. One investigator (the first to make a Luck roll) thinks they see a flash of blue light, reflected

in a shattered laptop screen. They can't make out where it came from; a fluorescent globe suddenly dies, maybe that was it? (In fact, this is Petty Officer Hash, spying on the investigation from the ceiling crawl space.)

With the right equipment, successful Luck and Electronics or Computer Use rolls resurrect a laptop sufficiently to determine that it was running a recording and CD-burning program. An additional Computer Use roll enables the investigator to recapture some parts of the recording.

The recordings are of the victims' voices, reciting words or phrases in English and then following with a word or phrase in Aklo. (It costs 1/1D6 SAN to listen for more than 15 minutes continuously. See Alan Moore's *The Courtyard* for a description of further possible effects of listening to Aklo. Insanity caused by failing the SAN roll takes the form of paranoia.)

It is possible to make out seven different voices. The English phrases are conventional "learn a foreign language" phrases: "Hello." "How are you?" "Please change the sheets in my room." "The pen of my aunt is in the garden."

Some partial pairs are also written in the notebooks. A Cthulhu Mythos or Other Language (Aklo) roll shows the English actually has no relationship to the Aklo phrases, which are in fact some form of spell.

The recording spans three hours, which is odd because the victims couldn't have been there for longer than two hours if they arrived when the booking began. It seems to get faster and faster (and more and more static-ridden) as the time advances, to the point where the conversation is a hypersonic squeal indistinguishable from feedback noise.

Computer Use, Mathematics or Music skills can slow the recording to reveal (a) it follows the same pattern of English/Aklo throughout and (b) the increase in speed is hyperbolic; if continued, the speaker would be speaking at an infinite speed about 10 minutes after the recording stopped. The computers' clocks reveal that the recording stopped about 20 minutes before Richard Gott dialled 911.

THE PACKAGES

There are no MLSA materials in the room—no CDs, textbooks or worksheets. They are in seven sturdy, faded, MLSA-insignia, stamped packages in the building's mail-drop chute, addressed to the victims. They have not yet been mailed to the recipients who recorded them. If not intercepted by the Agents, they will be delivered to the victims' houses *12 weeks ago*, at which point the curious victims, who all have reasons to be interested in a foreign language, will open the unrequested packages and

commence learning Aklo.

Unfortunately, if they are intercepted, any unattended packages vanish from the Agents' custody and make their way into the mail. Destroying a package results in the remnants spontaneously reassembling when unobserved. If the contents are separated, they spontaneously reassemble in a mundane but entropy-violating manner; e.g., a pile of papers falls off a desk and spontaneously slips into the envelope.

All this is because time is reversing for these packages. Examining the stamps under UV light reveals the otherwise unseen label W.A.S.T.E. (A Know roll identifies W.A.S.T.E. as the symbol of a fictional anarchist postal network in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. This is a red herring unless the Keeper decides otherwise.)

Biological analysis of spittle on the envelopes reveals that the envelopes were sealed by the victims.

Certain principles of conservation of reality dictate that the packages be as little noticed and as little observed as possible, and move as little in space as possible, when they slip back into the past. Thus, the packages' "preferred" location to time-jump is within the metaphorical black hole of the U.S. Postal Service automated mail sorting system. The longer the investigators manage to keep the packages under observation, the more blatant the causality violation when they do disappear and reappear in the U.S. mail, as if a rubber band was stretched further and further before eventually snapping.

THE FAMILIES

The victims' grieving families can add little. The victims seem randomly selected. They had only a few things in common: a desire to learn a foreign language; increasingly erratic behavior over the last two or three months; and most tellingly, they all mentioned thinking that they saw a glowing blue man or a blue light following them around at some point in that time period.

(If an investigator is displaced into the past, then this story is suddenly altered to two separate glowing blue figures seen at different times, or two blue lights instead of one.)

THE DANGEROUS TRUTH

Six of the victims died of overexposure to Aklo, which causes homicidal mania followed by death as the tongue and brain swell catastrophically. The effect of their "lesson" was to cast a Timegate spell to 12 weeks ago. The packages containing the recorded lessons to be sent in for examination; the mirror; and Petty Officer Hash, the seventh victim (and glowing blue man), were caught in the spell's backwash.

Anyone attempting to learn or reconstruct the lessons from the recordings and notebooks risks either casting Timegate upon themselves or succumbing to Aklo overexposure. The player should make a POW x 3 roll:

If the character rolls over POW x 3, his or her brain is unable to handle the time-warping grammar of Aklo and becomes physically warped itself, causing the unfortunate investigator to become manically homicidal for CON minutes before succumbing to a *grand mal* seizure and dying as his or her tongue swells awfully from pronouncing the unspeakable and chokes them. Immediate medical attention, hospitalization and neurosurgery is the character's only chance of returning to something vaguely resembling normal.

If the roll is under the character's POW, the investigator loses 2 POW and, as soon as he or she is unobserved by others, is transported 12 weeks into the past. There are no other ill effects, except that mundane events conspire to prevent the character from causing a paradox: e.g., meaningfully interacting with himself or herself, or with any colleagues, friends, family or the others involved in the investigation (except for the time-transported Petty Officer Hash, who is unlikely to be friendly). The investigator can interact inconsequentially—for example, calling a spouse at work and chatting about the weather—but as soon as the character mentions anything potentially revealing, the connection is broken. The cumulative mental strain of this dislocation from normal life costs 1D6/1D10 SAN; the character is likely to be a gibbering wreck by the time he or she returns to normal by catching up with the moment the spell is cast and the "other" instance of the character vanishes.

If roll is over the investigator's POW but under POW x 3, he or she loses 2 POW and is transported back in time—but is left POW in seconds into the future of everyone else. No one can see the character directly unless he or she stays perfectly still for longer than POW seconds, and there is a gap of POW seconds (to the investigator) between anything he or she does and any response occurring in the external world. To the external world, whenever the investigator moves he or she generates an eerie blue glow. A *Physics* or halved EDU roll recognizes this as Cherenkov radiation (normally a sign of very high radioactivity or nuclear fission) caused by the dust and skin particles that the time-displaced character sheds normally, briefly going faster-than-light as the particles leave their body and slip POW seconds into the past. To the displaced character, the radiation appears where he or she was POW seconds ago. This is what happened to the unfortunate Petty Officer Hash, who is the only person the displaced investigator is able to interact with in anything close to "real" time—if an insane, Aklo-spouting Navy SEAL who's still offset by a second or two (unless the investigator and Hash have exactly the same POW) is your definition of normal.

Most people have unconscious psychological filters of fear, weak will and causality, which prevent them seeing things



like time-displaced blue ghosts. Only a character who succeeds in a *POW + Cthulhu Mythos* roll can interact with the investigator as anything more than a fleeting vision in the corner of one eye.

Twelve weeks of almost total dislocation from the world causes 1D10/2D10 SAN loss. After the 12 weeks is up (that is, at the same point when the spell was originally cast) the displaced investigator can attempt another *POW* x 3 roll. Success means the character returns to normal. Failure means he or she remains like this forever, losing another 1D10/2D10 SAN every month.

CONCLUSION AND REWARDS

Here's the uncomfortable truth: There is no external cause or conspiracy behind the Aklo lessons. They exist in a closed, timelike loop which cannot be broken without a more serious disruption to spacetime than anything the investigators can achieve. Nothing can be done to stop it.

Successfully containing and removing preternatural evidence (mirror, recordings, etc): +1 SAN.

Containing the story (including satisfying or diverting the police, the media and the CDC, if involved): +1 SAN.

Understanding what happened (the time-loop): Make a SAN Roll.

Pass: Gain 1D3 SAN. Though this case once again brought you up against the unnatural, its self-contained nature

means that for once you can draw a line and declare "Case Closed."

Fail: Lose 1D3 SAN. Because this case happened without any apparent cause or effect, it could happen again, anytime, anywhere, with no reason other than the innate malevolence of the universe. One of those envelopes might be on your doorstep tomorrow. This case isn't closed. It can never be closed.

TIMELINE

12 WEEKS AGO: THE VICTIMS RECEIVE THE UNREQUESTED PACKAGES (POSTED BY THEIR CLASSMATES, 12 WEEKS INTO THE FUTURE) IN THE MAIL. CURIOUS, THEY OPEN THEM AND BEGIN LEARNING AKLO. PETTY OFFICER HASH ARRIVES FROM THE FUTURE BUT DESPITE HIS EFFORTS IS UNABLE TO WARN THE OTHER VICTIMS, WHO THINK THEY ARE SEEING A GHOST OR CONVINCE THEMSELVES THEY SEE NOTHING ODD AT ALL.

12 TO 7 WEEKS AGO: THE VICTIMS JOIN THE AMLA CHAT FORUM, SET UP AN "AKLO" THREAD AND GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER. THEY EVINCE GROWING PARANOIA AND INSANITY TO THOSE AROUND THEM. PETTY OFFICER HASH VISITS THE COMMUNITY CENTER BUT IS UNABLE TO INTERACT WITH ANYONE.

1 WEEK AGO: WILLIE CAULK BOOKS THE MEETING ROOM FOR THE GROUP'S FIRST (AND LAST, IT TURNS OUT) MEETING.

2 HOURS 40 MINUTES AGO: THE VICTIMS MEET AT THE CENTER AND RECORD EACH OTHER CONVERSING IN AKLO, THINKING THAT THEY ARE MAKING THESE RECORDINGS FOR THE PURPOSE OF THEIR AMLA EXAMS. UNKNOWINGLY, THEY BEGIN CASTING THE TIMEGATE SPELL.

50 MINUTES AGO: AS THEIR LAST QUASI-RATIONAL ACT, THE VICTIMS SEAL THEIR LESSONS INTO THE PACKAGES AND DROP THEM INTO THE ROOM'S MAIL CHUTE (WHICH FUNNELS TO THE BUILDING'S MAIL CHUTE).

40 MINUTES AGO: THE VICTIMS COMPLETE THE SPELL, THEN SUCCUMB TO AKLO MANIA AND TURN UPON EACH OTHER (EXCEPT FOR PETTY OFFICER HASH, WHO VANISHES INTO THE PAST).

30 MINUTES AGO: RICHARD GOTT, SECURITY GUARD, FINDS THE BODIES AND CALLS 911.

20 MINUTES AGO: SAM MISNER AND FIRE CREW ARRIVE. THEY CALL THE POLICE AND AMBULANCE. SAM CALLS DELTA GREEN, WHO DISPATCH THE AGENTS IN THE HOPE OF LOCKING DOWN THE SITUATION QUICKLY.

15 MINUTES AGO: POLICE AND AMBULANCE ARRIVE AND BEGIN DOCUMENTING THE SCENE AND REMOVING THE BODIES.

5 MINUTES AGO: MEDIA ARRIVES.

Now: AGENTS ARRIVE. CAPT. KERR DELIVERS A STATEMENT TO THE MEDIA. PETTY OFFICER HASH SEES THE AGENTS ARRIVE FROM HIS VANTAGE POINT ON THE ROOF, THEN MAKES HIS WAY INTO THE BUILDING'S CRAWL SPACE TO OBSERVE THEM. HE WILL FOLLOW THE AGENTS FROM THIS POINT ONWARDS.

2 HOURS INTO THE FUTURE: DEADLINE FOR NOTIFYING A-CELL OF AN IMPENDING CDC INVESTIGATION SO THEY CAN HAVE A FRIENDLY PLANTED IN IT.

4 HOURS INTO THE FUTURE: UNLESS PREVENTED, A CDC TEAM BOARDS A PLANE IN ATLANTA AND, AFTER ARRIVAL, ATTEMPTS TO TAKE OVER THE INVESTIGATION ON BIO-HAZARD GROUNDS.

7 A.M. TOMORROW: UNLESS INTERCEPTED BY THE AGENTS, THE PACKAGES ARE COLLECTED FROM THE BUILDING'S MAIL CHUTE BY THE POSTAL SERVICE AND VANISH INTO THE POSTAL SYSTEM AND THE PAST. (THEY WILL EVENTUALLY DO SO, NO MATTER WHAT.)

THE VICTIMS

Petty Officer Anthony Hash, Age 24, the Glowing Blue Man

Nationality/Race: American/Caucasian.

STR 13 CON 14 SIZ 15 INT 13 POW 13*

DEX 17 APP 9 EDU 12 SAN 0 HP 15

* after dislocation

Damage Bonus: +1D4.

Education: High school diploma.

Occupation: Navy SEAL.

Weapons: MP5 submachine gun 71%, damage 1D10.

Combat knife 63%, damage 1D4+2+db.

Armor: None.

Skills: Hide 70%, Sneak 70%.

Languages: Aklo 25%, English (own) 60%.

Physical Description: Caucasian, 6'4" tall, 203 lbs, dark brown hair in a tight crew cut, green eyes. Right handed.

Anthony Hash is a Navy SEAL. His mother and father still live in his hometown, Memphis, Tennessee. Somewhat romantic by nature but currently single, he had developed a plan to take leave from the military and go and fight against the Burmese with the ethnic armies of the Thai/Burma border area. This can easily be deduced from his diary and his assortment of maps, equipment and reading material (*Shadow Warrior*, *Kawthoolei Dreams Malaria Nights*, and other such books). He believes that Aklo is one of the languages spoken by the hill-tribes of this area.

As he learned Aklo, he developed an irrational fear that the military was spying on him and was going to send him on a suicide mission rather than let him leave. After following the investigators around for a while, he becomes convinced that they are a military hit squad come to lock him up forever in a military laboratory or simply kill him (not far from the truth, really), and determines to kill them if they find him.

He will explain all this to the investigators. He will explain it in mangled Aklo.

Because Petty Officer Hash is displaced 13 seconds into the future, when he is moving, attack skills against him are divided by 4, and dodges/defenses against his attacks are divided by 2.

CHARLES "CHARLIE" SKAGGS. AGE 32

Nationality/Race: American/mixed race (Caucasian and African American).

Education: High school diploma.

Occupation: Pro wrestler.

Charlie Skaggs, born in Washington, D.C., made the most of his huge size and hideous looks by becoming a pro wrestler and circus strongman billed as "The Mighty Skag, Heir of Tarzan, Raised by Killer Apes to be the New Lord of the Jungle." As he has gotten older he has become curious about what real jungles and their people and animals are like, which led to his interest in learning an exotic language.

As Charlie learned Aklo, he formed the warped belief that he himself really was part gorilla. He has been quizzing his aging mother about their family tree, but she has been unable to give a thorough history of the family. Her common-law husband, Charlie's father, was killed in a mugging some 20 years ago and his white family never accepted her. Her own family fled the Deep South after the Civil War and no one knows their roots before that.

Charlie's effects include copies of Darwin's *The Descent of Man*, a Lovecraft collection dog-eared to "Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family," and various racist tracts emphasizing the resemblance between blacks and gorillas, marked up in Charlie's unreadable scrawl.

LOIS HUANG-ZHU. AGE 15

Nationality/Race: American/Hmong.

Education: Some high school.

Occupation: Student.

Born in Fall River, Massachusetts, into a broad extended family, Lois was a typical first-generation immigrant teenager in that she constantly clashed with her parents, who had been sponsored over to the US for their tribe's support in the Indochina war. Her parents decided that they would only thrive if their children became 100% American, so they have never talked to their kids about the war or encouraged them to learn their original language. As a result, Lois felt she had no idea who she really was.

She had been learning Aklo under the mistaken belief that it was her ancestral language. As she has practiced Aklo, she became increasingly sullen and withdrawn from her family, but it's difficult to tell if this was Aklo-induced insanity or just normal teenage behavior.

PROFESSOR MABEL LIVELY. AGE 54

Nationality/Race: American/Caucasian.

Education: Ph.D. in Linguistics.

Occupation: Professor of Linguistics.

Professor Lively studied linguistics, and had been learning Aklo out of professional interest in a language she had never heard of. Her notes record her puzzlement at a language which seemed to break many of the standard grammatical rules.

Her exposure to Aklo induced the obsessive belief that her colleagues were stealing her work. To fool them she destroyed many of her files. She is survived by her father and a brother in Baltimore, Maryland.

GEORGIA RATCLIFFE. AGE 24

Nationality/Race: American/Caucasian.

Education: Lots of college.

Occupation: Student.

Georgia Ratcliffe was a perpetual student who never applied herself to anything. This was the first time she has seriously made an effort to learn a language, as opposed to thinking about how cool it would be to do so. She is survived by the rich, cold and distant parents who supported her.

Exposure to Aklo induced the insanity that her flat was full of hyperintelligent and malevolent rats, mice, ants and other vermin. The flat is covered with rat-traps, pesticides and baits.

THERESA HORNBACK. AGE 29

Nationality/Race: American Indian.

Education: Law degree.

Occupation: Tribal lawyer.

Theresa was an overworking, high-achieving lawyer who has been burning herself out in the cause of supporting her tribe against racism, exploitation and inequality. She planned to take a long holiday to Southeast Asia, but she didn't want to do so without learning at least one language

of the oppressed ethnic minorities of the area first. She mistakenly thought Aklo fit the bill and didn't bother to do enough research to learn better. Theresa was not close to her family but had many tribal friends and allies.

Exposure to Aklo induced in her the belief that the U.S. government was planning to "finish the job" and wipe out all the American Indians. She shared aspects of this belief with her friends and allies, encouraging them to stockpile weapons and distrust any federal agents who might be looking for her.

WILLIAM "WILLIE" CAULK. AGE 66

Nationality/Race: American/Caucasian.

Education: Some college.

Occupation: Retired businessman.

Caulk served in the Air Force in the early stages of the Indochina war before returning to found a successful business making accessories for cars. Retired, widowed, and in poor health before his death, he was thinking of retiring to Thailand, having fond memories of his wartime R&R there. Since he began to learn Aklo, he began accessing pornography featuring Southeast Asian women, pornography which became more and more bizarre and degraded over the 12-week period. Caulk left behind a son and daughter, both grown and living in other parts of the country.

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THE ARM IN THE GREEN BOX

AN ARCAN E ARTIFACT FOR DELTA GREEN

BY BRET KRAMER

This arcane artifact can serve several purposes—as a short encounter, a lead to further investigation, or a moment of levity. Keepers are encouraged to modify this encounter (particularly the research section) as needed.

THE GREEN BOX

During the course of an investigation, the Agents are assigned a mostly unremarkable Green Box—a storage locker used by Delta Green to house items that may come in handy in future cases or items too questionable to store anywhere more public. The contents of the Green Box are left to the Keeper, save one—a reanimated human arm.

Initially the Arm hides out of sight, but with a Spot Hidden roll (or simple Keeper fiat) an Agent notices curious trails in the dust. A thorough search of the storage space finds a set of handcuffs attached to a pipe. There is acrid black-flecked blue goo on the cuffs. The pipe itself is connected to the fire sprinkler system and runs from the floor to the ceiling; it is otherwise mundane.

THE ARM

The Arm (a left) consists of a Caucasian hand and forearm, stained ultramarine, torn roughly off at the elbow joint. It crawls along with its fingers. While the Arm is not sentient, per se, it reacts to touch stimuli, sensing vibrations, and it is driven by strange impulses. It usually crawls about aimlessly. When something large is detected (such as the Agents) the Arm initially flees. Agents might hear it with a successful Listen roll.

There are three possible options for the Arm:

ATTACK!

The Arm drops onto the investigator who misses a Luck roll by the greatest margin and attempts to strangle or gouge. If damaged it attempts to escape and hide.

ESCAPE!

The Arm scuttles away, making good use of cover. At a minimum, a Spot Hidden roll is needed to find it (note its Hide skill!) and a Grapple roll is needed to catch it. The Arm attempts to flee humans who approach it, crawling towards the nearest inaccessible or isolated spot. Aside from the danger posed by the Arm itself, any ordinary non-player character who sees the Arm crawling away will panic, alert the authorities, or both, risking exposure for the Cell.

HIDE!

The Arm conceals itself in gear or a vehicle. Later, perhaps while the Agents are driving or after they have gone to sleep, the Arm attacks.

THE ARM

STR 5	INT 1	DEX 9	CON 3
SIZ 2	MOVE 2	HP 3	

Attacks: Squeeze/gouge 50%, damage 1D2.

Skills: Climb 50%, Hide 75%, Sneak and Scuttle 100%.

Due to its size and erratic movement, attacks against the Arm are halved. If the Arm has latched on to someone, any missed attack on it other than Grapple strikes the Arm's victim instead unless the attacker succeeds at a Luck roll.

Sanity Cost: 1/1D4+1.

EXAMINATION AND RESEARCH

The Arm belonged to an adult human male, aged 25 to 40, with no identifying characteristics save the color. It was disarticulated by brute force. There is significant tissue

damage to the arm from the wrist to elbow, likely caused by constriction (squeezing through the locked cuff).

Fingerprints identify Carlos Pacheco, 46, a customs officer at the port of Seattle killed in an automobile accident nine months earlier. Agents seeking more information from A-Cell regarding Pacheco will be called (using a voice scrambler) asking why they are investigating him. If the discovery of his arm is disclosed, they are instructed reveal the Green Box, including the secured Arm, and pass on any evidence they have discovered.

The goo defies easy analysis. Making two Chemistry rolls (taking eight hours of lab time) establishes the basic formula: adrenaline, cerebral-spinal fluid, neurotransmitters and several complex unknown alkaloids. Oxygen exposure causes rapid degeneration into inert compounds.

The reanimating agent that created the Arm is in fact Sapphire, the Karotechia's version of Herbert West's formula, produced for them by Amalgamated Bio-Carb as outlined in the scenario "Dead Letter" in *Delta Green: Countdown*. This encounter can be linked to that scenario as the Keeper desires, serving as an introduction or a sequel.

Investigators who are familiar with Sapphire recognize it immediately.

Pacheco was in fact a Friendly who assisted a Delta Green cell examining a small shipment of the Sapphire chemical to which he was accidentally exposed. It killed and reanimated him. Restrained by members of the cell, he was taken to the Green Box where he eventually broke free, tearing off the Arm. The Cell panicked, killed him (again), and faked his death—forgetting the Arm.



DELTA GREEN: DIRECTIVES FROM A CELL

BY ADAM SCOTT GLANCY

Writing this Directive I'm taking a break from the Delta Green post-9/11 update, our new Delta Green book that will cover the changes to the fictional Delta Green universe caused by such real-world events as the 9/11 attacks and the War on Terror, Hurricane Katrina, the Indonesian tsunami, the Japanese earthquake, and political upheavals like the ongoing Arab Spring. Perhaps Osama Bin Ladin's assassination will be the end point of this update? But fear not, gentle readers. We're bringing Delta Green into the 21st century.

While working on the new material one issue has been foremost in my mind: the official canon. Understanding what comprises canon is supposed to prevent contradictions and inconsistencies when new material is published. But of course, you can't have contradictions unless you start treating certain material as canon. So the desire to have consistency is exactly the sort of thing that breeds contradictions. How's that for a paradox?

The issue of official canon is different for a role-playing game universe than it is for any other kind of vast narrative, be it a series of books, a comic book title, a long-running TV series or a movie franchise. When those fictional universes are published, broadcast, or released in theatres, they are complete. Role-playing

games are not complete when they are published. Every published role-playing game is a work of collaborative fiction between the authors, the players and the referee. The story doesn't really exist until the players and referee execute it around their game table. So who's to say what's official canon? After all, every gaming group has a unique experience with the published materials.

That's especially the case with the *Call of Cthulhu* role-playing game. It is a role-playing game based on an existing vast narrative, the Cthulhu Mythos, a fictional universe begun by H.P. Lovecraft but added to over nearly a century by scores of authors. H.P. Lovecraft himself encouraged his fans and friends to borrow his material right from the beginning, just as he borrowed theirs. From the moment it was conceived, the *Call of Cthulhu* role-playing game inherited that status as both a massive narrative and a shared universe.

The muddled nature of the literary Cthulhu Mythos make the question of what is canon for *Call of Cthulhu* even muddier. Lovecraft scholars like S.T. Joshi consider everything written for the role-playing game system to be non-canonical, right down to commonly accepted names of Lovecraftian critters that, although developed for the game, are now used in the derivative fiction. Names such as byahkee and dimensional shambler don't

DIRECTIVE 107: FIRING THE CANON

appear in Lovecraft's work even though the creatures themselves were well-described. They weren't named until Sandy Petersen and Lynn Willis came along.

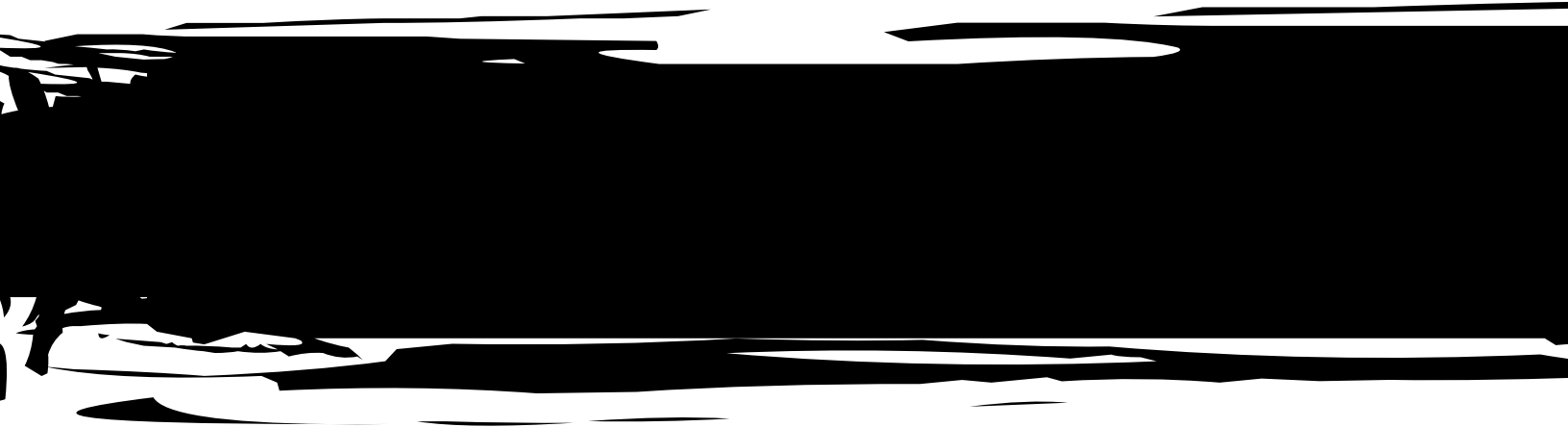
When John Tynes, Dennis Detwiler and I began work *Delta Green* on we considered it to be an alternate/non-canonical sourcebook for *Call of Cthulhu* that did not have to necessarily agree with all previously published *Call of Cthulhu* materials. Maybe it was the influence of *Vampire: The Masquerade*, but I did not want to get painted into a corner by official canon, or make my fictional universe so cluttered with canonical events that the players had no room to maneuver to create their own adventures. The return of the Great Old Ones always needed to be a looming threat, but it needed to stay just over the horizon.

Even then we were hesitant to advance the Delta Green universe's timeline or publish materials that would establish set outcomes for situations that appeared in previous sourcebooks. The reason for this was that we didn't want to script outcomes to conflicts in the Delta Green universe that the players should be creating for themselves. That's one of the reasons the novels and short stories set in the Delta Green universe are not considered canon for the role-playing game. They're just our take on how things could turn out. How it turns out for your players is a whole different matter.

ELEMENTS OF SURPRISE

Because role-playing is collaborative, there is no guarantee that what the author wrote is going to cover more than a few of the eventualities the players will generate through their choices. That means that the Keeper will likely need to be prepared to improvise new NPCs, locations and narratives to fill in the gaps in the published material. Very little published material can be run exactly as written. As a *Call of Cthulhu* author you hope that Keepers will use the material you prepared, but you accept that no game or scenario is going to survive contact with the players. When it comes to official rules and game universe canon, players and Keepers are more concerned with "getting it right" than the authors and publishers.

Some fans have complained that there just isn't enough Delta Green material on the market. It always seemed to me that if a Keeper tried to throw every antagonist we've ever written into a campaign things would get pretty cluttered up pretty damn fast. The Keeper simply can't use everything at the same time. Instead the Keeper is going to have to create his own canon for his own players, picking the options that are going to be the most fun for their group.



So, really, nothing is canon, at least not until the Keeper presents it. Once the Investigators learn a fact about the Delta Green universe, then it's canon.

If Majestic-12 is just too X-Files, or the Karotechia is overly "pulp," or Stephen Alziz is way too deus ex machina, then I see no reason why a Keeper has to use them. A Keeper could just as easily drop Delta Green itself and run a campaign based on SaucerWatch, Phenomen-X or PISCES.

Frankly, I wouldn't necessarily stop with editing the elements that are specific to the world of Delta Green. I would go after the Cthulhu Mythos as well. One of the biggest hurdles in writing (or running) *Call of Cthulhu* material is that many gamers have been playing this classic for as long as it's been on the market. It is quite a trick to surprise players who've been playing and reading Mythos material for years or decades. With Delta Green we've presented old Mythos threats in new guises and on new stages, beginning by wrapping the old horrors of the Mythos inside modern conspiracy theories. But as more players become familiar with the Delta Green campaign setting, even these changes in set and costume are not going to surprise players. Even if a Keeper is lucky enough to have players who don't metagame and react to the mystery based on player knowledge rather than character knowledge, it's always better to find ways of delivering mystery and horror in ways that aren't simply the tally of the Investigators' Sanity points or skill rolls. Genuinely surprising the Investigators is every Keeper's holy grail.

There are three tactics I can recommend to surprise your players. All of them involve knowing when to stop worrying about the canon.

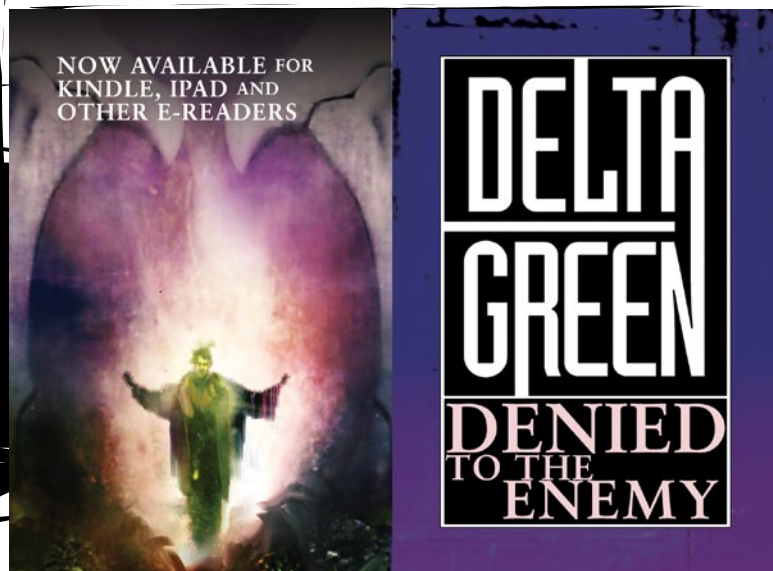
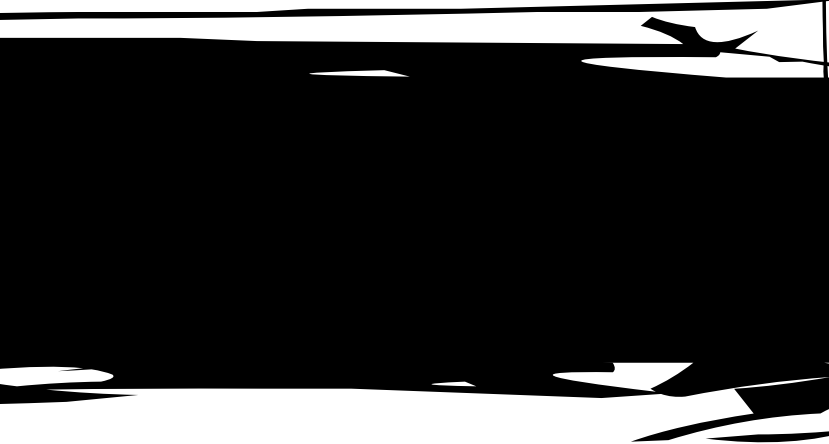
DROP THE MYTHOS

The first tactic is to steer clear of the Cthulhu Mythos. John H. Crowe, a longtime Pagan Publishing author, has definitely adopted this tactic. He spends his time combing through books on folklore in search of critters that he can inflict on his playtesters. Pagan Publishing's upcoming book *Bumps in the Night* is a collection of just those kinds of scenarios. Using the BRP rules, John Crowe has crafted scenarios around supernatural threats that the players won't find in the core rulebook or in *Malleus Monstrorum*. I won't give anything away here about *Bumps in the Night*, but he's inflicted upon me such horrors as non-corporeal Irish vampires, Mesopotamian rape monsters and Norse barrow zombies. None of these horrors have any connection to the Cthulhu Mythos and every one of them ruined my Investigator's day.

The only problem with this approach is that it depends on the individual Keeper's campaign canon. If the Keeper has already established that the only genuine supernatural forces are those of the Cthulhu Mythos, then bringing in non-Mythos folklore may not sit well. Revealing a Mythos creature or Outer God as the truth behind some folklore or myth is one thing, but bringing in other mythologies as existing wholly and separately from the Cthulhu Mythos is another.

ADD TO THE MYTHOS

The second tactic is to make new Cthulhu Mythos material that fits the goals of your campaign. Writing new material for the Cthulhu Mythos dates back to Lovecraft encouraging fans and friends to write



material based on his stories. The *Call of Cthulhu* RPG has certainly added plenty of new material over the decades, from the Goddess of the Black Fan to the insect colonies of the future Great Race of Yith. Creatures from horror literature have also been statted up for *Call of Cthulhu*, everything from Triffids to the Thing from Another World. As long as the Keeper makes sure to anchor these new additions to the Cthulhu Mythos then there will be fewer complaints about violation of canon. But a big pile of eyes tentacles and mouths does not a Great Old One make. Lovecraftian horrors should be more than just some unpronounceable creature to which debased cultists or deranged sorcerers throw the occasional sacrifice. They need to touch on the themes of Lovecraftian cosmic horror: Man's insignificance in the universe; the threat of science revealing too much; the price men will pay for knowledge and immortality.

CHANGE THE GAME

The last way to surprise players is by changing the game. This can be anything from using a different set of game mechanics to changing the game stats. These days BRP isn't the only way you can inflict the horrors of the Mythos on your players. The Gumshoe system has *Trail of Cthulhu*. *Savage Worlds* has *Realms of Cthulhu*. You can ambush your *Thrilling Tales* players who think they are playing in a two-fisted, villain-punching Pulp-style game with horrors from the Cthulhu Mythos. My first exposure to the Cthulhu Mythos didn't come playing *Call of Cthulhu*. It was GDW's science fiction classic *Traveller*. Suffice to say, having never run into Cthulhu cultists before that moment, I was knocked out of my socks during the big reveal.

Fiddling with the game stats can be a sure-fire way to surprise your players, especially if it's a critter they are familiar with from reading the rules. It's also a sure-fire way to annoy them, especially if they're Investigators have already encountered the monster before. Adding new powers or taking away old ones may come off as capricious. Personally I think that if the problem with a scenario is that the monster isn't tough enough then the Keeper should get a different monster, find a way to separate the Investigators from their firepower, or run the monster a little smarter so that it isn't just wading into the Investigators to get mowed down. I favor giving the smarter monsters spells to enhance their lethality. As bad as it is taking on a dimensional shambler, one armed with a couple of spells is just awful.

The Keeper should always be willing to create new spells and modify old spells to keep the Investigators guessing. Magic in *Call of Cthulhu* is something that is always evolving, not trapped in amber. The races that can create tools should always have the option of rolling out new gizmos and scientific atrocities to bedevil the Investigators.

The bottom line is that while canon in *Delta Green* is important, it really only affects the initial setup, the starting points of the campaign's universe. After that, the story is in the hands of the Keeper and the Investigators. No Keeper should hesitate to heave the canon overboard if it's going to cause his game to founder.

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THE EYE OF LIGHT & DARKNESS

< CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8 >

his humanity—which is essentially what *Call of Cthulhu*'s Sanity mechanic is doing—will become that horrifically alien being himself. Certainly, the seeds are already there. The player characters here are hardened Nazis.

The scenario is let down by a slight lack of historical verisimilitude, and, worse, underwritten character design. For example, one character is said to be blackmailing another and to know everyone else's secrets, but there is nothing about this in the character's description. Both issues can be fixed with the careful attention of the Keeper.

Digging for a Dead God is not a scenario for the inexperienced player or Keeper. It demands more interaction and roleplaying by the players and more input from the Keeper than is the norm, and its adult setup and themes call for a certain maturity. My advice is to warn the players of both in advance. This is not a scenario to run or play lightly. Given its demands, and despite the work that Keeper needs to do to get its character set up right, *Curse of the Yellow Sign—Act 1: Digging for a Dead God* has everything necessary to run a maliciously memorable single night of horror. If played to the hilt, the player characters deserve it. Seven phobias.



MACHINE TRACTOR STATION KHARKOV-37

By **BRET KRAMER**
120-PAGE PAPERBACK BOOK
PUBLISHED BY **CHAOSIUM, INC.**; \$20
REVIEWED BY **MATTHEW POOK**

Since 2003, the Miskatonic University Library Association series of monographs has been Chaosium's way of making others' works available to players of both *Call of Cthulhu* and *Basic Role Play*. Bar the printing, each monograph's author is responsible for the writing, the editing, and the layout, so the quality of the series varies widely and has led to some dreadful releases. Fortunately, *Machine Tractor Station Kharkov-37* is not amongst those.

This scenario takes the players deep into Stalinist Russia, little visited in *Call of Cthulhu* canon. In this one-shot or tournament scenario, they are not visitors but members of the Soviet establishment. It is March 1933 and contact has been lost with Machine Tractor Station Kharkov-37. Part of the collectivization program, it is the depot for the tractors and other equipment leased to the surrounding kolkhozes or collective farms. Output and production significantly increased for 1931, earning it both the Order of Lenin and a test dairy. The station has also attracted the attention of the OGPU (or United State Political Directorate, a precursor to the KGB), and once contact has been lost with both the station and the OGPU team, the GRU (the Soviet Union's military intelligence) likewise take an interest. Operating undercover as members of TASS, the Soviet Union's Telegraph Agency, a trio of GRU agents is assigned to investigate, but first they must collect supplies and troops from Red Army Supply Depot 945.

This scenario is designed for exactly six players, who take the roles of the three GRU agents and the commanding officer of Red Army depot 945, its doctor, and its political commissar. With twenty troops in tow, the convoy makes its way to the station to discover a scene that is much a dustbowl as it is a snowfield. The inhabitants and livestock are all missing. The station and its environs are all strangely desolate and lifeless.

What lies ahead is a bleak mystery played out against a hidden deadline. Unaware of this, the players' attention will be on the investigation and the overabundance of clues. Further, they have to contend with the tension between the two factions in the party, the soldiers and the GRU agents. To keep everyone's information and background secret, it is suggested that the Keeper prepare appropriately decorated folders for each pre-generated character. One nice touch is that orders for the GRU characters look like one-time cipher pads, which also makes them difficult to read indirectly.

Keeper advice is short and to the point, but this is not a long scenario. It has a stark and dangerous simplicity that leaves plenty of room for the players to get into character and role-play. They should relish its atmosphere of Party paranoia and distrust against an increasingly desperate situation.

Physically, *Machine Tractor Station Kharkov-37* is a bland if serviceable perfect-bound book. One potential issue is the fixed number of players and the fact that they are all male. Neither problem is addressed, making it a difficult affair to run. But this one-shot scenario delivers a fresh look at a previously used threat and an atmospherically effective, nearly no-win situation. In setting it in the Soviet Union, *Machine Tractor Station Kharkov-37* brings a new approach to encountering the Mythos and it should provide an experience to remember. 7 phobias.

The videos were shot in the first-person perspective of *The Blair Witch Project* and *Cloverfield*. They recounted the story of a film student named Jay looking for his friend Alex who went missing after abandoning his pretentiously titled student film, “Marble Hornets,” for unknown reasons. The last contact Jay had with Alex was when the latter mailed him the raw video from his shoot with the suggestion that he should burn all the tapes. However, Jay, being intrigued by the sudden bizarre turn of his friend, started watching the videos. When he found something important or interesting, he would post it on YouTube as a permanent record of his investigation. So began an independent, episodic horror movie told in a nonlinear style.



MARBLE HORNETS: THE COMPLETE FIRST SEASON DVD

DIRECTED BY TROY WAGNER

REVIEWED BY BRIAN M. SAMMONS

Have you heard of the Slender Man? If not, then you're in for a treat. If you have, keep reading anyway. While you might have seen some pictures or videos featuring this unique ghoul before, chances are good you didn't know the Slender Man has his own DVD. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The Slender Man was born on the Internet in a Photoshop contest to create new, creepy images back in 2009. The exceptionally tall, thin, long-limbed and literally faceless fellow was the hands-down favorite. He was always well dressed in a black jacket, white shirt and black tie and sometimes shown with tentacle-like appendages sticking out of his back, because as we all know, everything is made better with tentacles. Later that month, two young film students began posting a series of videos on YouTube under the account “MarbleHornets.” Not only was a certified Internet meme born, but so too was an original, reality-bending, interactive horror experience.

All the video segments—there are 36 of them ranging from a dozen or so minutes in length down to just over 60 seconds—have been collected here along with over a dozen responses from the mysterious YouTuber “totheark,” who begins to play a larger role in the story as it progresses. Some of the snippets are mundane and just go to build character. But the majority of them have subtly creepy elements—you just have to keep your eyes open to see them all. That's because the Slender Man's M.O. is to stalk and haunt, like any good monster, all the while driving his target insane. If that's not Lovecrafty enough for you, the more you look into the Slender Man, the more interested he gets in you, so there's the very Lovecraftian idea of forbidden knowledge and the price you must pay for prying into the unknown. I bet you can guess what starts happening to Jay as he continues to poke his nose into things he'd be better off staying away from.

In addition to just watching the movie, an enterprising Keeper of modern *Call of Cthulhu* games could use the individual video segments as awesome player handouts should you want to run a game where the investigators are looking for the missing film student and run afoul of the Slender Man. The elegant and emaciated fellow could easily be a cousin to the King in Yellow, one of the many guises of Nyarlathotep, or something completely new, different, and horrific. The possibilities are almost limitless to the creative Keeper.

If you're looking to get *Marble Hornets* on DVD you can order the two-disc set direct at www.marblehornetsdvd.com.

THE EYE OF LIGHT & DARKNESS

< CONTINUED >

com. I recommend this movie for innovation, originality, and surprisingly effective spooky moments and I give it 7 out of 10 phobias.



THE WATCHERS IN THE SKY

BY GRAHAM WALMSLEY, ART BY JÉRÔME HUGUENIN

36-PAGE PDF

PUBLISHED BY PELGRANE PRESS, \$4.95

REVIEWED BY MATTHEW POOK

Trail of Cthulhu, Pelgrane Press' RPG of Lovecraftian investigative horror penned by Ken Hite and set during the "dirty decade" of the 1930s, offers two styles of play. In the Pulp mode, the game is more action and gunplay orientated and the investigators are able to recover Sanity lost from encountering Mythos entities. Yet the game's natural inclination is towards Purist style in which the Mythos is less quantifiable, Sanity is all but impossible to recover, and any resort to the use of firearms is futile. Thus the Purist style lends itself to the one-shot scenario rather than the continued campaign. Graham Walmsley's *The Dying of St. Margaret's*, set at a grey and soulless all-girls school on a remote Scottish island, is a wonderfully bleak example. Walmsley has followed this up with *The Watchers in the Sky*, the second in what is now a quartet of Purist *Trail of Cthulhu* one-shots.

It presents a desperate affair that will draw disparate men and women to the North of England and into the clutches of a cult. Working best with its five pregenerated investigators, the scenario has three hooks that bring them together at Brichester University. In South London, they find that an inmate at an asylum is paranoid that the birds he feeds are watching him. At a nearby scientific laboratory, others find their experiments are disrupted by strange, misshapen birds that watch constantly. At Brichester University the dissection of an unknown bird reveals a strange biology. What exactly is the secret behind these bizarre birds? What has it to do

with the village of Rydal in the Lake District?

It needs a little effort by the GM to get the five investigators together and to Rydal, where naturally they find recalcitrant villagers and secrets to uncover. This heavy-handedness is one of two issues of concern with *The Watchers in the Sky*, the other being the lack of explanation for all that is going on. Neither issue will hamper the actual play, but less experienced players might find both experiences frustrating. This is intentional. The author wants to keep it a mystery, the Mythos unknowable, and wants the players to fill in the blanks.

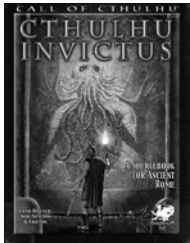
In *The Dying of St. Margaret's*, Walmsley explored *Trail of Cthulhu's* Drives (what pushes and pulls an investigator to examine the Mythos) and the Credit Rating value as representing the British class system of the 1930s. In *The Watchers in the Sky* he explores the investigators' Sources of Stability (what keeps each of them grounded in our perceived reality), strengthening these sources with individual Directed Scenes for each investigator (the other players being encouraged to take the roles of the NPCs in these scenes) before undermining them in the course of the scenario. That said, this exploration is understated. The players are expected to become aware of certain coincidences and parallels as the scenario's events unfold.

Walmsley also introduces introducing an alternative rule called "Drive Yourself Crazy" which suggests that the players rather than the GM take control of when their investigators suffer Stability loss. He even suggests that the process be turned into a race between the players and to let GM and players alike explore the unwritten point of the Purist game—to drive the investigators mad.

While *The Dying of St. Margaret's* was a bleak and fatal affair (there are even epilogues for the surviving investigators), *The Watchers in the Sky* is more odd, more mysterious, and more weird. Not quite as good or as focused as *The Dying of St. Margaret's*, it still deserves 7 Phobias.

THE EYE OF LIGHT & DARKNESS

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CTHULHU INVICTUS

BY CHAD J. BOWSER & ANDI NEWTON
WITH DEANE P. GOODWIN
168-PAGE PAPERBACK
PUBLISHED BY CHAOSIUM, Inc.; \$26.95
REVIEWED BY MATTHEW POOK

Cthulhu Invictus takes *Call of Cthulhu* back to the first century C.E. and the Roman Empire when it is prosperous, thriving, and expanding but also open to the venal, the corrupt, and the squamous. While mothers tell children tales of gods, heroes, and monsters, real horrors are abroad in the night, some unknown, others kept hidden for the Empire's safety.

In Greece, Athens has been prevented from progressing for over a century, punishment for magi summoning an avatar of Yog-Sothoth. Rome's Vestal Virgins tend the Sacred Flame, keeping both city and Empire safe spiritually. Were it extinguished, Y'Golonoc will be set free and the city easy prey to his depraved followers.

At night Hypnos, Lord of the Dreamlands, pulls the dreamers of Rome into his realm to compete in bloody and sadistic games. Merchant shipping crossing the Mediterranean is beset by attacks from Tritons and Merman—or rather, Deep Ones.

Both Bast and Nyarlathotep are active in Egypt, and cults to Shub-Niggurath are widespread, though under other names. The Cult of Cthulhu remains small, the Elder God still slumbering in sunken R'lyeh, his worship having slowly drifted in from the East.

Besides adding the more “traditional” Mythos aspects to the setting, the authors have made an effort to work elements of the Greco-Roman mythology into the Mythos. For example, the Olympians were originally priests who used an artifact to steal from the Dreamlands, while “Blade of Zarhost” is the second, an all-female militant branch of Zoroastrianism that emerged from Parthia to fight Sand Dwellers, Deep

Ones, and other Mythos threats. New spells follow this combination of the Greco-Roman and Cthulhu Mythos. For example, *Beseech Charon* does indeed contact the keeper of the way over the River Styx—who just happens to be an avatar of Yog-Sothoth.

Cthulhu Invictus provides a solid guide to and excellent maps of Rome and the Empire of A.D. 50, covering the key points of life in Rome as well as a grand tour of the Empire's provinces and regions beyond such as Germania Magna and the Empire's current foe, the Parthian Empire. There is enough background here, ranging from major cities, languages, typical names, and common occupations to notable cults and secret societies, and known monsters, to support character creation, which follows the standard rules. The new occupations include Roman ones such as Augur, Centurion, Gladiator, and Prefect, plus non-Roman ones like Barbarian, Druid, and Rabbi. Rules changes are minor and reflect the more combative and physical nature of Roman society and the difficulty in recovering lost Sanity.

The sourcebook includes a single scenario that takes the investigators to the Empire's edge to face a threat that could poison the whole of Syria and beyond. This is a more muscular and pulpy affair than *Call of Cthulhu* players might be used to, but the players should push for a more brutal, action-orientated game.

Although *Cthulhu Invictus* contains everything necessary to start playing in Ancient Rome, both Keeper and players will still need to adjust to what is a very different, perhaps even alien, setting. It has a more physical investigative process than the intellectualism of the paper trail usually found in *Call of Cthulhu*. This adjustment is hindered by the lack of advice on either running or playing the game, or indeed a discussion of the style of game that can be played. For example, *Cthulhu Invictus* lends itself to a hardboiled private eye style with the Finder occupation and a “swords & sandals” approach with more combative occupations. This lack of advice is even more disappointing given that *Cthulhu Invictus* originated as a monograph.

Ultimately, while the supplement includes everything necessary to play and run a game set in Ancient Rome, the failure to address both the differences already

present before the Mythos was added and how the game should be run forces player and Keeper alike to either do unnecessary research or ignore them and so simplify the setting.

Cthulhu Invictus really shines in successfully integrating the Cthulhu Mythos into the myths and legends of Ancient Rome and beyond, but the failure to include any Keeper advice is a major omission upon the part of the publisher. For that it rates six rather than seven Phobias.



HALLOWEEN HORROR

By JIM LYNCH, OSCAR RIOS, & R.J.

CHRISTENSEN

56-PAGE PAPERBACK

CHAOSIUM, Inc.; \$12.95

REVIEWED BY MATTHEW POOK

Halloween Horror is part of Chaosium's Miskatonic University Library Association series of monographs. Chaosium prints it but each monograph's author is responsible for the writing, the editing, and the layout.

Chaosium wastes no time of getting the contents of this supplement. No introduction, no explanation, just straight into the first of its adventures, the three best entries in the first of the publisher's now annual Halloween adventure contest.

The first scenario is "Eyes That Should Not See" by Jim Lynch. It begins with a failed robbery attempt at a small Massachusetts museum, the perpetrator being surprisingly silent when questioned. The target of the robbery is the exhibit "Ancient Treasures of the Pacific," wanted by a minor Mythos entity inimical to Cthulhu. Despite an interesting setup, as written this is a disappointing scenario, more a passable outline that needs work to be something more even in the hands of a capable Keeper. It needs better organization and fleshing out, as well as a full set of pregenerated

investigators rather than the rough outlines given, which were clearly written for the author's own playing group. This scenario shows promise but it leaves too much work for the Keeper.

"Halloween in Dunwich" by the prolific Oscar Rios is a one-shot set on Halloween in the midst of Lovecraft Country. It casts the players as children, all cousins aged between 11 and 13 years old. Though they are not the younger versions of notable Mythos figures, with one of them being named Edward Derby, they *could* be. They and their parents spend each Halloween at Great Grandpa Silas' farm, where there will be holiday fun, games, and treats. The party gives them the opportunity to escape the "teenage weirdness" of their lives, but a secret long forgotten quite literally comes back to haunt the family and it is up to the young investigators to save the day, or rather the night.

With ghosts, animated scarecrows, and dangerous cornfields, this is the monograph's only scenario to be set on Halloween and make use of its traditional bogeymen. This and its too-straight forward structure makes it feel like an episode of *Scooby-Doo*, but it is a most enjoyable affair, all the better if the cast are played as young versions of various Mythos notables.

R.J. Christensen's "Terror at Erne Rock" begins with a Halloween party aboard a private yacht off Nova Scotia and ends with all aboard cast ashore at a malfunctioning Canadian lighthouse after a severe storm. The investigators must rely upon their wits if they are to survive what is a locked-room situation. It plays well up until the point when the players have to read one of Lovecraft's tales as part of the adventure. That is fine for a campaign like *Beyond the Mountains of Madness*, but for a single scenario?

Call of Cthulhu has few scenarios actually set on Halloween, *Alone on Halloween* being a notable exception. To be fair, *Halloween Horror* adds only one more to that already short list, Oscar Rios' "Halloween in Dunwich," which is almost worth the price of the monograph alone. Of the other two, "Terror at Erne Rock" is a solid addition to any campaign, while "Eyes That Should Not See" is something for the Keeper to work with. Each would provide a good evening's play, perhaps even on

THE EYE OF LIGHT & DARKNESS

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Halloween, but *Halloween Horror* does not make as much use of its theme as it should. It deserves 4 phobias.



MURDER OF CROWS

By STAN!

32-PAGE PDF

PUBLISHED BY SUPER GENIUS GAMES; \$12

REVIEWED BY MATTHEW POOK

A tale of isolation and horror, *Murder of Crows* takes place in the fictional town of Bethlehem, New Hampshire. Forest bound and desperate to find a means to survive in the face of its failing logging industry, the town has turned to tourism and become an autumnal retreat catering to wealthy dilettantes and socialites. From these few weeks Bethlehem makes money enough to survive the rest of the year.

What brings Bethlehem to the attention of the investigators is an article or word from fleeing dilettantes describing how this year the seasonal visitors have been harassed and pecked by crows whenever they stepped under the forest canopy. The investigators could be ornithologists or naturalists with a professional interest in the unnatural avian behavior; socialites or journalist coming late to the town and the story;

or former natives of Bethlehem returning to solve the mystery. They need not be experienced in terms of the Mythos, or in terms of classic investigative skills such as Library Use. Indeed, outdoors and interpersonal skills will be probably of more use.

As they pursue the investigation, the player characters find themselves being monitored and then given messages by the crows, followed by other fauna—spiders, frogs, and the like that hop and scuttle towards and around them.

As a first release for *Call of Cthulhu*, *Murder of Crows* lacks polish. It needs a good edit, its handouts fail to impress, the NPCs lack descriptions, and there should have been a map of the villain's house. Further, why two of the pre-generated investigators have the Cthulhu Mythos skill, when the scenario barely involves the Mythos, is never explained.

Where *Murder of Crows* has the potential to shine is in presenting an unnerving and slowly encroaching menace. If it was good enough for Daphne du Maurier and Alfred Hitchcock, why not *Call of Cthulhu*? The relative lack of Mythos involvement makes the scenario easy to run with other horror RPGs as well as easy to set in the 1890s of *Cthulhu by Gaslight*, in the modern day, or on the fringes of a Lovecraft Country campaign.

If you suffer from arachnophobia, batrachophobia, entomophobia, ornithophobia, or scoleciphobia, then *Murder of Crows* is worth four phobias.



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nor bone,
they are the
very darkness
that we fear."

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KENNETH HITE
SHANE IVEY
GREG STOLZE

illustrated by

TODD SHEARER

2011 ENNIE AWARD NOMINEE

MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE: SIGNS

BY GREG STOLZE

My first kiss was very dramatic. We were on my front porch in Idaho during a rainstorm, and as our lips met, lightning struck and thunder crashed. Ever since that time, the power of a storm has been, to me, an erotic power.

Semiotics is the study of symbols and signs, and the attachment of meaning thereto. I was not initially a semiotician. I came to it obliquely, through archaeology. I came to it from a fascination with man's oldest attempts to attach *this*—an abstract thought form, a unit of meaning—to *that*, an image or a sound or a color.

I believed symbols were arbitrary. The moon was a woman in this culture, a rabbit in that one, and a big hunk of cheese in a third. There were always points of connection tying the metaphor together but if you were willing to belabor it, you could assign any meaning to anything. To me, a storm is passionate attraction. To a hurricane survivor, it's terror and destruction.

Have you seen the Elder Sign?

I saw it on some very exciting plinths, primitive things, old. They should have been off limits to archaeology, should have been a puzzle to paleontologists. Older than myths, older than neolithic skeletons in South America, dating from before the separation of the world's continents.

My personal sign for age is the scent of hot dust. When I visited my grandmother I was small enough to sit behind the electric oven in her kitchen, on top of a furnace register. It was the only warm room in that house, unless everyone was visiting for the holidays. The furnace would turn on and flood that little enclosure with the scent of dust from the vents while I played with my matchbox cars and wondered if being old meant always feeling cold.

Have you seen the Yellow Sign?

I first saw it on the Internet, where everyone first sees everything these days. The *World Wide Web*. Fascinating set of associations to 'web,' ideas of entanglement and patient

consumption. Spiders and flies. The Yellow Sign seemed at first to be nothing, and then to be a shallow and fraudulent symbol of an absurd, schizophrenic philosophy. But having seen it once, I found it again and again, as if it was chasing me. It became deep and powerful, an indicator nigh-universal among humanity if you knew which dark corners to search. If you charted its meaning as a conic section, starting at zero and progressing upward, it forms an asymptotic line. That means that its meaning approaches, but never quite touches, the infinite.

It was only a fortunate conjunction between them that let the former free me from the latter. The Elder Sign is a nullity, as useful for holding ideas in place as the numeral zero. The Yellow Sign is a linguistic omnivore, consuming meaning in order to expand and infect, making everything it touches a reflection of itself.

The terrifying thing about these two mysterious sigils is that they *are themselves*. Assigning alternate meanings to the images yields maddening confusion. Attempting to designate some other symbol to stand for them is disastrous. Nothing else can make you think these thoughts, there's no translation, no interpretation. They are *objective* symbols.

If they can be real, what other ideas can be? What other structures can exist, outside of matter or energy, awaiting only expression to begin colonizing our thoughts, our words and our images? Music, mathematics, paintings and poetry would all be vulnerable. Ours concepts are so primitive and plastic, just waiting to be formed by ideas from un-space and pre-time.

I do not want my symbols, my storm of craved love, the dusty warmth of grandma, to be infected. But I have gazed upon the plinth. I have seen the forms emerging from the patterns on my screen. The implications cannot be denied. I've seen the signs and I know what they mean.

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