

Wormwood

"And the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star from heaven, burning as if it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters; and the name of the star is called Wormwood; and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter". Revelations 8:10-11

Setting:

This scenario takes place in Moscow, Russia, and Chernobyl, Ukraine. From 2006 a new steel shell over Chernobyl is being constructed, which might complicate the mission. It's recommended that at least one agent speak Russian. The ability to use a Geiger counter is also helpful.

To: Active Cell

From: Alphonse

Subject: You are invited to a night at the Bolshoi Theater.

Cell A has discovered that a number of valuable playbills[[i](#)] have been offered on the Russian black market by a retired general. They are supposedly from former KGB archives. The playbills include formulae for the summoning of hypergeometrical entities. If they fall into the wrong hands, the consequences could be catastrophic.

Cell A has created a front identity of a wealthy private collector, plus his entourage, who wish to buy [a tome significant to your campaign]. Using this identity, make contact with the seller and arrange a meeting. Gather information on the general and any other "customers" he may have. Trace and obtain or destroy as many playbills as possible. Protect the general public from applications of hypergeometric procedures.

Be Seeing You,
Alphonse.

Plot

Cell A has fallen for GRU SV-8's "bait and switch". The GRU SV-8 front is former General Ogarkov (pp.84-85, Countdown)[[ii](#)]. He will communicate with the investigators via encrypted email and is an expensive man to deal with. Getting beyond chit-chat requires a "goodwill" payment of 5,000 \$US. His asking price is a million dollars per tome, (but he will bargain – GRU SV-8 is more interested in the customers than the money), to be placed in escrow in a shady Swiss bank. DG can come up with this money, but it will strain their resources[[iii](#)].

To tell the truth, this probably isn't a shotgun scenario. It's too big, too setting-specific, too campaign-impacting. I initially wrote it as a way to introduce GRU SV-8 and Delta Green to each other and it still works well for that purpose. As a result, even by cheating and putting all the detailed descriptions and notes in appendices, it still goes over the 1500 word mark, and so Adam would have every right to disqualify it. If, y'know, he was some whining, hide bound rules lawyer. Not that I'd dream of insulting the judge. Anyway, I'm sick of trimming it and I have nappies to change :)

So, instead of a shotgun shell, think of this as more of a roadside bomb. A rusting barrel of unmarked radioactive waste and nitroglycerine, painted with a target so that the next ignorant Amerikanski yahoos to drive by can't resist emptying a shotgun into it. They won't know what hit them.

Moscow:

The initial meeting occurs in a Starbucks. A young man whose flashy clothing and military bearing mark him as a former soldier turned Organizatskya gangster will approach. After identifying himself, he will insist on checking the agents for weapons, using a pat-down and a metal detector. He will refuse to proceed until any guns are disposed of. He suggests they return to their hotel and place the weapons in their room safe.

The contact escorts the agents to the Russian State Library – "What better place to hide a book, nyet?" This is a huge, austere building built in the neo-classical Soviet style. A statue of Fyodor Dostoyevsky towers over the front courtyard. A general knowledge roll may recall that the library is said to connect to a government-use-only underground railway, "Metro 2". See Appendix 4 for more description.

The contact will give them a letter and tell them to give it to the front desk attendant. He will then leave. This handover will occur in the public square, within sight of at least one member of the Moscow constabulary.

The letter is in Russian, on Russian State Library letterhead. It is signed by the deputy head of the library and states that the bearer(s) are to be granted access to restricted stack 23.

Entering the library requires completing a membership application (with passport details and a photo) and placing anything larger than a handbag in a locker. Photographic or video equipment is forbidden. Visitors also pass through a metal detector.

On being shown the letter, an attendant will escort the agents to a lift. She will give them a photocopied map of the fifth level below ground and circle an area in the back corner with pen. She will then return to her duties[iv].

Restricted stack 23 in fact contains mouldering Soviet-era propaganda and Communist Party branch meeting minutes. The stacks are intended to absorb ricochet. The agents will be ambushed by armed Spetsnaz, who will order them to surrender. They will be handcuffed, gagged, hooded, and rushed through several doors and onto what sounds like an underground railroad. They are taken to GRU headquarters and placed in separate cells for interrogation, using scopolamine, sodium pentathol, and eventually torture[v], if they prove uncooperative.

The agents' lives now depend upon convincing GRU SV-8 that they are not cultists; are more useful alive than dead; and would be missed. The smartest thing to do is tell (part of the) truth. GRU SV-8 has heard of Delta Green[vi], so revealing allegiance to DG would be one way to get the pain to stop.

Once the GRU is convinced of the agents' good character, they have a use for some DG patsies. Agents will be placed in a military hospital, with armed guards and nurses who neither ask nor answer questions. Apart from this, they will be well treated. Eventually, General Zimyanin (Countdown pp.80-81) will visit and explain the bait-and-switch. In an effort to win back their trust, he will show the scars of his torture in Leng and give a brief and misleading version of his agency's history combating "preternatural evil". Among other misdirections, he will claim to be part of the FSB.

The General says that his agency now only has jurisdiction within Russia, not the Ukraine. Unfortunately, an "incursion" has occurred at the former Chernobyl reactor. If the team are willing to investigate, the GRU will let them go free, offer to collaborate with DG in future, and maybe give them a copy of the tome.

Case summary:

Several young Muscovites have contracted leukemia. Tests show the presence of Strontium 90. They are known to be part of an occultist group. GRU SV-8 noticed and sequestered the investigation[vii]. Under interrogation, one member admitted to visiting Chernobyl, but exposure from a casual visit would be too low to cause such symptoms. In addition, she claims that a Geiger counter showed that the area visited was uncontaminated.

Checking their residence (Appendix 5) with radiation detectors will pinpoint the source: several unlabeled bottles of green liquid. Lab tests (or careful searching) reveal that this is home made absinth, very popular among self-styled bohemians.

Although agents might suspect a FSB hit[viii], this poisoning is self-inflicted. The absinth has been made with wormwood from the Chernobyl zone and the radioactive elements captured by the plant were thus ingested[ix].

Further questioning produces more details. The occultists believed the Chernobyl disaster fulfilled a biblical prophecy (derived from the folk etymology of Chernobyl = Wormwood)[x]. Therefore, Chernobyl is a good place to contact demonic powers. After performing a "rite", they received a "revelation": a "great beast" descended from a "UFO" and headed into the Zone. Following the track of the beast, they found it was very low in radioactivity. It led them to a patch of wormwood, which they harvested for Absinth. They believed a drink made from Chernobyl wormwood would be especially magical[xi]. The GRU can correlate this "UFO" sighting with the Russian military airspace records, which recorded an anomaly believed to be a small meteorite or comet.

GRU SV-8 will send the agents and two members of their Foreign Space Object Evaluation Unit, Col. Silkin and a translator/Speznatz "minder", to Chernobyl to investigate this "beast". They may hold back some or all of the agents' identification, equipment or compatriots[xii] as hostages, threatening to create a spy scandal exposing Delta Green if the agents do not return.

Travelling to Chernobyl:

Travel from Moscow to Kiev and on to the Chernobyl region is uncomplicated (Appendix 6)

It's easy to openly obtain entry to Chernobyl, by buying a permit and hiring a guide: a "stalker" in local slang. Shaking the guide and wandering around on your own, searching for aliens, is more difficult, but a large bribe will work wonders.

Not getting radiation poisoning requires precautions. Food and water should be brought in from outside. Masks should be used to prevent dust inhalation.

Following the occultists' directions leads to a small, recent impact crater. Strange, funnel-like marks in the soil and toppled trees, plus low Geiger counter readings, show that something large and radioactivity-neutralising left the site. Traces of a slimy black fungus can also be found. If analysed, the fungus is capable of absorbing gamma ray energy during photosynthesis. Further analysis suggests it may be part of a symbiote[xiii].

The trail heads towards the reactor. Following it, the agents will discover that something is attempting to tunnel or melt through the steel and concrete "sarcophagus". Several low-radiation trails lead off from the point of partial penetration, suggesting that the thing is repeatedly visiting this spot.

The truth:

Majestic-12 has discovered Flying Polyyps, which have evolved radioactivity-consuming properties. They have succeeded in capturing a Polyp (the "great beast") and have airlifted it to Chernobyl, using one of their anti-gravitic flyers (the "UFO"), to test the Polyp's usability as a "nuclear cleaner". If the Polyp can cleanse the radioactive contamination, MJ-12 will conclude that Polyyps can remove one impediment to their use of nuclear weapons against the Greys (sub-project GABRIEL). Polyyps might also be used against the arsenals of hostile nuclear powers (e.g. North Korea, Iran, Pakistan, China, Russia, France...)

The occultists inadvertently witnessed the drop. The Polyp is currently wandering from one concentration of radioactivity to the next, absorbing energy to dig with. Moving through a patch of wormwood was coincidental. It wishes to tunnel into the abandoned reactor and create a breeding nest.

Resources and Resolutions:

Taking on a well-fed Polyp is suicidal without heavy weapons or magical support. However, the Polyp is not particularly interested in humans when "food" is plentiful. Agents can monitor the location from cover and see the semi-visible monstrosity return (SAN rolls, please) and attempt to tunnel through the sarcophagus, before leaving to gather more energy. If the agents insist on a confrontation, they may realise (idea rolls) that after the Polyp has used up most of its MPs tunnelling is the best moment to strike. The GRU can scramble a Speznatz team to help once the incursion is confirmed.

One solution is to let the Polyp into the reactor and then seal it in. No builder will take on any job in the Zone, so the agents may have to brick the hole up themselves. Possibly abandoned supplies might be found in Pripyat. Once the hole is closed, the Sarcophagus will need to be magically sealed, or the Polyp will tunnel out again. An Elder Sign, Pnakotic Pentagram, Trap Hound, or Seal of Isis spell will serve. If the investigators are not capable of spellcasting, GRU SV-8 can send a "specialist" (Major Ektarina). However, because the magical seal needs to encompass the whole sarcophagus, it needs a sacrifice of 6 POW instead of the usual 2. This can be split between the group.

Detailed descriptions of Flying Polyyps can be found in the Pnakotic Manuscripts, which GRU-SV8 possesses, though the text predates the Polyyps' evolutionary leap. This mentions that the Yithians fought Polyyps with lightning guns. Agents may devise some way to electrocute the Polyp. The Pnakotic Pentagram spell can be found in Ludvig Prinn's "Mysteries of the Worm", extracts of which are present in the GRU's files[\[xiv\]](#).

Failure: If the Polyp is not killed, contained, etc, it will gradually consume the site's radioactivity. This will be noticed, though the scientific community will be unable to explain it. After the polyp has been absorbing energy for 2-3 years, it will begin hunting for meat, and then will spawn more polyyps. These will feed for a few years. Eventually they will eat all the radioactive waste and break out of the area looking for more. The Ukrainian armed forces will be mobilised to contain this "alien invasion". Since the Polyyps go after nuclear reactors, they may initially assume they are under attack from Russia, the US, or some other invading or terrorist power. This could easily lead to war.

Reward: GRU-SV8 lets you go, alive, and gives you their phone number. They might give you an opportunity to read the book you were after – probably not, though.

+2d6 San for successfully containing or destroying the Flying Polyp.

i DG speak for "mythos tomes"

ii Of course, neither he nor any other GRU agent will use their real names.

iii Using the details the GRU gets from the investigators later, they will attempt to steal their identities and claim the money from the bank during or after the scenario. They need the money. This may provide an opportunity for revenge-minded PCs to sting back.

iv If the players don't notice, make appropriate rolls to realise that granting unescorted access to a restricted area is quite unusual.

v Rules for torture: Each session of torture does 1d10 HP damage, although this is rapidly recovered, as the interrogators are experts at causing pain rather than permanent damage. Nevertheless, every time a PC is tortured, make a luck roll. If failed, the PC loses a point of CON permanently. Being tortured also causes a SAN check for 1d3/1d6 SAN loss. If the investigator wants to resist talking, then they must succeed in a POW*5 roll during the first session, a POW*4 roll in the second, POW*3 in the third, and so on until they must roll under their POW every session. If the investigator goes permanently mad, they are "discarded".

vi Which they believe to be an official US government agency.

vii At this point, the General may mention the time when GRU SV-8 prevented a global nuclear war by stopping a cult of Ithaqua acquiring nuclear weapons. This explains his interest.

viii Like the assassination of Litvinenko.

ix "In the vicinity of nuclear waste and nuclear test sites, strontium 90 also enters the metabolism of plants in lieu of calcium. For example, specimens of chamisa growing in Bayo Canyon, near Los Alamos, New Mexico, exhibit a concentration of radioactive strontium 300,000 times higher than normal plants. Their roots reach into a nuclear waste treatment area that has been closed since 1963; the radioactive shrubs are "indistinguishable from other shrubs without a Geiger counter". The same happens with the tumbleweed plants at the Hanford Site; "crews armed with pitchforks" are employed to prevent the contaminated plants from spreading." Wikipedia

x See Chernobyl in the popular consciousness – Wikipedia

xi Wormwood (latin: Artemisia) is commonly cultivated by occultists, due to its connection with the goddess Artemis. Wikipedia

xii It would be standard practice to hold one or more agents hostage as insurance – but that would make for a dull game for whoever played the hostage. Perhaps use an NPC or the character of a player who is absent. Alternatively, if there's a bookish type, s/he can stay behind and help search the GRU archives for methods of dealing with the "beast".

xiii Chernobyl Fungus Feeds On Radiation

xiv One way to think of this solution is to make the intuitive leap (Idea and Occult or Cthulhu Mythos rolls) from the fact that Wormwood is a traditional remedy for curing infestations of intestinal worms and for banishing hostile Ukrainian nature spirits. Supernatural worms => Mystery of the Worm => Prinn.

Appendix 1: Suggested Background viewing/reading:

"The Dragon of Pripjat" by Karl Schroeder (short story)

"Roadside Picnic" by Strugatsky (novel) (available free online).

"Stalker" by Strugatsky (novella)

"Stalker" by Tarkovsky (film)

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl (Computer Game).

"Pattern Recognition" by William Gibson (novel).

Numerous pictures, accounts, etc of the Pripjat/Chernobyl region are available online.

Appendix 2: Optional Sub-Plot:

The MJ-12 drop had a second purpose – as a part of Operation Looking Glass, they wish to flush out any Russian alien intelligence agency. They reason that by faking an "alien invasion" they can draw the Russians out. A few NRO Delta operatives were also dropped, to watch the Russian response. They will attempt to locate and follow the agents without being noticed. They do not wish to alert the hypothesized agency, and so will be cautious and attempt to withdraw from any confrontation. Their mission is to discover and investigate the agents' contacts in Moscow.

Only some of the tails will be MJ-12 aware – others will be local CIA, who have been issued what they believe to be legitimate orders. Shaking this tail should be difficult, as MJ-12 can draw upon years of CIA experience, but not impossible, because MJ-12 considers preserving their own cover more important than finding GRU SV-8. Capturing the tail will result in them claiming diplomatic immunity. GRU SV-8 will not back investigators up in a potential confrontation with the American Embassy.

Appendix 3: Using Fraternal Order of Librarians investigators.

Professor Klaus and the FOL generally are eager to get a look at the Russian copy of the Pnakotic Manuscripts, as he believes that the Great Race has censored the FOL's copies to remove information damaging to them, especially the spell Pnakotic Pentagram. The GRU's copy does not in fact have the Pnakotic Pentagram in it, but does have the useful instructions/spells Create Temporal Communicator, Imprison Mind and Apportion Ka, any of which the Prof. and the FOL would love to get.

The FOL can produce ID and documents claiming that the team is from a major museum, seeking to acquire more old books for their display of antiquities and supernatural beliefs from the Middle Ages. The FOL knows about Polyps, but not about MJ-12, so will be unable to explain how the Polyp got from Australia to Russia.

Appendix 4: Detailed Description of Russian State Library

The modern building complex was opened in 1940, and built in the soviet classicism style. The building is designed to give an austere feel, a sense of respect towards the knowledge stored there. The interior is more lavish, and less oppressive – marble staircase and Ionic columns, high ceilings, parquet floors, carpets and old books in dark-glass museum cases.

A long building contains cloakrooms (with ever-unfriendly old ladies), a checkpoint (clean book request forms are issued there, no container larger than a small handbag can be taken beyond it, metal detector, no photo or video equipment, special permission for laptops). A wide marble staircase leads to the second floor. The second floor is divided into three naves – the central leads to the reading halls on different floors, the side naves contain the corpus card index. The computer database is also there, but it is not even half finished.

Book storage:

The second floor is taken with corpus card index – rows and rows of bookshelves, going to the darkness. No dungeon dampness – the air will be dry, with smell of dust and books. Near the entrance to each floor there is a switchboard that controls all lamps on that floor. The lights are kept to minimum, to conserve books (and electricity). The floors are accessed by lift (I'm not sure of the type, but I like to imagine the industrial-type, capable of lifting a ton, with wire net walls and other Silent Hill creepiness) and a staircase.

It's easy to get lost – all the stacks look the same, the lights are dim, the index system is different from the international standards. Also the place can play all kinds of strange mind tricks – like losing the feeling of time/distance, creating the illusion that the way back took much longer than the way there, or the growing feeling of endlessness of the stacks. Also lost investigators can wander into the conserved part of the storage (where book stacks are covered in white sheets, suspiciously like a morgue), creating an even creepier sensation.

Appendix 5: Cheap flat on the outskirts of Moscow.

The young "cultists" collectively rented a small flat in Solntsevo, one of the furthest Moscow suburbs. It is small, shoddy, far from public transportation and relatively cheap (about \$400 a month). At the moment of writing, a sample plan can be found in at this address.

The hall is bare of any furniture, except a row of nails to hang coats and a heap of dirty footwear. Examining it with the Geiger counter will reveal that several pairs of heavy outdoors high-top boots have a noticeably higher (but not high enough to be immediately dangerous) level of radiation. The bathroom is filthy. If the GM desires so, several packs of weed can be found hidden there.

The kitchen is also bare – a wobbly table with remains of an old meal, a cooker and the sink, and three chairs. The floor is covered with yellow-checkered linoleum. The still for home-made absinthe is here, and a Geiger counter will immediately indicate a high level of radiation. Different photos of the stills and absinthe-making process can be found here.

The room:

The room is also sparsely furnished – a folded-out couch that was obviously used as a bed, as were sleeping bags on the floor. Several large backpacks lie in the corner, half-filled with travelling gear and supplies. It also shows minor radiation levels. A large wardrobe contains clothes the teenagers wore – mostly military style and black with logos of different rock and metal bands (Arija, Alisa, Korol i Shut, Kino, etc.). A few books of occult literature (in Russian) featuring Gurdjieff and Rasputin are piled in a corner. On the wall is a poster supporting Rasputin's canonisation as an Orthodox saint. Two bottles of absinthe can be found here, both showing high levels of radiation.

Appendix 6: Description of travel arrangements between Russia and Chernobyl.

Citizens of Russia don't need a visa (at the moment of writing), and GRU can arrange something for the foreign "guests". The investigators can travel by car, train or plane. Car or express train takes about 11-12 hours, plane flight takes 3 hours. Iodine tablets are recommended.

Unfortunately, once they cross the border, the status of investigators becomes rather unclear. The "Orange Revolution" of 2004 caused a shift in power in Ukrainian government, and generally Moscow-friendly attitude changed to pro-west policies, and that caused a major cooldown in relationships with Russia. Viktor Yushchenko is the current president. Things became more complicated at the end of 2006, when Russia attempted to pressure Ukraine government by rising natural gas price.

So, basically, if your game takes place after 2004, the investigators can't act as representatives of any Russian government agency, and will actually have to hide their allegiance with one, as it can be interpreted as hostile operation in the foreign territory.

A good idea is to act as some sort of independent ecological organization that wants measure radiation in the Chernobyl region. This will provide a good excuse for poking around Chernobyl and having a lot of equipment with you. If the investigators request, the GRU can produce the necessary papers – they will look as good as real.

Weapon transportation is another matter – it is illegal to bring weapons over the border, so the investigators will either have to smuggle them, or acquire them on the other side of the border.

Appendix 7: Flying Polyp Stats - Radioactivity-Addicted Rhinoceros

STR: 45 CON: 20 SIZ: 45 INT: 6 POW: 18 DEX: 15

SAN LOSS: 1d3/1d20

Physical Attacks: 2d6 Tentacles/Round, 85% attack, 1d10 damage ignores armor

Wind Blast; Radiation Blast; Suicide Bomb – see IOOL files for details.