ESOTERRORISTS

BY ROBIN D LAWS WITH GARETH RYDER HANRAHAN





THE ESOTERRORISTS

a roleplaying game of occult investigation by ROBIN D. LAWS 2



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PAGE CONTENTS

CONTENTS

PREFACE TO THE 2ND EDITION

THE BASICS

Who Are You? How Does the World Work? Who Are Your Enemies?

YOUR CHARACTER

Ratings and Pools Step One: Concept and Contacts Step Two: Assign Investigative Abilities What Good Are Investigative Ratings? Step 3: Assign General Abilities What Good Are General Ratings? Investigative Abilities Anthropology (Academic) Archaeology (Academic) Architecture (Academic) Art History (Academic) Astronomy (Technical) Ballistics (Technical) Bullshit Detector (Interpersonal) Bureaucracy (Interpersonal) Chemistry (Technical) Cop Talk (Interpersonal) Cryptography (Technical) Data Retrieval (Technical) Document Analysis (Technical) Electronic Surveillance (Technical) Evidence Collection (Technical) Explosive Devices (Technical) Fingerprinting (Technical) Flattery (Interpersonal) Flirting (Interpersonal) Forensic Accounting (Academic) Forensic Anthropology (Technical) Forensic Entomology (Technical) Forensic Psychology (Academic) History (Academic) Impersonate (Interpersonal) Interrogation (Interpersonal) Intimidation (Interpersonal) Local Knowledge Languages (Academic) Law (Academic) Linguistics (Academic) Natural History (Academic)

| 6 Negotiation (Interpersonal) Occult Studies (Academic) | | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| Occult Studies (Academic) | | | | | |
| Pathology (Academic) Photography (Technical) | | | | | |
| Photography (Technical) | | | | | |
| Reassurance (Interpersonal) | | | | | |
| Research (Academic) | | | | | |
| Streetwise (Interpersonal) | | | | | |
| Textual Analysis (Academic) | | | | | |
| Trivia (Academic) | | | | | |
| General Abilities | | | | | |
| Athletics | | | | | |
| Driving | | | | | |
| Filch | | | | | |
| Health | | | | | |
| Infiltration | | | | | |
| Mechanics | | | | | |
| Medic | | | | | |
| Preparedness | | | | | |
| Scuffling | | | | | |
| Shrink | | | | | |
| Shooting | | | | | |
| Stability | | | | | |
| Surveillance | | | | | |
| | | | | | |
| | | | | | |

THE GUMSHOE RULES SYSTEM

12

12

12 12

12

12

13

13

13

13

13

13

13

13

13

13

13

13

14 14

14

14

14

| Why This Game Exists |
|-------------------------|
| Mystery Structure |
| From Structure to Story |
| Gathering Clues |
| Core Clues |
| Special Benefits |
| Zero-Point Clues |
| Inconspicuous Clues |
| Simple Searches |
| Tests |
| Simple Tests |
| Piggybacking |
| Cooperation |
| Zero-sum Contests |
| General Spends |
| Contests |
| Fighting |
| Exhaustion, Injury, |
| and Gruesome Death |
| Bigger Fights |
| Armor |
| Cover |

| 14 | Ammo Capacity | 30 |
|----|--------------------------------------|------------|
| 14 | Range | 31 |
| 15 | Nonlethal Weapons | 31 |
| 15 | No Tasers (Optional Rule) | 31 |
| 15 | Stability Tests | 31 |
| 15 | Losing It | 32 |
| 15 | Mental Illness | 32 |
| 15 | Psychological Triage | 32 |
| 15 | Head Games | 32 |
| 16 | Regaining Pool Points | 33 |
| 16 | Improving Your Character | 34 |
| 16 | | |
| 16 | THE ORDO VERITATIS | 3 5 |
| 16 | Statement of Intent | 35 |
| 16 | Précis | 36 |
| 16 | Case Evaluation | 36 |
| 16 | Support Experience | 36 |
| 17 | Life in an Analysis Station | 37 |
| 17 | Sources and Methods | 38 |
| 17 | Deployment | 40 |
| 17 | Briefing | 40 |
| 17 | Investigation | 41 |
| 17 | Counter-Ops Response | 41 |
| | Communications Protocols | 41 |
| 19 | Neutralization | 42 |
| 19 | The Veil-Out | 42 |
| 20 | Ethics Code | 43 |
| 21 | Readiness Maintenance | 43 |
| 22 | Recruitment | 43 |
| 22 | What You Don't Know | 43 |
| 22 | | |
| 23 | THE ENEMY | 44 |
| 23 | The Laws of Esoterror | 44 |
| 24 | The Membrane | 44 |
| 24 | Materializing Supernatural Entities | 44 |
| 24 | The Contradiction | 44 |
| 25 | The Unifying Motivation of Esoterror | 45 |
| 25 | Magic: Can It Happen? | 45 |
| 26 | Extent of ODE Influence: a Variable | 46 |
| 26 | How Esoterrorists Are Made | 46 |
| 26 | Like Cancer, | |
| 27 | Esoterrorists Arrive in Cells | 47 |
| | Communications | 47 |
| 27 | Trending Conspiracies | 47 |
| 28 | Bundyclub | 48 |
| 29 | The Dollarmen | 49 |
| 30 | The Infernalists | 50 |

THE ESOTERRORISTS

CONTENTS

| Rugged |
|--|
| The Shepherdstown Cuckoos |
| Opponent Statistics |
| Health Loss for NPCs |
| Ability Pool Refreshment |
| Tests and Supporting Characters |
| Outer Dark Entities |
| Special Means of Dispatch |
| Blood Corpses |
| Game Statistics |
| Brutalizer |
| Game Statistics |
| Corpsejabber |
| Game Statistics |
| Discarnate |
| Game Statistics |
| Glistening |
| Game Statistics |
| The Host |
| Game Statistics |
| Kooks |
| Game Statistics |
| Man in Black |
| Nester |
| Game Statistics |
| Returner |
| Game Statistics |
| Scauler |
| Game Statistics |
| Shamebeast |
| Game Statistics |
| Torture Dogs |
| Game Statistics |
| Skin Crabs |
| Game Statistics |
| SCENARIOS |
| Designing Scenarios |
| Creating Investigation Triggers |
| Making Plots Specifically Esoterrorist |
| Ripped From the Headlines |
| Magic is Hard |
| Clues |
| Supporting Characters |
| Clue Types |
| Floating Core Clues |
| |

| Creating Investigation Triggers | 66 |
|--|----|
| Making Plots Specifically Esoterroristic | 67 |
| Ripped From the Headlines | 67 |
| Magic is Hard | 67 |
| Clues | 67 |
| Supporting Characters | 68 |
| Clue Types | 68 |
| Floating Core Clues | 68 |
| Leveraged Clues | 69 |
| Pipe Clues | 69 |
| Restricted Clues | 69 |
| Timed Results | 69 |
| Scene Types | 70 |
| Introductory | 70 |
| Core | 70 |

Alternate

| Antagonist Reaction |
|--|
| Hazard |
| Subplot |
| Conclusion |
| Hybrid Scenes |
| Ticking Clock |
| Building Scenarios on the Fly |
| Don't Panic! |
| Activating Players |
| Avoid Negation |
| Preparing a Fallback |
| Leading and Following |
| Chaos and Order |
| Running Scenarios |
| Giving Out Clues |
| Having the Right Ability |
| Using the Right Ability |
| Being in the Right Place |
| Rolling for Clues |
| and the GUMSHOE Style |
| The Mystery Structure |
| Perception Is (Nearly) All |
| Any Track Is the Right Track |
| Ending Scenes |
| Managing Resource Management |
| 5 5 5 |
| |
| STATION DUTY |
| A CAMPAIGN FRAME |
| |
| A CAMPAIGN FRAME |
| A CAMPAIGN FRAME For esoterrorists |
| A CAMPAIGN FRAME FOR ESOTERRORISTS Your Town Groundwork |
| A CAMPAIGN FRAME FOR ESOTERRORISTS Your Town |
| A CAMPAIGN FRAME FOR ESOTERRORISTS Your Town Groundwork Creating Characters |
| A CAMPAIGN FRAME FOR ESOTERRORISTS Your Town Groundwork Creating Characters Ordo Veritatis Agents Local Residents |
| A CAMPAIGN FRAME FOR ESOTERRORISTS Your Town Groundwork Creating Characters Ordo Veritatis Agents Local Residents Creating the Town |
| A CAMPAIGN FRAME FOR ESOTERRORISTS Your Town Groundwork Creating Characters Ordo Veritatis Agents Local Residents Creating the Town Small-Town Horror |
| A CAMPAIGN FRAME FOR ESOTERRORISTS Your Town Groundwork Creating Characters Ordo Veritatis Agents Local Residents Creating the Town Small-Town Horror Using Your Own Home Town |
| A CAMPAIGN FRAME FOR ESOTERRORISTS Your Town Groundwork Creating Characters Ordo Veritatis Agents Local Residents Creating the Town Small-Town Horror |
| A CAMPAIGN FRAME FOR ESOTERRORISTS Your Town Groundwork Creating Characters Ordo Veritatis Agents Local Residents Creating the Town Small-Town Horror Using Your Own Home Town Researching a Town |
| A CAMPAIGN FRAME FOR ESOTERRORISTS Your Town Groundwork Creating Characters Ordo Veritatis Agents Local Residents Creating the Town Small-Town Horror Using Your Own Home Town Researching a Town Fictional Towns The Place |
| A CAMPAIGN FRAME FOR ESOTERRORISTS Your Town Groundwork Creating Characters Ordo Veritatis Agents Local Residents Creating the Town Small-Town Horror Using Your Own Home Town Researching a Town Fictional Towns The Place The Atmosph/ere |
| A CAMPAIGN FRAME FOR ESOTERRORISTS Your Town Groundwork Creating Characters Ordo Veritatis Agents Local Residents Creating the Town Small-Town Horror Using Your Own Home Town Researching a Town Fictional Towns The Place The Atmosph/ere The People |
| A CAMPAIGN FRAME FOR ESOTERRORISTS Your Town Groundwork Creating Characters Ordo Veritatis Agents Local Residents Creating the Town Small-Town Horror Using Your Own Home Town Researching a Town Fictional Towns The Place The Atmosph/ere The People Local Knowledge |
| A CAMPAIGN FRAME FOR ESOTERRORISTS Your Town Groundwork Creating Characters Ordo Veritatis Agents Local Residents Creating the Town Small-Town Horror Using Your Own Home Town Researching a Town Fictional Towns The Place The Atmosph/ere The People Local Knowledge Using Local Knowledge |
| A CAMPAIGN FRAME FOR ESOTERRORISTS Your Town Groundwork Creating Characters Ordo Veritatis Agents Local Residents Creating the Town Small-Town Horror Using Your Own Home Town Researching a Town Fictional Towns The Place The Atmosph/ere The People Local Knowledge Using Local Knowledge Tracking the Town |
| A CAMPAIGN FRAME FOR ESOTERRORISTS Your Town Groundwork Creating Characters Ordo Veritatis Agents Local Residents Creating the Town Small-Town Horror Using Your Own Home Town Researching a Town Fictional Towns The Place The Atmosph/ere The People Local Knowledge Using Local Knowledge Tracking the Town Ordo Veritatis Briefing |
| A CAMPAIGN FRAME FOR ESOTERRORISTS Your Town Groundwork Creating Characters Ordo Veritatis Agents Local Residents Creating the Town Small-Town Horror Using Your Own Home Town Researching a Town Fictional Towns The Place The Atmosph/ere The People Local Knowledge Using Local Knowledge Tracking the Town |
| A CAMPAIGN FRAME FOR ESOTERRORISTS Your Town Groundwork Creating Characters Ordo Veritatis Agents Local Residents Creating the Town Small-Town Horror Using Your Own Home Town Researching a Town Fictional Towns The Place The Atmosph/ere The People Local Knowledge Using Local Knowledge Tracking the Town Ordo Veritatis Briefing Creating a Station |
| A CAMPAIGN FRAME FOR ESOTERRORISTS Your Town Groundwork Creating Characters Ordo Veritatis Agents Local Residents Creating the Town Small-Town Horror Using Your Own Home Town Researching a Town Fictional Towns The Place The Atmosph/ere The People Local Knowledge Using Local Knowledge Tracking the Town Ordo Veritatis Briefing Creating a Station The Place |
| A CAMPAIGN FRAME FOR ESOTERRORISTS Your Town Groundwork Creating Characters Ordo Veritatis Agents Local Residents Creating the Town Small-Town Horror Using Your Own Home Town Researching a Town Fictional Towns The Place The Atmosph/ere The People Local Knowledge Using Local Knowledge Tracking the Town Ordo Veritatis Briefing Creating a Station The Place The Place |

Creating Mysteries

Narrative Arcs

Tony Schilling

| 70 | The Enemy | 89 |
|-----------|---------------------------------------|-----|
| 70 | Adversary Mapping | 89 |
| 70 | Antagonist Reactions | 90 |
| 71 | Cell Responses | 90 |
| 71 | Defensive Responses | 90 |
| 71 | Offensive Responses | 91 |
| 71 | Supernatural Responses | 91 |
| 72 | Ordinary Horrors | 92 |
| 72 | Character Arcs | 92 |
| 72 | Creating Character Arcs | 93 |
| 72 | Running Character Arcs | 94 |
| 73 | The Series Arc | 94 |
| 73 | | 94 |
| 73 74 | Campaign Phases | 95 |
| 74 74 | Emergent Complexity | 95 |
| 74 74 | The Improvising GM | 97 |
| | Investigation Outlines | |
| 74 | Broken People | 97 |
| 74 | The Eyeless | 97 |
| | Gnaw Your Own Leg Off | 98 |
| 75 | Listeners | 99 |
| 76 | Breach Zero | 100 |
| 76 | Getting the Local Characters Involved | 100 |
| 77 | Setting up the Station | 100 |
| 77 | I.The Phone Booth | 100 |
| 77 | 2. Jake's Place | 100 |
| | 3.The Kidnapping | 100 |
| | 4.A Cryptic Warning | 101 |
| 70 | 5.Astray | 101 |
| 79 | 6.All Over Bar, the Crying | 101 |
| 79 | 7. Deep Underground | 102 |
| 80 | Persons of Interest | 103 |
| 80 | Mayor Jerry Crowe | 104 |
| 80 | Sheriff Douglas Eddington | 104 |
| 80 | Officer Rick Donner | 105 |
| 80 | Officer Marvin Sellers | 106 |
| 80 | Veronica Bayer | 106 |
| 82 | Fr. Jones | 107 |
| 82 | Dr. Anne Wallace | 107 |
| 82 | Carole Crowe | 108 |
| 82 | Stuart Mills | 109 |
| 83 | Joanne Felton | 109 |
| 83 | Sonia Tate | 110 |
| 83 | Alice Henshaw | 110 |
| 84 | Tom West | 110 |
| 84 | "Crazy Mary" | 111 |
| 85 | June Felton | 112 |
| 86 | Ed Bayer | 112 |
| 86 | Lenore Danek | 113 |
| 86 | Lori Wilson | 113 |
| 86 | Harry Stover | 114 |
| 87 | Jake Henshaw | 114 |
| 87 | Dina Chambers | 115 |
| 87 | Earl Calloway | 115 |
| 0/ | Lati Calloway | 115 |

CONTENTS

| Malcolm Chambers | | | | |
|------------------|--|--|--|--|
| Rosalinda Lopez | | | | |
| This Awful Place | | | | |
| Key Locations | | | | |
| Police Station | | | | |
| Jake's Place | | | | |
| Town Square | | | | |
| Bayer's Hotel | | | | |
| Doctor's Office | | | | |
| Valuemart | | | | |
| Stock Footage | | | | |
| Arriving in Town | | | | |
| Diner | | | | |
| Run-down Farm | | | | |
| Woods | | | | |
| Lake | | | | |
| Back Roads | | | | |
| Gas Station | | | | |
| School | | | | |
| Church | | | | |
| Junkyard | | | | |
| Playground | | | | |
| The Enemy | | | | |
| Schemes | | | | |
| The Ritual | | | | |
| The Summoning | | | | |

| 116 | Town of Woe | 125 | |
|--|---|---|--|
| 117 | Map the Breach | | |
| 118 | As Below, So Above | | |
| 118 | Local News | 127 | |
| 118 | Second meeting to | | |
| 118 | debate planning application | | |
| 118 | Local businessman's life | | |
| 119 | was an inspiration to all | 129 | |
| 119 | Vandals damage local park | 131 | |
| 119 | A great time to get involved | 131 | |
| 119 | Local boy has bright future | 134 | |
| 119 | Police refuse to comment on rumors | 134 | |
| 120 | Stress Reduction & Healing Workshop | 136 | |
| 120 | | | |
| 120 | | | |
| 120 | OPERATION PROPHET BUNCO | 138 | |
| | OPERATION PROPHET BUNCO Backstory | 138 138 | |
| 120 | | - | |
| 120 120 | Backstory | 138 | |
| 120 120 120 | Backstory Investigation Trigger | 38 38 | |
| 120 120 120 120 | Backstory Investigation Trigger Sinister Conspiracy | 38 38 38 | |
| 120 120 120 120 120 120 | Backstory Investigation Trigger Sinister Conspiracy Trail of Clues | 38 38 38 38 | |
| 120 120 120 120 120 120 121 | Backstory Investigation Trigger Sinister Conspiracy Trail of Clues Antagonist Reactions | 138 138 138 138 138 | |
| 120 120 120 120 120 120 121 121 | Backstory Investigation Trigger Sinister Conspiracy Trail of Clues Antagonist Reactions Scenes | 138 138 138 138 138 138 139 | |
| 120 120 120 120 120 120 121 121 121 | Backstory Investigation Trigger Sinister Conspiracy Trail of Clues Antagonist Reactions Scenes The Briefing | 138 138 138 138 138 138 139 139 | |
| 120 120 120 120 120 120 121 121 121 121 | Backstory Investigation Trigger Sinister Conspiracy Trail of Clues Antagonist Reactions Scenes The Briefing The Good Reverend | 138 138 138 138 138 138 139 139 140 | |
| 120 120 120 120 120 121 121 121 121 121 | Backstory Investigation Trigger Sinister Conspiracy Trail of Clues Antagonist Reactions Scenes The Briefing The Good Reverend The Visionary | 138 138 138 138 138 139 139 140 141 | |

| 25 | Victim Zero | 143 |
|----|---------------------------|-----|
| 26 | Reinterview | 144 |
| 26 | In the Trees | 144 |
| 27 | The First Disappearance | 145 |
| | Additional Raptures | 146 |
| 27 | Bones of the Raptured | 146 |
| | Attacked! | 147 |
| 29 | Dread and Swooping Shapes | 147 |
| 31 | Against the Host | 147 |
| 31 | Cell Busting | 148 |
| 34 | Veil-Out | 148 |
| 34 | | |

ADDENDA

| Investigative Ability Checklist | 149 |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| Character Matrix | 150 |
| Character Sheet | 151 |
| Scenario Worksheet | 152 |
| Adversary Record Sheet | 153 |
| Esoterror Cell Worksheet | 154 |
| Station Duty Town Sheet | 155 |
| Station Duty Scenario Worksheet | 156 |
| Station Duty Town Reference Sheet | 157 |
| | |
| Index | 158 |
| | |



PREFACE

PREFACE TO THE 2ND EDITION

S A GM, I NOTICED A PROBLEM WITH INVESTIGATIVE GAMES: systems treat information in the same way that they treat traps and treasure, that is, as something you might get if you roll the right numbers on a set of dice. Now I, like many GMs, had dealt with this by simply ignoring the rules as written, asking players for more information rolls or improvising clues on the fly to get information to the players. But, I felt, I simply shouldn't have to do this. I'm not just a GM; I'm a publisher, and, as a publisher, I had the luxury of asking Robin Laws to fix it for me.

The Esoterrorists was the first iteration of this new system, called GUMSHOE, and was created with a very particular brief in mind. Like many innovations, GUMSHOE evolved out of a fix to a specific problem, and it became much more than that.

I restricted the number of words Robin had to play with to 25,000 — a very tight brief — but I wanted a game and setting you could learn and teach quickly, a book that was affordable enough for people to try on impulse.

Out of that came the GUMSHOE system and the distinctive Esoterrorists background, which was based on Dave Allsop's disturbing World of Unremitting Horror. It supplemented Dave's vision of personal horror with a team-based approach well suited to investigative roleplay. That was the first edition, which we released in 2007.

It's become clear, though, over the years, that many players wanted more setting and background material and a more detailed explanation of the system in the core book. *The Esoterror Fact Book* detailed the setting in an in-world style, but GMs wanted more material on the background and on adventure creation in this distinctive world.

So, I commissioned Robin to write GM-facing setting material about the Ordo Veritatis and its enemies. This was designed to complement *The Esoterror Fact Book*'s in-world style rather than replace it. I also scoured other GUMSHOE games, actual play reports, and forums for nuggets of wisdom, and repurposed them for this new edition. Robin rolled in his new streamlined approach to initiative, and this is the result.

Finally, I asked the now-veteran GUMSHOE developer Gareth Hanrahan to create *Station Duty*, a setting for *Esoterrorists* more suited to sandbox-style gaming, where PCs can develop solid relationships with the locals and face the depths of smalltown horror.

I hope you'll find the new edition easy and fun to read, and that it makes GUMSHOE gaming in the world of the *Esoterrorists* horrifically gratifying.

Simon Rogers Publisher, October 2012

THE BASICS

an a proving a marca a s

You are REALITY'S LAST DEFENDERS, ELITE INVESTIGATORS combating the plots of the Esoterrorists, a loose affiliation of occult terrorists intent on tearing the fabric of the world and letting the monsters in.

THE BASICS

Unlike other investigative roleplaying games, *The Esoterrorists*' GUMSHOE rules system* ensures that the plot never grinds to a halt due to a failed die roll. As top paranormal detectives, you never fail in your areas of expertise. When necessary, you can expend extra effort to glean more from the evidence than any plodding journeyman could hope to find.

WHO ARE YOU?

You and your teammates are elite investigators drawn from various walks of life, all with a background in investigation. You may be a world-weary homicide detective, a lab-coated forensic scientist, a grizzled old-school reporter, a tweed-jacketed scholar, or even a hanger-on in the criminal underworld.

You lead a double life. Most of the time, you're an ordinary civilian, paying the rent and leading a normal existence. However, you belong to a cell of a secret, worldwide organization called the Ordo Veritatis (OV). This benevolent conspiracy, which operates with the tacit approval of the world's major powers, fights the machinations of the Esoterrorists, who seek personal power by evoking malign paranormal phenomena.

HOW DOES THE WORLD WORK?

Magic doesn't come into the world easily; it has a basic set point of sanity that's hard to tamper with. That's why ghosts and other occult manifestations are typically only encountered in certain haunted locations by highly sensitive individuals. But when people begin to doubt the sanity of their everyday world, these breaks in the fabric of reality become easier to create. Your enemies stage hauntings, create Fortean phenomena, and insert false evidence of nonexistent conspiracies into the historical record. These begin as hoaxes but, as they create mass hysteria, become real. As they peak, they spawn the so-called Creatures of Unremitting Horror, bizarre modernist monsters who must be destroyed before they become as much a part of consensus reality as lions or convenience stores.

* The name is not an acronym. It just likes the way it looks in capitals, that's all.

WHAT IS ROLEPLAYING?

This book is intended for experienced roleplayers. If you don't know what roleplaying is, how the heck did you get a copy of this book? 7

If you think this is a book about genuine, real-life supernatural phenomena or teaches you to use spells or be a real vampire, you are badly confused.

If you think roleplaying might be a cool form of entertainment but don't quite grasp the basic concept, look it up on the Internet or get a geeky friend to explain it to you.

WHO ARE YOUR ENEMIES?

The Esoterrorists are a worldwide network of misfits and rejects from various occult traditions who've banded together to enhance their power at the expense of others. When these plots succeed, the personal power of the involved Esoterrorists increases. Many use the power they glean for personal gratification, whether their tastes run toward money, drugs, or sex. Most enjoy power for its own sake, sadistically inflicting horror on an unsuspecting populace.

OTHER ANTAGONISTS

Although you often tussle with Esoterrorists, you never know at the beginning of a case just who's behind the occult events you're investigating. You may face independent cultists, lone-wolf ritualists, or free-ranging creatures spontaneously generated by the collective unease of people around them. YOUR CHARACTER

YOUR CHARACTER

HIS SECTION IS ADDRESSED TO PLAYERS AND SHOWS THEM HOW TO create their characters. GMs should read it, too.

Creating an *Esoterrorists* character is a simple threestep process. First, choose a **character concept**. Then, decide on your **investigative abilities** — they enable you to gather information and drive the plot forward. Finally, pick your **general abilities** — they help you survive while you're gathering information and solving problems. You create characters by spending build points on your character's abilities. Each ability has a numerical rating. Every rating point costs 1 build point to purchase.

STATION DUTY

If you are playing in a *Station Duty* game, please consult the character creation section of the "Station Duty" section (p. 79) before proceeding.

The GUMSHOE rules define characters by what they can accomplish in an investigative scenario. The component elements of each ability don't matter in rules terms. The rules don't care if your Forensic Accounting ability is one part native mental acuity to two parts training or vice versa, although you can mention them when describing your character to others. All that matters is how you solve cases and overcome other obstacles arising from them.

RATINGS AND POOLS

The number you assign to each ability is called a **rating**. Although you may improve it gradually over time, ratings remain static over the course of the typical game session.

Each ability has a **pool** of points, which fluctuates over the course of each session. You begin each case, or scenario, with pool points equal to your rating. You might then immediately spend some of them during a prelude phase to the investigation itself. You will definitely spend points as you conduct the investigation. At times your pool may increase, sometimes **refreshing** to equal its rating again.

The distinction between ratings and pools is a crucial one; keep it in mind as you read and interpret the GUMSHOE rules.

WHAT YOU DO

You are a member of a secret organization, the Ordo Veritatis (OV), reality's last defenders. The exact origins of the Ordo Veritatis are unknown to all but its most senior members. Field agents know that it arose in response to the nascent Esoterror movement and that its activities have on several occasions prevented Esoterrorists from decisively piercing the protective barrier between the natural and the supernatural.



AND LUNIALIS Before you start, decide why your character attracted the interest of the Ordo Veritatis in the first place. What qualifies you to conduct dangerous investigations into the supernatural? You might be an accomplished academic, a decorated cop, a

retired military officer, or even a shady character with extensive underworld contacts. The ordinary life you set out for yourself may allow you,

in tandem with some of the abilities listed below, to gather information you would not otherwise be entitled to. You do this by drawing on the contacts and resources that come with your day job. Naturally you must be careful not to alert your blissfully unaware colleagues to the true reason for your inquiries.

B ASSIGN ■ INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES

Investigative abilities are central to any GUMSHOE character; they enable you to gather information and drive the plot forward. The number of points each player spends on investigative abilities varies with the number of regularly attending players, according to the following table. The GM leads the group through the list of investigative abilities, ensuring that each one of them is covered by at least one member of the crew.

| # OF PLAYERS | INVESTIGATIVE BUILD | POINTS |
|--------------|---------------------|---------|
| 2 | 32 | |
| 3 | 24 | |
| 4 | 22 | |
| 5+ | 20 | Sale of |





Players who can only attend every now and then get the same number of investigative build points as everyone else but are not counted toward the total when deciding how many points to allocate.

FREE INVESTIGATIVE RATING

Knowledge of the history and methodology of occult practice is an essential tool in combating Esoterrorists. Every member of the Ordo Veritatis is given at least a basic grounding in it, gaining Occult Studies I for free.

WHAT GOOD ARE INVESTIGATIVE RATINGS?

Players used to the bumbling half-competence of their characters in other investigative game systems may be surprised to learn how effective even a single rating point is.

Any rating in an investigative ability indicates a high degree of professional accomplishment or impressive natural talent. If you have an ability relevant to the task at hand, you automatically succeed in discovering any information or overcoming any obstacles necessary to propel you from the current scene further into the story.

You may ask to spend points to gain **special benefits**. Sometimes the GM will offer you the chance to spend points. In other circumstances she may accept your suggestions of ways to gain special benefits. Use them wisely; spent points do not return until the next investigation begins. When creating characters, it is essential that you coordinate with your fellow players to make sure that at least one member of the group possesses each of the investigative abilities. Successful groups also ensure that the various general abilities are all accounted for. When in doubt, perform a roll-call of abilities to make sure you've covered all the abilities.

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITY BENCHMARKS

When choosing investigative abilities it is better to get a large number of abilities with fairly low ratings. Even a 1-point rating is worth having. You'll rarely want to spend more than 3 or 4 points on any one investigative ability.

WHAT DO ZERO INVESTIGATIVE RATINGS MEAN?

You must have an investigative ability to get useful information from it. However, if you have a positive rating but a zero pool, you can still get all core clues associated with the ability.



Each player gets 60 points to spend on general abilities, regardless of group size.

General abilities use different rules than investigative ones, which allow for possible failure. They help you survive while investigating. When choosing general abilities, you'll

YOUR CHARACTER

INTERPERSONAL ABILITIES AFFECT YOUR PERSONALITY

The interpersonal abilities you choose — and, perhaps more to the point, the ones you skip — say something about your character's demeanor and behavior. When your rating in an ability is 0, you can never get information or other benefits by using that persuasive tactic. So if you, as the player, are convincingly buttering up a contact but then have no Flattery to back that up, you can't succeed. This reveals something about your character's ability to impress others.

How this expresses itself is up to you. Having no Flattery, for example, might suggest that your character:

- is a lousy liar
- is too tongue-tied to let loose a flow of soothing compliments
- can't stand to cater to others' transparent emotional needs
- isn't empathetic enough to tell what those needs might be
- has an ego forbids you from shining the spotlight on anyone but yourself

Likewise, a Bullshit Detector of 0 might imply that you character is gullible, bad at reading subtle emotional cues, or prefer to take people at face value.

Intimidation 0 could suggest that you're not particularly scary, that you dislike leaning on people, or that you're so frightening that witnesses freeze up in your presence.

You can work out the implications of your interpersonal ability choices in advance. Or you can wait until your use of, or lack of, an ability comes up in play, and then explore how that manifests itself in your actual behavior.

want to concentrate your points among a few abilities, giving you comparatively higher ratings than you want in the investigative category.

Although there is no set cap on abilities, the second highest rating must be at least half that of the highest rating.

Justin wants to have a Health rating of 30. This requires him to take at least one other ability at 15. This would leave him only 15 points to spend on all of the other general abilities. Justin reconsiders, opting for a lower Health rating so he can spend his other points more freely.



FREE GENERAL RATINGS You start the game with I point each in Health and Stability.

WHAT GOOD ARE GENERAL RATINGS?

General abilities use a different set of rules and are measured on a different scale than investigative abilities. The two ability sets are handled in different ways because they fulfill distinct narrative functions. The rules governing general abilities introduce the possibility of failure into the game, creating suspense and uncertainty. Uncertain outcomes make scenes of physical action more exciting but can stop a mystery story dead if applied to the collection of information. This division may seem aesthetically weird when you first encounter it, but, as you grow used to the GUMSHOE system, you'll see that it works.

GUMSHOE focuses not on your character's innate traits but on what they can actually do in the course of a storyline. Why they can do it is up to each player. Your characters are as strong, fast, and good looking as you want them to be.

GENERAL ABILITY BENCHMARKS

A rating of 1-3 indicates that the ability is a sideline, 4-7 is solid but not off the charts, and 8 or more suggests a dedicated badassery that will be immediately apparent to observers when they see you in action.

We recommend ratings of at least 7 in core abilities, such as Health, Stability, and Shooting or Scuffling, and 4 in important ones such as Athletics, Stealth, and Surveillance. When you choose to have ratings of 0 in certain basic abilities, you're defining your character. An Athletics of 0 implies a surprising feebleness and lack of coordination for an OV agent. A Health of 1 puts you on the constant verge of hospitalization.

WHAT DO ZERO GENERAL RATINGS MEAN?

If you have no *rating* in a general ability, that is you have put no build points into it, you cannot make a test on that ability, with the exception of Shooting and Scuffling (see p. 27). That is not to say you can't do the thing at all; it's only if you want to attempt something requiring a test that you will not succeed. Your character might be able to drive, but, with a Driving rating of 0, you will not be able to deal with a car chase or potential crash. A zero pool in an ability with a positive rating allows you to test — you just won't have points to spend.

SPARE BUILD POINTS

Once all of the investigative and general abilities are covered, you are permitted, if you desire, to reserve any remaining build points to spend as situations arise during play. You may assign yourself additional abilities or increase your ratings in the ones you've chosen, as seems appropriate to your character and the situation. When you choose to do this, you are not suddenly acquiring abilities on the spot, but simply revealing for the first time what the character has been able to do all along. If your GM is running an ongoing series of *Esoterrorists* games, you will accumulate additional build points during play.

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES: ANTHROPOLOGY TO BULLSHIT DETECTOR

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES

The following abilities are the bread and butter of GUMSHOE characters.

Ability descriptions consist of a brief general description, followed by examples of their use in an investigation. Creative players should be able to propose additional uses for their abilities as unexpected situations confront their characters.

Certain specific actions may overlap between a couple of abilities. For example, you can enhance image resolution with either Data Retrieval or Photography.

Some abilities, like Research, are broadly useful and will crop up constantly. Others may be called for many times in the course of one scenario, and not at all in others. When building your character, strike a balance between the reliable workhouse abilities and their exotic, specialized counterparts.

Investigative abilities are divided into the following subgroups: Academic, Interpersonal, and Technical. The purpose of the subgroups is to allow you to quickly find the best ability for the task during play, by scanning the most likely portion of the overall list.

YOUR ORGANIZATION

The OV, as insiders call it, is organized in a cell structure to limit the potential damage of Esoterrorist infiltration. Members typically perform investigations under assumed identities, which last only for the duration of a single case. Mistakes in maintaining cover can lead to disaster: Esoterrorists love nothing better than to send assassins and creatures to torture and kill investigators' families and friends.

Teams stick together and rarely meet their peers. New teammates are shuffled in as old ones are killed. Rookies may be entirely new to the OV or transferred out of defunct teams. Briefings are conducted on site by high-ranking operatives, many of them ex-investigators. They invariably introduce themselves as Mr. (or Ms.) Verity.

ANTHROPOLOGY

(ACADEMIC)

You are an expert in the study of human cultures, from the Stone Age to the Internet Age. You can:

- identify artifacts and rituals of living cultures
- describe the customs of a foreign group or local subculture
- extrapolate the practices of an unknown culture from similar examples

ARCHAEOLOGY

(ACADEMIC)

You excavate and study the structures and artifacts of historical cultures and civilizations. You can:

- tell how long something has been buried
- identify artifacts by culture and usage
- distinguish real artifacts from fakes
- navigate inside ruins and catacombs
- describe the customs of ancient or historical cultures
- spot well-disguised graves and underground hiding places

ARCHITECTURE

You know how buildings are planned and constructed. You can:

- guess what lies around the corner while exploring an unknown structure
- judge the relative strength of building materials
- identify a building's age, architectural style, original use, and history of modifications
- ► construct stable makeshift structures
- identify elements vital to a building's structural integrity

ART HISTORY

(ACADEMIC)

(TECHNICAL)

(TECHNICAL)

You're an expert on works of art from an aesthetic and technical point of view. You can:

- distinguish real works from fakes
- ▶ tell when something has been retouched or altered
- identify the age of an object by style and materials
- call to mind historical details on artists and those around them

ASTRONOMY

You study celestial objects, including the stars, planets. You can:

- decipher astrological texts
- plot the movement of constellations
- study and debunk UFO reports

BALLISTICS

You process evidence relating to the use of firearms. You can:

- identify the caliber and type of a bullet or casing found at a crime scene
- determine if a particular gun fired a given bullet

BULLSHIT DETECTOR

(INTERPERSONAL)

You can tell when some people are lying. You must usually be interacting with them or observing them from a close distance, but sometimes you can spot liars on television, too. Unfortunately, nearly everyone lies, especially when facing possible trouble from the authorities. Sometimes you can infer why they're lying, but it's hard to reliably discern motive or get at the facts they're working to obscure. This sense doesn't tell you what they're lying about, specifically, or see through their lies to the truth.

Not all lies are verbal. You can tell when a person is attempting to project a false impression through body language.

Certain individuals may be so adept at lying that they never set off your bullshit detector. Some people believe their own falsehoods. Psychopathic personality types lie reflexively and without shame, depriving you of the telltale tics and gestures you use to sense when a person is deceiving you. Sometimes you need leverage to get information out of people who you know are lying — reinterviewing suspects in the light of additional facts is a genre staple.

(ACADEMIC)

YOUR CHARACTER

WHY NO LYING ABILITY?

Unlike many other RPG rules sets, GUMSHOE does not treat lying as an ability unto itself. Instead characters employ it as a tactic while using any of the various interpersonal abilities. With Bureaucracy, you tell functionaries what they want to hear. Using Cop Talk, you convince police officials that you're their kind of guy, and so on. There's a little bit of deception in nearly every successful interpersonal interaction — at least when you're on the job for the Ordo Veritatis.

BUREAUCRACY

(INTERPERSONAL)

You know how to navigate a bureaucratic organization, whether it's a governmental office or a large business concern. You know how to get what you want from it in an expeditious manner, and with a minimum of ruffled feathers. You can:

- ▶ convince officials to provide sensitive information
- gain credentials on false pretences
- find the person who really knows what's going on
- locate offices and files
- borrow equipment or supplies

Bureaucracy is not a catchall information-gathering ability. Bureaucrats wish to convey the impression that they are busy and harried, whether or not they actually are. Most take a profound, secret joy in directing inquiries elsewhere. When players attempt to use Bureaucracy to gain information more easily accessible via other abilities (such as Research), their contacts snidely advise them to do their own damn legwork.

If your character has a Bureaucracy rating higher than 1, you are permitted, during any scenario, to specify that your character spent some time working at an Ordo support station (see p. 36). Doing so costs 2 Bureaucracy points, which can be spent at any time during any scenario.

CHEMISTRY

You're trained in the analysis of chemical substances. You can:

- identify drugs, pharmaceuticals, toxins, and viruses among a wide variety of other materials
- match samples of dirt or vegetation from a piece of evidence to a scene

COP TALK

(INTERPERSONAL)

(TECHNICAL)

You know how to speak the lingo of police officers and make them feel confident and relaxed in your presence. You may be a current or former cop, or simply the kind of person they immediately identify as a solid, trustworthy citizen. You can:

- coolly ply cops for confidential information
- ► get excused for minor infractions
- imply that you are a colleague, authorized to participate in their cases

CRYPTOGRAPHY

(TECHNICAL)

You're an expert in the making and breaking of codes, from the simple ciphers of old-school espionage tradecraft to the supercomputer algorithms of the present day.



DATA RETRIEVAL

(TECHNICAL)

(TECHNICAL)

You use computer and electronic technology to retrieve and enhance information on hard drives and other media. You can:

- recover hidden, erased, or corrupted computer files
- increase the clarity of audio recordings, zeroing in on desired elements
- miraculously find detailed high-resolution images within a blurry video image or blurry JPEG

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

You're an expert in the study of physical documents. You can:

- determine a document's approximate age
- ▶ identify the manufacturer of paper used in a document
- tell forged documents from the real thing
- ► identify distinctive handwriting

ELECTRONIC SURVEILLANCE

- match typed documents to the typewriters that produced them
- ▶ find fingerprints on paper

(TECHNICAL)

(TECHNICAL)

You're adept at the use of sound recording equipment to gather evidence. You can:

- trace phone calls
- plant secret listening devices
- locate secret listening devices planted by others
- make high-quality audio recordings
- enhance the quality of audio recordings, isolating chosen sounds

EVIDENCE COLLECTION

You're adept at finding, bagging, and tagging important clues. You can:

- ▶ spot objects of interest at a crime scene or other investigation site
- note relationships between objects at a crime scene, reconstructing sequences of events
- store objects for forensic analysis without contaminating your samples

EXPLOSIVE DEVICES

You're an expert in bombs and booby traps. You can:

- defuse bombs and traps ►
- reconstruct exploded bombs, determining their materials, manufacture, and the sophistication of the bomb-maker
- safely construct and detonate explosive devices of your own

FINGERPRINTING

(TECHNICAL)

(TECHNICAL)

You're an expert in finding, transferring, and matching fingerprints. This includes expertise in the computer software used to compare sample fingerprints against large databases of criminal defendants and government personnel.

FLATTERY

(INTERPERSONAL)

You're good at getting people to help you by complimenting them, as subtly or blatantly as they prefer. You can get them to:

- reveal information
- perform minor favors
- regard you as trustworthy

FLIRTING

(INTERPERSONAL)

You're adept at winning cooperation from people who find you sexually attractive. You can get them to:

- reveal information
- help you in small ways
- date you

It's up to you whether a high rating in Flirting means that you are physically alluring or simply exude a sexual magnetism unrelated to your looks.

FORENSIC ACCOUNTING

You comb through financial data looking for irregularities. In the words made famous during Woodward and Bernstein's investigation of the Watergate scandal, you know how to "follow the money."You can:

- tell legitimate businesses from criminal enterprises
- spot the telltale signs of embezzlement
- track payments to their source

FORENSIC ANTHROPOLOGY

(TECHNICAL)

(ACADEMIC)

You perform autopsies on deceased subjects to determine their cause of death. In the case of death by foul play, your examination can identify:

- the nature of the weapon or weapons used
- the presence of intoxicants or other foreign substances in the bloodstream
- the contents of the victim's last meal

In many cases, you can reconstruct the sequence of events leading to the victim's death from the arrangement of wounds on the body.

You also perform DNA analysis on samples found at crime scenes, matching them to samples provided by suspects.

FORENSIC ENTOMOLOGY

You specialize in the relationship between corpses and the legions of insects who dine on them. By studying eggs and larvae in a decomposing corpse you can:

- determine approximate time of death
- identify a crime scene, in the case of a dumped body

FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY

You apply psychological insight to the solving of criminal cases. From the details of a crime scene, you can, based on past case studies of similar offenses, assemble a profile detailing the perpetrator's likely personal history, age, habits, and attitudes.

You can also glean useful information from simple observation of certain individuals, especially as they react to pressure.

HISTORY

You're an expert in recorded human history, with an emphasis on its political, military, economic and technological developments. You can:

- ► recognize obscure historical allusions
- recall capsule biographies of famous historical figures
- tell where and when an object made during historical times was fashioned
- identify the period of an article of dress or costume

IMPERSONATE

(INTERPERSONAL)

(INTERPERSONAL)

You're good at posing as another person, whether briefly misrepresenting yourself during a phone call or spending long periods undercover in a fictional identity.

Successfully disguising yourself as an actual person known to those you're interacting with is extraordinarily difficult. Brief voice-only mimicry requires a spend of at least 1. Face-to-face impersonation requires a spend of at least 2 to 3 points for every five minutes of sustained contact between you and the object of your impersonation. Especially wary or intelligent subjects cost more to hoodwink than dull-witted walk-on characters.

INTERROGATION

(INTERPERSONAL) You're trained in extracting information from suspects and

witnesses in the context of a formal police-style interview. This must take place in an official setting, where the subject is confined or feels under threat of confinement, and recognizes your authority (whether real or feigned.)

INTIMIDATION

You elicit cooperation from suspects by seeming physically imposing, invading their personal space, and adopting a psychologically commanding manner. Intimidation may involve implied or direct threats of physical violence but is just as often an act of mental dominance. You can:

- gain information ►
- inspire the subject to leave the area
- quell a subject's desire to attempt violence against you or others

(TECHNICAL)

BUREAUCRACY TO INDIMIDATION

(ACADEMIC)

(ACADEMIC)

YOUR CHARACTER

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

This ability is specific to local characters in a *Station Duty* campaign (see p. 83 for more details).

LANGUAGES

(ACADEMIC)

For each rating point in Languages, you are verbally fluent and literate in one language other than your native tongue. You may specify these when you create your character or choose opportunistically in the course of play, revealing that you just happen to speak Javanese when circumstances require it. You are not learning the language spontaneously but revealing a hitherto unmentioned fact about your character. You may elect to be literate in an ancient language which is no longer spoken.

LAW

(ACADEMIC)

You are familiar with the criminal and civil laws of your home jurisdiction and broadly acquainted with foreign legal systems. At a rating of 2 or more, you are a bar-certified attorney. You can:

- ► assess the legal risks attendant on any course of action
- understand lawyerly jargon
- argue with police and prosecutors

LINGUISTICS

(ACADEMIC)

You are an expert in the principles and structures underlying languages. You can probably speak other Languages, but that is a separate ability that must be purchased separately. You can:

- given a large enough sample of text, decipher the basic meaning of an unknown language
- identify the languages most similar to an unknown language
- ▶ identify artificial, alien, and made-up languages

NATURAL HISTORY

(ACADEMIC)

You study the evolution, behavior, and biology of plants and animals. You can:

- tell when an animal is behaving strangely
- tell whether an animal or plant is natural to a given area
- identify an animal from samples of its hair, blood, bones, or other tissue
- identify a plant from a small sample

NEGOTIATION

(INTERPERSONAL)

You are an expert in making deals with others, convincing them that the best arrangement for you is also the best for them. You can:

- haggle for goods and services
- mediate hostage situations
- swap favors or information with others

OCCULT STUDIES

(ACADEMIC)

You're an expert in the historical study of magic, superstition, and hermetic practice from the Stone Age to the present. From Satanists to the Golden Dawn, you know the dates, the places, the controversies, and the telling anecdotes. You can:

- identify the cultural traditions informing a ritual from examining its physical aftermath
- supply historical facts concerning various occult traditions

ORDO VERITATIS AND THE LAW

You and your teammates operate in a hazy world of extralegal authority. You may be authorities of various sorts in your day-to-day professional lives, from cops to district attorneys. Sometimes you can quietly use the resources of these jobs in your capacity as fighters against the Esoterrorists. On other occasions you'll work purely as civilians. Individuals with police powers, of arrest for example, may only exercise them in their jurisdictions, and only in a way that can be explained away to the mundane authorities.

Patrons and accomplices of the Ordo Veritatis exist throughout the world's power structures, particularly in the industrialized world. Although you can't flout the law with impunity or obviously be seen to commit major crimes, you can expect some behind-the-scenes leeway to be granted when circumstances force you to bend procedure to keep a lid on your occult enemies.

In general, the rules concerning illegal activity are as follows:

- I. Don't break the law unless you absolutely have to.
- **2.** Break rule one only when the safety or sanity of the public is at stake, and only if the cost of inaction is significantly greater than that of action.
- 3. Don't tell anyone about the Ordo Veritatis. If they already know, they'll understand.
- If you are imprisoned or detained by the rightful authorities of a major nation, sit tight and we'll get you out.
- 5. If you are imprisoned or detained elsewhere, or by illegitimate or corrupt authorities, do your best to escape. Knowingly or not, they're probably working at the behest of the Esoterrorists.
- 6. Don't get caught.
- guess the intended effect of a ritual from its physical aftermath
- identify occult activities as the work of informed practitioners, teenage posers, or bona fide Esoterrorists

Your knowledge of the occult is that of a detached, even disapproving, outsider. This ability does not allow you to work magic or summon supernatural entities. Doing either of these things is bad, the work of Esoterrorists. It weakens the fabric of reality and warps the practitioner's psyche. You can, at best, fake your way through a ritual while attempting to pass yourself off as a believer. Even in this situation, your actions do not evoke supernatural effects. Your covertly hostile presence may, in fact, be enough to prevent an Esoterror ritual from achieving efficacy. As mentioned earlier, all OV agents get Occult Studies 1

for free.



PATHOLOGY

(ACADEMIC)

You are trained in carrying out medical examinations of living human subjects and forming diagnoses based on your findings. You can:

- diagnose probable causes of sickness or injury
- identify the extent and cause of an unconscious person's trauma
- detect when a person is suffering from a physically debilitating condition such as drug addiction, pregnancy, or malnutrition
- establish a person's general level of health
- identify medical abnormalities

If you have 8 or more points in Medic, you get Pathology 1 for free.

PHOTOGRAPHY

(TECHNICAL)

You're proficient in the use of cameras, including still and video photography. You can:

- take useful visual records of crime scenes
- spot manual retouching or digital manipulation in a photographic or video image
- realistically retouch and manipulate images

REASSURANCE

(INTERPERSONAL)

You get people to do what you want by putting them at ease. You can:

- elicit information and minor favors
- allay fear or panic in others
- instill a sense of calm during a crisis

RESEARCH

(ACADEMIC)

You know how to find factual information from books, records, and official sources. You're as comfortable with a card catalogue and fiche reader as with an Internet search engine. The contacts file on your personal digital assistant brims with phone numbers of exotic and useful contacts.

STREETWISE

You know how to behave among crooks, gangbangers, druggies, hookers, and other habitués of the criminal underworld. You can:

- deploy criminal etiquette to avoid fights and conflicts
- identify unsafe locations and dangerous people
- gather underworld rumors

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

By studying the content of texts (as opposed to the physical characteristics of documents) you can draw reliable inferences about their authorship. You can:

- determine if an anonymous text is the work of a known author, based on samples of that author's work
- determine the era in which a text was written
- identify the writer's region and level of education
- tell a real work by an author from a false one

TRIVIA

You're a font of apparently useless information that would stand you in good stead as a contestant on a quiz show. You're especially good in the following spheres of interest:

- celebrities and entertainment
 sports records and statistics
- geography
- arts and letters
- names in the news

This catchall ability also allows you to know any obscure fact not covered by another GUMSHOE ability. (In moments of improvisatory desperation, your GM may allow you to overlap with abilities which none of the players at the current session possess or which no one is thinking to use.)

THE VEIL-OUT

An investigative team's last responsibility on a completed case is to lay out a plan for the Veil-Out. This is the official coverup for governmental and media consumption. The team must provide a plausible explanation for all previously publicized aspects of the case. A well-planned Veil-Out reduces public anxiety, debunking a case's supernatural elements and downplaying its distressing atrocities. The government and public are both willing participants in any Veil-Out. Authorities hate to admit to the existence of horrible forces they can't control. Ordinary people don't want to believe in the uncanny or gaze too deeply into the abyss of human depravity.

(ACADEMIC)

(ACADEMIC)

(INTERPERSONAL)

GENERAL ABILITIES

This section describes what you can do with the various general abilities.

ATHLETICS

Athletics allows you to perform general acts of physical derringdo, from running to jumping to dodging oncoming or falling objects. Any physical action not covered by another ability probably falls under the rubric of Athletics.

If your Athletics rating is 8 or more, your Hit Threshold, the Target Number your opponents use when attempting to hit you in combat, is 4. Otherwise, your Hit Threshold is 3.

DRIVING

You're a skilled defensive driver, capable of wringing high performance from even the most recalcitrant automobile, pickup truck, or van. You can:

- evade or conduct pursuit
- avoid collisions, or minimize damage from collisions
- spot tampering with a vehicle
- conduct emergency repairs

For every additional rating point in Driving, you may add an additional vehicle type to your repertoire. These include motorcycle, transport truck, helicopter, or airplane. You may choose exotic types, like hovercrafts and tanks, although these are unlikely to see regular use in an investigation-based game.

FILCH

Your nimble fingers allow you to unobtrusively manipulate small objects. You can:

- pilfer clues from a crime scene under the very noses of unsuspecting authorities
- pick pockets
- plant objects on unsuspecting subjects

HEALTH

Health measures your ability to sustain injuries, resist infection, and survive the effects of toxins*. When you get hit in the course of a fight, your Health pool is diminished. A higher Health pool allows you to stay in a fight longer before succumbing to your injuries.

When your Health pool is depleted, you may be dazed, wounded, or pushing up the daisies. For more on this, see "Exhaustion, Injury and Gruesome Death," p. 27.

INFILTRATION

You're good at placing yourself inside places you have no right to be. You can:

- ► pick locks
- deactivate or evade security systems
- ▶ move silently
- find suitable places for forced entry and use them

Despite its name, Infiltration is as useful for getting out of places undetected as it is for getting into them.

MECHANICS

You're good at building, repairing, and disabling devices, from classic pit-and-pendulum traps to DVD players. Given the right components, you can create jury-rigged devices from odd bits of scrap. Mechanics doubles as an investigative ability when used to:

- evaluate the quality of workmanship used to create an item
- determine the identity of a handmade item's maker by comparing it to known work by that individual

MEDIC

You can perform first aid on sick or injured individuals. For more on the use of this ability, see p. 28.

If you have 8 or more points in Medic, you get 1 point in Pathology.

INVESTIGATIVE PROTOCOLS

The Order can provide its operatives with substantial resources when necessary. For security reasons, investigators are, however, expected to maintain minimal contact with their cell leaders or Mr.Verity throughout the course of a case. It is better to exhibit a high level of Preparedness than to send in a field requisition for more equipment.

Investigators are fact finders first and enforcers of the unwritten laws of civilization second. Once they've determined the dimensions of an Esoterror plot, identifying its principals and their bases of operation, they can step aside and call for back up. When the perpetrators are easily taken down, the team may perform mop-up duties on its own. In the case of large concentrations of enemies or supernatural creatures, they instead call in Ordo Veritatis Special Suppression Forces (SSF)*. These heavily armed paramilitary units perform the necessary killing, destroying, and burning, while the team heads back to a rendezvous point for debriefing. Efficient and overwhelming force is a hallmark of an SSF operation. Where possible, investigators rely on bombs and cruise missiles, exterminating from afar.

* Special Suppression Forces are detailed in The Esoterror Factbook, which also includes crunchy combat options.

* Health can be viewed in a more abstract way too; see p. 33.

PREPAREDNESS

You expertly anticipate the needs of any mission by packing a kit efficiently arranged with necessary gear. Assuming you have immediate access to your kit, you can produce whatever object the team needs to overcome an obstacle. You make a simple test (p. 24); if you succeed, you have the item you want. You needn't do this in advance of the adventure but can dig into your kit bag (provided you're able to get to it) as the need arises.

Items of obvious utility to a paranormal investigation do not require a test. These include but are not limited to note paper, writing implements, a laptop computer, a PDA with wireless Internet access, a mini USB drive, a cell phone, various types of tape, common tools and hardware, light weapons, flashlights of various sizes, chem lights, batteries, magnifying glasses, a thermometer, and a no-frills audio recording device.

The utility of traditional anti-supernatural accoutrements such as crucifixes, holy water, and silver bullets is a matter of great debate within the Ordo Veritatis. Whether you choose to include them in your basic kit reveals your attitude toward the supernatural. Is it purely the work of the Esoterrorists, or are there other unnatural forces out there? Decide for yourself, and pack wisely.

Other abilities imply the possession of basic gear suitable to their core tasks. Characters with Medic have their own first aid kits; Photographers come with cameras and accessories. If you have Shooting, you have a gun, and so on. Preparedness does not intrude into their territory. It covers general-purpose investigative equipment, plus oddball items that suddenly come in handy in the course of the story.

The sorts of items you can produce at a moment's notice depend not on your rating or pool, but on narrative credibility. If the GM determines that your possession of an item would seem ludicrous or out of genre, you don't get to roll for it. You simply don't have it. Any item which elicits a laugh from the group when suggested is probably out of bounds.

Inappropriate use of the Preparedness ability is like pornography. Your GM will know it when she sees it.

SCUFFLING

You can hold your own in a hand-to-hand fight, whether you wish to kill, knock out, restrain, or evade your opponent.

SHRINK

You can provide comfort, perspective, and solace to the mentally troubled. You may be a therapist or counselor, a priest or pastor, or just an empathetic and intuitive individual. You can restore panicked characters to a state of calm and treat any long-term mental illnesses they accrue in the course of their investigations.

SHOOTING

You are adept with firearms.



STABILITY

Jarring or stressful events can exert a damaging long-term psychological toll. Confrontation with supernatural Esoterrorist manifestations can provoke outright madness. Your Stability rating indicates your resistance to mental trauma. If you are playing a *Station Duty* game, you may be asked to assign Sources of Stability (see p. 81).

You get Stability 1 for free.

SURVEILLANCE

You're good at following suspects without revealing your presence. You can:

- guide a team to follow a suspect for short periods, handing off to the next in sequence, so the subject doesn't catch on
- use telescopic viewing equipment to keep watch on a target from a distance
- find undetectable vantage points
- ▶ hide in plain sight
- perceive (either with sight or other senses) potential hazards to yourself or others

This ability incorporates the Sense Trouble ability used in other GUMSHOE settings.

If you have 8 or more points in Surveillance, you get 1 point in the investigative ability Electronic Surveillance.

THE ESOTERRORISTS

18

YOUR CHARACTER

| | INVESTIGATIVE | | GENERAL |
|---------------------|-------------------|---|--------------|
| ACADEMIC | INTERPERSONAL | TECHNICAL | Athletics |
| Anthropology | Bullshit Detector | Astronomy | Driving |
| Archaeology | Bureaucracy | Ballistics | Filch |
| Architecture | Cop Talk | Chemistry | Health |
| Art History | Flattery | Cryptography | Infiltration |
| Forensic Accounting | Flirting | Data Retrieval | Mechanics |
| Forensic Psychology | Impersonate | Document Analysis | Medic 🕺 |
| History | Interrogation | Electronic Surveillance | Preparedness |
| Languages | Intimidation | Evidence Collection | Scuffling |
| Law | Negotiation | Explosive Devices | Shooting |
| Linguistics | Reassurance | Fingerprinting | Shrink |
| Local Knowledge* | Streetwise | Forensic Anthropology | Stability |
| Natural History | | Forensic Entomology | Surveillance |
| Occult Studies | | Photography | |
| Pathology | | | |
| Research | | a formation of the second s | |
| Textual Analysis | | | |
| Trivia | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |



HIS CHAPTER DESCRIBES THE BASIC GUMSHOE RULES SYSTEM and is addressed to players and GM alike. But first bear with us for a little explanatory theory.

THE GUMSHOE RULES SYSTE

WHY THIS GAME EXISTS

GUMSHOE speeds and streamlines the time-honored form of the investigative roleplaying game. The central question a traditional RPG asks is:

Will the heroes get the information they need?

Assuming that they look in the right place and apply appropriate abilities to the task, GUMSHOE ensures that the heroes get the basic clues they need to move through the story. The question it asks is:

What will the heroes do with the information once they've got it?

If you think about it, this is how the source materials we base our mystery scenarios on handle clues. You don't see the forensic techies on CSI failing to successfully use their lab equipment or Sherlock Holmes stymied and unable to move forward because he blew his Zoology roll.

You don't see this because, in a story, failure to gain information is rarely more interesting than getting it. New information opens up new narrative possibilities, new choices, and new actions for the characters. Failure to get information is a null result that takes you nowhere.

In a fictional procedural, whether it's a mystery novel or an episode of a cop show, the emphasis isn't on finding the clues in the first place. When it really matters, you may get a paragraph telling you how difficult the search was or a montage of a CSI team tossing an apartment. But the action really starts after the clues are gathered.

Investigative scenarios are not about finding clues; they're about interpreting the clues you do find.

GUMSHOE, therefore, makes the finding of clues all but automatic, as long as you get to the right place in the story and have the right ability. That's when the fun part begins, when the players try to put the components of the puzzle together.

That's hard enough for a group of armchair detectives, without withholding half the pieces from them.

When you do see information withheld from characters, it's seldom portrayed as a failure on the part of the competent factgathering heroes. Instead, the writers show an external force preventing them from applying their abilities. In an investigativehorror story, you might get the interdimensional monster that can bend, and therefore obscure, reality. Information is only withheld when it makes the story more interesting — usually by placing the heroes at a handicap while they move forward in the storyline. In GUMSHOE terms, they're not trying to get an available clue and failing; they're using an ability for which no clue is available.

Historically, story-based roleplaying, of which investigative games were an early if not the earliest example, evolved from dungeon-bashing campaigns. They treat clues the same way that dungeon games treat treasure. You have to search for the clue that takes you on to the next scene. If you roll well, you get the clue. If not, you don't — and the story grinds to a halt.

However, treasure gathering isn't the main event in a dungeon game. There, the central activity is killing the monsters and enemies who live in the dungeon. The treasurefinding phase comes afterwards, as a mere reward. If you don't get all the treasure in a room, you lose out a bit, but the story keeps going, as you tromp down the hallway to the next monster-filled chamber.

Imagine a dungeon game where you either have to roll well to find another room to plunder or sit around feeling frustrated and bored.

Many of our favorite roleplaying games use the traditional roll-to-get-a-clue model. You may be lucky enough to play in them without ever seeing your game grind to a halt after a failed information roll. Perhaps your GM, or the scenario designer, has carefully crafted the adventure so that you never have to get any specific clue to advance the story.

More likely, your GM adjusts on the fly to your failed rolls, creating elaborate work-arounds that get you the same information by different means. When you think about it, these runaround moments are essentially time killers. They bring about a predetermined, necessary result while giving you the illusion of randomness and chance. GUMSHOE cuts out these filler moments in favor of scenes that actually advance the story. With the time saved, you can construct more detailed, compelling mysteries for the players to sort out. That's where the streamlining comes in.

If you've never had a game stop dead on a missed clue, you may naturally figure that it never happens to anyone. Having run GMing seminars at conventions for years, I can assure you that this is not the case. People come up to me all the time to share their horror stories of games that literally go nowhere on a blown spot test. This should not be surprising. GMs are doing what the rules tell them to do, failing to see the unwritten rule

THE GUMSHOE RULES SYSTEM

THE TRADITIONAL WORK-AROUND

Some GMs of investigative games have responded to secondhand descriptions of GUMSHOE by saying that, because it ensures that players always get the clues they need, it does what they are already doing. I wonder to what extent this assertion matches reality. When a game design provides a rule, that rule tends to get used, even when it shouldn't. Its use occurs reflexively, even invisibly.

The crystal ball I use to peer into other peoples' houses while they GM is in the shop for repairs, so I guess I can't conclusively say that commenters are misdescribing their own play styles. However, my bet would be that most of them are:

- putting absolutely crucial information (what in GUMSHOE are called core clues) out in plain sight, with no ability use (and therefore no roll) required. In other words, they break the rules as written to achieve the desired result*
- employing the above-mentioned work-around, continually finding new ways to reveal the same information, until somebody finally gets the needed roll
- and

or

still requiring rolls for less essential clues

We have probably abetted this misperception by emphasizing the fact that GUMSHOE never leaves you stuck on a failed die roll. The traditional ability roll method tends not to leave you stuck in practice because GMs have grown used to working around the rules as written. For those folks, the value of the GUMSHOE approach is not that it does something they can't or haven't done before, but that it does so with smooth and seamless efficiency. Why should you have to work around? It's not only what it does but how it does it.

* Publisher's note: I've heard this workaround called "GUMSHOE'ing it"

that they should then spend five to twenty minutes of game time introducing a work-around.

GUMSHOE gives you the rules you should actually use as written, skipping the workaround.

But even if you've never noticed this problem, play it because it focuses and streamlines play, eliminating the elaborate work-arounds your GM has to use to make the missed information rolls invisible to you. It replaces these moments of circular plotting with more interesting scenes that move the story forward.*

 Publisher's note: the GUMSHOE way of acquiring clues also differentiates the feel of play from dice roll-based games in a subtle way.

MYSTERY STRUCTURE

Every investigative scenario begins with a crime or conspiracy committed by a group of antagonists. The bad guys do something bad. The player characters must figure out who did it and put a stop to their activities.

If you use the GUMSHOE rules for straight-up crime drama, the team investigates a crime, finds out who did it, and puts the culprits under arrest.

In the *Esoterrorists* setting, the team investigates an occult conspiracy, finds out who did it and why, and takes action to end the occult manifestations. The investigators may detain or kill the Esoterrorists behind it. They may destroy any supernatural creatures or effects generated by the conspiracy. Or they might turn over the information gained in their investigation to a specialized Ordo Veritatis clean-up team, who ruthlessly and efficiently disposes of the guilty parties and their workings.

Your GM designs each scenario by creating an investigation trigger, a sinister conspiracy, and a trail of clues.

The investigation trigger. This is the event, often a gruesome crime, that attracts the attention of the Ordo Veritatis, resulting in the initiation of an investigation. Some examples trigger events are as follows:

- the discovery of a murder victim, obviously slain during a ritualistic killing
- the discovery of a corpse slain by supernatural means, perhaps by a creature
- sightings of supernatural creatures or phenomena
- the apparently mundane death of an Ordo Veritatis member or ally

The sinister conspiracy. This sets out who the bad guys are, what they've done so far, what they're trying to do, and how the investigation trigger fits into the overall scheme. The GM also determines what has to happen to prevent the plot from going forward. This, unknown to the players, is their victory condition — what they have to do to thwart the bad guys and bring the story to a positive conclusion.

Once the GM has the logic of the story worked out from the villain's point of view, she then thinks in reverse, designing a **trail of clues** leading from the investigation trigger to an understanding of the sinister plot and its players, sufficient to get to work destroying it.

Optionally, the GM may also plan a series of **antagonist reactions**. These lay out what the bad guys do when they find out that they're being investigated. The GM determines what conditions trigger them, and what the antagonists attempt to do. These may include further crimes, giving the team more to investigate. They may try to destroy evidence, hinder the investigation by planting false leads, or to intimidate or dispose of potential witnesses, including accomplices they no longer trust. They may attack the investigators. Foolish, overconfident, or risktaking antagonists may take them on directly. Clever antagonists will strike from a distance, taking great pains to cover their tracks.



MYSTERY STRUCTURE

MUNDANE MYSTERIES

The scenario structure given in the main text assumes you're using the *Esoterror* background or a similar setting of occult investigation.

Ordinary crime dramas may call for a simpler structure. The bad guys could still be furthering a sinister plot, or they may be doing nothing after committing the triggering crime other than hoping that the investigators don't catch up with them. In this case there is no ongoing conspiracy to disrupt. To achieve victory and bring the scenario to a successful conclusion, the investigators need merely prove their case against the criminals. The climactic scene might involve wringing a confession from the wrongdoer or provoking the revelation of the crucial bit of evidence which will ensure a conviction.

FROM STRUCTURE TO STORY

The GM's structure notes are not a story. The story occurs as you, the team of players, bring the structure to life through the actions of your characters. The story proceeds from scene to scene, where you determine the pace, discovering clues and putting them together. Your characters interact with locations, gathering physical evidence, and supporting characters run by the GM, gathering expert and eyewitness testimony.

The first scene presents the mystery you have to solve. You then perform legwork, collecting information that tells you

more about the case. Each scene contains information pointing to a new scene. Certain scenes may put a new twist on the investigation, as the initial mystery turns out to be just one aspect of a much bigger story. As clues accumulate, a picture of the case emerges, until your characters arrive at a climactic scene, where all is revealed and the bad guys are confronted. A wrap-up scene accounts for loose ends and shows the consequences of your success — or, in rare instances, failure. (Why is failure possible at all? Its possibility creates urgency and suspense.)

To move from scene to scene, and to solve the overall mystery, you must gather clues. They fuel your forward momentum.

TIP FOR PLAYERS: CONTAINING SPECULATION

Investigative scenarios often bog down into speculative debate between players about what *could* be happening. Many things *can* be happening, but only one thing *is*. If more than one possible explanation ties together the clues you have so far, you need more clues.

Whenever you get stuck, get out and gather more information.

GATHERING CLUES

Gathering clues is simple. All you have to do is 1) get yourself into a scene where relevant information can be gathered, 2) have the right ability to discover the clue, and 3) tell the GM that you're using it. As long as you do these three things, you will never fail to gain a piece of necessary information. It is never dependent on a die roll. If you ask for it, you will get it.

You can specify exactly what you intend to achieve: "I use Textual Analysis to determine if the memo was really written by Danziger."

Or you can engage in a more general informational fishing expedition: "I use Evidence Collection to search the crime scene."

If your suggested action corresponds to a clue in the scenario notes, the GM provides you the information arising from the clue.

Intrepid investigator Stig Thompson is on the trail of a roving tribe of high-tech cannibals. He searches a section of forested land off the highway for evidence of their presence. His player, Justin, says, "I put my video camera in infrared mode and scan the area for heat traces." This is all he needs to do to get the information he needs to proceed to the next scene, a confrontation with the cannibals in their encampment. "Blobs of heat energy pop up to your right, about a hundred yards away. It looks like there's four or five people, appearing and disappearing behind a barrier."

Some clues would be obvious to a trained investigator immediately upon entering a scene. These passive clues are provided by the GM without prompting. Scenarios suggest which clues are passive and which are active, but your GM will adjust these in play depending on how much guidance you seem to need. On a night when you're cooking with gas, the GM will sit back and let you prompt her for **passive clues**. When you're bogging down, she may volunteer what would normally be **active clues**.

CORE CLUES

For each scene, the GM designates a **core clue**. This is the clue you absolutely need to move to the next scene, and thus to complete the entire investigation. GMs will avoid making core clues available only with the use of obscure investigative abilities. (For that matter, the character creation system is set up so that the group as a whole will have access to all, or nearly all, of these abilities.) The ability the GM designates is just one possibility, not a straightjacket — if players come up with another plausible method, the GM should give out the information. Core clues never require a spend.

SPECIAL BENEFITS

Certain scenes allow you to gain **special benefits** by spending points from the relevant investigative ability pool. During your first few scenarios, your GM will offer you the opportunity to spend additional points as you uncover these clues. After that

NOTE THE CLUES

We've found in actual play that it's best that at least one player is taking notes of active leads; in a standard GUMSHOE game, players should either be following or finding active leads. I haven't found a group where at least one person isn't keen to do this.

it's also up to you to ask if it there's anything to be gained by spending extra time or effort on a given clue. You can even propose specific ways to improve your already good result; if your suggestion is persuasive or entertaining, the GM may award you a special benefit not mentioned in her scenario notes.

Each benefit costs either 1 or 2 points from the relevant pool, depending on the difficulty of the additional action and the scope of the reward. When asking you if you want to purchase the benefit, the GM always tells you how much it will cost. Additional information gained provides flavor but is never required to solve the case or move on to a new scene. Often it makes the character seem clever, powerful, or heroic. It may grant you benefits useful later in the scenario, frequently by making a favorable impression on supporting characters. The benefit may be helpful in arranging the veil-out, the all-important Ordo Veritatis coverup undertaken at the conclusion of an investigation into the supernatural. It may allow you to leap forward into the story by gaining a clue that would otherwise only become apparent in a later scene. On occasion, the additional information adds an emotional dimension to the story or ties into the character's past history or civilian life. If you think of your GUMSHOE game as a TV series, an extra benefit gives the actor playing your character a juicy spotlight scene.

"Can I tell what kind of barrier they're behind?" asks Justin. The GM knows that it's the cannibals' tricked-out recreational vehicle. This information isn't necessary to move forward, and, in fact, Stig will stumble across it in a moment if he keeps going toward the cannibal camp. But it would be mighty impressive, in a Sherlock Holmes kind of way, if he could answer that question now.

"Do you want to spend a Photography point?" asks the GM. Justin agrees and reduces his pool from its maximum of 3, down to 2. Justin has already established that in Stig's civilian life, he's an electronics freak and rabid early adopter who pays for his gear with a variety of oddball freelance gigs. This gives the GM an opening to justify Stig's impressive insight while also giving him a distinctive character moment.

The GM explains as follows: "The contours are unmistakably familiar to you from the time when you were hired to shoot footage at the New Mexico RV Show. It's a luxury motor home, a 2006 Patriot from Beaver Motor Coaches. You remember the price tag on one of those puppies. Over three hundred grand."

Stig whistles through his teeth. "These aren't your father's hillbilly cannibal cultists," he says.

ZERO-POINT CLUES + INCONSPICUOUS CLUSE



The act of spending points for benefits is called a **spend**. The GM's scenario notes may specify that you get Benefit x for a 1-point spend or Benefit y for a 2-point spend. Sometimes minor non-core information is available at no cost.

GMs of great mental agility who feel comfortable granting their players influence over the details of the narrative may allow them to specify the details of a special benefit. If you wish to make a spend in a situation where the GM has no special benefit to offer you, and cannot think of one that pertains at all to the investigation, you do not lose the points you wish to spend.

ZERO-POINT CLUES

Not all free information is a core clue. If you have a rating in an ability, your character is highly skilled in that ability, and the GM will give you a lot of relevant information without any spend — anything a character with that ability would know.

INCONSPICUOUS CLUES

Sometimes the characters instinctively notice something without actively looking for it. Often this situation occurs in places they're moving through casually and don't regard as scenes in need of intensive searching. The team might pass by a concealed door, spot a droplet of blood on the marble of an immaculate hotel lobby, or approach a vehicle with a bomb planted beneath it. Interpersonal abilities can also be used to find inconspicuous clues. The classic example is of a character whose demeanor or behavioral tics establish them as suspicious.

EXAMPLE SPECIAL BENEFITS

Here are some special benefits you might get from investigative point spends.

The benefit gives you an advantage in a future contest of general abilities.

- You see that your vehicle has been sabotaged before you fire up its engines.
- CCTV footage shows that the internment camp has a gap in the fence.
- The plans reveal that, to avoid triggering the bomb, you must keep it horizontal.

The benefit gives a supporting characters a favorable impression of you.

- You recognize and recover stolen artwork for the original owner, who will then be more inclined to help you.
- You spend points to discover a hidden room where there is a hostage who can either give clues or even help with general abilities.
- Once you find the hostage, you spend Reassurance to calm his nerves and aid with the veil-out.
- You recruit an OV asset.

The benefit can lead to a flashback scene.

You find the body of an old colleague and remember that she was a good agent who went missing after a bungled OV operation.

a Data Retrieval spend allows you to specify that you coded a software firewall which stands between you and the Esoterror cell leader's cloud data.

Point spends can help you resolve moral dilemmas or avoid reputation-smirching incidents.

- Intimidating a local might net a core clue for free, but a two point Reassurance spend on the same witness could get you the same information without blackening your name.
- A little Flirting with the witness to one of your recent infractions encourages her to keep the incident to herself.

Extra point spends might speed up an investigation.

- A Forensic Anthropology spend lets you run all of the DNA samples you gathered in half an hour, instead of half a day.
- A Trivia spend means that you can rattle off an obscure piece of celebrity biography off the top of your head rather than visibly consulting your iPhone.
- A spend might allow you to stretch the definition of the ability you're using, granting you a core clue that would ordinarily be gained with a different ability than the one you have.

One of the most important uses of special benefits spends is enacting the Veil-Out (p. 42).

- You can plant or hide physical and data evidence.
- You can persuade people to keep quiet about the truth or feed them a different version of events.
- You can use technical abilities to create plausible theories to explain Esoterror activity.

THE GUMSHOE RULES SYSTEM

It's unreasonable to expect players to ask to use their various abilities in what appears to be an innocuous transitional scene. Otherwise they'd have to spend minutes of game time with every change of scene, running down their abilities in obsessive checklist fashion. That way madness lies.

Instead the GM asks which character has the highest current pool in the ability in question. (When in doubt for what ability to use for a basic search, the GM defaults to Evidence Collection.)

If two or more pools are equal, it goes to the one with the highest rating. If ratings are also equal, their characters find the clue at the same time.

Stig visits the hospital to get his lip stitched up after a scuffle with a young cannibal. His pal Mitchell Blunt waits with him. The doctor in the ER is a cannibal, too, and intends to drug Stig and have him hauled off to his favorite butcher's shop. The GM decides that the Forensic Psychology ability will alert them to a sense of predatory anticipation underlying the doctor's wearily professional demeanor. Both characters have the skill; Stig has 2 points in his pool, while Mitchell has 3.

"Mitchell," says the GM, "you can't put your finger on it, but there's something hinky about the doctor. He's got what Shakespeare would call a lean and hungry look."

SIMPLE SEARCHES

Many clues can be found without any ability whatsoever. If an ordinary person could credibly find a clue simply by looking in a specified place, the clue discovery occurs automatically. You, the reader, wouldn't need to be a trained investigator to find a bloody footprint on the carpet in your living room or notice a manila envelope taped to the underside of a table at the local pub. By that same logic, characters don't require specific abilities to find them, either. When players specify that they're searching an area for clues, they're performing what we call a **simple search**.

Vary the way you run simple searches according to pacing needs and the preferences of your group. Some players like to feel that their characters are interacting with the imaginary environment. To suit them, use a call-and-response format, describing the scene in a way that suggests places to look. The player prompts back by zeroing in on a detail, at which point you reveal the clue:

YOU: Beside the window stands a rolltop desk. PLAYER: I look inside! YOU: You find an album full of old photographs.

At other times, or for players less interested in these small moments of discovery, you might cut straight to the chase:

You: You find an album full of old photographs in the rolltop desk.

In the first case, the player who first voices interest in the detail finds the clue. In the second, at your discretion, it goes to:

- the character to whom the clue seems most thematically suited (for example, if you've established as a running motif that Agent Jenkins always stumbles on the disgusting clues, and this clue is disgusting, tell his player that he's once again stepped in it)
- a player who hasn't had a win or spotlight time for a while
- the character with the highest Evidence Collection rating



A TEST OCCURS WHEN THE OUTCOME OF AN ABILITY USE IS IN DOUBT. Tests apply to general abilities only. Unlike information gathering attempts, tests carry a fairly high chance of failure. They may portend dire consequences if you lose, provide advantages if you win, or both.

Even in the case of general abilities, the GM should call for tests only at dramatically important points in the story, and for tasks of exceptional difficulty. Most general ability uses should allow automatic successes, with possible bonuses on point spends, just like investigative abilities.

DIE ROLLS

All die rolls in GUMSHOE use a single ordinary (six-sided) die.

There are two types of test: simple tests and contests.

SIMPLE TESTS

A simple test occurs when the character attempts an action without active resistance from another person or entity. Examples include driving a treacherous road, jumping a gorge, sneaking into an unguarded building, binding a wound, shooting a target, disconnecting a security system, or remaining sane in the face of creeping supernatural horror.

The GM determines how hard any given action is by assigning it a Difficulty Number ranging from 2 to 8, where 2 offers only a slim chance of failure and 8 verges on the impossible. The player rolls a single die; if the result is equal to

TESTS: SIMPLE TESTS, PIGGYBACKING + COOPERATION 2

DIFFICULTY NUMBERS AND STORY PACING

Just as the GUMSHOE system keeps the story moving by making all crucial clues accessible to the characters, GMs must ensure that tests and contests essential to forward narrative momentum can be easily overcome. Assign relatively low Difficulty Numbers of 4 or less to these crucial plot points. Reserve especially hard Difficulty Numbers for obstacles which provide interesting but nonessential benefits.

For example, if the characters have to sneak into the cannibal campground in order to stage the final confrontation, assign the relatively low Difficulty Number of 4 to the task. If it seems to the characters that they ought to have a tougher time of it, insert a detail justifying their ease of success. The cannibal assigned to patrol duty might be found passed out at his post, say.

YOU SUCCEED WHEN YOU FAIL

Where it is essential to overcome an obstacle in order to reach a core scene, and the obstacle requires a test, allow success whatever the result, but give a negative consequence other than failure for the test. For example, the character climbs a fence but is injured, recorded on CCTV, poisoned, or tagged. This rule never protects characters from Health or Stability loss.

or higher than the Difficulty Number, the character succeeds. Before rolling the die, the player may choose to spend any number of points from the relevant ability pool, adding these to the final die result. Players who forget to specify the number of points they want to spend before rolling are stuck with the unmodified result.

In the game world, expenditure of pool points in this way represents special effort and concentration by the character, the kind you can muster only so many times during the course of an investigation.

Stig wants to climb a high wall to see if Unremitting Horrors lurk on the other side. The GM needs the group to get to the other side of the wall and therefore assigns the relatively low Difficulty Number of 3 to the task. Stig's player, Justin, has a full 8 points in his Athletics pool. He decides that he really needs a win on this one and decides to spend half of them on the attempt. He rolls a 5. With the 4 points from his pool, this gets a final result of 9. Displaying impressive acrobatic grace, Stig hauls himself over the wall.

The *Esoterrorists* setting is meant to be a straight-up and brutal horror game. Losing points is meant to hurt. To truly evoke that spirit, the GM never reveals Difficulty Numbers.

GMs running GUMSHOE in non-horror environments, or who wish to water down the setting's intentional level of oppressive nastiness, may choose to reveal Difficulties. The test represents the character's best chance to succeed. Once you fail, you've shot your wad and cannot retry unless you take some other supporting action that would credibly increase your odds of success. If allowed to do this, you must spend more pool points than you did on the previous attempt. If you can't afford it, you can't retry.

Mitchell has just failed his Mechanics test to repair a broken pump in the sinking ship he and the other investigators are trapped in. He spent 2 points from his Mechanics pool on this attempt. The GM decides he'll have one more shot at it before the ship capsizes. Now he must spend at least 3 Mechanics points. Fortunately he has 4 points left in his pool. The Difficulty Number of the repair attempt is 5. Mitchell rolls a 6, adding 3 points to get a final result of 9. The pump kicks back in, just in time to reverse the ship's sinking.

PIGGYBACKING

When characters act in concert to perform a task together, they designate one to take the lead. That character makes a simple test, spending any number of his own pool points toward the task, as usual. All other characters pay 1 point from their relevant pools in order to gain the benefits of the leader's action. These points are not added to the leader's die result. For every character who is unable to pay this piggybacking cost, either because he lacks pool points or does not have the ability at all, the Difficulty Number of the attempt increases by 2.

Stig, Mitchell, Lauren, and Yoriko attempt to sneak into the Uffizi Gallery in Florence to perform tests on the famous Botticelli painting Primavera. Lauren, with an Infiltration of 8, takes the lead. Stig, Mitchell, and Yoriko have 2, 0, and 4 points in their Infiltration pools, respectively. Stig and Yoriko pay 1 point apiece; their pools go down to 1 and 3. Because Mitchell has no points to spend, the Difficulty Number of the Infiltration increases from 4 to 6. (If the group left him behind, it would be easier to sneak in, but he's the one with the Art History degree.) Lauren spends 3 points on the attempt and rolls a 1. This would have overcome the Difficulty if it wasn't for Mitchell's presence. Clearly, he's stumbled on his way into the gallery, setting off the infrared sensors.

In most instances a group cannot logically act in concert. Only one character can drive a car at one time. Two characters with Preparedness check their individual kits in sequence rather than checking a single kit at the same time.

COOPERATION

When two characters cooperate toward a single goal, they agree which of them is undertaking the task directly, and which is assisting. The leader may spend any number of points from her pool, adding them to the die roll. The assistant may pay any number of points from his pool. All but one of these is applied to the die roll. Stig and Mitchell are trying to repair a badly damaged old motorcycle so they can escape on it before the members of a Baghdad militia show up to kill them. Stig has 3 points left in his Mechanics pool. Mitchell has 2 points. They decide that Stig is the main mechanic, and Mitchell his assistant. Both choose to spend all of their remaining points on the attempt. Stig adds 3 points to the die roll. Mitchell spends 2 points, but adds only 1 to the die roll. Stig's player rolls a 3, for a result of 7. This beats the Difficulty Number of 6, allowing them to zoom away on the back of the bike as semiautomatic rounds ping all around them.

ZERO-SUM CONTESTS

A zero-sum contest occurs when something bad or good is definitely going to happen to one of the PCs, and you need to find out which one takes the hit. Each player makes a test of a general ability. A zero-sum contest can be positive or negative. In a positive contest, the character with the highest result gets a benefit. In a negative contest, the one with the lowest result suffers an ill consequence. When embarking on a contest with an open Difficulty, inform the players that this is an open Difficulty and whether this is a positive or negative test. They then decide in advance how many points to spend to modify their rolls, keeping this number secret from other players by writing it down on a piece of paper. They then roll the dice, reveal their expenditures, and announce their final results. You can cap the maximum spend.

Be cautious when treating events with negative outcomes as zero-sum contests. Because they guarantee that something bad will definitely happen to one of the PCs, make sure that the negative consequence is distressing but does no permanent harm to the character. For example, it's acceptable to decide that one PC falls into a trap, but not that the trap then crushes him to death — or seriously wounds him, for that matter.

Worse results of zero-sum contests are acceptable if the characters have had some other fair chance to avoid exposure to the bad situation.

If players are tied for best result (in the case of a positive test) or worst (in a negative test), the tied players may subsequently spend any number of additional points from the pool in question, in hopes of breaking the tie in their favor. Should results remain tied after additional expenditures, choose the winner based on story considerations.

GENERAL SPENDS

Occasionally you'll want to create a task at which there is no reasonable chance of failure, but which should cost the characters a degree of effort. To do this, simply charge the character(s) a number of points from relevant general ability pools. Where tasks can be performed by cooperative effort, multiple characters may contribute points to them. 1 or 2 points per character is a reasonable general spend.

CONTESTS

Contests occur when two characters, often a player character and a supporting character controlled by the GM, actively attempt to thwart one another. Although contests can resolve various physical matchups, in a horror game the most common contest is the chase, in which the investigators run away from slavering entities intent on ripping them limb from limb.

In a contest, each character acts in turn. The first to fail a roll of the contested ability loses. The GM decides who acts first. In a chase, the character who bolts from the scene acts first. Where the characters seem to be acting at the same time, the one with the lowest *rating* in the relevant ability acts first. In the event of a tie, supporting characters act before player characters. In the event of a tie between player characters, the player who arrived last for the current session goes first in the contest.

The first character to act makes a test of the ability in question. If he fails, he loses the contest. If he succeeds, the second character then makes a test. This continues until one character loses, at which point the other one wins.

Typically each character attempts to beat a Difficulty Number of 4.

Stig flees through an abandoned mall from a chainsawwielding cultist. His Athletics pool is 6; the cultist's is 7.As the fleeing character initiating the chase sequence, he's the first character to act. He rolls against a Difficulty of 4, spending 1 point. He rolls a 4, and manages to scramble toward the food court.

The cultist spends 1 point as well, rolling a 3. He slides along the polished floor, revving his chainsaw.

Stig spends another point, taking his Athletics to 4. He rolls a 2. That's not enough to get away. Stig has backed himself into a corner, caught between garbage bins emblazoned with the logo of a popular fast-food corporation. The cultist advances on him. Now he has no choice but to stand and fight.

Where the odds of success are skewed in favor of one contestant, the GM may assign different Difficulties to each. A character with a significant advantage gets a lower Difficulty Number. A character facing a major handicap faces a higher Difficulty Number. When in doubt, the GM assigns the lower number to the advantaged participant.

An investigator running through a swamp finds it harder to move quickly than the marsh creature pursuing him. In this case he might face a Difficulty Number of 4, while the marsh beast gets the lower Difficulty of 3.

Throughout the contest, GM and players should collaborate to add flavor to each result, explaining what the characters did to remain in the contest. That way, instead of dropping out of the narration to engage in an arithmetical recitation, you keep the fictional world verbally alive.

26 -

CONTESTS: FIGHTING + INJURY 21

FIGHTING

Fights are slightly more complicated contests involving any of the following abilities:

- Scuffling vs. Scuffling: the characters are fighting in close quarters
- Shooting vs. Shooting: the characters are apart from one another and trying to hit each other with guns or other missile weapons

INITIATIVE: Determine whether the character who attempts to strike the first blow seizes the initiative, and therefore gets the first opportunity to strike his opponent, or if his intended target anticipates his attack and beats him to the punch — or shot, as the case may be.

As GUMSHOE is player-facing, how this works depends on whether the PC in the situation is the aggressor or the defender.

In a Scuffling contest, the PC gets to go first if his Scuffling *rating* equals or exceeds that of his target.

In a Shooting contest, he gets to go first if his Shooting *rating* equals or exceeds that of his target.

Otherwise, the opponent goes first.

In the rare instance where two PCs fight one another (when one of them is possessed, say), the PC with the higher applicable *rating* (Scuffling or Shooting) goes first. If their ratings tie but their pools do not, the one with the higher pool goes first. If both are tied, roll a die, with one player going first on an odd result and the other on even.

A contest proceeds between the two abilities. When combatants using the Scuffling or Shooting abilities roll well, they get the opportunity to deal damage to their opponents.

- HIT THRESHOLDS: Each character has a Hit Threshold of either 3 (the standard value) or 4 (if the character's Athletics rating is 8 or more.) The Hit Threshold is the Difficulty Number the character's opponent must match or beat in order to harm him. Less competent supporting characters may have lower Hit Thresholds. Creatures may have Hit Thresholds of 4 or higher, regardless of their Athletics ratings.
- **DEALING DAMAGE:** When you roll equal to or higher than your opponent's Hit Threshold, you may deal damage to him. To do so, you make a damage roll, rolling a die, which is then modified according to the relative lethality of your weapon, as per the following table:

WEAPON TYPE DAMAGE MODIFIER

| | Fist, kick | -2 | |
|---------|---|----|--|
| | Small improvised weapon, police baton, knife | -1 | |
| Machete | e, heavy club, light firearm | 0 | |
| | Sword, heavy firearm | +1 | |

For firearms, add an additional +2 when fired at point blank range.

Supernatural creatures often exhibit alarmingly high damage modifiers.

Characters may never spend points from their combat pools to increase their damage rolls.

FIGHTING WITHOUT ABILITIES

A character with no points in Shooting is not allergic to guns. Anyone can pick up a revolver and empty it in the general direction of the foe. Likewise, a character with no Scuffling ability is not going to just ignore the fire axe sitting on the wall when a blood corpse bursts through a partition wall.

However, such characters will use their weapons ineffectively and hesitantly. Using a weapon (including fists or feet) without ability has the following drawbacks:

- ▶ You automatically do an additional -2 damage.
- You must declare your action at the beginning of each round and cannot change it if the tactical situation alters.
- You automatically go last in each round.
- If you are using a firearm, a roll of I means you have accidentally shot yourself or one of your allies, as selected (or rolled randomly) by the GM. Do damage as normal (including your automatic -2 penalty).

The final damage result is then subtracted from your opponent's Health pool. When a combatant's Health pool drops to 0 or less, that combatant begins to suffer ill effects, ranging from slight impairment to helplessness to death; see sidebar.

Unlike other contests, participants do not lose when they fail their test rolls. Instead, they're forced out of the fight when they lose consciousness or become seriously wounded.

EXHAUSTION, INJURY, AND GRUESOME DEATH RESISTING UNCONCIOUSNESS

Unlike most abilities, your Health pool can drop below 0.

When it does this, you must make a Consciousness test. Roll a die with the absolute value* of your current Health pool as your Difficulty. You may deliberately strain yourself to remain conscious, voluntarily reducing your Health pool by an amount of your choice. For each point you reduce it, add 1 to your die result. The Difficulty of the Consciousness test is based on your Health pool *before* you make this reduction. You will always succeed on a -1, so effectively, you only need to roll on a -2. However, sometimes tests can be adjusted by circumstances (for example you are drugged). If you jump straight to Seriously Wounded, you make a single test, even if that's a result of spending points at Hurt to to avoid a losing consciousness. If you go to Hurt, then to Seriously Wounded as a result of two separate attacks, you make two separate Consciousness tests.

Elam Stokes is being chased by condo cultists through the lobby of a swank apartment building. They hit him with a harpoon, dropping his Health pool to -3. He really wants to get away from them, lest they sacrifice him on their altar to conspicuous consumerism. Thus he must remain conscious. The absolute value

* In other words, treat the negative number as a positive. For example, if your Health pool is at -3, the Difficulty of the roll is 3, and so on. of -3 is 3, so this is the Difficulty of his Consciousness test. He chooses to expend another 2 Health points he doesn't have, pushing himself onward toward the revolving doors. That gives him a bonus of 2 to his roll. He rolls a 6, for a final result of 8. Elam gets away, but now his Health pool is down to -5.

INJURY

If your pool is anywhere from 0 to -5, you are hurt but have suffered no permanent injury, beyond a few superficial cuts and bruises. However, the pain of your injuries makes it impossible to spend points on investigative abilities, and increases the Difficulty Number of all physical tests, excluding Conciousness tests, but including opponents' Hit Thresholds, by 1.

A character with the Medic ability can improve your condition by spending Medic points. For every Medic point spent, you regain 2 Health points — unless you are the Medic, in which case you gain only 1 Health point for every Medic point spent. The Medic can only refill your pool to where you were before the incident in which you received this latest injury. He must be in a position to devote all of his attention to directly tending to your wounds.

If your pool is between -6 and -11, you have been seriously wounded. You must make a Consciousness roll.

Whether or not you maintain consciousness, you are no longer able to fight. Until you receive first aid, you will lose an additional Health point every half hour. A character with the Medic ability can stabilize your condition by making a Difficulty 3 Medic test. However, he can't restore your Health points.

Even after you receive first aid, you must convalesce in a hospital or similar setting for a period of days. Your period of forced inactivity is a number of days equal to the positive value of your lowest Health pool score. (So if you were reduced to -8 Health, you are hospitalized for 8 days.) On the day of your discharge, your Health pool increases to half its maximum value. On the next day, it refreshes fully.

When your pool dips to -12 or below, you are dead. Time to create a replacement character.

Stig is attacked in his own motel room by a slime-dripping creature made of hair, claws, and his own sexual guilt. It leaps on him, making this a close-quarters fight, for which the Scuffling ability is required. The GM declares that the creature is the aggressor, since it's come out of nowhere to attack the sleeping Stig. The creature has a Scuffling rating and pool of 12, a Health rating and pool of 10, a Hit Threshold of 4, and a Damage Modifier of 2. Stig's Scuffling rating is 10 but his pool is down to 6. His Health pool is down to 8 from a rating of 12. His Hit Threshold is 4. With no weapons at hand, his Damage Modifier is -2.

The GM spends 2 points from the creature's Scuffling pool, dropping it from 12 to 10. The GM rolls, getting a 2. Modified by the point spend, that comes out to a 4, which beats Stig's Hit Threshold. The creature may then make a damage roll. The GM rolls a 4; with his Damage Modifier of 2, that equals 6 points of damage. The creature's rancid claws dig deep into Stig's naked torso, reducing his Health pool from 8 to 2. Stig screams in terror, hoping to summon his teammates, slumbering in the adjoining rooms.

He flails at its shifting visage with white-knuckled fists. His player, Justin, spends 3 points, taking his pool from 6 to 3. He rolls a 3, for a result of 6, which just meets the creature's Hit Threshold, because it's increased by 2 this round due to surprise. He therefore deals damage to it. Justin rolls a 5. Combined with his -2 modifier, this comes out to 3 points of damage. The creature's Health pool drops from 10 to 7.

The creature responds by attempting to tear open Stig's abdomen to get at his liver. The GM spends another 2 Scuffling points for the creature, taking its pool from 10 to 8. The roll is high, a 5, which modifies to a 7. The ensuing damage roll is a 2, which the creature's Damage Modifier brings to a total of 4. Stig's Health drops to -2. He is now **hurt**, and suffers an increase of 1 to all Difficulty Numbers, including his opponent's Hit Threshold, which now becomes 5. He must make a Consciousness roll, against a Difficulty of 2, which is the absolute value of his Health pool. He rolls a 3, remaining conscious.

Now it's Stig's turn to hit back. Justin spends 2 points, reducing his pool from 3 to 1. He rolls a 2, for a total of 4. Before he got hurt, that would have been enough, but now he's just short of the mark. He tries to jab his thumbs into two of its eye sockets but can't exert enough pressure to harm the thing.

The creature attacks again, spending another 2 Scuffling points, taking its total from 8 to 6. The GM rolls a 5, for a total of 7 — again enough to deal damage. The damage roll is a 3, plus the Damage Modifier of 2. The creature digs deep into Stig's internal organs, dropping his Health total from -2 to -7. He is now **seriously wounded** and thus unable to continue fighting. That puts Stig out of the fight. His Consciousness roll faces a Difficulty of 7, the absolute value of his Health pool. He could go even further into the red to strain for a bonus, but he elects not to. There's no point in making the roll, which is guaranteed to fail. Stig passes out.

If Stig were alone as well as unconscious, the creature could and would proceed to finish him off, tearing him to bits. Fortunately for him, his friend Mitchell Blunt comes to help him, pounding on the hotel door. With its Scuffling down to 6, the creature doesn't feel up to a battle with a fresh opponent. As Blunt busts down the hotel door, it scuttles up through the window, leaving behind only a noxious stench as it disappears into the night.

Stig is seriously wounded and will die if not stabilized. Fortunately, Mitchell Blunt can stop the bleeding. A long convalescence now awaits the unfortunate Stig.

BIGGER FIGHTS

Combat becomes more chaotic when two groups of combatants fight, or a group gangs up against a single opponent.

If one group of combatants is surprised by the other (see sidebar), the surprising side goes before the surprised side.

Otherwise, determine initiative as follows.

CLOSE-UP FIGHT: If any PC has a Scuffling rating equal to or greater than any combatant on the other side, the PCs act first.



SHOOT-OUT: If any PC has a Shooting rating equal to or greater than any combatant on the other side, the PCs act first.

Shoot-outs may devolve into scuffles; this does not alter the already-established initiative order.

The time it takes to go through the ranking order once, with each character taking an action, is called a **round**. When one round ends, another begins.

In the course of each round, either the PCs or their enemies go first, as already established by the initiative order. Then the other side responds. The order in which the two sides act remains unchanged from round to round.

During the portion of the round devoted to the PCs, each participating PC makes an attack in sequence, according to the players' seating order, from left to right. Sequence becomes irrelevant, obviously, when only one PC is participating (or still standing) in the fight.

PCs who join a combat in progress also act according to their seating order.

In their portion of the round, opponent(s) respond with their own wave of attack attempts, ordered by the characters they're targeting, again using a left to right player seating order. Where multiple opponents attack a single PC, the GM determines their order of action in whatever manner she finds convenient — usually the order in which she's tracking them in her rough notes.

The order of action can therefore change slightly from round to round for the PCs' opponents, but not for the PCs.

INJURY, BIGGER FIGHTS + ARMOR 💈

WHY SEATING ORDER?

We use seating order because it's easy to remember and implement. If players really care who among them goes first, have them switch seats so that they're sitting from highest Scuffling or Shooting ratings to lowest, using pool levels and die rolls to break ties. **Hint:** they will never care this much.

Some supernatural creatures may strike more than once per round. They make each attack in succession and may divide them up between opponents within range or concentrate all of them on a single enemy. GMs order these attacks in whatever order they find convenient, so long as they fall within the portion of the round devoted to enemy attacks. Usually it's easiest to have them act against multiple PCs at once, starting when they reach the first target in the seating order.

When called upon to act, each character may strike at any opponent within range of his weapons.

Creatures may choose to use their actions to deal additional damage to downed or helpless opponents rather than engage active opponents. They automatically deal one instance of damage per action. Only the most crazed and bestial human enemies engage in this behavior.

The fight continues until one side capitulates or flees or all of its members are unconscious or otherwise unable to continue.

ARMOR

Armor may reduce the damage from certain weapon types. If you're wearing a form of armor effective against the weapon being used against you, you subtract a number of points from each instance of damage dealt to you before applying it to your Health pool. Light body armor, as worn by police officers, reduces each instance of damage from bullets by 2 points and from cutting and stabbing weapons (knives, swords, machetes) by 1 point. Military-grade body armor reduces bullet damage by 3 points. In reality, body armor reduces all damage. In genre depictions, it's bullet-focused. In keeping with the GUMSHOE way, this rule privileges genre emulation over reality.

SURPRISE

Player characters are surprised when they find themselves suddenly in a dangerous situation. Avoid being surprised with a successful Surveillance test. The basic Difficulty is 4, adjusted by the opponent's Stealth Modifier.

Player characters surprise supporting characters by sneaking up on them with a successful Infiltration or Surveillance test. The basic Difficulty is 4, adjusted by the opponent's Alertness Modifier (see p. 52).

Surprised characters suffer a +2 increase to all general ability Difficulties for any immediately subsequent action. In a fight, the penalty pertains to the first round of combat.

Mitchell is shot by a street punk working as an unwitting dupe of the Esoterrorists. The GM rolls a 3 for the punk's damage, adding I point for his high-caliber handgun, for a total damage of 4. Mitchell wears light body armor, reducing the damage to 2 points. His Health pool decreases from 6 to 4.

Light body armor is heavy, hot, and marks you out as someone looking for trouble. All of these drawbacks apply doubly to military-grade body armor. Investigators can't expect to walk around openly wearing armor without attracting the attention of the local SWAT team. Armor and heavy weapons may prove useful in discrete missions conducted away from prying eyes.

In choosing to make contemporary body armor highly effective against firearms, we're drawing on the portrayal of Kevlar vests in cop shows and movies. We make no claims for any resemblance between these rules and real life. The rules also favor close-up physical confrontations, which are more in keeping with the horror genre than firefights. GMs using the GUMSHOE rules in more realistic, horror-free investigative settings may wish to reduce the effectiveness of body armor against gunfire.

Creatures often have high armor ratings. They may possess hard, bony hides or monstrous anatomies that can take greater punishment than ordinary organisms. Most supernatural creatures are more resistant to bullets and other missile weapons than they are to blunt force trauma, slashes, and stab wounds.

COVER

In a typical gunfight, combatants seek cover, hiding behind walls, furniture, or other barriers, exposing themselves only for the few seconds it takes them to pop up and fire a round at their targets. The GUMSHOE rules recognize three cover conditions:

ONE GUN, TWO COMBATANTS

If your opponent has a gun well in hand and ready to fire, and you charge him from more than five feet away, he can empty his entire clip or chamber at you before you get to him, badly injuring you. You are automatically hit. He rolls one instance of damage, which is then tripled. Yes, we said tripled. And, yes, the tripling occurs after weapon modifiers are taken into account. This is why few people charge when their opponents have the drop on them.

If your opponent has a pistol, but it is not well in hand and ready to fire, you may attempt to jump him and wrestle it from his grip. If he has a pistol well in hand but is unaware of your presence, you may also be able to jump him, at the GM's discretion. The characters engage in a Scuffling contest to see which of them gets control of the gun and fires it. The winner makes a damage roll against the loser, using the pistol's Damage Modifier, including the +2 for point blank range.

If you jump an opponent with an unready rifle, a Scuffling combat breaks out, with the opponent using the rifle as a heavy club.



EXPOSED: No barrier stands between you and the combatant firing at you. Your Hit Threshold decreases by 1.

- **PARTIAL COVER:** About half of your body is exposed to fire. Your Hit Threshold remains unchanged.
- FULL COVER: Except when you pop up to fire a round, the barrier completely protects you from incoming fire. Your Hit Threshold increases by 1.

AMMO CAPACITY

The Esoterrorists sets aside the loving attention to firearm intricacies characteristic of most contemporary-era RPG systems*. For example, characters need reload only when dramatically appropriate. Otherwise, they're assumed to be able to refill the cylinders of their revolvers or jam clips into their automatic weapons between shots.

When reloading is an issue, GMs may request a Shooting test (Difficulty 3) to quickly reload. Characters who fail may not use their Shooting ability to attack during the current round.

Separated from his teammates, a wounded Mitchell crawls into a condemned tenement to hole up. Unfortunately for him, the building is inhabited by a passel of the supernatural creatures called kooks. The GM decides that limited resources will increase the sequence's sense of terror, and declares that Mitchell has only four shots left in his Glock autopistol and only one extra ammo clip in his pocket. She plans to have the kooks gang up on him, forcing him to roll Shooting to successfully reload as they rush him.

* Crunchy combat rules are available in The Esoterror Fact Book.

+ NON-LETHAL WEAPONS | STABILITY TESTS

RANGE

The effect of range on firearms combat is likewise simplified nearly out of existence. Handguns and shotguns can only be accurately fired at targets within fifty meters. The range limit for rifles is one hundred meters.

NONLETHAL WEAPONS

In GUMSHOE, nonlethal attacks never take an opponent out faster than standard combat. Otherwise, players will have their characters simply knock their enemies out and kill them in cold blood, which is unsympathetic and out of genre. Thus Tasers and stun guns work less effectively in the game than in real life.

NO TASERS (OPTIONAL RULE)

Although Tasers exist in the world, they are not used by OV operatives. A string of incidents in which victims suffered fatal heart attacks after overzealous Taser use have led to stringent operational restrictions. In one case, Taser use empowered a supernatural creature. (This emulates the treatment of Tasers in the source material. In real life they might arguably be a life-saving nonlethal technology. Because they make action sequences boring and short, popular fiction occasionally puts them in the hands of bad guys and their minions, but does not give them to the heroes. Sympathetic characters use holds, punches, and/or threats of gun violence to subdue recalcitrant suspects.)

These weapons are ineffective against nearly all supernatural creatures.

STABILITY TESTS

Even non-supernatural effects often prove emotionally destabilizing. Every violent encounter puts you at risk for post-traumatic stress syndrome. Any confrontation with the supernatural threatens a complete psychotic break, manifesting as a bizarre detachment from reality.

When an incident challenges your fragile sanity, make a Stability test against a Difficulty Number of 4.

If you fail, you lose a number of Stability points. The severity of the loss depends on the situation. As with any other test of a general ability, you are always permitted to spend Stability points to provide a bonus to your roll. However, it's never a good bet to spend more points than you stand to lose if you fail.

Your Stability loss from failed tests is capped at the worst incident in that scene. Points spent on providing bonuses are still lost.

LET THE PLAYERS DECIDE

One technique we've found that will suit some groups is to place the Stability loss chart in the hands of one of the players, who can then pipe up when a Stability-threatening incident occurs. This usually leads to greater Stability losses than would otherwise have occurred.

| S | T | Å | B | L | IT | Y |
|---|---|---|---|---|----|---|
| | _ | - | - | | | |

| INCIDENT | LOSS |
|----------|------|

| | 33 |
|---|----|
| A human opponent attacks you with evident intent to do serious harm | 2 |
| You are in a car or other vehicle accident serious enough to pose a risk of injury | 2 |
| A human opponent attacks you with evident intent to kill | 3 |
| You see a supernatural creature from a distance | 3 |
| You see a supernatural creature up close | 4 |
| You see a particularly grisly murder or accident scene | 4 |
| You learn that a friend or loved one has been violently killed | 4 |
| You discover the corpse of a friend or loved one | 6 |
| You are attacked by a supernatural creature | 7 |
| You see a friend or loved one killed | 7 |
| | |

You see a friend or loved one killed in a particularly gruesome manner

GMs should feel free to assess Stability losses for other incidents, using the examples provided as a benchmark. Some especially overwhelming creatures may impose higher than normal Stability losses when seen from a distance, seen up close, or ripping your lungs out.

Here's a Stability test in action:

Stig's current Stability is 8. While maintaining surveillance on a farm subject to crop circle manifestations, he sees a blurry, inhuman figure through his night vision goggles. Like any other Stability test, Stig's player, Justin, will be trying to beat a Difficulty of 4. Confident that this long-distance sighting constitutes only a minor brush with destabilizing weirdness, Justin elects to spend only I point to bolster his roll. Alas, he rolls a 1, for a result of 2, two lower than the Difficulty Number. Having failed, he suffers a Stability loss of 3. Having spent I point on his bonus and lost another 3 to the failure, Stig's new Stability pool value is 4.

Characters make a single roll per incident, based on its highest potential Stability loss.

Stig and his teammate Kacie are poring through a flooded basement looking for evidence. Animated corpses pop up from beneath the water to attack them. Stig drives off the creatures, but not before they tear Kacie open in front of his eyes, looping their rotten arms through her entrails. His player, Justin, makes a single roll, with a potential Stability Loss of 8, the worst of several pertaining to the incident.

Groups craving an additional point of complexity can occasionally alter Difficulty Numbers for Stability tests depending on the character's attitude toward the destabilizing event. Characters who would logically be inured to a given event face a Difficulty of 3, while those especially susceptible face a 5. A character whose daytime identity is that of a surgeon or coroner might, for example, face a lowered Difficulty when encountering gruesomely mutilated bodies. A stock car racer would get a

THE GUMSHOE RULES SYSTEM

better chance against car accidents. No character type gets a break when encountering supernatural creatures.

LOSING IT

Like Health, your Stability pool can drop below 0.

If your Stability ranges from 0 to -5, you are shaken.

Difficulty Numbers for all general abilities increase by 1, and it becomes more difficult to use investigative abilities.

If you want to make an investigative spend, make a test with the absolute value* of your current Stability pool as your Difficulty. You may deliberately strain yourself, voluntarily reducing your Stability pool by an amount of your choice. For each point you reduce it, add 1 to your die result. The Difficulty of the Stability test is based on your Stability pool *before* you make this reduction. If you succeed, you can make the investigative spend.

If your Stability ranges from -6 to -11, you acquire a mental illness.

This stays with you even after your Stability pool is restored to normal. See below for more. You also continue to suffer the ill effects of being shaken. Furthermore, you permanently lose 1 point from your Stability *rating*. The only way to get it back is to purchase it again with build points.

When your Stability reaches -12 or less, you are incurably insane. You may commit one last crazy act, which must either be self-destructively heroic or self-destructively destructive. Or you may choose merely to gibber and drool. Assuming you survive your permanent journey to the shores of madness, your character is quietly shipped off to a secure Ordo Veritatis psych facility, never to be seen again. Time to create a new character.

MENTAL ILLNESS

If the incident that drove you to mental illness was mundane in nature, you suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD.) You are haunted by dreams of the incident and spend your days in a constant state of anxiety and alert, as if prepared for it to repeat itself at any moment. Whenever your senses register any input reminding you of the incident, you must make a Stability test (Difficulty 4) or freeze up. If you freeze up, you are unable to take any action for fifteen minutes and remain **shaken** (see above) for twenty-four hours after that. Tests to see if you show symptoms of PTSD do not in and of themselves lower your Stability pool.

If driven to mental illness by a supernatural occurrence, you face a range of possible mental disorders. The GM rolls on the following chart or chooses a disorder based on the triggering circumstance. The player is then sent out of the room, while the GM and other players collaborate on a way to heighten his sense of dislocation and disorientation.

TEDIOUSLY OBLIGATORY DISCLAIMER

This game simulates mental illness as seen in pop culture, especially the horror genre. It should not be confused with real psychology. Although no disrespect is intended to those suffering the real-life effects of mental illness, we submit to those concerned by this issue that horror is meant to be irresponsible, disreputable, and upsetting.

- DELUSION. The other players and GM decide on a mundane detail of the world which is no longer true and has never been true. For example, there might be no such thing as a squirrel, a Volkswagen, or orange juice. Maybe John Lennon was never assassinated or never existed in the first place. PCs and supporting characters deny knowledge of the chosen item, person, or event.
- HOMICIDAL MANIA. The GM takes the player aside, tells him that he knows one of the other players is a supernatural creature, and tells him just how to kill the monster.
- **MEGALOMANIA.** When the character fails at a dramatic moment, the GM describes the outcome of his ability attempt as successful, then asks the player to leave the room. The GM describes the real results to the other players, then invites the megalomaniac player back into the room.
- MULTIPLE PERSONALITY DISORDER. At moments of stress, another player is assigned control of the character, speaking and acting as if he's an entirely different person.
- **PARANOIA.** The other players are instructed to act as if they're trying to keep straight faces when the affected player returns. Occasionally they exchange notes, make hand signals to the GM, or use meaningless code words, as if communicating something important the player is unaware of.
- **SELECTIVE AMNESIA.** The group decides on an event that did happen in the world that the player has now forgotten all about. He's married, or killed someone, or pseudonymously written a best-selling book. Everyone he meets refers to this new, verifiable fact that he has no knowledge of.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRIAGE

A character with the Shrink ability can spend points from that pool to help another character regain spent Stability points. For every Shrink point spent, the recipient gains 2 Stability points.

If a character is acting in an erratic manner due to mental illness, another character can spend 2 points of Shrink to snap him into a state of temporary lucidity. He will then act rationally for the remainder of the current scene.

HEAD GAMES

Mental illness can be cured through prolonged treatment using the Shrink ability. At the beginning of each scenario, in a prologue scene preceding the main action, the character administering the treatment makes a Shrink test (Difficulty 4).

* In other words, treat the negative number as a positive. For example, if your Stability pool is at -3, the Difficulty of the roll is 3, and so on.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRIAGE + HEAD GAMES | REGAINING POOL POINTS

After three consecutive successful tests, and three consecutive scenarios in which the patient remains above 0 Stability at all times, the mental illness goes away.

However, if the character ever again acquires a mental illness, he regains the condition he was previously cured of. Permanent cure then becomes impossible.

A successful Shrink test undertaken during the course of a scenario suppresses its symptoms until the patient next suffers a Stability loss.

REGAINING POOL POINTS

Spent points from various pools are restored at different rates, depending on their narrative purpose.

Investigative ability pools are restored only at the end of each case, without regard to the amount of time that passes in the game world. Players seeking to marshal their resources may ask you how long cases typically run in real time. Most groups finish scenarios over 2–3 sessions. Players may revise their sense of how carefully to manage point spending as they see how quickly their group typically disposes of its cases.

(GMs running extremely long, multipart investigations may designate certain story events as breakpoints where all investigative pools are refreshed. For example, a globehopping investigation where the team meets a separate team of Esoterrorists enemies in five different locales might allow refreshment of investigative pools after each group of enemies is neutralized.)

Use of the Shrink ability permits limited recovery of Stability points in the course of an episode. Full refreshment occurs between cases. It is possible only when the character is able to spend calm, undisturbed quality time with friends and loved ones uninvolved in the shadowy world of the Ordo Veritatis. In campaigns where the teammates' personal lives are



a matter of background detail only, refreshment automatically occurs between episodes.

GMs who wish to add a soap opera element to their campaigns, in which the characters must balance the everyday pressures of ordinary life against their activities as covert battlers of the supernatural, can complicate this process. In this campaign type, the characters must work to keep their support networks

WHAT DO POOL POINTS REPRESENT?

Pool points are a literary abstraction, representing the way that characters get their own time in the spotlight in the course of an ensemble drama. When you do something remarkable, you expend a little bit of your spotlight time. More active players will spend their points sooner than less demonstrative ones, unless they carefully pick and choose their moments to shine.

Remember, all characters are remarkably competent. Pool points measure your opportunities to exercise this ultracompetence during any given scenario. Even when pools are empty, you still have a reasonable chance to succeed at a test, and you'll always get the information you need to move forward in the case.

Pool points do not represent a resource, tangible or otherwise, in the game world. Players are aware of them, but characters are not. The team members' ignorance of them is analogous to TV characters' obliviousness to commercial breaks, the unwritten rules of scene construction, and the tendency of events to heat up during sweeps. We represent this most purely in the case of investigative skills, which are the core of the game. Their refreshment is tied to a purely fictional construct, the length of the episode.

However, where a pool could be seen to correspond to a resource perceptible to the characters, we handle refreshment in a somewhat more realistic, if also abstract, manner. Characters' ebbing Health scores are perceptible to the characters in the form of welts, cuts, pain, and general fatigue*. Stability is less tangible but can be subjectively measured in the characters' moods and reactions. Physical abilities, also tied to fatigue and sharpness of reflexes, are also handled with a nod to the demands of realism.

* The publisher uses Health to represent the narrative plausibility of a character subject to peril not dying. An NPC with I Health might be badass but drop the first time he's hit because he's not important to the narrative, or his death is

THE GUMSHOE RULES SYSTEM

intact. If they fail, they regain no Stability between episodes. As part of the character creation process, players must detail their network of friends and loved ones in a paragraph or two of background text, which is then submitted to the GM for approval.

The Health pool refreshes over time, at a rate of 2 points per day of restful activity. (Wounded characters heal at a different rate, over a period of hospitalization; see p. 28.) Use of the Medic ability can restore a limited number of Health points in the course of a session.

Pools for the physical abilities of Athletics, Driving, Scuffling, and Shooting are fully restored whenever twenty-four hours of game-world time elapses since the last expenditure. The remaining general abilities refresh at the end of each case, like investigative abilities.

IMPROVING YOUR CHARACTER

At the end of each investigation, each player gets 2 build points for each session they participated in. (This assumes a small number of 3–4 hour sessions; if you play in shorter bursts, modify accordingly.) Players who had characters die in the course of the investigation only get points for each session involving their current character.

These build points can be spent to increase either investigative or general abilities. You may acquire new abilities or bolster existing ones. If necessary to preserve credibility, rationalize new abilities as areas of expertise you've had all along but are only revealing later in the series.



34-

THE ORDO VERITATIS

WEMBERS OF THE ORDO VERITATIS CHARACTERIZE THEMSELVES as reality's last defenders. This resilient, globe-spanning, extravagantly funded covert organization gathers together researchers, intelligence officers, world leaders, psychologists, experts in the occult, and, above all, investigators, in a last-ditch effort to protect the world's population from the Unremitting Horrors of the Outer Dark.

STATEMENT OF INTENT

The Esoterror Fact Book, a companion volume to the main rules, presents details on the Ordo Veritatis and its working methods in the form of excerpts from its top-secret operations manual. This section covers some of the same ground, but from a different angle. Aimed at the GM, it shows you how to bring information

about the Ordo into play. It complements the *Fact Book* chapter without superseding it.

Use relevant sections of the *Fact Book* as player handouts. They convey the organization's flavor and point of view, and immerse players in the setting. Encourage enthusiastic players to read the book in its entirety*

SCENARIO PREMISES

Text boxes such as this present scenario premises arising from the background information given in this and subsequent chapters. By running these scenarios, or others like them, you can lift setting details from the page and place them before the players, as part of the story.



* Urge them to purchase it; portions of the proceeds go to the organization's purchase of new attack helicopters.
PRÉCIS

This section nutshells essential Ordo Veritatis facts.

- **GOAL:** To thwart the aims of the Esoterrorists, a widely dispersed, self-replicating conspiracy whose quest for occult power threatens to destroy civilization, if not the world itself.
- **ORGANIZATION:** Like its enemy, the Ordo Veritatis consists of a number of cells, whose members operate in isolation from one another. Unlike the Esoterrorists, they are coordinated by a hidden command structure and aided by an equally secretive support network.
- **CELL TYPES:** The Ordo fields two main types of operational cell: **investigators** and **Special Suppression Forces**. Players in a baseline series of *The Esoterrorists* portray the members of an investigative cell*. Except where specifically indicated, all references in this book assume that you're running a standard investigative series. Cell members serve part time. When not called for duty, they go about their regular lives, pursuing such professions as police officer, journalist, doctor, author, intelligence analyst, professor, research scientist — or even professional criminal.

INVESTIGATIVE OPERATIONS: A typical investigative operation consists of the following stages:

- *Case Evaluation:* Researchers at a support station learn of
- a possible Esoterror operation.
- 2 Deployment: An operations officer chooses the investigative cell most suitable for the task. Team members, engaged in their daily lives, receive a minimal briefing, usually consisting only of a destination and the travel arrangements that get them there.
- **3** *Briefing:* At the rendezvous point, a briefer, always codenamed Mr. or Ms. Verity, meets the cell and provides them with an information package, objective, and whatever details of the case have already been unearthed during phase I.
- **4** *Investigation:* The team collects physical evidence and interviews witnesses. It analyzes gathered information, pursuing the leads discovered, until the underlying Esoterror threat stands revealed.
- 5 *Counter-Ops:* Throughout the course of an investigation, the team should expect to face and repel hostile action from the enemy cell or its assets.
- 6 *Neutralization:* When the nature of the threat has been fully exposed, the team acts to shut down the cell and destroy its supernatural assets.
- 7 *Veil-Out:* The cell devises and executes a cover-up of any paranormal events (genuine or mock) arising from the enemy operation.

- **ETHICS CODE:** Ordo cells follow a rigid code of ethics. Violations threaten not only the organization's ability to operate throughout the world but may destabilize the Membrane. Assassination, for example, is permitted only under a strictly constrained set of circumstances. Torture committed by, or at the behest of, cell members always thins the Membrane.
- **READINESS MAINTENANCE:** Cell members may exit operations suffering from any number of debilitating mental conditions. Support personnel work with valued operatives to mitigate the effect of such psychiatric ailments as PTSD (posttraumatic stress disorder) and PPED (post-paranormal encounter disorder.)
- **RECRUITMENT:** Aggressive recruitment compensates for a regrettably high turnover rate among cell members. Agents, recalling vividly the circumstances of their own recruitment, may be asked to assist in scouting potential new talent.

CASE EVALUATION

In play, case evaluation usually occurs backstage, performed by unidentified NPCs the PCs never meet, at an undisclosed location. This section shows you how the process works and suggests ways to occasionally bring case evaluation into the forefront of a scenario.

SUPPORT EXPERIENCE

The player of any character with a Bureaucracy rating higher than 1 may, during any scenario, specify that his character spent some time working at an Ordo support station. (Inform qualifying players of this option after initial character creation.) Doing so costs 2 Bureaucracy points, which can be spent at any time during any scenario.

If this occurs after the first session, the player may specify whether the character has only just now started serving in this capacity or if he's been doing it all along and has only now seen fit to mention it.

Show that a PC has support experience by marking the Bureaucracy ability on his character sheet with a highlighter pen.

Characters with support experience enjoy some familiarity with head office protocols and operations. As field agents subject to capture and torture, they seldom know everything.

Certain facts are known only by senior support staffers who double as field agents. Characters with ratings of 3 or higher may, if their players want, be identified as senior staffers. If a character already qualifies when the support experience spend is made, the player chooses whether he's been at this for a long time or has only now started.

When a character with support experience adds 1 or more points of Bureaucracy during improvement, the player may choose to specify that he has been promoted to senior status. This is never obligatory.

* For a full rundown on the alternate Special Suppression Forces series frame, see The Esoterror Fact Book.

PRECIS

CASE EVALUATION: LIFE IN AN ANALYSIS STATION 37

OPERATION FERRARI PIGEON

Senior staffers rarely do field work, because their status makes them a high-value target for Esoterror counterintelligence cells. These groups specialize in aggressive actions against the Ordo Veritatis and its assets. Acknowledge this in your series with a scenario in which a paranormal event serves as a trap to lure the group's resident senior staffer to capture and interrogation.

Roleplayers hate having their characters captured. Handle this one of two ways:

- **ABSENT PLAYER:** When the player of the senior staffer misses a session, run a scenario in which his character has already been taken, and the objective of the mission is to locate and rescue him taking out the Esoterror counterintel team in the process.
- **IMPRISONMENT LEADS TO ESCAPE:** Structure the scenario so that the senior staffer might be briefly captured but then gets ample opportunity to escape preferably with key information required to shut down the bad guys.

A fact known to anyone with support experience appears after this bullet point.

- A fact known to senior staffers with Bureaucracy ratings of 3 follows this bullet point.
- A fact known to senior staffers with Bureaucracy ratings of 4 or more follows this bullet point.

Any fact available to a support staffer is supplied by you, the GM, in response to player questioning. Where the investigation turns on one of these facts, offer it to the player unprompted. Do not use facts about the Ordo as core clues if none of the players have the necessary level of support experience*.

Players can circumvent the need for the spend by volunteering to read the relevant sections of *The Esoterror Fact Book*. This is known in the GMing world as a reward for doing homework, er, investing in the setting. In this case, the character doesn't necessarily have support experience but has been approved to read applicable sections of the highly restricted operations manual.

LIFE IN AN ANALYSIS STATION

- Ordo Veritatis case analysts work out of anonymous installations scattered throughout the developed world.
- These support stations are secured primarily by anonymity and secondarily by state-of-the-art electronic security technology.
- Many appear from the outside to be drab, demoralizing office complexes situated in remote industrial parks.





- Almost invariably, they look like that on the inside, too. Agents expecting the majestic, dramatically lit stage design of a Hollywood espionage thriller will be disappointed to find glum, scuffed interiors indistinguishable from the warrens of any gray-faced file shuffler. Whatever truly high-tech gear that might be on hand hides behind an aging, impersonal facade.
- This calculated drabness performs an important countermagical duty. The combined presence of many individuals aware of the Outer Dark is in itself a threat to the Membrane. By placing the analysts in the most dully normal surroundings possible, the OV keeps them sane and grounded, if slightly depressed. This diminishes impact on the Membrane.
- Analysts spend two months off duty for every month on.
- They are paid for off-duty time and required to spend it on constructive activities that bolster psychological readiness, such as athletics, meditation, arts appreciation, or working with one's hands.
- They are also rotated between stations, reducing the chances of contagious madness outbreaks[†].
- Analysts willingly submit to regular psychiatric evaluation.
- Many analysts are former field officers no longer able to perform active investigations due to stress or physical impairments suffered while out on operations.
- H These are the most carefully monitored of all.
- Facilities tend toward the temporary. Headquarters allows few stations to remain open in the same location for long. Sites are stripped out and their personnel dispersed to other new stations.
- † Contagious madness outbreaks sometimes occur among large groups of individuals exposed to the existence of the Outer Dark. In addition to posing a constant threat to OV back offices, they fell a number of would-be Esoterror cells each year. In this latter case, the mass murder/suicide events they trigger thin the Membrane. They may also function to weed out weak enemy groups from strong ones.

THE ORDO VERITATIS

OPERATION THREE HOLE PUNCH

Mr. Verity assigns the team to correlate possible connections between a series of apparently disparate murders. They appear suspicious to the Ordo's media monitoring analysts because:

- they all occur within a two hundred mile radius of Harrisburg, PA
- they all occur within a three-month period
- the killers claim no recollections of their crimes
- the details of the murders recall past Esoterror cases though never the same case twice

If you are well into a long-running series, the crimes might all relate to cases the PCs themselves have handled. At any rate, the original cases had little in common beyond Esoterror ties. They may not even have happened on the same continent.

SOURCES AND METHODS

Evaluation analysts flag cases in possible need of field evaluation through four principal means:

- MEDIA MONITORING: searching publicly available media reports for keywords and cross-references
- **ELECTRONIC TRAFFIC SIFTING:** searching intercepted private telecommunications, from telephony to Internet traffic, for keywords
- •• ONGOING SURVEILLANCE: covertly watching the activities of known or suspected Esoterror operatives
- INFORMANT REPORTS: tips from information-gathering assets in the field, few of whom are aware of the import of their scuttlebutt or the true nature of its destination

MEDIA THREAT ANALYSIS (MTA)

- Perhaps surprisingly, the source of information that leads to more field investigations than any other is the simple media report.
- Strangeness often reveals itself in a confluence of seemingly unrelated and apparently mundane news reports which, when filtered through the right software, reveals potential Esoterror activity.
- The first line of analysis is performed not in a support station but by operatives working in isolation throughout the world. They scan local media for questionable articles, relaying material through a dead-drop system to a clearinghouse.
- The clearinghouse strips out information that might identify the MTA officer and relays it to a support station, which then determines whether a field investigation is warranted.
- ★ Events need not be supernatural to attract Ordo attention. Esoterror cells often capitalize on the trauma and cognitive dissonance generated by ordinary crimes, deaths, and disasters. Their operations then attempt to create a supernatural manifestation from these psychic resonances, either by summoning Outer Dark entities or creating a hoaxed paranormal event which might later become real.

THE SINISTER CONSPIRACY: Each killer was possessed by an incorporeal one-off Outer Dark entity, who manifested through surplus computer equipment that belonged to a now-shuttered Harrisburg case-analysis station. It was supposed to be destroyed in accordance with Ordo protocol. Instead the contractor, who also handles sensitive data-destruction jobs for the CIA, let down his guard long enough for a shady relative to make off with several car loads of purloined electronic equipment. By this time, the entity, attracted by the psychic residue left in the circuitry by dozens of latently stressed support personnel, had attached itself to the gear. Each of the killers had used computer equipment from this consignment in their home or office. The team must track down the other recipients before one of them gruesomely repeats the details of an old case.

- Traumatic events attracting global coverage, like the Japan tsunami of 2011 and subsequent Fukushima nuclear reactor crisis, may generate field actions without an MTA event.
- As predicted, Japanese Esoterror cells pounced on quite legitimate radiation fears and outrage over official negligence generated by the disaster. They heightened and shaped these disturbances in the Japanese national consciousness in an attempt to summon various entities through the rapidly thinning Membrane. OV dispatched its own teams to find and interdict them without having to consult MTA reports.
- Media report sifting is done by a program code-named Debby Ann.
- **W** It churns through the stories submitted by many separate analysts working in isolation and assigns them a score.
- If you get a dud case, it's because Debby Ann sometimes spits out wonky results.
- Though field agent lore says otherwise, all MTA-generated stories are first reviewed by a human senior staffer, who makes an independent judgment before approving the assignment of field agents.

DUD CASES

In the world of the characters, dud cases — reports of possible Esoterror activity that lead to nothing or dead-end after an initially promising lead — occur with comforting regularity.

This does not mean that you should be presenting the players with pointless or truncated cases. Good series, like good stories, edit out the boring parts. You might, from time to time, offhandedly refer to the dud cases as having happened between scenarios:

"Since OPERATION BRIDGE BIRD, the organization called you out for a series of dud cases: a media-generated report that went nowhere near Porcupine, South Dakota; a ritual murder that turned out to be a false rumor in Paola, Kansas; and a pursuit after a known Esoterror asset who gave you the slip in Homerville, Georgia. You're beginning to think it's quiet out there... too quiet."

OPERATION LEMMING PACK

The team scrambles to the scene of a hostage-taking in progress at the Citizens Bank in New Tucson, Arizona. One of the hostages is Frederick O'Grady, an MTA officer. Security camera footage of one bank robber identifies her as Felicia Younce. Her dossier pegs her as a former hanger-on in an Esoterror-affiliated cult and recent escapee from a nearby women's prison. The confluence of possible Esoterror suspect and Ordo asset can't be a coincidence, so the team is sent in to end the crisis before O'Grady spills what he knows about the group.

ELECTRONIC TRAFFIC SIFTING (ETS)

- ★ Through its contacts in various Western intelligence agencies, the Ordo can tap into the enormous stream of communications data intercepted by the NSA and its sister agencies in allied countries.
- ★ Tapping in is the easy part; sifting through the data for the odd telltale names, phrases, and numerological values that indicate Esoterror activity poses the real challenge.
- This is the job of a division of desk agents, deployed at support stations throughout the industrialized world.
- ₩ They are ETS, or Electronic Traffic Sifting, analysts.
- Unlike Media Monitoring analysts, they can't work alone, because agreements with mundane intelligence agencies require utmost security for the data stream.
- **ETS** officers must have high security clearances in their country of operation.
- The program used to connect seemingly innocuous words and expose sinister Esoterror clusters is called SALAMIS.
- When a mission starts with a vague objective, it is likely a fishing expedition (or whisper hunt, in Ordo parlance) in response to a flagging of keywords by ETS. Often they lead to nothing more than useless legwork. Sometimes they put agents in the middle of a do-or-die operation that they

OPERATION LOW JOKER

The team arrives at an obscure office complex in an industrial park outside Red Deer, Alberta. Inside its forlorn exterior pulses an OV support station largely dedicated to ETS action. Since the NSA can't examine American electronics traffic, Canada's equivalent agency, the CSE, performs these duties on the other side of the border. If the site is compromised and this fact revealed, an international scandal will follow — possibly resulting in a cutoff of the data spigot to the OV. Right now it's in lockdown, with terrified civilian analysts trapped inside. SALAMIS, as the jokes have unknowingly foretold, has apparently achieved both independent intelligence and a case of homicidal psychopathology. It's taken control of the building and plans to ingeniously kill them, one by one.

THE SINISTER CONSPIRACY: It's not SALAMIS that's controlling the building's systems, but an entity anchored to the corpse of Esoterror devotee Derrick Wilkard. In 1987, Wilkard almost broke open the Membrane for good during a ritual on Salt Spring Island, British Columbia. An OV team led by RCMP officer Tim Nielsen In fact, it is a coincidence. Felicia's up to her hips in Esoterror, for sure. She intends to turn what looks like a mundane bank hit gone wrong into a bloody ritual murder that will be revealed on live television. But she has no idea who O'Grady is.

THE SINISTER CONSPIRACY: That's because the creature she summoned back in prison is an Outer Dark entity, the Acausalist, who grants those who kill for it the power of fortuitous coincidence. To stop Felicia, the team has to get inside the bank while an Outer Dark entity ensures that the chips always fall weirdly in her favor.

could never have interrupted without ETS.

- **ETS** officers can't help but personify SALAMIS. When it spits out a recommendation for investigation, they say it's had a hunch.
- Despite the grousing of investigative cells, most ETS flags lead to ongoing surveillance, not the immediate dispatch of a top action team.

SURVEILLANCE AND DEEP COVER (SDC)

- A small group of field agents worldwide serve in the Ordo's Surveillance and Deep Cover (SDC) wing.
- * They track suspects whose activities are deemed suspicious but not immediately threatening.
- ▶ Less challenging than investigative cell duty, SDC status provides an ongoing niche within the organization for skilled agents who must step back for health or family reasons.
- You may be called in to investigate a case after an SDC operative reports that a target seems to be launching an operation of unknown import.
- If the SDC agent already knows the nature of the target's escalating scheme, the investigative phase may be skipped. Instead an SSF force steps in to apprehend or destroy enemy assets.

stopped him. After debriefing judged him no longer a threat to the Membrane*, he was sentenced to a life term in civilian prison. Released for humanitarian reasons after a cancer diagnosis, Wilkard tracked Nielsen to his new job at the complex. Wilkard has no idea that Nielsen was ever an OV member. He thinks the man was a cop then and, as per the station's cover, a real estate cold caller now. He dug himself a grave and performed the ritual to make his corpse the anchor of a discarnate (p. 56.) The discarnate is quickly learning to understand and control the computer system. Now it knows enough to pretend to be SALAMIS. Unless stopped quickly, it will figure out the NSA/CSE connection and a way to blow the Ordo's signals intelligence cover. That entails discovering the Wilkard angle, then finding and destroying his corpse.

^{*} In the world of occult tradecraft, the eighties were a different, more innocent time.

THE ORDO VERITATIS

OPERATION REVERSE ORDER

An Ordo dupe informant operation goes awry when a psychologically unstable would-be Esoterrorist, frustrated by his inability to advance in a local cell, tracks down its members and murders them. Trouble is, they weren't real Esoterrorists but a fake cell run by the OV to gather intel and interdict nutcases before they made contact with the enemy. Mr. Verity assigns a routine objective to the PC team: they're to Veil-Out any signs of fake Esoterror or Ordo Veritatis involvement from the suspect's killing spree.

THE SINISTER CONSPIRACY: The routine job turns into a catand-mouse when members of a real Esoterror cell show up to launch their own parallel investigation. Initially also believing that the dead were real Esoterrorists, they want to find out what they were up to and take over their operations and assets. At the same time, they work to enhance public dismay over the original killings, hoping to thin the Membrane, so that a local Mothman-style legend will coalesce into a real Outer Dark entity.

SDC agents reveal themselves to investigators only on a need-to-know basis. You may be called in on a case generated by an SDC report and never know it. You may talk to a witness who is an SDC agent, without ever discovering this. However, according to what is known as the Red Herring Protocol, SDC agents will step in and ID themselves if you start to like them as suspects or otherwise waste valuable time poking into their business.

INFORMANT REPORTS

- A global informant network files reports to the Ordo, some of which lead to the dispatch of field agents. These include academics; journalists; law enforcement, government, and intelligence officials; and members of occult subcultures.
- Some know they work for the OV; others are dupes. The latter think they're reporting to governments, watchdog groups, or secret societies.

Some even believe they're being considered for Esoterror membership but in fact report to fake cells run by OV impostors.

An additional objective of any field mission is the protection of any involved informants, knowing or duped. Informants often become targets of retaliation as field investigators disrupt enemy operations.



DEPLOYMENT

Field agents maintain ultra-secure smartphones disguised as slightly out-of-date commercial devices. Assignments come in as text messages, complete with electronic travel tickets. Agents must be prepared to drop any business of their everyday lives, complying immediately with travel orders.

By standard protocol, agents first rendezvous with one another and then meet Mr. Verity in a second secure locale. When sent to deal with an emergency already in progress (such as operations Low Joker and Lemming Pack, above), they go directly to the scene and are briefed there by Mr. Verity.

BRIEFING

The group meets a different Mr. Verity each time. Mr. Verity may be a woman. (Exception: for a case that involves a Mr. Verity in later scenes — for example when one is kidnapped or murdered — you might want to establish a connection to that NPC by introducing him in several previous installments.)

- The role of Mr. Verity is played by a senior staffer who is posted to a nearby station, or was the handler who approved the assignment in the first place, or both.
- Not all senior staffers work as Mr. Verity.
- Those whose covers have been blown and may be under Esoterror surveillance are considered a liability to operational security and never go to the field, even to conduct briefings.
- The OV uses in-person briefings to convey information too sensitive to commit to any communications network...
- \bigstar ...and because spoken orders have been proven to be
 - A) easier to digest in their entirety
 - B) more likely to be obeyed
 - c) psychologically stabilizing.

During the briefing, Mr. Verity hands over any credentials the group needs. When operating under false identities specific to the mission, agents receive detailed profiles giving them all the background they need to play their parts. Where special matériel or equipment has been deemed necessary to mission completion, Mr. Verity either provides it directly or supplies the location of a cache and the means to access it (keys, access codes, or the like).

INVESTIGATION | COUNTER-OPS RESPONSE: COMM PROTOCOLS

Mr. Verity may also supply names and contact info for official liaisons. These may be police, emergency personnel, or intelligence officers. Usually they aid the OV unknowingly, requiring agents to maintain cover in their presence.

INVESTIGATION

Responsibility for the investigative phase rests entirely in the PCs' hands. Agents wield maximum autonomy, making decisions without reporting back to Mr. Verity or headquarters. That's what a cell structure is all about. (As if you need to be told this, this conceit gives maximum decision-making control to the player characters. They're protagonists driving the action, not flunkies waiting for orders and/or assistance.)

Without constant instruction from above, investigative cells rely on protocols to guide their actions. Crucial imperatives laid out in the protocols include the following:

- Maintain cover.
- Minimize public distress generated by the case.
- Collect evidence not to make criminal cases but to facilitate your veil-out.
- Where an Outer Dark Entity (ODE) is involved, attempt to determine whether it can only be, or is more easily, destroyed by a certain attack, weapon, or method. This is known as a special means of dispatch (SMD.) Do not assume that the ODE type you're encountering has an SMD; some do not. Others might be vulnerable to SMDs the Ordo hasn't yet discovered. Your investigators might be the ones to identify an SMD, in the course of an investigation. When field agents identify a special means of dispatch, back-office agents enter the information in the databases for use in later cases.
- If the ODE can only be killed by an SMD, make preparations to facilitate this.
- ▶ When in doubt, gather more information.

When the players seem to be doing something weird or out of character for the OV, you as GM can always make up a protocol on the spot and tell them about it. It may be new to the players but isn't to the characters.

Players aiming to sharpen their investigative chops should consult the "Investigation" section of the operations manual, as seen in *The Esoterror Fact Book*.

COUNTER-OPS RESPONSE

Any field investigation can abruptly swerve into a churning buzz saw of flesh-rending bloodshed*. The following ranked priorities govern direct contact with the enemy, its assets, and entities of the Outer Dark.

- Protect informants and other OV assets.
- Protect civilians.

- Protect fellow agents and friendly non-civilian personnel (police, soldiers, intelligence agents).
- ▶ Contain or destroy Outer Dark Entities.
- Minimize public distress.
- Suppress evidence of supernatural occurrences, or lay groundwork for subsequent veil-out procedures.
- Capture hostile humans for interrogation and possible incarceration.

COMMUNICATIONS PROTOCOLS

The Ordo's access to high-level signals intelligence offers field agents little real-time advantage. Even when assigned a case on the basis of communications intercepts, they can't access these resources during the ensuing investigation. The products of satellite imagery, cell-phone tracking, and other high-tech spying technologies may be available in special cases where agents are credentialed to liaise with non-Ordo police or intelligence agencies.

Agents may freely use their own electronic surveillance resources against targets. The ethics code does not concern itself with privacy issues.

Investigators have the means to contact Mr. Verity and/or a support station during an investigation but may use it only in the following dire emergencies:

- an agent or civilian must be taken to an Ordo Veritatis medical facility after suffering serious or life-threatening injuries that cannot be veiled-out at a civilian hospital
- an agent has suffered a psychotic break and must be extracted
- an enemy target has been captured and interrogated to the fullest, and must now be rendered over for long-term incarceration at an Ordo Veritatis holding facility

Although the enemy enjoys only weak or intermittent access to signals intelligence, it may ally with Outer Dark Entities, for example a creature called the chitterer, to spy on electronic communications. So far this has only occurred in isolated instances. Agents should not allow the possibility of supernatural surveillance to paralyze their efforts. To do nothing in the face of uncanny watchers is to submit to Esoterror.

OPERATION PIXEL BITCH

When Darryl Appling, an NSA officer detailed to liaise with the German intelligence service (BND), goes AWOL and next shows up as a watchtower sniper in Siegen, Germany, the team performs what is supposed to be routine follow-up duty at his home in Bethesda, MD. There they discover that Appling came into possession of a satellite spy photograph depicting an Unremitting Horror creature — perhaps a photo taken during a prior case of the PCs.

They arrange for destruction of all digital copies of the image but discover that five more hardcopies were made and sent out by Appling before he descended completely into madness. The team must hunt down the images before they drive more viewers insane. And each time they find a new copy, the ODE depicted therein has grown larger and more terrible, as if readying itself to burst through the glossy photo paper into the real world.

^{*} In scenario construction parlance, attacks by enemies on the group are covered under the Antagonist Reactions header.

THE ORDO VERITATIS

OPERATION BACK BLAG

Mr. Verity dispatches the team to investigate claims by Sebastian Eyre, a London tabloid reporter who has in the past aided the Ordo's veil-out activities in the UK. The paper that for more than thirty years employed Eyre was just put out of business by the international conglomerate that owns it, as a sacrificial lamb in an ongoing phone-hacking scandal. Since it closed its doors, three of Eyre's fellow cashiered colleagues have died under mysterious, yet apparently unrelated, circumstances. Eyre senses the workings of the Outer Dark.

What he doesn't know, and the victims did, is that an even worse scandal has yet to surface. A team of reporters covering a series of child murders hid evidence from police in hopes of

NEUTRALIZATION

In cases requiring the application of extraordinary force, the team may call in a Special Suppression Force team to terminate enemy conspirators and assets.

Otherwise, the team initiates aggressive action itself, obeying as applicable the priority tree governing counter-ops.

THE VEIL-OUT

Widespread public knowledge that something supernatural has occurred can, over the long run, be more damaging to the Membrane than the result of any direct enemy action. To prevent such beliefs from forming, the team creates a mundane cover story explaining away any paranormal events that may have occurred, or are thought to have occurred, during the operation.

The agent's primary ally in any veil-out is the human capacity for denial. This deep-seated survival mechanism allows people to persist even in the face of cosmic danger. The public hungers for rational (that is, untrue) explanations. Successful cover stories tell them what they want to hear.

The Ordo bullet-points its cover-up methodology as follows:

- Start by finding the most plausible seeming counternarrative to the sinister conspiracy.
- Discard any mundane counter-narrative that is itself profoundly distressing or challenging to prevailing mores.
- Secure the cooperation of friendly witnesses, who will often be all too anxious to sweep the matter under the rug.
- Cajole resistant or hostile witnesses using the full range of persuasive techniques* at your disposal.
- Spread word of your counter-explanation via the media.
 - Check your briefing pack to see if OV-friendly media representatives are available in the area to assist.
 - Bargain with or manipulate civilian media personnel with such techniques as flattery, bribes, proffered scoops, and/or threats to cut off sources.

getting an exclusive interview with killer Adrian Finch before he turned himself in. Instead, he was arrested by police. Evidence of the reportorial misconduct never surfaced, not even after Finch's prosecution and subsequent death behind bars.

A cult of half-baked Esoterror ritualists worked a summoning seeking to harness the national anxieties generated by the press scandal as already known to the public. The resulting entity homed in on the guilt of the killer-concealing reporters and is now enjoying itself bumping them off in various apparently unconnected ways. When it finishes with them, it will move onto the rest of Britain's tabloid culture... unless the team intercepts it and finds a way to send it howling back to the Outer Dark.

Encourage cranks, conspiracy theorists, and other widely discredited or disregarded figures (counter-reliables) to publicize a crazy version of the story, possibly close to the truth. Their association with the story causes mainstream society to dismiss it.

ETHICS CODE

Unlike mundane institutions, the Ordo Veritatis cannot afford to pay mere lip service to its ethics code. Improper actions by its agents, through a psychic dynamic its researchers have yet to fully understand, tear the Membrane. This happens even when no one knows about it. The code breaks down into two categories, active goals and the proscribed behaviors.

Active goals:

- protect human life and dignity
- protect civilization and the values of civil society
- enhance order, rationality, calm, and tranquility Proscribed behaviors:
- assassination of human enemies*, except in extremis
- use of excessive force
- ► torture
- fomenting public confusion or distress
- treason (intentional cooperation with Esoterror and associated forces)

Where an ethics violation seems necessary to achieve mission objectives, agents may contact Mr. Verity to apply for a Warrant of Exigency, granting permission to proceed. Such requests are rejected about three quarters of the time.

Violations may result in referral to a review board.

 ODEs may be freely killed, as may humans who have been irrevocably possessed or parasitized by them.

* In game terms: make Interpersonal spends.

READINESS MAINTENANCE | RECRUITMENT | WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW 43

THE OV ARE THE GOOD GUYS

The Esoterrorists always portrays the Ordo Veritatis as the good guys — albeit sometimes chillingly determined ones. This flies in the face of a standard conspiracy genre trope, in which the hero's bosses always sell them out. Here they're neither bureaucratic backstabbers nor villainous betrayers.

We do this for a couple of reasons. First, the above is a cliché, so it's refreshing not to do it.

More importantly, players hate getting screwed over by their patrons, especially when the reversal hard codes itself into the scenario opener no matter what decisions they take. This is as overused in roleplaying as it is in fiction.

This is not a game of frustration and cynicism, but one of dedicated badassery pitted against repulsively horrible enemies. For a greyer-toned horror-espionage experience where getting burned is priced into player expectations, see another GUMSHOE game, *Night's Black Agents*, which takes a vampiric bite out of the espionage genre.

READINESS MAINTENANCE

Behind the bureaucratic term Readiness Maintenance lies the Ordo's crucial program of psychological monitoring. Most agents end their careers not due to death or physical injury but as a consequence of mental debility.

During debriefing, agents must report any signs of mental illness, either self-observed or on the part of their teammates. They must also contact the agency when they suffer delayed symptoms during downtime.

The organization treats any sign of mental disturbance as an incipient crisis to be averted forthwith. Skilled mental health professionals, cleared to hear nonoperational OV secrets, make themselves available around the clock to cope with psychological crises.

On any suggestion that an agent's psychological status threatens reliability in the field, he is referred to an inquiry called a 101 Board. He may be:

- cleared
- placed on leave during treatment
- ▶ retired from field operations
- retired from all operations
- (if deemed a threat to himself or others) interned at the Order's psychiatric facility, Installation Spaniard, until he is no longer a threat

OPERATION MEDULLA STRANGE

This scenario combines two classic plot tropes, putting the heroes falsely on trial and trapping the heroes in a hallucinatory mindscape. It begins *in media* res, with each member of the group facing 101 Boards at an Ordo psychiatric facility. As the institution becomes increasingly improbable and nightmarish, and the trial sessions ever more outlandish, the group realizes that their senses are being toyed with. There must be a way to break out of this false reality... but how?

OPERATION RAIN AGAIN

Ask a player who you feel hasn't received enough spotlight time to explain how his or her character joined the Ordo. Specify that the PC stumbled into a situation of Unremitting Horror, aided an existing team (which might have included other members of the current group), and won enough respect to be put forward. Let the player fill in the details around this framework. Then devise an investigation which turns out to be a return of whatever horror the character thought dispatched at the end of the incident. The new case hinges on details of the recruitment, allowing the player to intersperse flashback sequences throughout the episode — and perhaps learn a previously unearthed terrible truth behind the original incident.

 (if the threat he poses to others is deemed incorrigible) euthanized

RECRUITMENT

As the series progresses, you might encourage players to specify how their characters were recruited to the Ordo. They might have:

- been approached by a mentor in an official agency (police, intelligence, disaster management) who is an active or reserve member of the Order
- been put forward by a friend or colleague who is a current field agent
- stumbled onto a case in progress, impressing field agents, who put them forward for membership
- been the victim or target of an Esoterror operation, who, in the process of fighting back, independently uncovered the OV's existence

However they came to the attention of the order, they were rigorously scrutinized and psych tested before any approach.

The OV always needs reliable new blood and urges agents to look out for likely recruits. PCs may decide that sympathetic supporting characters they encounter during investigations are likely recruits and recommend them for the Ordo.

WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW

The Ordo keeps its org chart and list of facilities and departments secret from field agents. In the world, this prevents suborned or possessed agents from penetrating the wider group. Infiltrations stop at the cell level, which is the whole point of adopting that structure in the first place.

In play, this gives us, and you, the freedom to introduce new support wings and protocols as scenarios demand.

The focus in an *Esoterrorists* series isn't on the back office, headquarters, or a hierarchy of supporting characters more important than the investigators. It's with the PCs out in the field confronting horrors and in the lead, as they should be.



THE ENEMY

DESPITE ITS OUTWARD APPEARANCE AS A COHERENT CONSPIRACY, Esoterror is best understood as a resilient, self-generating meme. Since its obscure inception sometime during the scientific revolution*, its devotees have independently trucked with the Outer Dark in their reckless quest for unrestrained, tyrannical power.

THE LAWS OF ESOTERROR

The Esoterrorists comprise a fast-growing international conspiracy drawing from all walks of life. Conspirators range from Washington power brokers to backwoods cannibals. The roots of the movement trace back to at least the Victorian era. When they started out, they were able to influence people only through suggestion. They practiced rituals, but their evocations were limited to persuasive parlor tricks, from knocking tables to the summoning of ectoplasm.

Their generation-spanning plans for global control only began to come to fruition in the 1990s, at the end of the Cold War. As old power arrangements shattered, Esoterrorist agents stepped in to fill the gap. For nearly a decade and a half, their occult power has steadily increased. Their ritualists feed off the growing globalization of electronic media and the accelerating pace of dislocating social change. Whenever the world appears more disturbing or surreal than it is already, the veil between the ordinary material world, bounded by the laws of science, becomes permeable. Illogic becomes its own logic. The surreal gains physical form.

THE MEMBRANE

Central to Esoterrorist theory is the existence of the Membrane, a barrier between the separate realms of objective and subjective reality. The world we live in is determined by immutable physical laws, which exist whether we mere humans like it or not. We can refuse to accept them or pretend that different rules govern us, as we have for most of our existence on this planet. But concrete reality doesn't change. In the objective realm, there is no magic.

In the subjective realm, physical reality is what its inhabitants collectively declare it to be. Entities are mostly abstract in nature and biological only in afterthought. They are forever changed by the minds of those around them and exert the same influence on others. Those of great will dominate the others, changing the rules at will. These are our gods, demons, and monsters.

Like the eastern symbol of yin and yang, there is a tiny bit of subjectivity in the objective realm and a fragment of objectivity in the subjective. Without this tension the two worlds would wither and die. It is the Membrane that maintains this tension but keeps them forever apart.

Esoterrorist rituals seek to harness the fleeting elements of subjectivity in the objective realm and use it to poke holes in the Membrane.

MATERIALIZING SUPERNATURAL ENTITIES

The more porous the Membrane becomes, the easier it is to materialize beings infused with subjectivity.

The creatures Esoterrorist rituals evoke don't literally travel here from the subjective realm, which they refer to with ominous terms such as the Outer Dark. They materialize here but for a few instants after their arrival obey the irrational non-physics of the Outer Dark. They then adopt an objective, biological form. At this point Esoterrorist ritualists impose a form on them via intense concentration. It is easiest to materialize a creature whose design and biology has already been worked out by others. This is why Ordo Veritatis teams most often encounter the same handful of disturbing creatures.

To create an entirely new form of monster, Esoterror practitioners must carefully design the creature from the skeleton up, with a working, if improbable, biology. Anatomists, natural historians, conceptual designers, and Hollywood imagineers work together to build viable creatures. Sometimes, they work as intended and can be sent out to prey on the innocent and eat away at the world's objectivity. More often than not, they explode in a shower of burning viscera, sending their designers skulking back to the drawing board.

THE CONTRADICTION

Esoterrorists want everyone to believe in magic and horror but can't operate openly. Esoterrorists refer to this lamentable state as The Contradiction. Their members may occupy lofty perches of power throughout the world, but they're still a minority of paranoid whack jobs. Whenever a cell is exposed, the Ordo Veritatis arranges for its speedy extinction. Hemmed in by a resourceful enemy, they must continue to scheme in the shadows, waiting for the day when the tables are turned and it is the forces of rationality who must hide from the world's magicwielding masters.

^{*} Some say it dates back to the Enlightenment. Contradictions in the historical record confound researchers attempting to pinpoint a precise start date for the Esoterror movement.

The insane scholars and intuitive schizophrenics who've stumbled onto the edges of the Esoterrorist mystery tend to overestimate its global reach. Its members are influential, well placed, and effective, but, contrary to the conspiracy theories, they don't direct the course of all global events. However, they often try to piggyback on disasters and atrocities, exploiting them as a source of supernatural energy. For this reason they may seem more central to world events than is really the case.

For example, Esoterrorists weren't responsible for the 9/11 attacks perpetrated by al-Qaeda. However, once the attacks happened, Esoterrorists used their contacts in the media and government to enhance the devastating psychological impact. It was Esoterrorists who made sure that the text crawls under news shows, first used to provide updates in the hours after the attacks, became a permanent fixture of television broadcasts forever after. News crawls foster bizarre juxtapositions and information overload, increasing people's sense of an increasingly jumbled and irrational world. The energy from this psychic residue continues to spawn supernatural creatures throughout the industrialized West.

THE UNIFYING MOTIVATION OF ESOTERROR

Esoterrorists perpetually believe themselves on the verge of a sorcerous breakthrough, one which will invest in them the bizarre abilities now exclusively wielded by the Outer Dark Entities (ODEs.) Though all to date have failed, fresh cells continue to spring up. The failure of previous attempts merely feeds the megalomaniacal dedication of those who come after. Each new charismatic psychopath who stumbles onto the tenets of Esoterror convinces himself that he will be the one to finally pierce the Membrane, imbue himself with the might of true sorcery, and embark upon a triumphant campaign of conquest and slaughter. Not like those other fools! In the meantime, participation in the occult Ponzi scheme that is Esoterror conveys certain temporal benefits. Depending on their predilections, successful leaders gain spectacular access to wealth, luxury, drugs, and sexual opportunities. Rich or poor, celebrated or obscure, they accrue psychological dominance over the lesser cell members around them. These henchmen, lackeys, gulls, and submissives in turn find the strong direction that completes their otherwise aimless, unfulfilled lives.

MAGIC: CAN IT HAPPEN?

Ordo Veritatis researchers endlessly debate a central question: Is the quest of the Esoterrorists as quixotic as it is venal and destructive? Is it in fact possible for humans to perform acts of true magic? During post-mission interrogation, almost any captured cell leader will claim to have fostered minor effects of an otherworldly nature. Supposed examples include the following:



- clairvoyance/clairaudience
- extrasensory perception
- the extraction or erasure of memories
- extraordinary luck
- the hexing of objects that interfere with mechanical or electronic devices or induce bad luck in enemies
- foreknowledge of the future
- the implantation of images, thoughts, and ideas into weak minds
- temporary immunity to gunfire or other physical attacks
- the formulation of chemically inexplicable psychoactive substances

Ordo studies have proven the existence of certain low-order psychic abilities. These can arise spontaneously without exposure to the Outer Black. Whether Esoterror involvement brings latent abilities to the fore remains unclear. ODEs might well be able to stimulate their development in certain individuals. Or perhaps they extend empty promises of psi mastery, as they do in so many other areas.

Some cell leaders focus more heavily than others on the acquisition of sorcerous capabilities. Others treat ODEs as they would an influential mundane patron who, if properly served, will extend them the authority, status, and sense of control they obsessively seek.

THE ESOTERRORISTS

THE ENEMY

THE OV AND PSYCHIC POWERS

Deployment of psychic abilities weakens the Membrane, whether or not users are consciously in contact with the otherworld. The OV attempts to isolate individuals displaying them, discouraging them from making the public aware of their existence. Some become background assets. However, use of psychic abilities in the field has proven almost universally disastrous. ODEs can sense the presence of psi-capable humans. They may use this sense as a homing beacon to locate field agents. Worse, they sometimes burrow into the minds of psychic operatives, driving them mad and/or directing them to betray the group.

For this reason, psychics may never enter secure OV facilities. When the OV must consult them, handlers establish contact from a remove.

To equip supporting characters with psychic powers, see the relevant section of *Fear Itself*, the GUMSHOE game of personal horror.

In conclusion: the prime motivation of the typical Esoterrorists might be entirely delusional. If this is the case, the enemy would not represent the first or last group of subversives to sow havoc in pursuit of a ridiculous, unattainable goal.

That's the optimistic view.

The pessimistic assessment has it that the Esoterrorists really are going to learn sorcery. Given the rate of Membrane deterioration over the last century, it could be sooner than later.

EXTENT OF ODE INFLUENCE A VARIABLE

Unlike the Ordo, Esoterrorists report to no central authority, human or alien. No evidence has been found to date suggesting that a leadership hierarchy of Outer Dark Entities directs the activities of cells or, for that matter, exists at all. To the extent that ODEs can be said to have a politics, it is a chaotic, mutually competitive one. Individual entities recruit and manipulate human servitors, as pimps do sex workers. To determine whether these seemingly autonomous actors then pay tribute to mightier or senior creatures would require a degree of insight into the Outer Dark that could only be described as dangerous.

The degree to which an ODE exercises operational management of its human servitors varies according to circumstance and creature type. A cell might:

- be aware of ODEs without answering to any of them
- serve them at a safe remove, perhaps by summoning them and then standing back to watch the gore fly
- directly report to an ODE, either present in this reality or contacted through the Membrane
- exhibit no free will whatsoever, instead acting as earthly puppets for ODEs operating from the world beyond

HOW ESOTERRORISTS ARE MADE

OV analysts belonging to the Psychographic Profiling Unit study the formation of Esoterror cells. The personality of the cell's founder or current leader predicts much about its behavior. PPU methodology fits most leaders into two categories.

Dominants are seekers of temporal power who have never seen a hierarchy they do not wish to sit at the top of. They reach out to Esoterror to extend their power after running out of striving room in their mundane fields. This is by far the most common type of cell leader.

Sadists take delight, usually sexual, in the suffering of others. They share this quality with most ODEs and so seek them out as mentors and enablers. This is the second most common cell-leader type.

The following profiles are less frequently applied to leaders. Rank-and-file operatives usually fall into one of these categories.

Attention-Seekers want everyone to know who they are and to go down in history as among its greatest monsters. If tearing the Membrane were an art form, they'd be its geniuses.

Ciphers lack personality and desire, making them the ideal vessels for ODE possession and dominance.

Exofetishists serve ODEs in hopes of having sex with them.

Hedonists desire luxury and sensual pleasure. They believe that service to Esoterror will gain them the trappings and experiences they crave.

OPERATION AGNES SCRATCH

When high-end street art meets deadly coincidence, the team meets up in a culture-rich metropolis, intent on suppressing a burgeoning urban legend. The instigating event occurs when a mayor's graffiti abatement program ignites controversy by destroying a pair of commissioned murals. In response, the enigmatic street artist Stroppy, whose work famously commands stratospheric auction results, covertly installs stencil murals at the sites in question. One depicts Mayor Wes Logan, another, his lightning-rod chief enforcer Grady Punch. Both show the men under attack by a spray-painted monster evocative of Outer Dark Entities. Within days of each other, Logan suffers a fatal heart attack, and Punch dies in a city-hall elevator accident.

As agents arrive, social media buzzes with the concept of a street-art death curse. The original two deaths seem entirely coincidental and natural. Stroppy, if tracked down, appears innocent of Esoterror connection. But then an opportunistic cell starts breaking into homes, leaving Stroppy-style stencils on the wall, and later arranging for homeowners to suffer apparently supernatural demises. Can the agents stop them before the progressively more horrible stencil images come to life, animated by entities from the Outer Dark? **Quislings** don't necessarily hate mankind; they're simply convinced that it is doomed, and that the only way to survive is to throw in with the inevitable victors of the coming war between realities.

Avengers believe themselves to have been wronged by all around them. They seek other misfits and haters and spear operations of appalling violence.

Unwilling to make decisions for themselves, **submissives** delegate their self-control to an outside force, the harsher and more punishing the better. Hidden behind their passivity is a suppressed yearning to turn their self-hatred outward, against others. ODEs, who incarnate cruelty and dominance, activate this impulse. The same psycho-dynamic has throughout history supplied murderous dictators with a steady supply of weak-minded lackeys eager to do their bidding.

For detailed psychographic profiles, including interpersonal strategies for dealing with each type, see *The Esoterror Fact Book*.

LIKE CANCER, ESOTERRORISTS ARRIVE IN CELLS

A new cell develops by any of the following methods:

- **SELF-GENERATED:** a leader type stumbles onto evidence of Esoterror and decides to form his own group, before or after seeking contact with the Outer Dark.
- **ESOTERIC AWAKENING:** An individual or group interested in the occult learns enough to conduct a summoning ritual often unaware of the true nature of the beings brought across the divide. Those deemed useful by the manifesting entity are then commanded to form a cell. The rest are tortured, killed, or devoured, as its predilections dictate.
 - Certain transgressive behaviors and extreme emotional states mimic the function of summoning rituals. These momentarily puncture the Membrane, allowing ODEs to cross over. They may then build a cell around the unwitting summoner. The summoner may or may not come to regard herself as a practitioner of magic.
- **CROSS-MEMBRANE:** an ODE becomes aware of a suitable candidate to form a new cell, then proceeds to initiate the target into the Esoterror way. Means of contact may be mental or purely physical. The contactee may already be willing or rendered pliable after a program of psychic domination and/or torture, often with a sexual component.
- **CELL FISSIONING:** A subordinate member of an existing cell forms an offshoot, with or without the permission of the first cell's commander. The newly generated cell may take on other former members of the originating group. Or the leader may seek a completely new recruit roster.
- **DAUGHTER CELL:** One cell, from a remove, creates an offshoot consisting entirely of new recruits. Often this is an expendable cutout cell designed for a single operation, and then discarded. Members of the daughter cell never learn the true identities or hideouts of the mother gang.

REMNANT SURVIVAL: Cell members escaping an OV sweep regroup in a fresh location, recruiting new prospects to replace the apprehended and slain.

COMMUNICATIONS

Members of sophisticated cells may employ state-of-the-art tradecraft to communicate with one another.

Most cells rely on obscurity and a set of simple precautions. They avoid cell phones, email, and other modern networking technologies, instead relying on face-to-face meetings, deaddrop messages written on physical paper, and physical signaling.

Alternately, they adopt cover identities and communicate under the guise of their supposed organization. If executed properly, only insiders realize that a newsletter for the aquarium fanciers' club, minutes of the residents' association, or skate-punk hashtag is really a means of conveying operative instructions.

Some cells are so primitive that they wouldn't know a communications protocol if it manifested from beyond the Membrane to eat the neighborhood dog. These are your classic cannibal families, degenerate hill people, and gangs of homeless youths.

Cell structure protects the conspiracy from the Ordo Veritatis. When a cell stands exposed at mission's end, its members are rarely able to provide leads to parallel organizations. The worldwide wave of raids dreamt of by early Ordo officials never occurs.

That said, the richest and most savvy cells, protected by tradecraft-level protocols, do occasionally coordinate with one another. They take pains to minimize exposure, using satellite redirects, non-Euclidean encryption, and perhaps even a secret, parallel Internet. Top cells use these contacts chiefly to move money between groups. Esoterror brings in ten times as much operational money as the now-beleaguered al-Qaeda network. However, this revenue stays disproportionately within a tiny number of rarefied cells capable of shielding transfers from OV signals officers and forensic accountants. Much of their funding appears to originate in a systematic manipulation of the stock market. Theories that the 2008 international financial crisis resulted from an Esoterror profit-taking move remain tantalizing but unprovable.

TRENDING CONSPIRACIES

Like snowflakes (that want to violate everything you hold dear), no two Esoterror cells are alike. As they are best understood by example, here are five up-and-coming cells agents might confront. Entries conclude with a scenario springboard.

Unlike the cell profiles given in *The Esoterror Fact Book*, these are not written in character as intelligence files the Ordo has composed for its own use. These cells remain unknown to the organization until your PCs investigate the mysteries they create.

cell structure / series structure

The Esoterrorists packages its ongoing villains in a cell structure for a couple of reasons. First of all, it fits the game's geopolitical horror motif. Just like the unpredictable economic and demographic forces transforming our world, Esoterror is radically decentralized and disruptive. Stateless terrorism continues to loom as a primary wellspring of background anxiety. Every time you go to through airport security, a ritualistic event supposedly meant to soothe this unease instead reinforces it. To portray our conspiracy as amorphous and thus unstoppable underscores that theme.

THE ENEMY

This grounding in real-world issues gives *Esoterror* stories a distinctive flavor. A realistic take on a global conspiracy lends the fanciful horror elements a tang of credibility.

Most importantly, though, the division of antagonists into small cells keeps the opposition manageable. Players confronted with monolithic, ultra-powerful conspiracies often grow dispirited. They stop taking the bold actions that drive stories forward, certain that they're being monitored at every instant and that they have no chance against an overwhelming adversary. Cell structure allows PCs to tackle a discrete set of enemies in each scenario, without having to track an everwidening network of untouchable opponents. At the same time, it explains why new enemies keep popping up even after a succession of successful busts.

That's why this chapter presents general guidance on the common traits of Esoterror cells, and a series of examples to use in your game, rather than an interconnected org chart with relationship maps and so on.

This is not to say that you couldn't run a more sandboxy, player-driven series. The *Station Duty* series (see p. 79) places the agents in one haunted place over an extended period of time as they root out a multi-headed, localized conspiracy. You could fuse the Esoterror mythos with the series structure of *Night's Black Agents* to send the team roving about the globe, mopping up cells one by one. In this setup, the end of each scenario provides a core clue for the next, fusing the series into a single web of intrigue. In either case, though, it's still easier to start with a mystery for each episode and tailor your Esoterror baddies to fit it.

BUNDYCLUB

NATURE OF CELL: Serial-killer team LEADER: John Michael Loehr LEADER PSYCHOGRAPHIC PROFILE: Sadist

Ever since he hit puberty, two contradictory impulses have shaped the life of Ohio landscaper John Michael Loehr: his desire to sexually gratify himself through mutilation and murder and his paralyzing fear of getting caught. He would have performed the usual acts of a budding serial killer — setting fires, killing animals — were it not for the constant attention of his handson, helicopter-parenting mother, Maria. After quitting her job as a social worker to act as a full-time mom to John and three stepchildren, Maria poured all of her energy into moment-bymoment supervision of her charges. By demonstrating her love for him in the form of suffocating vigilance, Maria unwittingly made herself his personal embodiment of paranoid menace. Loehr secretly collected serial-killer literature but never dared act on his antisocial obsessions.

By the time her son reached adulthood, Maria, who died of cancer in 1998, had become a permanent presence in John's head. Though he lived alone, constructed a basement dungeon, and compulsively stalked potential victims, he could never bring himself to complete the dreadful act. Instead he joined an Internet forum devoted to collecting grisly artifacts of the American serial-killing tradition. The secretive core group dubbed itself Bundyclub.

Slowly Loehr laid the groundwork to turn a handful of hangers-on and wannabes into actual killers. He argued that even their greatest heroes always got caught because forensic profiling invariably led investigators to them. If a group acted in concert, dividing up the various tasks involved in a killing, the psychological trail they'd leave behind would be too confusing to lead to any one of them. Years of late-night typing finally swayed them. Loehr shaped Bundyclub into a crowdsourced serial-murder operation. Each summer they pick a random location - last year's was Irmo, South Carolina - to which none of them have any connection. They travel there separately, not unlike Ordo Veritatis agents. Carefully parceling their tasks, they establish a kill site, acquire and equip a kidnap van, and narrow down a prospective victim list to a final candidate. They switch up tasks, resulting in an MO so scattered that the FBI has yet to connect any of the murders. Nonetheless, Loehr always delegates the risky jobs to someone else.

The other members of Bundyclub are as follows:

- Albert Andrew Lee, bald, hulking building superintendent, Florence, SC
- Lon David Garvey, absurdly swaggering gas station attendant, Stony Plain, Alberta
- Daniel Fabian Werner, nondescript squinting accountant, Chippewa Falls, WI
- Nate Younker, Jr., rat-faced hardware store clerk, Buffalo, NY

Loehr acquired the psychological insight and finesse required to organize the Bundyclub from a corpsejabber (p. 55). It occupies the desiccated body of his mother, which Loehr dug up a couple of years after her death. Most of the year, he stores Mom in a nonfunctional freezer unit in the basement of his home in Burton City, OH. When he goes on a road trip, he keeps the animated corpse in a sleeping bag in the back of his van, consulting "her" for advice when necessary.

Although the thought of capture terrifies Loehr as much as ever, the corpsejabber in his mother's body reckons that it's about time to expose the Bundyclub, loosing a torrent of Membrane-thinning publicity.

OPERATION THREADJACK

Use Bundyclub to insert mayhem and murder into a weird news story you rip from the headlines (as per p. 67.) Take a story that seems weird and psychologically destabilizing but lacks an obvious villain, such as one of these:

- an act of vandalism against a famous work of art or revered landmark
- police overreaction when a psychic reports the existence of a nonexistent mass grave
- the husband of an elderly celebrity's announcement of plans to plastinate and display her body after death

The incident provokes a minor media flurry while the Bundyclubbers are on their way to this year's randomly chosen murder site. "Maria" changes their plans, detouring them to the town or city where the newsworthy incident takes place. She then inveigles them into a multiple-victim murder spree, creating the impression that something supernatural has been awakened by the weird event. While the serial killers work to avoid detection as always, the corpsejabber nudges them into the paths of the OV team, intending to instigate an even more explosive real-life weird tale.

THE DOLLARMEN

NATURE OF CELL: Financial conspiracy LEADER: Michael B. Marrone LEADER PSYCHOGRAPHIC PROFILE: Dominant

Founded on the day of the Lincoln assassination, the investment banking and securities firm Hostetter Marcus has for over a century vigorously guarded its status as a fixture of world capitalism. Every noteworthy financial scandal and economic meltdown since the Depression has in some way arrived with the fingerprints of Hostetter Marcus smeared all over it. Yet, again and again, regulatory attempts to curb its power or punish its excesses have fizzled. Surely this is a coincidence. It cannot be that the revolving door between its New York executive suite and the Department of the Treasury, which continues to turn whether the White House is occupied by a Republican or Democrat, protects the company from reprisal. Surely Hostetter Marcus's impunity derives from the simple fact that it has always been too big to fail. The firm has so entangled itself in global financial dealings, not to mention the portfolios of the uberrich, that its survival remains ensured no matter what blunders or shadiness it commits. Ordo agents have been as unsuccessful as the SEC in finding any fire behind the smoke.

True paranoids add a conspiratorial explanation to the firm's financial hegemony. They say that it is staffed from CEO to janitor with worshippers of Satan. Perhaps at their orgiastic retreats, crackpots concede, he is propitiated under the name of Mammon, but it is the Great Beast they follow all the same. Conspiracy theorists individualize the exact details of their Hostetter Marcus-related ravings. In the end, though, they one and all discredit themselves with a climactic plunge into blatant anti-Semitism.

For decades Ordo Veritatis researchers have come to suspect that these conspiracy theories are helped along by forces within Hostetter Marcus itself. Anyone who tries to root out a real conspiracy within its lushly appointed boardrooms can then be tarred as a typical nutbar.

The truth is this: Hostetter Marcus was founded as an Esoterror front. Throughout its history, highly placed henchmen of the Outer Dark have cycled in and out of the company. At certain points, its board has been stacked with them; at other times, it has consisted only of ordinary greedheads. The marvel of it is that the company remains just as rapacious, if not more so, when the cultists leave operations to civilian number crunchers.

The firm's occult founders nicknamed their cabal "the Dollarmen." In a rare example of a self-perpetuating, multigenerational cell, it has long survived them. Esoterror operatives promoted to its leadership find a file left mysteriously open on their desks when they assume their positions. It reveals this history, concluding with an admonition to cherish this secret name.

Last year, when an uninitiated CEO had to be kicked upstairs for public relations reasons, an Esoterror operative, Michael B. Marrone, slid into his chair. As public fear gains potency in bad economic times, Marrone intends to prolong or provoke* a devastating international downturn. As reckless as he is arrogant, Marrone may prove willing to do what his ODE-propitiating predecessors would not: risk the secrecy of Esoterror's enduring involvement with Hostetter Marcus.

Marrone, a math genius and classic extrovert in the Boston tradition, first glimpsed the Outer Dark in the solution to a theorem he tried to crack as a student. Using his bulldog instinct for opportunity, he located, rushed, and took over a near-defunct Esoterror cell within the alumni association of his alma mater, Dartmouth College. With occasional aid from the nightmare dimension, he rocketed through positions at a series of financial institutions before being recruited for his current gig. His charmingly brash confidence may lead him to toy with investigators when keeping his distance might be wiser.

Ringed by ambitious go-getters anxious to please him, he requires few active conspirators on the payroll. Marrone instead maintains contact with a number of independent Esoterror assets from various walks of life:

- Laurent Goinard, his suave, secretly self-castrated counterpart at the gigantic Dutch asset management firm JOH Groep, Inc.
- Towanda Norvell, daughter of sixties radicals turned expert assassin
- Reah Shears, icily gorgeous anchor for the cable business news outlet FPN
- Reed Stebbins, physically and verbally ponderous US Congressman (D-NY)
- Dick Pfeffer, venal mob-affiliated union boss
- Prakash Ventakesh, socially stunted fellow Dartmouth math whiz capable of summoning Outer Dark entities by running equations in his head

* Depending on when you read this.

THE ESOTERRORISTS

They in turn can marshal significant resources to harass, mislead, or muscle nosy investigators.

THE ENEMY

OPERATION BALANCE SHEET

Use the Dollarmen cell to add an Esoterror element to a financial or business story ripped from the headlines, such as one of these:

- a financial scandal
- criminal charges involving a banking or investment figure
- ▶ a political showdown threatening debt default or government shutdown
- ➤ an environmental catastrophe caused by corporate malfeasance

Mr. Verity assigns the team to investigate the suspicious death of freelance journalist Ted Schaefer, who had been probing Michael Marrone's connections to the headline-making case. Schaefer's death earns OV attention because he was considered a prospect for field agent recruitment. His notes have gone missing. The team is to find out what he was working on, in hopes that it provides the long-sought smoking gun linking Hostetter Marcus to Esoterror.

THE INFERNALISTS

NATURE OF CELL: Biker gang LEADER: Derek "Gas Can" Stokes LEADER PSYCHOGRAPHIC PROFILE: Quisling

When he burned three men alive in a field outside Uniontown, MD, Derek "Gas Can" Stokes was not trying to summon an otherworldly entity. He was merely teaching a lesson to any other drug-trade associates who might contemplate ripping off his Infernalists biker gang. But an ODE came nonetheless - a Brutalizer (p. 54) who dubbed itself Spatterglide. Attracted by the carnage, and allowed through the Membrane by the agony of Stokes's victims, Spatterglide beat the murderous biker to a pulp, then demanded his undying fealty. Stokes swore to serve Spatterglide, sealing a mystic bond he cannot undo. He then proceeded to introduce his gang-mates to the creature, who made each of them in turn its bitch. Since then the Infernalists have increased their hold over the southern Maryland meth trade, serving as needed as local muscle for Esoterror. The jumpin ceremony for new recruits climaxes in a bloody beatdown from Spatterglide; those who make it out alive become grim, tattooed exemplars of a supernatural Stockholm Syndrome.

Stokes hates Spatterglide, the Esoterror philosophy, and anything vaguely occultic. But he's stuck, convinced that the Outer Dark will soon invade the world. A survivor above all else, he sees no percentage in breaking free. At least Spatterglide will protect him from other entities when the sky turns black with them, as they swarm triumphantly across the land. The monster can peer into his soul, or so he assumes. If he so much as thought about betraying him, that would be the end of poor old Gas Can for sure.

HOW TO CREATE AN ESOTERROR CELL

- Pick a phenomenon of postmodern life you find in some way disturbing, dissonant, or frightening. It could be overtly occultic but doesn't have to be.
- Figure out how to twist it so that it serves the Esoterror ends of psychological destabilization and power acquisition.
- Imagine who might be in charge of a secret group dedicated to that goal.
- Decide which of the psychological profiles (p. 46) best applies to your leader.
- Extrapolate from the goal to the specific crimes the cell has committed (or commits as the action unfolds.) This becomes your scenario premise.
- As you flesh out your scenario, work out likely antagonist reactions and which allies the leader might require to bring them about. These become the remainder of your cell.

As you can see, cell creation is inseparable from scenariomaking. Build the cell that fits your mystery and your desired scenes of horror.

Other members of the Infernalists include the following:

- Scott "Black Plague" Pellman, corpulent bruiser capable of full function on a blood alcohol level high enough to kill a horse
- Bruce "Logjam" Totten, reflexively violent thug with rage issues, albeit a loving husband and father to four young daughters
- Ernie "Crasher" Parris, not quite right in the head after one collision too many
- Jim "Savager" Savage, the gang's tactician, weapons procurer, and demolitions expert
- Ray "Sockit" Tooley, grinning and boyish, thinks of himself as the kid brother Gas Can never knew he had

OPERATION GRUDGEKILL

Use the Infernalists to re-skin a horrific news event involving warfare between drug gangs. The team investigates a mass killing which appears to have ritual occult overtones. The crime scene says otherwise. (Spatterglide likes mass murder but has no need for ritual trappings — already present in world, it has no intention of inviting other entities to share its fun.) But on further digging they find traces of the Outer Dark in the Infernalists' rise to power.

Alternately, add the Infernalists to any scenario in which an ODE requires mundane enforcers. Spatterglide can sense the presence of other entities, and sometimes loans out its crew to them, in exchange for access to interesting victims.

TRENDING CONSPIRACIES

RUGGED

Nature of Cell: Fitness retreat Leader: Sandy Hester Leader Psychographic Profile: Exofetishist

Tanned, blond, and immaculately sculpted, fitness guru Sandy Hester sports the kind of bod that reduces other men to grudging envy. Hester earns his living helping the already obsessively buff get buffer. His most recent innovation combines his career with his unearthly avocation. Realizing that the lust for physical mastery is as much a spiritual yearning as anything else, Hester has dusted off elements of the pseudo-mystical men's movement of the 90s and repackaged them for the leaner, meaner teens. His program, called Rugged, combines extreme calisthenics, austere dietary requirements, and a healthy dollop of motivational speaking. Hester pitches his speeches to the kind of guy who obsesses over Fight Club while entirely missing its satirical point. He tells them that the modern world infantilizes and feminizes young men. By perfecting their bodies, by overcoming their limitations, they can triumph over this culture-wide emasculation, recapturing their true, primal selves. Those specially selected achievers, those who've attained his program's pinnacle, score invitations to the Rugged retreat. This weeklong binge of boundary-testing athletic activities gradually morphs into a guided spiritual awakening. Using criteria given him by his totem entity, he divides participants into three categories:

- Failures. Most attendees break under the pressure. They're allowed to keep taking lower-level Rugged classes but are never re-invited to the retreat. These men return home disappointed but none the wiser.
- Recruits. A very few participants may respond to the hidden subtext of the spiritual mumbo jumbo in a way that suggests their candidacy for Esoterror involvement. In the months following the event, Hester contacts them, schools them in its principles, and sends them off to found new cells relevant to their positions in life.
- Food. The one or two attendees who most excel at the physical obstacles (but show no Esoterror propensity) are taken to Hester's benefactor, who consumes their masculine essence, leaving them footless shadows of their former alpha selves.

Hester has fantasized about sex with grotesque, inhuman creatures since puberty. At age twenty-one, he kidnapped a classmate, placed her in a handmade monster mask, and raped her. This act brought into the world a one-off Outer Dark manifestation, which shaped itself to meet his desires. This being, which he calls Gwen, shambled off to live in the forest where his retreats are now held. He brings her victims and in exchange is permitted coitus with her. Hester alone can withstand this contact without losing his virility.

Gwen (Difficulty 6 Stability to glimpse her, Difficulty 10 to look at her head on) is an amorphous, toothy, ropy monstrosity of unmistakably vaginal aspect. She personifies a twisted fear of femininity, as conjured into unearthly flesh.



Men she's fed on return to their lives and sink into despond. They drop their fitness regimes, fatten themselves on repulsive junk food, and withdraw from their loved ones. Some, but not all, eventually explode in senseless acts of Membrane-thinning violence.

Meanwhile, Sandy Hester keeps recruiting...

OPERATION MISSING JIGSAW

A series of violent and suicidal crimes by apparently unconnected, formerly fitness-obsessed men leads the team to Sandy Hester and the creature at the heart of his personal forest.

THE SHEPHERDSTOWN CUCKOOS

NATURE OF CELL: Possession victims (communicated through trading card game)
 LEADER: Matty Corbo
 LEADER PSYCHOGRAPHIC PROFILE: Cipher

ODEs don't limit their exploitation of human desire to those safely above the age of majority. They also take advantage of the unformed psyches of children, sometimes creating pint-sized cells of possessed servitors.

This has happened in Shepherdstown, WV, a historic small town known for its annual street fest. A gang of kids, led by alpha child Matty Corbo, has developed an obsession with a line of trading cards. Called *Kooky Kreatures*, this set recalls the *Mars Attacks* or *Wacky Packages* collectibles of decades past. Created by alternative cartoonists for a major card company, the product itself innocuously depicts a series of gross and goofy monsters.

THE ENEMY

Matty, 9, couldn't get enough of these cards. Perhaps his monomania stems from his parents' regular screaming matches. He wanted a complete set so much that he convinced his friends to start buying them, too. When they couldn't purchase the ultrarare chase cards, given their limited allowances, they started shoplifting. They went so far as to order cards on eBay with filched credit card numbers. Yet the final cards remained elusive. Matty's tortured avarice allowed the Outer Dark into his heart.

Now selected cards, when he concentrates on them, shift from cartoony drawings to 3-D writhing depictions of various ODEs. If any of his friends have cards on their persons, he can command them like puppets. The first card he bought talks to him in a buzzing, inhuman voice. It tells him he can have the whole set. There are just some bad people who have to be taken care of first...

The other kids, all either nine or ten, are as follows:

Danita Olivares, pretty and bossy

THE ESOTERRORISTS

- Rachel Luby, shy and put-upon
- Ronnie Barnett, clumsy and sensitive about his weight problem
- ▶ Frank Fernandez, embarrassed by his family's poverty
- ▶ Lorilee Herren, precociously brainy

OPERATION CHASE CARD

Matty and friends have embarked on a covert kill spree. Supplied with clever and elaborate plans by the talking cards, they've so far managed to make each death look like an accident — if always an unlikely and chilling one.

The coincidence of so many fatal freak accidents in one small town leads to an MTA report. The team arrives just as the cards tell the kids to escalate. The ODEs play a game with the unwitting agents to see how many additional slayings they can engineer before the Stability-shattering truth comes out.

OPPONENT STATISTICS

You usually only need game statistics for characters, including ODEs, that the investigators will end up facing. Most witnesses, suspects, and noncombatants require only a text description, indicating, for example, which interpersonal abilities they're most likely to respond to.

Opponents use the same Hit Threshold and weapon damage rules as player characters.

HEALTH LOSS FOR NPCS

To make bookkeeping easier for GMs, human opponents and ODEs are killed when their Health pools drop to 0. The GM may, if she thinks it dramatically appropriate, use the rules for PC injury and death for certain important human NPCs.

ABILITY POOL REFRESHMENT

NPCs refresh ability pool points according to how often they appear. A creature that is not encountered for 24 hours or more may replenish all of its ability pools, with the exception of Health, which it recovers at the rate of 1d6 points per day.

HEALTH RATINGS FOR MINOR FOES

When choosing Health ratings for dramatically unimportant foes, don't worry about simulating their relative robustness in comparison to the general population. Focus on how many hits they ought to be able to take before dropping, according to dramatic logic. If you want a thug who falls to a single burst of automatic fire, give him a Health of I or 2.

If the Investigators encounter an NPC later on in the same day, such as by tracking an ODE to its lair, it can refresh all of its ability pools to a maximum of half their total rating, again with the exception of Health, which it cannot refresh at all.

Creatures that have special rules for recovering Health, such as regenerating creatures, follow their own rules rather than those given above.

An **Attack Pattern** is an optional game statistic suggesting how the opponent might spend its Scuffling and/or Shooting points from round to round of a fight. GMs should always consult story logic and dramatic needs first and resort to the attack pattern second. You might want a vast lumbering creature to smash doors and walls around the PCs, and a small vicious ODE to attack with unerring precision. These numbers are a fallback if you can't decide how the opponent would spend or are uncomfortable choosing to spend enough to guarantee a hit each time. Don't use them just because they're there, even if you find the pull of numbers — oh, sweet, beautiful numbers — generally irresistible.

A security guard's Attack pattern is 2/4/2. That means he'll spend 2 Shooting points the first round, 4 the next, and 2 for the next round. This will run through his Shooting pool of 8.

When you do use the Attack Pattern, increase the spends after each miss until the opponent either starts to hit or runs out of points. Once engaged, opponents figure out how hard the PCs are to hit, adjusting their efforts accordingly.

Armor is subtracted from each instance of damage the opponent takes. Where a weapon or weapons is listed after the number, the Armor reduces damage only from those weapons. Some Armor may protect against all Scuffling attacks but not Shooting attacks, or vice versa.

An opponent's **Alertness Modifier** represents its ability to sense your activities, whether through standard senses like sight and hearing or exotic ones like echolocation, pheromone recognition, or energy signature reading. When you try to sneak past it, the Alertness Modifier is applied to your base Infiltration Difficulty, which is usually 4. It also applies to Surveillance tests when you're trying to observe the opponent without being observed in turn. The Alertness Modifier reflects all of the individual's sensing capabilities: natural, supernatural, and technological.

An opponent with a **Stealth Modifier** is either significantly harder or easier to spot with Surveillance. It alters the difficulty number for that or similar tests.

TESTS AND SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

Game statistics in GUMSHOE are, whenever possible, playerfacing. When you as GM have the choice between making a determination based on a player test or on a test made by you on behalf of a supporting character, always choose the player. For example, you may want to specify that there's a chance a rescued victim has a mental breakdown while the agents are shepherding her to safety. Rather than having her make a Stability test to see when and if this happens, set it up so that a player makes a Reassurance spend to calm her. Likewise, if you want to have a supporting character steal something in a situation where the PCs are in no position to affect the outcome, simply decree that it happens. Don't bother testing the character's Filch ability. To do otherwise is to engage in false branching: you are creating unpredictability for yourself in a way that remains invisible to the players. They don't get a chance to alter the outcome, and thus gain no benefit from the uncertainty you've introduced.



SMDS OF UNREMITTING HORRORS

Since 2008, breakthroughs in labs and in the field have revealed the following SMDs for creatures documented in *The Book of Unremitting Horror*. Page numbers below refer to the GUMSHOE edition of that dreadful volume.

All of the clues provided in the "Player knowledge" entries are available via a 2-point **Occult Studies** spend. Waive the spend when the SMD acts as a core clue.

Bleeder (pp. 10–12) *Player knowledge*: Bullets filled with dried blood plasma are especially effective against these blood-draining, bandage-shrouded false healers. *Mechanical effect*: Shooting attacks on Bleeders using plasma bullets carry damage values of +6.

Kook (pp. 50–53) *Player knowledge:* When sprinkled with the cremains of a murdered prepubescent, kooks, who turn children into monsters, lose their physical formidability. *Mechanical effect:* Sprinkling the ashes requires a Scuffling success or might be possible over a wide area via an ingenious combination of Explosive Devices and Mechanics. It prevents the kooks from using their "Lust for Life" or "Radiant Haze" abilities.

Ovvashi (pp. 76–80) *Player knowledge*: Ovvashi, ODEs who prey on the homeless, can be slain by a dagger made from the sharpened femur or humerus of a person who died outdoors, destitute, and without a fixed address. *Mechanical effect*: A Scuffling attack successfully made with this weapon reduces the Ovvashi's Health pool to 4, unless its Health is already at or below that number, in which case it instantly destroys the Ovvashi.

Sisterite (pp. 105-110) *Player knowledge*: Sisterites, who hunt lonely men they meet online, wither when splashed with the blood of a male virgin who has refrained from pleasuring himself to visual imagery of any kind for the last seven years or more. *Mechanical effect*: Splashing liquid on the Sisterite requires a Scuffling success and costs the creature 10 Health. The Sisterite's Hit Threshold drops by 1 if the player thinks to use a spray bottle as a delivery mechanism.

IN A WORLD WHERE VAMPIRES ARE A POP-CULTURE STAPLE AND THE dread Elder Gods are available as plush toys, traditional monsters have lost their power to terrify and appall. *Esoterrorist* creatures may recall demons, ghosts, or the undead, but always with an unexpected twist.

For more Esoterrorist creatures, see The Book of Unremitting Horror.

SPECIAL MEANS OF DISPATCH

Some ODEs can be slain by special means of dispatch. This weapon or killing technique may be:

- the only means of destroying a creature
- an easier way of destroying a creature that is also vulnerable to ordinary attacks
- a means of sending a being back to the Outer Dark, either permanently or for a useful period of time

The legendary tradition of monsters manifesting well-known weaknesses — vampires to garlic, faeries to cold iron — is a folkloric echo of these vulnerabilities.

The way in which a creature's SMD is revealed to the players gives you considerable room for variation between scenarios. The harder the creature is to kill without the SMD, the easier it should be to learn it.

Where the Ordo suspects the involvement of a given creature type from the outset, its SMD may also be known to the organization. If so, it is revealed to the group by Mr. Verity as part of the initial briefing.

When the team uncovers the presence of a known creature type during the investigation, an Occult Studies ability use or spend reveals the SMD. This reflects the agent's knowledge of OV creature databases. If the creature is very hard to kill without the SMD, favor the free ability use over the spend.

A supporting character involved in the mystery has learned of the SMD, allowing a PC to use another ability to get it out of the character. This could be anything from an interpersonal ability to Cryptography, Data Retrieval, or Electronic Surveillance.

THE ENEMY

Academic abilities might likewise lead to the discovery of an SMD: Archaeology might recall a particular mix of herbs left as a protective measure in Chinese tombs; Art History might recall a

THE ESOTERRORISTS

painting of an ODE-like creature being felled by a gilded rapier. If the goal of a scenario is to destroy a creature already known from the outset, the discovery of the SMD might be a core clue, since the story can't be satisfactorily concluded without it. The SMD would also be a core clue if the agents must kill or banish a creature to move on through the story to the solution of the mystery. In these rare instances, investigative ability spends are never required to learn about an SMD or acquire its physical components.

More often the issue of whether the characters survive a monster fight is tangential to the solution of the mystery at hand. In this standard case, the SMD is not a core clue, but rather an extra benefit — albeit an extremely useful extra benefit. As a baseline, learning about a creature's SMD ought to be a 2-point spend. The cost drops to 1 if the SMD only modestly impedes a creature or if the process of acquiring it is unduly distressing or difficult. It rises to 3 when the SMD kills/banishes the creature outright or is trivially easy to secure.

If, as happens very occasionally, the Ordo knows from the outset that one of these creatures figures in a case, it informs agents of the SMD as part of their briefing. In the latter case, agents receive any obscure physical items needed, such as plasma bullets.

Certain SMDs, such as those for the kook and ovvashi (see sidebar), are disturbing to procure or even to contemplate. Depending on how agents go about gathering them in the field, these induce Stability tests of various intensities.

BLOOD CORPSES

These zombie-like entities rampage insatiably for human blood, consuming it through hollow claws, which function as both rending weapon and feeding tubule. For more on Blood Corpses, see *The Book of Unremitting Horror*, p. 13.

GAME STATISTICS

ABILITIES: Athletics 6, Health 8, Scuffling 12 HIT THRESHOLD: 3 ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1 STEALTH MODIFIER: -1 WEAPON: +1 (Talons) ARMOR: +2 vs. Shooting

BRUTALIZER

I was the strongest in Patpong. Anyone would say this. When I entered a bar, there was trembling. All feared my fists, my feet, my elbows. More than that, they feared my rage. Whether man or woman, no one dared show disrespect to me. The only fighters who would face me in the ring were fools straight from the countryside, who did not know my name. I left them dazed and forever broken. That gave me pride, yes it did.



Then one night I walked down that alley, neon signs blurring in my drunken sight. It appeared to me in a blaze of chains and studs, of blades and wire. In minutes, all was sealed. It turned me to a whimpering ball of blood and pain. I was nothing, and it was my master.

 Interrogation transcript, suspect Kittitat Chuntakaro, Case File Reference OPERATION FASTFEET

Not all Outer Dark horrors are psychological. Brutalizers embody the terror of physical domination. They exist to smash, slice, crush, and stomp victims until they bend, quivering and shattered, to their will.

Brutalizers break through the Membrane during acts of prolonged and appalling physical violence. They revel in the suffering of the victims, then turn on the victimizers. Brutalizers exult in turning the tables on bullies and hard men. No terror registers more piquantly on a Brutalizer's psychic palate than that of a formerly fearless battler reduced to agonized, pantspissing subordination.

Though a brutalizer may be pulled through the Membrane by a solitary bully, for example, a habitual domestic abuser, they take special delight in breaking the leaders of hierarchical groups

OUTER DARK ENTITIES: BLOOD CORPSE TO CORPSEJABBER

55

bound together by the threat of physical force. Favorite targets include gangsters, military officers, cops, and prison guards. Truly responsible authority figures, who use force only reluctantly and to the minimum extent necessary, do not attract or interest them.

Though brutalizers occasionally step in to personally destroy an enemy, their thrill kills gain utmost savor when committed secondhand. They thin the Membrane by requiring their subjects, and through them, any subordinates they command, to commit acts of shocking violence. A Brutalizer may consider its minions a long-term resource, allowing them to protect themselves from exposure and consolidate their position. Or it may send them off on an immediate spree of distressing mayhem.

Brutalizers lose solidity and essence when in the direct presence of the nonviolent. They take care to manifest themselves only in the company of experienced combatants. They might appear before a team of OV agents in an isolated locale, ready to smash them to a collective pulp. But they wouldn't follow them as they fled into a nearby family restaurant.

To envision a brutalizer, imagine a football linebacker blown up to eight feet in height. Picture his body as a mass of leather, chrome studs, metal shards, and blades, all wrapped in a swirling nimbus of barbed wire. Visage varies between specimens, from reptilian to robotic to alien to altogether absent.

- **Forensic Anthropology:** (observing one of its brutalized henchmen) Victim has suffered and recovered from a severe beating. (1-point spend) The offender delivered the beatdown with surgical precision, doing the maximum possible damage to bones and tissue that would nonetheless permit a full recovery.
- **Forensic Psychology:** (after speaking to a brutalized henchman) The individual subconsciously pauses before speaking, as if fearfully calculating the odds of offending an absent authority figure.

GAME STATISTICS

ABILITIES: Athletics 18, Health 20, Scuffling 32

hit threshold: 3

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: -2

- STEALTH MODIFIER: -2
- **WEAPON:** +2 (Blades and Barbed Wire)
- **ARMOR:** +5 vs. Shooting (semi-corporeal)
- **SPECIAL ABILITY:** In addition to its standard one attack per round, it may immediately launch a Scuffling attack when damaged by a Scuffling attack. Although it usually directs the attack at the character who damaged it, it can use it against any foe within Scuffling range.
- **SPECIAL MEANS OF DISPATCH:** Introduce the Brutalizer to a large number (6 or more)of noncombatants previously unexposed to the Outer Dark. In an effect that seems to tear it to shreds and suck it through a vortex, the Brutalizer is abruptly banished back to the Outer Black. *Downsides of this SMD*: Noncombatants are likely to suffer lingering psychological harm; word of the incident degrades the Membrane.



CORPSEJABBER

- KT: Are you sleeping, Daddy?
- CE: No Piggy I'm awake.
- KT: I wish you wouldn't call me that Daddy.
- CE: But you're my darling Piggy.
- KT: Please stop.
- CE: Don't be such a baby. Did you do what I asked?
- KT: I don't want to.
- CE: You're disappointing me again, Karen.
- KT: She didn't do anything bad to me. Not like the others.
- CE: That's 'cause you haven't given her the chance yet. You can't give her the chance.
- KT: I'm afraid, Daddy.
- CE: You won't get caught. I'll make sure of that.
 - Transcript of audio surveillance session between suspect Karen Tracy (KT) and a Corpsejabber Entity (CE), 24/01/2002, Case File Reference OPERATION PUDDING POP

- KT: How?
- CE: Never you mind. Just slip the substance in her yogurt. And describe it to me, the way she dies.
- KT: I keep telling you, she's one of the only ones who's ever been nice to me.
- CE: To your face. Imagine what she says behind your back. KT: I don't think...
- CE: Are you fatter today? I
- think you're looking fatter again, honey.
- KT: Yeah, well, you stink, Daddy.
- CE: Time for another coat of lacquer, then, huh? After you get that bitch. Are we agreed, Piggy?

Corpsejabbers enter our world by piggybacking on the mental energy given off by individuals unable to resolve their disturbed relationships with now-dead loved ones. The corpsejabber materializes inside the body of the deceased. Where a corpse is unavailable, it manifests in cremains or an object the victim views as a symbol of the deceased.

Where the corpsejabber appears inside a body, it emits a telepathic signal impelling the victim to come to it and disinter it. (In many cases, corpsejabbers manifest in bodies the victims have already dug up or hidden from authorities.)

The corpsejabber proceeds to prompt the already disturbed victim to act out on latent impulses toward murder, sabotage, or other antisocial behaviors. It shapes the victim's plans, to achieve maximum Membrane-degrading impact. Sometimes it appears to acquire a genuine, if at the same time abusive, affection for its adopted human. Eventually though, it turns on the victim, encouraging it to acts that will lead to death or incarceration. This is not the main goal, but rather a side effect of the creature's need for a horrifying revelation.

The corpsejabber can assist its human stalking horse from afar, judging when to do so by observing events through its subject's senses. Once per scene, it can refresh any one pool (including Health) of its subject or any accomplices he might have. Accomplices must be close enough for the main subject to see or hear without electronic aid. The link allowing the corpsejabber to share perceptions and refresh pools works at a distance of up to 6 miles. Most therefore confine their subjects' activity to a small radius. Others allow their charges to take them on the road. Travel, needless to say, poses additional preservation challenges to creatures residing in mummified corpses.

To send a corpsejabber entity back to the Outer Dark, destroy its mummified corpse, cremains, or focus object. The creature then emerges from its hiding place, where it exists in our reality for up to 6 rounds. During that time, it typically attacks whoever wrecked its home.

When exposed, a corpsejabber is seen to be a weird assemblage of eyeballs, teeth, hair and dust. It's about the size of a house cat. The corpsejabber creates appendages from its shapeless form allowing it to pursue, leap on, and entangle its chosen victims. The harm dished out by a corpsejabber attack is not physical but psychological.

- **Forensic Anthropology:** (studying host corpse) The corpse has been subjected to repeated, nonprofessional preservation attempts. (1-point spend) These are insufficient to maintain the corpse in its present state of preservation. Some additional force, perhaps unearthly, intervened.
- **Forensic Psychology:** (after meeting subject) The subject can be described as codependent and is definitely under the sway of another strong personality. (1-point spend) Likely a family member. (2-point spend) Subject suffered a breakdown when this dominant personality exited the subject's life, which was repaired by finding a substitute for it.

GAME STATISTICS

THE ENEMY

ABILITIES: Athletics 8, Health 12, Scuffling 12 HIT THRESHOLD: 3

- **WEAPON:** +2 (Psychic Assault; damage from its attacks is applied to Stability instead of Health)
- **SPECIAL MEANS OF DISPATCH:** Exists physically only for 6 rounds after it is exposed or until its Health is reduced to 0, whichever comes first.

DISCARNATE I can see you right now.



 Messages found on person of decapitated field agent [REDACTED] in Montesano, WA safe house, Case File Reference DREAM DANCE

Based on its behavior, a discarnate seems to be a suicide victim's spiteful ghost. In fact, the mayhem it wreaks is the work of a poltergeist-like ODE. It remains in the Outer Dark but, through a magical link, gains the capacity to manipulate objects, including electronics and complex machinery, within a limited zone of control.

A terrible ritual establishes the link. A single Esoterrorist, or Esoterror asset, performs the working. It begins with the construction of a tunnel-shaped underground grave. While digging, ritualists concentrates on a location to which they feel an intense emotional tie. It might be a past or present workplace or dwelling. Sometimes the victim focuses on the site of a transformative humiliation or setback. Throughout the process, they may handle an object taken from this place — a piece of tile, a door knocker, a nameplate. Meanwhile, they support the tunnel with planks rigged to collapse with the pulling of a cord or the activation of a modest explosive charge. At ritual's end, ritualists climb inside the tunnel, slash their own wrists and throat, and pull the grave down around themselves.

Only a select few summon the ferocious will to consummate this ferocious act of self-slaughter. Ritualists may wish to punish those they blame for the series of defeats that led them to these straits. Terminally ill Esoterrorists sometimes enact the ceremony as their final kick at a world they despise.

The summoned discarnate gains access to the ritualist's memories, especially the negative ones, and most particularly those concerning the chosen location. It can then haunt that location from afar. Typically it orchestrates its poltergeist manifestations with the slow build of a master storyteller. It begins by moving a few objects and making some weird noises. When reporters show up, it escalates. When the story needs more fuel, it delivers bigger effects. As it begins to wane, it starts killing people.

In rare instances it may opt instead for an abrupt blitzkrieg of supernatural attacks. This becomes a typical MO against Ordo facilities.

The discarnate shows an exquisite mastery of mechanics, sabotaging or engineering devices to turn them into murder traps. Simple examples include cars urged suddenly into motion, appliances that electrocute their users, and garbage disposals that activate during cleaning. In rural areas, discarnates indulge their soft spot for rampaging farm equipment.

Discarnates use writing implements or, lately, computers to communicate with people they want to toy with. They delight in taunting investigators. Once this cat-and-mouse game begins, they have been known to take their assaults to mockingly theatrical lengths. Using telekinesis, they construct Rube Goldberg death traps from found objects.

The discarnate never appears in this plane and thus can't be banished. However, its access to the real world can be severed, by finding and immolating (or thoroughly pulverizing) the dead ritualist's body.

GAME STATISTICS

Discarnates lack game statistics, per se. Instead, investigators interact with them as a series of deadly traps. They can move objects, make noises, and perform other poltergeisty tricks at will. After pulling a killing attack, however, they have to wait until any of the following conditions arise:

- an hour of game-world time passes
- twenty minutes of real time passes
- a PC moves to a new room in the haunted building (if applicable)
- the PCs next discover a core clue

Whether you describe it as simple or a set piece out of a *Final* Destination flick, a successfully sprung trap:

- kills a supporting character outright
- requires a targeted PC to make an Athletics test; if the result is under 13, he takes damage equal to the difference between the result and 13.

Until a scenario's climax, it is usually more effective to have the antagonist horribly kill off sympathetic supporting characters than to whittle down the main cast of investigators.

Give characters the chance to spot and neutralize discarnate traps, whether aimed at them or bystanders. The Difficulty to spot discarnate traps starts high, drops, and then slowly escalates as follows:

| | # 0F | PRIOR | TRAPS | DIFFICULTY | | |
|---|------|-------|-------|------------|--|--|
| | | | 0 | 14 | | |
| | | | 1 | 4 | | |
| | | | 2 | 6 | | |
| | | | 3 | 8 | | |
| | | | 4 | 10 | | |
| | | | 5 | 12 | | |
| | | | 6 | 14 | | |
| 1 | | | and | l so on | | |

This pattern ensures that a first trap (which should be aimed at a supporting character) probably goes off, establishing the threat. The next one becomes an easy spot, followed by a methodical ratcheting of tension.

Most traps are detectable by Mechanics or Surveillance. Other abilities may be available as options depending on the trap's nature — Driving would help to spot a car rigged to kill, for example.

Once spotted, a trap can be deactivated with a Difficulty 4 Mechanics success.

GLISTENING

You've passed them on the street. You've met them, time and time again. Humanity is one of the most successful species on this planet; small wonder we have a few parasites and pilot fish tagging along with us. You can recognize them by the touch of their skin. It's a little too moist, a little too shiny — slick without being clammy.

Of course, by the time you're close enough to touch, the Glistening has you.

The Glistening is an infection from the Outer Dark. It is similar to both an insect hive and to a fungal infection, taking root in the victim's skin and nerves. Anyone touched by a victim risks infection. The spores can also be transferred via inhalation. Glistening spores can survive on other surfaces; the walls and furniture of a Glistening victim's home are always covered in spores. Ordo operatives are advised to use protective face masks and gloves when dealing with Glistening outbreaks.

The newly infected exhibit few signs of illness, other than a slightly elevated temperature and occasional nausea. Once the infection reaches the brain, the victim enters the second stage of the Glistening process. The fungus can now influence the victim's behavior. Strong-willed victims may become somnambulant or obey the fungus's commands when distracted, drunk, or exhausted. Weak-willed victims may become utterly enslaved by the Glistening. Victims are unaware of any external influence on their behavior and always believe themselves to be acting perfectly rationally. If challenged, they will justify their behavior to themselves using the most tortured logic if necessary.

THE ESOTERRORISTS

One second-stage victim in each outbreak is chosen by the Glistening to become a stage-three creature, known as a "sessile" or "Glisten Queen." The fungus runs riot through the victim's body, transforming it into an immobile, mummified knot of fungus with dense strands of neural tissue running through it. Effectively, the sessile is a single giant brain that coordinates the activities of its Glistening slaves. If the sessile is destroyed, another victim is chosen by the disease to become the next sessile. The sessile needs to be fed by its slaves. As the sessile's digestive system is mostly destroyed by the transformation, the slaves must regurgitate predigested food into the sessile. Sessiles "burn out" after 18 months on average and must be replaced by another victim.

Under normal circumstances, Glistening outbreaks seek only to spread and to defend the sessile. The fungus is intelligent to some degree and knows that humans can injure it. Therefore, it spreads cautiously and avoids drawing attention to itself. The Glistening's psychic links cannot be maintained where the Membrane is strong, further limiting the fungus's range.

Esoterrorist cells who successfully cultivate Glistenings can use the fungus as an information-gathering tool. To do so, they infect victims and transform them into sessiles. The sessile is then held hostage; if the Glistening does not comply with their commands, the sessile will be injured or destroyed.

- **Forensic Psychology:** The suspect is behaving strangely. Behavior is consistent with posthypnotic suggestion.
- **Forensic Entomology:** It's a fungal infection. The victim's entire body is covered in spores, centered around nerve clusters.
- **Evidence Collection:** The fungus glows under strong ultraviolet light.

Streetwise: There's an abandoned house down the street that gets a lot of visitors. They never stay long and they always go alone.

GAME STATISTICS

GLISTENING SLAVE

ABILITIES: Athletics 4, Health 3, Infiltration 4, Scuffling 6, Shooting 6 HIT THRESHOLD: 3

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +0

STEALTH MODIFIER: +0

wEAPON: -2 (Fists) or +0 (Handgun)

ARMOR: None

INFECTION: Anyone who touches an infected victim risks infection. A Health test (Difficulty 4) is required to avoid contracting the Glistening. If the test fails, the victim is infected. Prompt medical treatment can kill off the spores before they take root.

GLISTENING SESSILE

The sessile form is usually immobile but can respond if its existence is in danger.

ABILITIES: Athletics 14, Health 24, Scuffling 20 HIT THRESHOLD: 3 ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +0 STEALTH MODIFIER: -3

WEAPON: +3 (Punch)

ARMOR: None

THE ENEMY

- **INFECTION:** Anyone who touches a sessile risks infection. A Health test (Difficulty 6) is required to avoid contracting the Glistening. If the test fails, the victim is infected. Prompt medical treatment can kill off the spores before they take root.
- **SPORE PUFFS:** Each time the sessile is injured, it sends thousands of spores into the air. Anyone who hits the creature with Scuffling or a short-range Shooting attack must test to avoid infection.
- DEGENERATION: The sessile is usually immobile. Moving and fighting rapidly drains its strength. The sessile loses 1d6 Health per round.

THE HOST

At first I think I was seeing it through the eyes of Father Hollis. It glowed, from the inside out, you know. Like a Renaissance painting. The whole nine angelic yards: halo, robes, alabaster skin, pink pursed lips. The vast white feathery wings. And oh those blinding, blinding eyes. Blazing into my soul. Seeing all the dirty shit I got up to over the years, before I got clean, before I hooked up with you guys. I wanted to fall on my knees and worship it. But despite the whole higher power business in twelve-step, I never bought into the literal religious mythology, you know? So after Hollis disappeared, I guess I was able to see them from my own, not so beatific point of view.

So when I went up into the church rafters, and saw the bones, and saw them going to town on them, that's when I saw them for what they really were. That's when I freaking lost it. Their hunched, quadrupedal stances. That godawful translucent skin, and what's worse, what was beneath it. A skeletal structure like no man or beast on this earth, spiraling and inter-curved. Those horrible organs dangling inside.

You think I'm overreacting, don't you? Well, you wouldn't if you'd seen them. Gnawing — no, not gnawing, more sucking, absorbing the flesh, pulling it off with lipless mouths.

If the world crawls with demons like that, well then, there's got to be a God, right?

I know that because He talks to me now.

- Agent [Redacted] Testimony before 101 Hearing,

7/26/2011, Case File Reference OPERATION SPIRE HOLD

The creatures known collectively as the Host break through the Membrane in locales gripped by religious frenzy. Once here, they establish lairs in high places, such as treetops, attics, steeples, and clock towers. They then hunt for their favored prey, extremely devout humans in a state of spiritual agitation. With a flap of (apparently) leathery wings, they snatch their victims up to the safety of their lairs. There they proceed to devour their flesh, nourishing themselves on psychic residue trapped within. The Host leave only a tumble of bones behind, hiding them in their lofty nests. This tactic conceals their kill sprees as a series of disappearances. Those caught up in the visionary mania often attribute the vanishings to an ongoing miraculous event of some kind.

To keep the frenzy whipped up, and the gateway to the Outer Dark open for more of their kind, the Host manifest themselves to susceptible individuals as angelic figures. The exact nature of this illusion may change to suit prevailing cultural norms. In the west and other places where Christianity

OUTER DARK ENTITIES THE HOST TO KOOKS



predominates, they guise themselves as angelic figures straight out of popular iconography.

In their true forms, they are humanoids of bizarre anatomical construction. They can walk in a bipedal position but run and feed in a quadrupedal crouch. Hairless, rubbery, see-through skin allows a glimpse at the confusing spiraled collection of cartilaginous material that passes for a skeleton. Any wings the agent may observe are illusionary; they swoop through the air by magically exciting oxygen molecules. The process is not physical but mental. Their blank, bald heads display no sign of sensory organs. A porous expanse of pliable tissue appears in place of a mouth. They place this next to the flesh of their victims, liquefying and absorbing it.

The Host distinguish between two types of victims: those they suborn, and those they devour. They only crave the soul essence of the fervently faithful who have been pure in deed as well as in belief. They recoil from the soul-taste of holier-thanthou types whose supposed devotion masks selfish or exploitative behavior. The Host appear before these sorts to stoke the mood of revivalism or apocalyptic thinking that brought them across the veil. They may also demand personal favors the Host themselves can't or don't want to perform for themselves. For example, they might seek the eradication of interfering investigators. The beings never refer to themselves singly, but always in the plural, even when describing an action undertaken by only one of them. They also prefer the third person. Sample statement: "You have injured the Host, but, yea, the Host shall avenge us." This typifies the pseudo-King Jamesian lingo they speak in when dealing with humans, devout or not.

- **Occult Studies:** The Ordo dossier on the Host indicates their vulnerability to an SMD. Supposedly you can kill one on the spot instantly by force-feeding it a communion wafer. (2-point spend) This is unlikely, as it implies that communion wafers, an object of the mundane world, hold an inherent magical property. Also, this theory privileges the rites of a few denominations of a single religion, a telltale sign of an old wives' tale.
- **Forensic Anthropology:** (leveraged on revelation of above clues) If the creature feeds only through a paranormal osmotic process, it may suffer severe injury if it tries to digest anything in an anatomically conventional way. (on examination of victim's bones) Although every scrap of tissue has been removed from the bone, it inexplicably shows no sign of gnawing, chewing, tool use, or solvent application.
- **Anthropology:** (after profiling both a victim and a human accomplice) The Host makes a psychological distinction between prey and servitor (as detailed in the description above).

GAME STATISTICS

ABILITIES: Athletics 5, Health 20, Scuffling 16

HIT THRESHOLD: 3 ALERTNESS MODIFIER: + |

STEALTH MODIFIER: +2

WEAPON: +0 (Claws); if in an open area, a Scuffling success means that it grabs a hold, flies up into the air, and drops the victim, for +3.

ARMOR: +3 vs. any Scuffling and Shooting (unconventional anatomy); however, a Scuffling success intended to break through the mouth tissue and force feed it a communion wafer gains a further +6 damage bonus.

KOOKS

Kooks are demented, feral children sporting oversized heads, dark black eyes, and mouths with razor-sharp teeth. They prey primarily on children but aren't averse to chomping down on Ordo Veritatis investigators who attempt to spoil their fun. See *The Book of Unremitting Horror*, p. 50, for a more detailed breakdown of kooks.

GAME STATISTICS

ABILITIES: Athletics 8, Health 6 Scuffling 10 HIT THRESHOLD: 5 ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1 STEALTH MODIFIER: +2 (small, quiet) WEAPON: +1 (Teeth) ARMOR: +3 vs. Shooting THE ENEMY

MAN IN BLACK

THE ESOTERRORISTS

Stories of mysterious Men in Black are a staple of conspiracy theory. Black-suited agents show up to warn or threaten those who witnesses strange events. These Men in Black appear human but behave in a stilted, almost robotic fashion. The Men in Black leave no trace of their presence; they appear when their target is alone. Conspiracy theorists have linked Men in Black to medieval conceptions of the Devil or to secret government agencies. Those who know of the secret struggle assume the Men in Black urban myth is born out of stories of Ordo Veritatis agents investigating threats to reality.

The truth is far stranger. The Man in Black is a psychic phenomenon, born out of injuries to the Membrane between our world and the Outer Dark. When the Membrane is wounded, it cries out, and those cries are unwittingly heard by sensitive humans. The human mind interprets these psychic signals as best it can; as the Membrane is in pain, the Man in Black's words often come across as threats or intimidation, even though the phenomenon does not emanate from the Outer Dark. Subjects may have delusions of visits by black-clad agents who give vague warnings or of telephone calls in the middle of the night to the same effect. The Man in Black's messages are always disjointed, a verbal patchwork drawn partly from the subject's subconscious and partly from words and images associated with the wound in the Membrane. A breach near a baseball diamond might produce a Man in Black who uses baseball metaphors in his bizarre threats.

As the Man in Black is fundamentally a hallucination, other witnesses cannot perceive the Man's communications, and the subject may appear insane. The Man in Black's warnings cannot always be trusted, as forces of the Outer Dark can tune into the psychic link and corrupt the message.

Outsiders (see *The Book of Unremitting Horror*, p. 73) may be related to the Man in Black.

Bullshit Detector: There's an unmistakable note of sincerity in the Man in Black's words. He really means what he says — even when his communication has been distorted by the Outer Dark.
Textual Analysis: Looking at a transcript of the Man in Black's message strongly suggests a nonnative English speaker. Parts of the speech appear to be parroted directly from other texts.
Electronic Surveillance: He doesn't show up on video, no one else saw him, and you're having one-sided phone conversations with no one on the other end. Are you sure you're not crazy?

NESTER Their natural form is that of a misshapen grey-skinned humanoid, standing about three feet tall on its spindly limbs. The creature's arms end in razor-sharp hooks; the head is eyeless and resembles a bird from some angles. Viscous green drool hangs from the nester's beak-like mouth. This drool is a potent analgesic, which

the nester can spit at enemies to dull their reactions.

When they enter our reality, nesters follow their instincts and look for a place to nest. The nester creeps up on a sleeping victim, and, with terrible delicacy, its hooks make a long surgical incision across the abdomen. The nester scoops out fat and muscle and other unnecessary organs, hollowing out enough space for it to curl up within the victim. Choice morsels of the waste parts are eaten; the rest are buried nearby. The nester then takes up residence in the victim's body. While nesters can nest in cows, horses, or other large animals, they prefer humans. Heavily pregnant women are ideal for their purposes, but the growth in obesity means that nesters have many more potential hosts. This behavior is similar to that of skitches (see *The Book of Unremitting Horror*), and the two may be different manifestations of the same horror. The nester can keeps its host alive for years, and a sleeping nester is often mistaken for a cancerous tumor or a cluster of fat cysts on X-rays or ultrasounds. They can also exert some control over the host by secreting their painkilling spray from inside the host's body, dulling the victim's mind and leaving them open to suggestion. Nesters emerge from their nests at night while the host sleeps, cutting the nesting sac open from the inside and resealing it when they are done. The creatures emerge to hunt and to reproduce, which they do by laying tiny eggs on the bodies of the dying. The nester-spawn feed on both each other and the rotting corpse after death, until only one spawn survives to grow into a juvenile. This survivor digs its way to the surface and goes in search of its own nest.

- **Forensic Entomology:** The eggs laid on corpses and dying victims by nesters look like frogspawn at a casual glance, but a powerful microscope reveals they are unnatural creations.
- **Chemistry:** Victims of the nester's painkilling spray have faint green stains on their skin and clothes. Chemically, it is primarily a benzylisoquinoline alkaloid akin to morphine.
- **Evidence Collection:** Making a nest means removing tissue to make space. Nesters usually bury this waste tissue nearby or hide it somewhere in the victim's house.
- **Photography:** Nesters can partially obfuscate their presence in an X-ray or other medical scan, but sufficiently detailed analysis can reveal their presence.
- Forensic Anthropology: There's something alive in here!

GAME STATISTICS

ABILITIES: Athletics 6, Filch 6, Health 7, Infiltration 10, Scuffling 8, Shooting 6

HIT THRESHOLD: 4

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: + |

STEALTH MODIFIER: +2

WEAPON: +1 (Claws)

ARMOR: None

NUMBING SPRAY: A nester can secrete a painkilling spray that numbs flesh. The creature can make **Shooting** tests to attack with the spray. If the attack hits, the victim suffers a 1-point levy on any general ability tests (except Shrink and Stability) for the next six hours. (A 1-point levy means that the character must spend one extra point to get any benefit from a spend; for example, spending 3 points of Scuffling would give a +2 bonus to the character's attack).

A successful **Medic** test at Difficulty 6 counteracts the effects of the anesthetic with a few minutes' treatment.

RETURNER

We found the enemy asset, Saari, quivering and in a state of cardiac arrest. He laughed as we burst in on him, then lost consciousness. Dr. Semple tried to resuscitate him, to no avail. He was dead, a burst poison capsule still melting on his tongue.

We stopped Saari's laptop from auto-erasing its hard drive. A quick scan of its contents informed us of his bomb plot. The file revealing which of three locations Saari had ultimately chosen for the bomb proved irretrievably corrupted. We were stymied.

At this time we voiced our frustrations in frank language.

Then Agent Stanhope produced from his satchel a plastic specimen container. At first I did not believe it. He had not disposed of the creature from the lab site, but instead had retained it, alive. It writhed and flopped inside the container and seemed perhaps to hiss. In a calm tone of voice, as if asking someone to pass the salt, Stanhope requested that Dr. Semple open Saari's chest cavity. When questioned as to his intentions, Agent Stanhope stated that we could use the creature to bring Saari back, so we could question him regarding the location of the bomb.

- That is when we all knew that Stanhope had gone insane.
 - excerpt, after-action report, by Agent [REDACTED], Case File Reference OPERATION WASTE TANK

The Returner manifests in this world as a quivering mass of tissue about the size and shape of a human heart, from which six to eighteen cartilaginous tendrils protrude. When placed on the chest of a recently deceased human being, it burrows in, displacing the heart. Its tissue fuses with the corpse's, leaving a patch of inflamed, raised skin resembling a burn scar. The Returner's tendrils shoot through the victim's body, threading into its nervous system. Soon the corpse stutters back to life. The Returner's malign alien personality overrides the body's restarted brain, which it can plunder for memories. The creature accesses them, when necessary, to crudely mimic its dead host's personality, mannerisms, and speech patterns. Depending on how damaged its vocal apparatus was before the Returner took over, it may talk normally or in a considerably distorted manner. Like most Outer Dark Entities encountered on the other side of the Membrane, a Returner exercises fiendish cunning. It only puppets its host into the pose of a mindless zombie when called for by some trick or scheme. Although fresh victims grant greater versatility, Returners can return animation to an embalmed body. They can to a limited extent overcome the host's living impairments of movement: they might make a quadriplegic walk again but couldn't do the same for a legless body.

The corpse continues to deteriorate at a normal rate, unless forestalled by the ingestion of living human flesh*. It must take at least half an hour to nourish itself on its victim. Each feeding grants the corpse roughly three days of arrested decomposition. Meals must consist of roughly equal parts blood, flesh, and brain matter.

A ritual of human sacrifice brings a Returner into this realm. It can't occupy the body of the sacrificed victim, which is thoroughly dismembered during the ceremony.

* Living as of the beginning of the feeding, that is.

61

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Returners may also appear spontaneously to persons struck by obsessive or otherwise unbalanced grief. They establish fleeting telepathic connections with these unwitting, spontaneous summoners. Through this bond the Returner instructs the mourner to place it on the chest of the deceased.

Returner motivations vary by individual. Some serve more powerful ODEs. Others independently seek to damage the Membrane. Mostly, though, they simply enjoy the ability to roam about the mundane world, balancing the desire to wreak sadistic havoc against the desire to extend their sprees as long as possible.

Even with repeated feedings, no corpse lasts forever. They tend to give out after five or six feedings, with fitter, fresher bodies lasting a few feedings longer and substantially decomposed or originally unhealthy specimens giving out sooner.

When a body does finally fall apart, a Returner has twelve hours to find a new corpse. Otherwise it is pulled back into the Outer Dark. Its tendrils afford it a primitive locomotion at tortoise-like speeds. Without a corpse to wear, a Returner poses no physical threat: a single well-placed foot stomp squishes it into oblivion. Returners can't bond with living victims. Nor can they establish telepathic links to humans other than their involuntary summoners. Their best tactic for gaining a replacement body: kill a victim with their failing one, then transfer over.

- **Negotiation:** Returners may trade information to investigators in exchange for deals that let them roam and kill a little while longer*.
- **Forensic Anthropology:** (observing an animated corpse) What seems like jerky, zombie-like motion is actually the result of something exercising a puppet-like control of the body, through manipulation of its nervous system.

GAME STATISTICS

These reflect the typical animated body, either fresh or recently fed. Degrade as necessary for a failing body. ABILITIES: Athletics 6, Health 6, Scuffling 8 HIT THRESHOLD: 2 ALERTNESS MODIFIER: -2 STEALTH MODIFIER: -2 WEAPON: -2 (Fists), -1 (Knife or Improvised Weapon) ARMOR: +2 vs. Shooting, takes +2 damage from any Scuffling hit

62

^{*} They are most often asked to supply intelligence on the capabilities, activities, and whereabouts of other ODEs. Although OV policy frowns on Negotiating with Returners (or any other ODEs for that matter), field agents may use their discretion when weighing the dire consequences of such bargains against the possible gains. Will they prevent more death, suffering, and Membrane damage by squeezing the Returner for intel than they would by simply snuffing it out?

OUTER DARK ENTITIES: SCAULER TO SHAMEBEAST



Scaulers are born from rotting meat that's submerged in polluted, oxygen-dead water. They nest in the eaves of old buildings, feeding on garbage and vermin until their wings unfurl and they fly for the first time. Fully grown, a scauler looks like a twometer-long winged eel. The scauler's sinuous body is covered in abrasive scales, like the toothy skin of a shark. The wings are like those of moths, being surprisingly delicate and furred. The creatures have no eyes but have a mouth full of fangs.

Scaulers have a prodigious capability for regeneration. They cling to life with ferocious intensity and can recover from almost any wound. Even tearing the scauler to pieces does not put an end to it — the only way to destroy a scauler permanently is to incinerate all the remains or find some other way of ensuring that not even a single cell survives.

While scaulers can be formed "naturally" in areas of Low Membrane Strength, they can also be summoned and bred by servants of the Outer Dark. The monsters can be trained as hunting dogs, guards, or even assassins. When trained, they are single-minded killers. They attack by flying past victims at speed, scraping and slapping them with long tails. They prefer to attack the neck — a blow from the tail of a fast-moving scauler can not only snap the neck, it also tears the delicate skin and rips open arteries. Once a victim is down, the scauler folds its wings and lands to feast, burrowing into the stomach and exiting through the armpit or mouth once it has eaten its fill.

Forensic Anthropology: The victim's wounds suggest a highspeed impact with a small vehicle — maybe a motorcycle?

- **Natural History:** The scales look like sharkskin, but they're not from any known species.
- **Evidence Collection:** If I'm reading these splatter patterns correctly, something exploded, scattering pieces of itself all over the area... and then they crawled or were drawn back together.
- **Anthropology:** (interviewing a witness) The description of the creature resembles Mesoamerican myths of feathered or winged serpents.

GAME STATISTICS

ABILITIES: Athletics 12, Health 12, Infiltration 6, Scuffling 12 HIT THRESHOLD: 4

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +2

STEALTH MODIFIER: +|

wEAPON: Special (Tail Slap), +3 (Bite)

ARMOR: +1 vs Scuffling, +1 Shooting

TAIL SLAP: A successful tail-slap attack can either do +1 damage or knock victims prone if the Scauler wins an Athletics contest against the target.

BITE: A Scauler can only bite a prone or otherwise helpless victim. The bite attack inflicts +3 damage. If this attack reduces the target to -6 or less, the Scauler burrows into the victim's flesh and automatically inflicts 2 damage per round until the victim is dead.

REGENERATION: The Scauler regains I point of Health per round unless its remains are thoroughly burnt or otherwise destroyed.

SHAMEBEAST

Mother told me I would change down there, and that nothing good could come of that. From Health classes I thought I knew what she meant. But then this started to happen. I don't know who to talk to. Even thinking of the school nurse and her horrible pinched face sickens me. I can't go to a women's clinic. They belong to the devil. And as for Mother... forget it!

But they keep growing. I cut them off, and they bleed, and then heal, coming back stronger than before. It's too painful to keep trimming them. What is happening to me?

And for all the awfulness, I can't stop thinking about Caden Porter! What's that all about?

- diary entry, victim/perpetrator Alisha Cyr, 31/08/2005

The shamebeast, a parasitic denizen of the Outer Dark, crosses into our reality in places where public reaction to sexual scandal or hysteria has thinned the Membrane. It sometimes makes the transition spontaneously. Often however, Esoterror cells summon shamebeasts by staging events that heighten the impact of an ordinary sex-related news story.

The shamebeast first appears in quasi-corporeal larval form. It seeks out a victim who suffers from extreme sexual repression. The larva enters the host during sleep. It burrows up through the urethra and incubates. In Western countries, Shamebeasts disproportionately target women, striking them 70% of the time*.

* Intriguingly, this percentage flips in predominantly Islamic nations.

THE ENEMY

The shamebeast grows in the host's lower abdomen. During this time the host is starved of oxygen and often confined to bed suffering from an inexplicable exhaustion. After a twenty-eight day incubation, the shamebeast sends chitinous large-celled follicles up through the victim's skin. The shamebeast breathes through these protrusions, which appear throughout the pubic region. Aside from this grotesque symptom, the victim stages an apparent recovery. The host becomes energetic, ravenous, unusually extroverted, and obsessed by sexual thoughts.

Inevitable attempts to destroy the growths fail; the resilient follicles grow back hardier than before. Surprisingly few victims report symptoms to medical professionals. When it does happen, Ordo assets at the Center for Disease Control (or like agencies in other jurisdictions) discreetly arrange for the doomed victim's painless disposal.

Usually, however, the infection goes unreported by the sufferer, who proceeds to pursue the now-amplified sexual urges she has always suppressed. Partners either become hosts for newly generated larvae or die from Ebola-like symptoms ten to thirty minutes after penetration first occurs.

Esoterrorist exofetishists sometimes evade both fates. They dose themselves with a potent drug cocktail, including antimicrobials and a psychoactive decoction derived from the banisteriopsis vine, before inviting sexual contact with a host. If they are lucky, they experience a transcendental orgasm of hallucinatory proportions. If not, the phrase "Ebola-like" achieves explosive realization.

Summoners from Esoterror cells may kidnap hosts for this purpose, leading to their sudden disappearance from an already mysterious and horrifying situation.

After the host's sixth act of postincubation coitus, the shamebeast reaches maturity. It bursts from the host's abdominal cavity, with invariably fatal results. The emerging monstrosity attacks any living creature in sight until it is killed, or eighteen hours pass, at which point it explodes into a shower of inhuman viscera. During this phase it is fortunately incapable of larval impregnation. It appears as a bloated, headless humanoid frame covered with puffy, lamprey-like protrusions, each several feet in length and as thick as a baseball bat. It uses these to kill its prey, both with 6. blunt force trauma and the injection of an acidic slime via toothy grapplers.

Contact with the adult creature, including being hit by it, induces a state of acute sexual arousal completely at odds with the situation. The psychic backlash from this effect can prove emotionally destabilizing.

The game statistics below reflect this final form, the only iteration of its life cycle you can have a fight with.

- **Chemistry:** The compounds in the exofetishist anticontamination cocktail are a combination of antimicrobials and hallucinogenics.
- **Forensic Psychology:** An interview with the main victim identifies her as suffering from repressed sexual neuroses.
- **Forensic Anthropology:** (on living secondary victim in incubation stage) There are microscopic injection points in the pubic region, corresponding to follicle strikes during coitus.
- **Pathology:** (after analyzing mess of mushy tissue that remains after a secondary victim dies) Cellular decomposition was brought about by an extremely accelerated microbial infection. The microbes are unearthly and definitely of Outer Dark origin.

GAME STATISTICS

ABILITIES: Athletics 8, Health 12, Scuffling 16 HIT THRESHOLD: 3 ALERTNESS MODIFIER: -2 STEALTH MODIFIER: -2

WEAPON: +0 (Protrusion); the first hit any victim suffers requires a Difficulty 6 Stability test. At the end of combat, each character

> struck by the shamebeast suffers an additional I damage for each hit sustained, an aftereffect of the slime injection. **ARMOR:** + I vs. Scuffling, +5 vs. Shooting (no internal organs)

TORTURE DOGS

These extra-dimensional huntertrackers resemble giant mammalian cyborg weevils. Whirring power drills jut from between their oversized, prehensile mandibles. They use these to inject psychotropic toxins into the bloodstreams of their victims, which heighten their consciousness of pain, while keeping them awake for marathon torture sessions.

GAME STATISTICS

ABILITIES: Athletics 8, Health 7, Scuffling 9 HIT THRESHOLD: 4 ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1 WEAPON: +1 (Drill), +3 (Mandibles) ARMOR: +2 vs. Shooting, +1 vs. Scuffling

SKIN CRABS

These parasites from the Outer Dark prey on the recently deceased. In its juvenile form, the skin crab is a crustacean about the size of a man's hand, protected with an off-yellow exoskeleton. It has no claws; instead, it has two bulbous, razoredged growths at the end of its spindly arms. Skin crabs use these growths for digging into the soil to find newly buried corpses.

If a crab finds a corpse, then an uncanny union of the two takes place. The crab burrows into the soft tissue at the base of the jaw and eats through the tongue and the roof of the mouth to get into the braincase. It devours the brain first, then begins a bizarre transformation. Overnight, the crab absorbs more than 90% of the corpse's innards, sucking up flesh and bone alike, turning the remains into a loose bag of flesh attached to an intact head. As it eats, the crab grows and grows, adopting an almost human shape. Long legs grow into the corpse's skin; a bony exoskeleton pushes out the collapsed chest cavity, and those bulbous arm growths turn into something very like human hands. Within a few hours of finding a host, the skin crab is able to drag itself out of the grave.

A mature skin crab looks human at first glance. The skin is loose in places, the extremities may have rotted slightly, and the tongue has been replaced by fused palps, but it's close enough for the skin crab to blend in with human society, usually as a homeless vagrant or foreign worker. The fresher the corpse, the better — the crab absorbs some of the host's memories as it eats the brain. If a crab gets to a corpse within minutes of death, it can retain enough knowledge to pass as the corpse even to the victim's friend and family. This deception is literally skin deep — scrape away the oily skin, and you'll see the bone exoskeleton underneath. The creatures therefore take exaggerated care of their skin, avoiding even the smallest risk of cuts if possible. Some disguise this by claiming to have a medical condition like hemophilia; others wrap themselves in protective clothing.

Skin crabs usually kill to reproduce. Within a year of taking over a corpse, the crab begins to produce eggs in its abdomen and needs fresh bodies for them. Some crabs lurk around graveyards, hospitals, retirement homes, and mortuaries, hoping to find a fresh corpse at the right time, but most secure their offspring's future directly. The crab disgorges half-a-dozen pearly eggs containing infant crabs via the navel.

- **Forensic Psychology:** (looking into the host's medical history) The suspect's behavior changed suddenly several years ago. It could be the result of a stroke, but there are no records of any medical treatment since then. In fact, the suspect has no medical records at all in the last five years.
- **Impersonate:** There's something off about the way that guy moves. He's trying to mimic the gait of the people around him, but he's not getting it right. It's like his joints are in the wrong place.
- **Forensic Entomology:** This piece of skin has parasites in it found only in long-dead tissue. It's also been treated with some sort of chemical preservative. There's no way this was left by a live suspect this has been dead for years.
- **Natural History:** Those crushed crab carcasses on the beach aren't from any known species.
- **Streetwise:** (talking to local street people) There's a homeless guy down by the bridge who never seems to age.

GAME STATISTICS

ABILITIES: Athletics 6, Infiltration 6, Health 14, Scuffling 16 HIT THRESHOLD: 3 ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1 STEALTH MODIFIER: +1

- **WEAPON:** +0 (Fists) or +4 (Razor Claws)
- ARMOR: +4 vs. Shooting, +3 vs. Scuffling
- **RAZOR CLAWS:** Skin crabs can extend razor-sharp barbs from their forearms. These claws do +4 damage, but rip through the crab's covering of skin, ruining its disguise. The creatures only use these barbs when in grave danger, because extending the claws means that the creature's hands lose their fleshy covering, making it much easier to spot the monster's inhuman nature.

CONTRACTOR DESIGNING SCENARIOS

SCENARIOS

HE GUMSHOE SYSTEM SUPPORTS A CERTAIN STYLE OF SCENARIO design. The rules are less important to the success of your game than the way you structure your adventures.

Because the players need to know the basic mystery structure, too, it has already been described in depth, on p. 20. The following tips take you further under the hood.

CREATING INVESTIGATION TRIGGERS

Use the Ordo Veritatis as a narrative device allowing you to insert the characters immediately into the story without the need for elaborate motivation. The PCs' unknown bosses place them in a situation, giving them the information they need to get started, and off they go. If you're having trouble getting the characters into the story, you're probably overthinking.

The OV investigates a large number of weird-seeming incidents, including ones with no overt supernatural connection. Anything that induces wide-scale cognitive dissonance may be an Esoterrorist plot. (Their success in placing disorienting text crawls under all news broadcasts after 9/11, which had no supernatural component, is a prime example.)

So it is perfectly permissible to have the OV briefer say: "According to our computer modeling, this Britney Spearsserial-flashing incident has increased background unease in the population by sixteen basis points. There may be nothing to it, but we want you to check it out and file a background report just in case." (Presumably the characters get sent on wild goose chases on a regular basis, but since this isn't particularly interesting, it happens in the background, between real adventures, just like their trips to the mall to buy socks and visits to the dentist.)

The OV maintain various data-mining techniques, searching communications for keywords, and may trigger an investigation based on this alone. "This company matches the profile for an Esoterrorist front, and we've red flagged seventeen different cognitive-dissonance techniques in their advertising. Then, last week, their marketing manager disappeared under mysterious circumstances." Or they may have uncovered intelligence, the sources of which they can't reveal to the team for fear of blowing other agents' identities. "We have good reason to believe this guy/ place/company is hinky, so we're sending you in to check it out. For operational reasons we have to leave you in the dark, but if our confidential source is correct, you'll soon confirm his or her intelligence on your own."

So you don't need a monster sighting or dismembered corpse to start an adventure, although those things are cool, too.

Remember also that it's okay to portray the Esoterrorists as bold or careless, especially when an operation is already beginning to unravel for them:

- They're carefully organized in a cell structure, so that the damage from possible exposure only hits expendable operatives.
- They enjoy ordering murders and look for rationalizations justifying them.
- They're self-centered sociopathic scumbags, who are happily prepared to throw their rivals and lackeys under the bus.
- In many past cases, they've often gotten as much zeitgeistdamaging bang out of the cleanup of an abortive operation as from the operations themselves.

It's all part of the unusual dynamic where the good guys are more anxious to cover up the crimes than the people committing them. This is a distinctive element, so don't be shy about playing it up.

The organizational structure of the Esoterrorists should remain somewhat shadowy and undefined, because it's more menacing that way. The players should believe them capable of anything, even if they're not.

The conspiracy adapts and changes in response to OV countermeasures. They can be compared to post-Afghanistan al-Qaeda, in that they have a fugitive, hard-pressed command center using quasi-covert means to communicate with small, highly autonomous operational cells who are unaware of one another. However, unlike al-Qaeda, no one knows who their ultimate leaders are.

Local cell leaders act with considerable autonomy. There may be someone up the chain to see to their murders if they screw up, but if they're caught, they have little to reveal about



the higher-ups. Many cells may be connected to the main leadership by ideology alone. Despite ongoing OV efforts to block communications, any lunatic with a web connection can find Esoterrorist propaganda and the inspiration to self-start an operation. The rich, twisted, and alienated are disproportionately represented in their ranks, so they can have whatever real-world resources you need to make your stories work. On the other hand, if you want to do a scenario where isolated backwoods rubes who barely have running water are conducting an Esoterror operation, that works, too.

MAKING PLOTS SPECIFICALLY ESOTERRORISTIC

The Esoterrorists' is an unusual setting for an RPG, in that it's intentionally narrow in focus. Most settings instead offer complicated, wide-ranging settings supporting a huge number of potential campaign premises (even if most groups actually play the default premise). In this way, *The Esoterrorists* is more like a tightly focused mainstream media property than an RPG setting.

It is also meant to be highly accessible, so that if you prefer a preexisting contemporary horror investigation setting, you can adapt *Esoterrorists* material and techniques to it with a minimum of tweaking.

That said, there are a few distinctive elements in the *Esoterrorists* formula, and these are worth playing up, because they may result in fresher content.

RIPPED FROM THE HEADLINES

Horror elements become more frightening when juxtaposed with recognizable elements of ordinary life. *The Esoterrorists* posits a world where events on the evening news frequently resound with a sinister secret meaning, for those in the know.

Here we borrow a device from TV procedural shows, using topical references to recent events to drive investigative plotlines.

To create scenarios, scan through the news for the most outrageous, distressing, or unbelievable stories of the day. Add an additional layer of backstory, explaining how the Esoterrorists benefit from either creating this news event or exploiting it after the fact. Create a crime or supernatural event that tips the Ordo Veritatis to the existence of a possible Esoterrorist operation. Always find a way to introduce the idea of manipulation of the zeitgeist to the Esoterrorist plot.

Legal concerns force us, like the writers of TV procedurals, to fictionalize the characters and situations. In the privacy of your own home, however, there's nothing stopping you from populating your gruesome mysteries with real, undisguised public figures.

A great Esoterrorist scenario is a novel mix of elements from real-world news and headlines with standard horror tropes. When introducing weird or supernatural elements, ask yourself, "How can I make this shockingly real and current?"

MAGIC IS HARD

Another important distinction from other similar settings is that the bad guys are very sharply limited in what they can pull off, supernaturally. They can summon horrible creatures, and that's about it. Perhaps they can use the changing zeitgeist to change physical reality in a way that does not overtly appear to be supernatural in any way. For example, they might be able to ritually channel people's growing fear of global climate change to accelerate global climate change.

However, they are not sorcerers and can't throw lightning bolts, kill at a distance, read minds, or whatever. This is to preserve the investigative aspect of the game, so that the reality of physical evidence isn't thrown out the window by the presence in the setting of efficacious magical effects. When players encounter a locked room mystery, they can be confident that the bad guy hasn't just teleported out or flown off the balcony.

CLUES

If a piece of information is essential to move the story on, it's a **core clue**. It costs nothing. You can also offer tidbits of information at 0 points that a character with a specific ability might know, if the information isn't consequential enough to be worth a point spend.

If you have a piece of information that offers a fun sidelight on the action but is not essential to move through the story, you can make this available with a 1- or 2-point spend. Choose the cost of the spend according to the entertainment value of the information, not the game-world difficulty of completing

and Area and Area and Area and Area

SCENARIOS

IMPRISONMENT AS PLOT DEVICE

Obstacles where the punishment for failure is imprisonment or other loss of freedom to maneuver should be introduced with caution. If the characters can gain information while captured and will be presented with a fairly easy avenue of escape afterwards, by all means, include them. You can allow tests or contests to avoid such consequences.

However, plot turns in which characters are arrested by the authorities and cannot escape invariably bring game sessions to a screeching, thudding halt. Either allow the characters to avoid them with automatic successes on interpersonal abilities or build an escape hatch into your story. The team's Ordo Veritatis superiors serve this purpose well. Assuming that the players are jailed in an industrialized democracy or Western ally, they can always get the characters sprung, after a suitable interval of nail-biting and discomfort.

Be wary of plot construction that demands characters accept captivity to gain crucial information. Many players would sooner have their characters disemboweled by torture dogs than accept even a brief sojourn in comparatively cushy confinement. Unfortunately, with this player type, you won't get very far by pointing out that getting captured is a genre staple. Their attitude is rooted in a deep-seated desire to maintain emotional control and is not typically susceptible to argument.

the task. The whole point of the system is to make clues easy to acquire, so that players can get on with the fun of figuring out how they fit together. Facilitate this by making choices that get information into the hands of players. Habits die hard, so make sure you're not slipping back into the old paradigm and making the clues hard to get. See the Example Special Benefits table on p. 23 for examples of point spends. Make every spend worthwhile for the players; if in doubt, offer information for zero points.

If an action's consequence of failure might be madness, death, or injury, by all means make it a test. If game-world logic suggests that a supporting character will actively oppose the PC, make it a contest.

In a horror game, mayhem suffered by the protagonists is not an impediment to forward movement. Horror characters are expected to die early and often. The player creates a new character, the Ordo Veritatis ships him to the scene, and bingo, you've got more meat for the grinder, and the story continues.

For this reason, we advise you to structure *Esoterrorist* campaigns in an episodic manner, so that no ongoing plotline depends on the continued survival of any particular PC.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

Unlike other systems, GUMSHOE is not a simulation in which PCs and NPCs are mechanically equal. Because protagonists and supporting characters have different structural roles in the creation of an investigative story, they have different mechanics to support them. NPCs should never roll independently of the PCs to determine whether or not something happens. For example, there is no need for them to make Stability rolls, or to have other decisions or behaviors determined by die rolls during play. If you think it's interesting or necessary for a character to go nuts if condition Y is met, just say that it happens. Where possible, see to it that player decisions determine whether condition Y occurs. If it's not interesting or necessary, there shouldn't be a chance of it happening.

Where the responses of supporting characters ought to be variable, find a way to trigger them by rolls or spends made by the players. Make them player-facing, in other words.

Let's say the arms dealer the players are interrogating has a chance of panicking midway through the exchange and attempting to swallow a cyanide pill. A traditional way to do this would be to have him make a confidence roll or something similar.

The GUMSHOE way to do it is to make his decision incumbent on what the players do. You could:

- call for a **Shrink** roll to keep him calm
- allow for either Intimidation or Reassurance as ways of getting him to talk but (after giving the players an indication that one choice is better than the other) have him freak out if it's Intimidation they used have him remain calm on a Reassurance spend
- have him remain calm if they remind him of his mother, who (if they were smart) they befriended during the previous scene

CLUE TYPES

FLOATING CORE CLUES

It can be useful to structure a scenario with one or more freefloating core clues. These typically advance the story from one distinct section to another. Where an ordinary core clue is linked with a particular scene, a **floating clue** can be gleaned in any one of several scenes. The GM determines during play which scene gives up the clue.



68

Floating clues allow you to control the pacing of a scenario. They allow the characters to play out all of the fun or interesting experiences in one section of the scenario before the story takes a dramatic turn. For example, you might want them to separately meet all of the suspected Esoterrorists before they, and the PCs, get locked up for the night in an old dark house. To achieve this, withhold the core clue that moves the investigators to the dark house until after they've met all of the relevant supporting characters. That way, you prevent them from leaping ahead into the narrative without getting all the information they need to fully enjoy what follows.

Likewise, a floating clue allows you to perform like a ruthless editor, skipping unnecessary scenes when you need to kick the narrative into a higher gear. Let's say you've chosen five possible scenes in which the Investigators might logically get a necessary core clue. You figure that this phase of the adventure should take about an hour. If the players breeze through the scenes in ten minutes apiece, you can save the core clue for the last scene. If they linger, taking twenty minutes per scene, you'll want to make the core clue available after the third scene.

Player frustration level usually serves as a better trigger for a floating core clue than a predetermined time limit. If they're having obvious fun interacting with the vivid supporting characters you've created or being creeped out by uncanny phenomena, you can give them more of what they want by saving the core clue for the final scene. On the other hand, if you see they're getting bored and frustrated, you can slip in the floating clue earlier.

LEVERAGED CLUES

A staple element of mystery writing is the crucial fact which, when presented to a previously resistant witness or suspect, causes him to break down and suddenly supply the information or confession the detectives seek. This is represented in GUMSHOE by the **leveraged clue**. This is a piece of information which is only available from the combined use of an interpersonal ability and the mention of another, previously gathered clue. The cited clue is called a **prerequisite clue** and is by definition a subcategory of core clue.

PIPE CLUES

A clue which is important to the solution of the mystery, but which becomes significant much later in the scenario, is called a **pipe clue**. The name is a reference to screenwriting jargon, where the insertion of exposition that becomes relevant later in the narrative is referred to as "laying pipe." The term likens the careful arrangement of narrative information to the work performed by a plumber in building a house.

Pipe clues create a sense of structural variety in a scenario, lessening the sense that the PCs are being led in a strictly linear manner from Scene A to Scene B to Scene C. When they work well, they give players a "eureka" moment, as they suddenly piece together disparate pieces of the puzzle. A potential risk with pipe clues lies in the possible weakness of player memories, especially over the course of a scenario broken into several sessions. The GM may occasionally have to prompt players to remember the first piece of a pipe clue when they encounter a later component.

RESTRICTED CLUES

Certain clues which are necessary to the solution of a mystery will not be known to everyone with the ability required to access them. Instead, these are **restricted clues** — secret, esoteric, or otherwise obscure facts which one member of the group just happens to know.

Only a select few people know about OPERATION CORNWALLIS, but if it is necessary to the completion of an investigation, an investigator will be one of them.

To preserve the sense that the group has access to littleknown facts, only one group member knows the information in question; its revelation comes as news to all of the other investigators, even those who have the same ability. The first character with the relevant ability to take an action that might trigger the clue is the one blessed with this fortuitous knowledge. Where no clear first actor exists, as in a clue provided as soon as the investigators enter a scene, the GM chooses the investigator with the highest current pool in that ability (if applicable) or the investigator who has had the least recent spotlight time or most requires a positive reversal of fortune. Alternately, the GM may allow applicable background considerations to determine the possessor of the restricted clue: for example, a character with high Bureaucracy might recognize an Esoterror suspect from back-office work.

TIMED RESULTS

The following structural technique applies to any GUMSHOE game where the characters have access to the services of a forensic lab and rely on tests performed by others.

You can shape the pacing of a case with a **timed result**. This occurs when believability requires a suitable interval between the submission of evidence to forensic experts and the results of the testing they perform. In police procedurals, it is common for the direction of an investigation to be suddenly changed when the lab results come in. The scientific evidence may exonerate the current top suspect or point the investigators toward new witnesses or locations. Alternately, it can change the meaning of previously gleaned information, causing the investigators to reinterview previous witnesses or conduct closer searches of crime scenes.

A timed result can serve as a delayed-reaction core clue, directing the PCs to a new scene. These are useful devices in cases where the scenes can be connected in any order. If the PCs get bored or bogged down in one scene, they can receive a phone call from the lab techs calling them in to receive some much-needed exposition, which sends them in a new direction.

The arrival of a timed result can also change the players' interpretation of their current case notes without moving them to a new scene. They might dismiss a suspect's alibi, alter their

THE ESOTERRORISTS

RECORDS ARE YOUR FRIEND

In addition to your adventure notes, there are two other documents you need to run the game.

When you are creating your adventure, make a note on the Investigative Ability Checklist (p. 149) of the investigative abilities you've planned. It's a good idea to add clues for as wide a range of abilities as possible. You can also use the checklist during character creation to ensure all the abilities are covered and that redundant abilities are left out.

Secondly, during character creation, have your players note their choices of investigative abilities on the GM's Investigator Matrix (p. 150). This enables you to pick out which characters might notice obvious clues and ensure spotlight time is evenly spread.

When you prepare your next session, you can use the Investigator Matrix to see what interests your players. If someone has a 3-point rating in Art History, you could add some forged artwork or a menacing sculpture to your notes. This is particularly useful in an improvised game.

timeline of events, or reject information provided them by a witness whose perceptions are revealed as unreliable.

News of a lab report requiring the team's attention can also be used to cut short a scene that the players won't abandon, even though they've already collected all available clues.

SCENE TYPES

Having planned out your mystery, it's time to arrange it into scenes. Each of these takes place in a different location or involves an interaction with a different supporting character ---usually both. Under the title of the scene, write the scene type, the scene or scenes which lead to the current scene, and scenes which lead from it. Here is an example scene header from the introductory adventure.

THE GOOD REVEREND SCENE TYPE: Core LEAD-IN: The Briefing LEAD-OUTS: The Visionary, The Skeptic, Newshounds of Sequoia City

Scenes fall into the following types.

INTRODUCTORY

This is the first scene of the episode. It establishes the premise of the mystery. If it's the characters' first meeting, have the agents first rendezvous with one another. Then, they meet Mr. Verity in a second secure locale where you provide the briefing and answer questions. When sent to deal with an emergency already in progress, they go direct to the scene and are briefed there by Mr. Verity. You can extend this scene if it's your first session of The Esoterrorists. See the Introductory scene in "Operation Prophet Bunco."

CORE

SCENARIOS

Core scenes present at least one piece of information necessary to complete the investigation and get to the climactic scene.

Each core scene requires at least a single core clue.

A core clue typically points the group to another scene, often a core scene.

Avoid hard-sequenced core clues, which can only lead to one another in a single order.

You're constructing one way to move through the story to another core clue, not the only way. In play, you may find yourself placing the core clue from one scene in another, improvised scene inspired by the logical actions undertaken by the players. (This is also true of published scenarios, by the way.) The scene structure guarantees that there's at least one way to navigate the story but should not preclude other scene orders. By following the structure you also ensure that you're creating a branching narrative driven by player choices. This avoids the syndrome of the story driven by the actions of supporting characters, which the players observe more or less passively.

ALTERNATE

Alternate scenes provide information which may be of some use in understanding and solving the central mystery but aren't strictly necessary to reach the conclusion. They often provide context and detail. Or they might provide the same information as core scenes, but in another way. As a third option, they might allow the group to eliminate a red herring possibility. These exculpatory facts are valuable; they let the agents narrow their search to the real answer, even though they don't, strictly speaking, lead to another core clue.

ANTAGONIST REACTION

This is a scene of danger or trouble in which supporting characters opposed to the PCs' success take action to stop them or set them back. This might be a fight scene, but could just as easily be a political hassle, act of sabotage, or other less direct challenge. If it helps you keep track, you might note in brackets that the enemies faced are tangential rather than primary opponents. Antagonist reactions can be floating; that is, you can use them to kick up the pace if things are flagging.

HAZARD

A hazard scene presents the PCs with an impersonal obstacle to their safety or ability to continue the investigation. It must typically be overcome through tests or contests.

PIPE

A pipe scene delivers a pipe clue. See p. 69.

SUBPLOT

A subplot scene gives the characters an opportunity to wheel, deal, explore, and interact without directly altering the course of the investigation. These may arise from personal arcs, side deals, public relations efforts, or simply the curiosity of one

PLACING INFORMATION

A core scene typically includes many pieces of information in addition to its core clue. Facts may provide understanding and context. Or they may obscure the mystery, by focusing attention on irrelevant details. Creating a scene is about anticipating the questions the players will ask and figuring out which answers ought to be available to the investigative experts their characters happen to be.

- Don't make all non-core clues spends. Add spends when:
- you think of facts that seem enjoyably arcane
- a piece of information is tangential or obscure
- characters might get information more quickly than they otherwise would
- they might secure some other practical advantage

If a spend doesn't make the character giving up his points seem more impressive, or confer some other advantage, it shouldn't be a spend.*

The publisher goes out of his way to make sure that players consider every point spend to be worthwhile.

or more agents. Where the central mystery provides structure and forward momentum, the subplot adds flavor and character. Sequences arising from it may be what the group remembers long after the mystery has been put to bed. Subplots are more suited to long-running campaign play.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion brings the group to the end of its investigation and often confronts it with a moral dilemma, physical obstacle, or both. Functionally, it's a final hazard or antagonist reaction scene, although it may be initiated by the players busting in on Esoterrorists or ODEs. The classic conclusion of an RPG mystery is a big fight. Your group may insist on a climactic scrap or prefer to avoid it through quick talking and clever thinking. It's easy to make a fight or other action scene feel exciting and conclusive. In *The Esoterrorists*, conclusions tend to be gory and sanity threatening.

HYBRID SCENES

Some scenes double up, most often when a general challenge leads to an information opportunity. It's okay to give out a core clue as a reward for overcoming an obstacle only if that core clue is also available by other means. Otherwise you risk creating a situation where a core clue becomes unavailable, violating the central tenet of the GUMSHOE system.

TICKING CLOCK

In a typical GUMSHOE investigation, the GM moves the plot along by largely ignoring the picayune logistical hassles of getting in touch with witnesses, making appointments with

SCENE DIAGRAMS

To check that player choice matters in your scenario, diagram its scenes. Connect them with arrows, checking to make sure that they can be unraveled in any order. It's acceptable to add unpredictability and variance with non-investigative scenes (antagonist reactions, hazards, and subplots) but better form when the players can connect the core and alternate scenes in more than one way.

them, traveling through the city, and so on. By doing so, you edit out the boring parts and cut straight to what matters, just as an author or screenwriter would.

In some adventures, the investigators are in a race to solve the case. This can be a specific deadline (an assassination attempt) or an escalating threat (a series of supernatural deaths or dream attacks). Here you should absolutely pay attention to the passage of time. Here simple logistical challenges generate suspense if they can't get the car started to get to the interview at the Vock asylum, they're wasting valuable time.

Accordingly, each interview scene lists how long the investigators have to wait before requesting a meeting and actually getting to talk to the witness. In many cases, the time windows can be shortened with spends in the investigative abilities necessary to secure the meeting in the first place. For example, Detective Fix is available after three hours normally but within one hour with a Cop Talk spend. Few witnesses make themselves available after the early evening. If a time window runs past that, the interview takes place the following morning. At your discretion, a doubled spend may permit a meeting in the evening but will not at night or early morning.

Time windows can't be circumvented simply by showing up and knocking on doors. However, if players cleverly overcome other obstacles to shorten a time window — for example, by wangling an invitation to a benefit they know a supporting character will be attending — reward them by allowing the interview to proceed sooner than planned.

Clever Esoterror cell leaders might cook up wild goose chases to send them on — trying to kill them with delays.

Ticking clock scenarios require deft handling of the balance between frustration and progress. See to it that any delays build suspense. As they face them, mention Membrane-weakening incidents to remind them of the urgency of their mission. Avoid slipping into the syndrome of the merely annoying obstacle.

In the *Esoterrorists* adventure *Six Packed*, we use a literal ticking clock to provide heightened suspense.

BUILDING SCENARIOS ON THE FLY

Despite our courageous admission in the accompanying sidebar, it's still entirely possible to improvise your way through fun and exciting episodes you create as you go. If you're wired to think on your feet, you may find it easier to build a mystery this way. Improvised games require you only to keep the backstory in mind. The flow of investigative scenes arises from the actions
SCENARIOS

NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART

No matter what story form you're talking about, whether in roleplaying, prose fiction, or TV drama, good mystery writing is hard. You have to plot in two directions, working out both the backstory the investigators will work to reconstruct and the series of forward-going events in which they reconstruct it. Logical dilemmas you might handwave away in a more dramatic or action-oriented story stop the players from correctly working out the backstory. Logic errors are usually sins of omission and, by definition, easy to miss. When you're plotting a story, it always makes sense to you. Should your players find a hole in your logic, you'll have to react on the fly, adjusting the backstory to make sense. As you do so, you'll hope that your alterations fix the problem without introducing others.

This is why adventure books for mystery games sell better than adventures for other roleplaying games — because they're tougher to create.

undertaken by the players. You don't have to anticipate what the players will do. Instead, you wait for them to do it and build scenes and dispense clues accordingly. Keep your Investigator Matrix to hand, because it lists all of the characters' abilities and signals to you to the type of game they want.

ROUGHING IT OUT

When first teaching yourself to improvise mystery scenarios, start by jotting down rough notes. Later you may prefer to keep everything in your head. The longer the interval between your rough plotting process and the actual game, the more likely you are to forget crucial details.

Before you start, nail down your mission in detail and create your introductory scene. You can then go on to create provisional ideas for the other scenes and clues. You can follow these as written or set them aside in favor of more interesting possibilities that arise spontaneously in play. The first approach is easier to keep straight in your head and may be preferable for beginning improvisers. The second allows you to harness the spontaneous energy that flows from spur-of-the-moment group creativity.

DON'T PANIC!

First of all, don't sweat any uncertainty you may be feeling. It's common, and it'll go away once you plunge in. When in doubt, take a deep breath, break down your options, and ask yourself which one is the most interesting at the moment. Once you've made that choice and brought it out in play, you can then concern yourself with building on it to spur further interesting developments down the line.

Strong improvising is about reacting to input. Each choice you make builds on the previous ones. Soon your scenario will manifest a sense of momentum all its own.

ACTIVATING PLAYERS

A common complaint about investigative scenarios is that they "railroad" players into tightly following a slavishly predetermined story path. Although you rarely see the opposite complaint voiced, a significant number of groups flail in confusion when not steered in an obvious direction.

Let players weigh options for as long as the discussion seems lively and fun. If you see the group get frustrated and unable to make a collective choice, gently insert yourself into the discussion. Summarize the various suggestions made and direct the discussion toward a conclusion. Guide the players in eliminating choices without nudging them to a preferred answer. This detachment is easier to attain when you don't settle on one.

Remind the players that the only way forward in a mystery scenario is to gather more information. Be ready for moments where players feel overwhelmed, either because there are too many choices to choose between or, more likely, no obviously risk-free choice. Nudge them onward by reminding them that they've been trained by the OV as problem solvers. Perhaps unlike the players, the characters are used to forming hypotheses, testing them by gathering information, revising their theories, and moving forward. They respond to dilemmas by breaking them down into steps. With a little coaching, they'll quickly internalize this problem-solving methodology. Your players will learn to take the initiative, abandoning the "wait for clues" passivity trained into them as they were run through more predetermined scenarios.

AVOID NEGATION

When running a mystery scenario, it helps to think two or three scenes ahead of the players. It's often useful to have a possible climactic sequence in mind, too. That allows you to foreshadow enough to make the ending appear to be a logical outgrowth of the scenes that preceded it. (For more on this, see the next section.)

Don't let the possible plot forks you have in mind become too fixed in your imagination. Instead, keep them provisional, so that you can turn away from them and substitute new choices more in keeping with player input.

This is a long-winded way of restating the basic principle of improvisation used by stage actors: never negate. If, as a sketch unfolds, one performer identifies the other as his mother, the second performer must embrace and build on that choice. To simply swat down the choice and say, "I'm not your mother," is extremely poor form. It stops the story dead and punishes the other participant for attempting to advance it.

In a like vein, train yourself to respond to unexpected possibilities by embracing them and building them into the ongoing storyline. You may have decided that the pathologist Elsa Hower is an innocent dupe in an Esoterror scheme which requires fresh corpses. However, if the players heavily invest themselves in seeing her as a villain, you might consider setting aside that planned revelation, so they can feel a sense of unmitigated triumph when they bring her to justice. You don't have to accept every piece of player direction at face value. Keep the story surprising by building twists onto the elements you do incorporate. When in doubt, make the player half-right. Perhaps Elsa has been parasitized by an ODE that can be extracted and subjected to an emotionally satisfying comeuppance, allowing the team to both save an innocent and punish the guilty.

It's not necessary to turn the narrative on a dime with every piece of player input. The key is to avoid a scene in which nothing happens, or in which your scene is less interesting than the one suggested by the player. When a player says that there must be a way into the archives beneath the ruined cathedral, it's disappointing to rule it out or prevent the players from finding it because they haven't the right skill to spend from. Finding a way into the ancient catacombs is more fun, and more plotadvancing, than not. This doesn't mean, however, that while they're down there, they can't stumble into danger.

PREPARING A FALLBACK

Worksheeting a complete mystery, including solution, gives you a solid foundation to riff from. You might depart from it significantly as the story unfolds. Nonetheless, you've got it in your back pocket if everyone's inspiration suddenly flags.

Some groups may feel cheated if they think you're shifting the answer to the central problem on the fly. Others get annoyed if you don't. Get a read on your group's position on this sometimes divisive theoretical issue. To complicate matters, various of your players may sit on either side of the fence. In the end, it may be more important to appear as if you're catering to their taste than actually doing it.

Never fall in love with your fallback. Mentally separate what has actually been revealed in play from the background facts you believe, at the moment, to be true. If player interest suggests it, always be ready to abandon facts not yet introduced, however vivid they may seem to you.

LEADING AND FOLLOWING

Improvising is a technique, not an ultimate goal. Occasionally you'll find that it's more entertaining for all involved if you seize the narrative reins and steer them in a particular direction. This will tend to happen more near the end of a scenario, when you're trying to wrap all of the threads together into a coherent and satisfying conclusion.

Again this is a matter of responding to the mood and attitude of the players. When they're actively engaged in the story and throwing out fun suggestions, follow their lead. When their creativity hits the wall, pick up the slack. Improvisation is an organic process of give and take.

CHAOS AND ORDER

Any mystery story — or any real-life investigation, for that matter — appears chaotic at first, gradually resolving its way to order. As the investigators accumulate facts, the number of possible truths multiplies. Mystery stories proceed by elimination, methodically reducing the number of possibilities until only one remains.

Expect each story to sputter at first as the players sort through the various leads offered by their mission briefing and initial contacts. They'll toss out multiple theories without sufficient evidence. Debates over which clues to follow may bring out personality clashes between characters.

This first stage of a story may feel like pushing a rock up a hill. But when you get it over the crest of that hill, and various plot possibilities are eliminated and the main thread settled upon, the rock picks up speed, rolling faster and faster until you reach the one conclusion that seems suddenly to fit. At which point the torture dogs burst through the partition wall, the bullets start flying, and the agents must fight for their lives until they administer the special means of dispatch.

RUNNING SCENARIOS

SCENARIOS

"THE GUMSHOE RULES SYSTEM" (P. 19) COVERS MUCH OF WHAT you need to run *The Esoterrorists*; this section supplements that with additional GM-centric advice.

GIVING OUT CLUES

To get information, the PC needs to be in the right place, with the right ability, and use that ability. This section deals with each of these preconditions. In short, though, whatever you've done in other games, you should always err on the side of giving out information, not holding it back.

HAVING THE RIGHT ABILITY

The rules offer a number of ways to call on abilities, depending on the situation. Choosing the right way to call on an ability is crucial to the forward momentum of your investigative plot. Make this choice according to the consequences of failure.

If the consequence of failure is that a character fails to get a piece of crucial information, success should be automatic, provided that the character has the ability in question, and the player thinks to ask for it. However, **any credible attempt to get information that would yield a given clue yields that clue, whether or not this is the ability you've specified in the scenario.**

(Even at that, you may need to improvise during play if no player steps up to claim the needed clue, bending the details of the scenario so that the same information can be garnered with a different ability, possibly by another player.)

USING THE RIGHT ABILITY

You can give out clues both actively and passively (see "Gathering Clues" on p. 22). By default, though, GUMSHOE assumes that the use of interpersonal abilities is active; the players have to correctly choose an appropriate ability and describe how they're using it to open a contact up to questioning. When you see that players are hesitant, tell the player with the relevant ability that his experienced OV character can sense that it will work here:

- "You get the feeling that this guy will crack if you lean on him a little." (Intimidation)
- "He seems kind of smitten by you." (Flattery)
- "The squeal of a police scanner tells you that you've got a wannabe cop on your hands." (Cop Talk)

BEING IN THE RIGHT PLACE

GUMSHOE procedural series require their own conceits in order to keep the story moving in an entertaining manner. They require the audience's complicity in looking the other way. Here GM and players handwave certain elements that break the rules of realism in order to keep the game running smoothly, just as TV scriptwriters do. For example, *the conceit of primacy* in shows such as *Law and Order* ensures that the lead characters get the juiciest cases and more action than any cop is likely to experience in a lifetime. Just as the aforementioned devices arise from the requirements of TV drama, GUMSHOE's conceits grapple with the limitations of a roleplaying session.

The major device you'll want to adopt, needed for all but the smallest groups, is the conceit of *elastic participation*:

Use the concept of elastic participation to ensure that there is always a PC in the right place.

Roleplaying is traditionally a group effort like shows which focus on small teams of investigators. When an ensemble cast tackles a big case together, they split into partnerships to split up necessary tasks. The scriptwriters make sure that obstacles are always matched to the capabilities of the characters in a given scene. In a roleplaying game, where responsibility for the obstacles lies with the GM and task splitting is determined by the players, some additional fudging is required to match the two elements.

COMPENSATING FOR SPOTTY ATTENDANCE

Older gamers most likely to enjoy an investigative campaign are sadly prone to scheduling disruptions. If your group is typical, you may not be able to rely on any particular player showing up on a given night. To compensate for this, give each player a pool of free-floating investigative points, which they can spend to gain a clue in investigative abilities they don't have. When this occurs, explain it as the character remembering a fact or technique taught to them by their absent teammates. Adjust the quantity of points as needed for your group's requirements. This is an alternative to elastic participation if you don't want the absent player's PC to appear at the scene.

RUNNING SCENARIOS CLUES

COME BACK WHEN YOU'VE GROWN SOME MANNERS!

Usually, it's dull and pointless to enforce the apparent absence of a PC with an appropriate ability from a scene. Instead, you use elastic participation. Occasionally, though, it can lead to interesting roleplaying opportunities which highlight, through roleplaying, a character's lack of an interpersonal ability. It's a technique you should use sparingly. A prime example of this is the witness who will only speak to someone with a particular interpersonal ability, perhaps the charming young journalist but not the bluff, intimidating former CIA agent. When the first caller is rebuffed, the second PC can sweep in and have time in the spotlight, using Flattery on the witness. If you think such a scene builds on characters rather than just being an annoying roadblock, then use it. This works even better when both characters are on the scene and the second one says, "Let me handle this."

This technique is distinct from the leveraged clue (see p. 69), where witnesses will only ante up when the PCs have obtained new information that gives them emotional leverage over the subject.

GUMSHOE works best when you assume that everyone is kind-of sort-of along for every scene — without squinting too hard at any resulting logic or staging absurdities. That way, the group continues to enjoy collective access to all of the investigative abilities needed to gather clues. Perhaps even more importantly, the concerted minds of four to six untrained roleplayers are often needed to replicate the deductive skill of a single professional investigator. Often, the easiest method is just to specify characters are on the scene when they are needed.

Most of the time, you can just let the group sort through the clues without constantly justifying the use of the elastic participation conceit. That's what a conceit does: it says, "Let's not worry about this annoying bit of realism."

You can collaborate with the group to come up with ways to conceal the breaking of the fourth wall that occurs when six people pile into an interrogation room or examine the same piece of physical evidence. Two-person teams can be dispatched to perform particular tasks while keeping seamlessly in touch with the rest of the team. Assume, for example, that suggestions given by players whose characters aren't present in a scene represent cell-phone conversations, head-up displays, or other high-tech transmission equipment which is appropriate to the genre. A technical expert can lend his ability to another PC by watching a video feed on his laptop. When necessary, you can establish that an absent character with a specialized ability briefed the PC on the scene, telling him what to look for. In many cases, one agent can bag evidence and let the technician look at it later. Try to guide the group so that the splitting into teams trope occurs during non-investigative sequences. A stakeout that leads into a chase scene needn't occur under the assumption that everyone is "sort of there." By finding ways to break it every so often, you hide the conceit. Enlist your players in maintaining it.

(Elastic participation is not unique to investigative games. Most groups playing a classic dungeon-delve campaign allow characters of absent players to be present to use minor, exotic abilities. At the same time, the characters are typically not treated as present when a big fight breaks out.)

ROLLING FOR CLUES AND THE GUMSHOE STYLE

Just as in games where you roll for clues, players always have to describe a logical course of action that might lead to their getting information, directly or indirectly suggesting the ability they use to get it. In the traditional model, there's a roll; you supply the information on a success. In GUMSHOE, this step is skipped — but it's the only step skipped.

Traditional style:

PLAYER: I examine the body looking for a cause of death.
GM: Roll Forensic Anthropology.
PLAYER: I succeed.
GM: It's blunt force trauma to the back of the skull. There are traces of a slimy residue.

GUMSHOE style:

PLAYER: I examine the body looking for a cause of death.GM: [Checks worksheet and sees that the player's character has Forensic Anthropology] It's blunt force trauma to the back of the skull. There are traces of a slimy residue.

In neither style do you see players grabbing their character sheets as soon as they enter a new scene and shouting out, "Anthropology! Archaeology! Art History! Evidence Collection!" They don't do this because it would be weird, boring, and stupid — and because in neither case does it fill all the requirements necessary to get information from a scene.

The only difference between GUMSHOE and those systems is the lack of a die roll. You know your group. Give out information in the same way you would usually give out information: actively, passively — GUMSHOE doesn't care. Your players will solicit it, or you will give it out, just as you always do. There will be a strong effect on your gaming, but from a subtle change.

THE ESOTERRORISTS

GUMSHOE IS AS HARD AS YOU NEED IT TO BE

SCENARIOS

Rolling above a number on a die can be immensely satisfying, because of the potential for failure and the relief of tension if you succeed. In GUMSHOE, we leave that tension for general ability tests. This has led some commentators to suggest that gathering information in GUMSHOE is "too easy," as if rolling dice were a skill. But GUMSHOE doesn't care how difficult your clues are once you've obtained them — it's all about getting the clues. We recommend that core clues are straightforward, so that adventures don't get bogged down, but if you want more difficult clues, even ciphers, cryptic images, or complex documents — help yourself. Certainly, if anyone in your group claims "it's too easy," you'll be ready to hit them with something brain twisting.

THE MYSTERY STRUCTURE

An investigative story in any medium is, by its very nature, highly structured. The investigators learn of a mystery, then move through a series of scenes, each of which concludes in the acquisition of a clue which segues into the next scene. The story reaches its climax when the investigators discover and reveal the answer to the mystery. It may or may not conclude, for extra punch, in a physical confrontation with the story's now revealed antagonist.

Structure can be difficult to achieve in the roleplaying medium. Guide the players too little, and they lose the thread, resulting in a loose and sloppy narrative that provides none of the neat order-making pleasure the genre is meant to provide. Guide them too much, and they feel that their freedom of action has been taken away from them and that they're merely observers moving through a predetermined sequence of events. (As you probably know, this latter syndrome is known in roleplaying jargon as *railroading*.)

The trick to successfully running investigative scenarios is to strike the right balance between the two extremes. The exact balance is a matter of collective taste. Groups prone to flailing about may welcome a strong structure with clear goals, a straight narrative path, and definite resolutions. Players who resolve questions of procedure with swift efficiency, or who prefer to focus on characterization over storyline, require a looser hand on the structural tiller.

PERCEPTION IS (NEARLY) ALL

Some groups are hypersensitive to issues of railroading. These concerns, which are absolutely legitimate, may be based on past bad experiences with controlling GMs who forced them to enact essentially passive roles in unalterable, preset storylines. If members of the group are avid roleplaying theorists, they may respond out of a general ideological feeling that players ought to shape and drive the story, taking on responsibilities traditionally given to the GM.

The most important way to prevent players from feeling railroaded is to remain flexible and reactive to the choices the characters make. We'll discuss this a bit more in the next section.

However, nearly as crucial is avoiding the appearance of railroading.

Some players may feel that the GUMSHOE system's reliance on automatic successes inevitably leads to a railroaded result. In practice, this simply isn't so. The degree of narrative flexibility a GM exercises is entirely unrelated to the game's resolution mechanic (or relative lack of same). Flexibility remains up to the GM and your ability to improvise within the basic structure of the investigative story, as it does in nearly any set of roleplaying rules.

As proof of this, we cite a weird phenomenon that occurred during playtest. The groups that expressed the strongest misgivings about possible railroading were those whose GMs had done the most improvising.

This result can be partly attributed to variances in group tastes, but it also suggests the enormous importance of maintaining the *perception* of free choice. When you're on a roll as a GM, you can create the perception of free choice even when players respond predictably to the scenario. On an off night, you can convey the impression of constricted options even though you're improvising furiously to keep up with their completely unexpected choices.

Here are five ways to maintain the perception of narrative freedom:

When using a prewritten adventure, paraphrase as much as possible. Avoid reading right from the scenario. Even if it's well-written, your narration, no matter how halting and tentative, will seem more spontaneous than canned text. Some GMs read too much of the scenario out loud because they have trouble extracting the necessary nuggets from a prewritten text. Judicious use of a highlighting pen can work wonders to zero in on the best details, which you can then weave into your own extemporaneous sentences.

During scenes of character interaction, listen carefully to player dialogue and respond accordingly. Riff with the players. This is more important than spewing the supporting characters' clues or talking points, even if that means altering the characterization from what you see on the page.

Encourage players to flesh out minor details of the setting and situation. If they ask you what the weather is like, ask them what they want it to be. If they ask if such and such an item is present at a particular location, tell them that it is and ask them to describe it. On rare occasions the mystery plot will turn on these little details, and you'll have to pull back from this technique and stick to your clue trail. Otherwise, seek out opportunities for player input.

Tailor characters and situations to the player characters. If a player portrays a sloppy, rumpled reporter, confront her with a neat-freak, press-hating authority figure. A character known to fall for sexy librarian types should meet successions of sexy librarians, and so on.

Introduce story elements giving players opportunities to flesh out their characters' backstories. Weave old friends, acquaintances, mentors, colleagues, and rivals into your supporting casts.

If you yourself are still worried that GUMSHOE encourages or requires railroading, take heart in this last result from playtest. Each group submitted an account of the events of the sample adventure (p. 138) that differed radically from everyone else's. In each case the wide variances of incident arose from disparate player choices. Just like it's supposed to.

ANY TRACK Is the right track

Although it may be, oddly enough, more important to maintain apparent than actual narrative freedom, we should still endeavor to provide the real thing to the maximum extent possible.

Fortunately, it's easier to provide freedom than it is to seem like you're providing it. Simply ensure that any clue, especially any core clue, is available not only to players using the ability specified in the scenario, but to *any player who provides a credible and entertaining alternate method of acquiring that clue*. The scenario is a foundation to work from, which ensures that there is at least one way to move through the story. It should never be regarded as the only way to get to the resolution. A group of players will often come up with better ideas than the scenario writer ever could. Give yourself permission to go with them.

One slight exception: this advice pertains only to clues available in the current scene. Allow players to leapfrog scenes by acquiring information they're meant to get later only when pacing permits. If you're early in a session when the threat of leapfrogging occurs, and you're not confident you can improvise enough new intervening scenes to make a full evening's entertainment, by all means block the players' efforts. If you're zooming toward evening's end, leapfrogging may prove a blessing — just be sure to squeeze in all of the necessary ancillary information the players might miss by skipping ahead.

Scenes in the middle of an investigation can often be juggled around with no ill effect to the storyline. When this is the case, it's always better to let the players dictate pacing than to force them back into the order of events envisioned by the scenario.

The scenario is only the blueprint. The building happens during play.

ENDING SCENES

In a novel or TV episode, writers can freely cut to the next scene when their characters have acquired all of the clues available in the current one. The characters might stick around for hours tying up loose ends and pursuing fruitless questions, but this doesn't happen on screen. We, the audience, are not forced to sit through such sequences. This kind of concise editing isn't so easy in the roleplaying medium. Players don't know when they've got all the clues.

Here's a simple trick to gently steer them onwards, without unduly breaking the illusion of fictional reality:

Before play, take an index card and write on it, in big block letters, the word SCENE. As soon as the players have gleaned the core clue and most or all of the secondary clues in a scene, and the action begins to drag, hold up the card. When the players see this, they know to move on. (Of course, you have to explain the cue to them before play begins.) Easy, efficient, yet somehow not nearly as disruptive or jarring as a verbal instruction.

Even better, use one of the musical stings available from the Pelgrane Press website for just this purpose.

MANAGING RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

The mechanical tension in *The Esoterrorists* comes from GUMSHOE's "resource management" nature. Investigators (and their players) have a limited number of pool points to use while accomplishing the mission or solving the mystery.

Investigative pool points should not be a problem. No core clue needed to solve the mystery should depend on spending pool points. The mechanical role of investigative pool points is to manage spotlight time and as a method for the players and GMs to signal "oncoming coolness" to each other. A player who says, "Can I spend a Bureaucracy point here?" is requesting something cool for his agent to do or discover during the scene. When the GM says, "Do you want to spend an Art History point here?" she's signaling that there's something awesome available during this scene that she thinks the player (or players) would enjoy. This repartee will eventually become nearly seamless and automatic.

General pool points, however, are trickier. If the Investigators reach the abandoned warehouse at full Stability, Health, Athletics, and Shooting, they're not going to be too terrified unless the Mystery Man is there backed up by a clutch of blood corpses. But if they drain away too much Stability or exhaust all their Scuffling battling antagonists, they won't survive the climax no matter how well they've reasoned out the solution. It's vitally important that the GM keep an eye on the party's pool points, especially Stability and at least one "fight or flight" pool (Athletics, Scuffling, or Shooting). Given the PC ability to drop Health and Stability to -11 without *fatal* result, in most cases, characters should reach the climax with their key pools hovering in the low single digits.

The GM can work to hit this mechanical sweet spot in two ways. First, tailor the threat levels to the party's resources, as delineated on the Investigator Matrix. If they have four Investigators with 30 Stability points between them, don't write adventures that call for more than 15 or so Stability tests without intentionally planning one of two things: a "killer" adventure, or a refreshment interim. (Players will likely spend 1 or 2 Stability points on tests, even if they succeed.) Those 15

THE ESOTERRORISTS

tests might include three major Stability-threatening encounters (three major encounters times four Investigators is 12 tests). Every group is different, spending points or hoarding them at different rates. It may take you a couple of adventures to learn your group's "burn rate," but it's a key datum for you as GM.

SCENARIOS

The third, and equally important, management technique is adding encounters if the party seems to be "too healthy." **The object of the game is horror, and horror comes from a threat.** The threat should be both fictional ("If we don't infiltrate this compound now, the sisterites will swarm") and mechanical ("If we face another torture dog, we're not going to have any Stability points left when we meet the sisterites."). This "soak" encounter doesn't always have to be a monster attack, although that always helps. It can be a horrible nightmare, a magical phenomenon, or even a "mundane" horror like a grotesque murder. This technique has the added advantage of being dramatically effective, too; it's the faithful "tension-andrelease" model that works on everything from slasher flicks to roller coasters. Adding a "soak" encounter on an ad hoc basis usually works okay, but it's better yet if the GM predesigns it to be a natural — or even obvious — part of the adventure. It can be a floating antagonist reaction scene, for example.





YOUR TOWN



YOUR TOWN

Your town isn't like other places. There's something wrong with it.

No one wants to admit to themselves, but things are strange here. More madness. More sorrow. More deaths. More horrible "accidents." It's not like it used to be. There's something rotten in the heart of this place, a cancer of the soul that eats away at everything good and leaves only monsters behind. Your town is sick.

Who or what did this to your town? Some government experiment? Corporate pollution? Was it something alien? Do invisible monsters lurk at the threshold of perception, warping your town in their own nightmare images? Or — even worse — did someone you know do this? Could your neighbors, your friends, even your family be somehow responsible for this inexorable slide into the abyss?

You didn't want to admit things had gotten bad, but the strangers forced you to see. They came to town to uncover its secrets, to pierce the veils of deception and find out what's really going on. They pit cold science against occult horror. They want the truth.

They call themselves the OrdoVeritatis. And they need your help.

Station Duty presents an alternative campaign framework for *The Esoterrorists*. Instead of sending the player characters on missions across the world, *Station Duty* encourages them to delve into the mysteries of one small town over the course of several investigations. It's inspired by the whole genre of small-town horror (a highway that runs, roughly, from Innsmouth through Castle Rock and onto Twin Peaks and Silent Hill). Over the course of this campaign, the players will uncover all the secrets of this little town, and maybe even save it from itself.

This section provides instructions on creating your own small-town horror, by either creating a fictional town to destroy or else taking your own hometown and warping it. It also provides a cast of characters to populate the town and notes on potential Esoterrorist conspiracies and monsters that the GM can use to build an investigative campaign around the setting. Every town has its secrets, and there is always another layer of deception or denial to be revealed.

Throughout this section, the setting you will create is referred to simply as the Town.

Here's how this section breaks down:



"Groundwork" describes how to design the shared setting and the team's shared cover, and outlines the initial situation that draws the attention of the Ordo.

"This Town Eats People" discusses how to run a *Station Duty* campaign and provides several worked examples of how to use elements of the Town to create mysteries.

"Breach Zero" is a sample starting scenario that can be used to kick off your campaign.

"Persons of Interest" lists two dozen residents of the Town to populate your campaign.

"This Awful Place" contains descriptions of key locations in Town.

"The Enemy" describes potential Esoterrorist plots for the campaign, along with new monsters.

"Local News" contains handouts taken from the Town's newspaper, as well as discussion of the secrets behind the headlines.



STATION DUTY

BEFORE YOUR *STATION DUTY* CAMPAIGN KICKS OFF INTO ACTUAL PLAY, THE Town and the team's Station are collaboratively created by the GM and the players. The Town gets created before the game begins; the Station can be created at the same time or developed over the course of the game. First, though, come the player characters.

CREATING CHARACTERS

In *Station Duty*, some of the player characters are experienced Ordo agents, veterans of dozens of cases, but the other characters are residents of the Town who are inducted into the Ordo Veritatis over the course of the first investigation. Split your group roughly 50/50 between the two categories.

Before the game starts, have the players work out how their characters will team up in the first session of the game. The sample adventure, "Breach Zero" (p. 100), posits that the Local Resident PCs are all friendly with a victim of an Esoterrorist scheme, but other approaches are possible. The Locals could already be investigating a string of strange events or be recruited because of their expert knowledge.

ORDO VERITATIS AGENTS

Create the experienced agents using the standard character creation rules (p. 8). Go into detail on the character's background — unlike a regular Ordo Veritatis mission, being assigned to Station Duty means that the character is actively involved in the investigation for months. How does that affect the characters' previous jobs? How does it affect their families? Are their partners okay with the unexpected move to a new Town?

LOCAL RESIDENTS

For the Local Residents, we'll use slightly different rules. The Locals lack the expert training of the visiting agents.

Local characters are limited to putting a maximum of one build point in any technical investigative abilities. However, Local characters gain access to a special set of investigative abilities called Local Knowledge. The available Local Knowledges are determined when the Town is being built (see p. 84).

CREATING THE TOWN

The Town is created collaboratively by the GM and the players. At this stage, the goal is to sketch out the Town's mundane aspects and characters — its history and geography, its important landmarks and features, and its social dynamics. Leave the horror and mystery bubbling under for the moment,

and do not go into exhaustive detail on anything — leave that to be filled out in play.

SMALL-TOWN HORROR

Small-town horror is intimate and local. It's the horror of the monster lurking just outside your door, watching your house as you sleep. It's the horror of being betrayed by your neighbor, the kindly old woman you've known all your life, when she tears off her mask of flesh to reveal the writhing maggots underneath. It's the horror of knowing that you are the only thing standing between innocent, helpless, defenseless people and the darkness, that the cavalry won't come in time to save the day — it's all up to you.

For all that to work, keep the following precepts in mind.

- THE TOWN IS WORTH SAVING. The Town is strange. Some of the townsfolk are evil, monstrous or insane but not everyone in town is a monster. Most of the people who live in the Town are just good people who deserve a chance to survive. Make sure the players want to save the Town, not burn it down. Encourage the player characters to put down roots and get to know the various townsfolk. (If you're using the Sources of Stability rules, then most of the Sources should be resident in Town.)
- THE TOWN HAS SECRETS. Nothing is quite as it seems. Everyone in Town — not just the Esoterrorist villains — has something to hide. Affairs, lost loves, bizarre beliefs, drug addictions, criminal schemes, insane jealousies, psychic dreams, things they would never admit to anyone. If the player characters investigate, they will always uncover hidden truths beneath the veneer of normality.
- THE TOWN IS STRANGE. The weakness in the Membrane allows strangeness to bleed through from the far side. The Town is haunted by monsters and other weird creatures. You can get lost easily in the wilderness around the Town. This strangeness manifests in other, smaller ways too. Radios in the town pick up broadcasts from long ago or far away. The coffee in the local diner is just too damn good. The kids chant eerily prophetic rhymes when playing hopscotch. This strangeness lurks beneath the surface of the Town, and only a few people are really aware of it. Others in Town might suspect something strange is going on but are unwilling to admit it to themselves.
- THE TOWN IS SMALL... BUT NOT TOO SMALL. A few hundred people live in and around here. It's small enough so that most people know their neighbors, but it's big enough to accommodate a large cast of suspects. The Town is as big as it needs to be.

USING FEAR ITSELF

If you've got the Fear Itself game, you can use those rules for the Local Residents. The lighter, less specific technical and academic abilities from Fear Itself are perfect for modeling the more general, less precise abilities of the Local Residents. The Local cop might be able to lift a fingerprint or match a bullet using Investigative Procedure, but doing a detailed forensic examination of bone fragments or reconstructing a bullet's trajectory using computer modeling is beyond his capabilities.

The Esoterrorists abilities map to Fear Itself as follows.

| | FEAR ITSELF | THE ESOTERRORISTS |
|----------------|------------------|-------------------------|
| | | Archaeology |
| | Humanities | Art History |
| | | Textual Analysis |
| | | Anthropology |
| der. | Social Sciences | Forensic Psychology |
| 1. J | | Linguistics |
| | | Cryptography |
| - | Commuter Science | Data Retrieval |
| | Computer Science | |
| | | Electronic Surveillance |
| | | Ballistics |
| Convine State | | Document Analysis |
| | Investigative | Evidence Collection |
| and the second | Procedure | Fingerprinting |
| | | Forensic Accounting |
| | | Forensic Anthropology |
| | | |
| S. | | Astronomy |
| | | Chemistry |
| | Science | Explosive Devices |
| | | Forensic Entomology |
| - | | Pathology |
| | | |
| | | |

Some clues should be available to both sets of abilities — a character can find a fingerprint using either Investigative Procedure or Evidence Collection. However, more technical clues should be available only to characters using *The Esoterrorist* abilities.

The Fear Itself rules for psychic powers may be used; however, in keeping with the stern cosmology of the Esoterrorists setting, these powers are the result of the Local Resident's longterm exposure to the Outer Dark and are unnatural abilities tied to supernatural entities.

If using the *Fear Itself* rules, then the Local characters get extra build points. Remember that the Local characters can also buy Local Knowledges.

| BUILD POINT |
|-------------|
| 20 |
| 16 |
| 12 |
| |

SOURCES OF STABILITY

Sources of Stability, originally explored in *Fear Itself*, work excellently in a *Station Duty* campaign. For every three full rating points that a character has in Stability, the player must name one person that the character confides in and relies on, one person who makes the world worth fighting for. A name and an identifying phrase is enough for each at the start of play; they'll be fleshed out later on.

In general, player characters may not choose other investigators as a Source of Stability, except where there are romantic or emotional entanglements. It's permissible, but risky, for several characters to rely on the same Source.

Relying on others helps keep a character sane but exposes them to danger. If a Source of Stability is threatened, the character needs to make an immediate Stability test. Worse, if a Source of Stability is killed or otherwise eliminated, the Stability points associated with that Source are lost.

Cutting yourself off from a support network has equally bad effects. Characters who do not have semi-regular contact with Sources of Stability are unable to refresh their Stability pools.

THE TOWN IS ISOLATED. It doesn't need to be on an island or in the middle of the forest or cut off from civilization, but the town is definitely a little isolated. It might be a few hours' drive from the nearest big city, or at the end of a long and winding road, or sometimes cut off by flooding or snowstorms. It should have its own police force, its own mayor, its own schools, and other institutions. Alternatively, the Town can be part of a larger city, but still very self-contained and insular.

THE TOWN IS FAMILIAR. The Town should be familiar to the Local Resident players, so they can make up details about the Town on the fly. Tell the players to take ownership of the Town; they can invent any mundane details they want. THE TOWN IS NEAR THE WILDERNESS. The Town needs a nearby place of danger and uncertainty. For a backwoods town, it's the dark woods. For a coastal town, it's the sea. It could be the mountains, or the swamp, or the old mines. For an urban neighborhood, it could be the waste ground or the slum. It's a place where bad things happen, where danger lurks, where there might be monsters, in contrast to the safe, sedate, ordinary Town.

If your own hometown matches these criteria, run with that. You might need to change one or two features of the place to suit the game, like eliminating nearby towns to make it more isolated or adding a suitable wilderness. Alternatively, you can pick another town known to the players, pick a town and research it, or make up a fictional town. Ensure that the Town feels familiar to all the Local Resident players.

STATION DUTY

USING YOUR OWN HOME TOWN

THE ESOTERRORISTS

Using your own home as the Town maximizes familiarity. You don't need to describe locations, as the players are already familiar with them ("You find the body in that little car park at the back of the fire station, you know, the one next to the Chinese restaurant"). The horror is on your doorstep. It is best to avoid setting the game *too* close to reality — games where the characters meet real-life people known to the players (or the players themselves) end up as surrealist comedy, not horror. Instead, use a mix of fictional characters, stock NPCs, and well-known local figures.

RESEARCHING A TOWN

Researching a real-life town gives you street plans, photographs, and local details but maintains a narrative distance that is lost when using your own home town. If you live in a large city that would be unsuitable for use as the Town, then this approach gives you a more suitable setting. These days, online maps and encyclopedias give some information about almost every settlement in the developed world, and you can dig up local color and even copies of small-town newspapers with a few minutes' research on the Internet. Using a real-life place can generate unexpected inspiration as you research the town's history — even the dullest, most obscure little place has a few haunted houses, unsolved murders, or other juicy details.

FICTIONAL TOWNS

Finally, you can create the Town from scratch or take a real-life town's map and fill it with your own locations and characters. This lets you tailor the Town to your liking and drop in locations or geographical features as needed. Fictional Towns may lack the quirky details of real-world places, but the unfettered creativity of the players during the Town creation session should provide plenty of interesting plot hooks.

THE PLACE

Come up with a list of the following:

- Notable landmarks scenic lakes, mountains, ruins, parks, statues, tourist attractions. What does the Town put on its postcards?
- Important buildings police station, courthouse, museum, hospital, town hall, hotel, shopping malls. What does the Town look like? What's the architecture like? How old is the Town?

GROUNDWORK CREATING THE TOWN

SIX TOWNS FOR HORROR

ALASKAN MINING TOWN: It's dark and snowbound for six months of the year. All your neighbors have ice axes.

QUIET NEW ENGLAND VILLAGE: Come for the foliage and the antiquing, stay for the high murder rate. Old buildings, old money, old cults.

ANONYMOUS MIDWESTERN FARMING TOWN: Surrounded on all sides by fields of waving corn. The days go by slowly here, ambling along like a lazy dog. It's all red-painted barns and quiet lives.

PACIFIC NORTHWEST LOGGING TOWN: It rains nine days out of every ten. The fog-shrouded trees stand like mute sentinels, and there are secrets hidden in these dark hills. **SLEEPY HOLIDAY RESORT:** For a few weeks during the summer, this town comes alive with the laughter of children and holidaying families. The rest of the time, it's shuttered and almost empty, and the tourist attractions look sinister and misshapen in the winter dusk.

DYING RUST BELT TOWN: The population of the town is dwindling. Every year, there are more abandoned houses, more empty windows staring at the rusting dinosaur hulks of shutdown factories.

- Key streets and roads how do you get in and out of town? Where do the roads go? Is there a railway or river? What sort of obstacles are there?
- Places frequented by the Local characters bars, restaurants, workplaces

On a large piece of paper, start sketching a map of the Town. Don't define everything at this point — just note down the main streets and one or two landmarks. Where's the police station? Where's the school? Where's the main shopping area? Sketch the map even if you have access to street maps of the Town — this map communicates the areas that will be important in the game to everyone.

Have the Local Resident players pick where they want to live and work on the map.

Over the course of the campaign, add locations to this map as they arise in play. It's a good idea to use sticky notes for locations of passing importance, but don't worry if the map gets messy or confusing. It is supposed to reflect the tangled, confused nature of small-town relationships.

THE ATMOSPHERE

What's the Town like? Is it a quiet, sleepy place? Is it slowly shrinking as people move away to the big city, or is it stable? Is there a tourist season? Has it become a popular place for the rich to have a holiday home? What's the main industry in the Town? Is there (or was there) a big factory that employed most of the population? What about farming, or logging, or fishing? Is the Town a nice place to live, or is it stricken by poverty? Is the overall atmosphere one of depressed dreariness or bucolic charm? Have each of the players describe a scene in the Town. What would someone driving through the Town see? What's a typical day like in the Town?

What's really important in Town? Is there a big annual festival? How about that local sports team, anyway? What is the weather like, typically? How often does it rain, and how heavily? What dangers do you have to watch out for?

The Local Residents have lived most of their lives in Town and have a few shared experiences. For each pair of Local Resident characters, have the players come up with an incident from their characters' lives that both of them remember vividly. Anything from "we dated back in high school," to "when we were kids, we found a corpse in the woods" to "his character's mother had an affair with mine's father" works, although most of these shared experiences should encourage the characters to trust each other. Go through each pair of Local Residents and note down their shared experiences. This is a great opportunity to establish Sources of Stability.

THE PEOPLE

Who lives in the Town? Who do the Local Residents know well? Who are the Town's public figures and best known faces? Give the players the list of persons of interest (see p. 103) and have them pick one or two each as friends or acquaintances. The full "cast list" of the series will be filled out in play, but it's a good idea to establish some major NPCs immediately.

Important questions:

- ➤ Who runs the town? Who are the local officials and authority figures? Who are the police?
- Who's a good source of information? Who knows what's going on? Who are the local experts? Who are the gossips? Who knows everyone?
- Who's trouble? Who causes problems for the town? Who does no one trust?

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

These are special investigative abilities born of the characters' familiarity with the area. Some of these will be common to most towns — the Police Department might count as a faction, or the Commercial Center, or the Church Congregation, or the Local Kids might. Others are particular to a Town. Identify different areas, groups, or factions within the Town that can be used as Local Knowledges. Regions around the Town can also qualify as Local Knowledge, like the Woods or the Lake.

For example, a coastal village might have the following:

- The Boats the local fishing boats, yachts, fishermen, sailing enthusiasts, and supplies. This skill would also cover knowing about the weather, sailing techniques, recognizing different boats, and getting access to a boat if needed.
- Main Street the Town's shops, restaurants, and other major businesses, their staff, their habits, and their customers. A character with this skill would know most people in Town and be able to spot odd behavior or strange visitors.

- Town Hall local politics, bureaucracy, and town records. This skill would also cover the local emergency services and the people in Town who can exert influence over elected officials.
- Along the Shore Knowledge of life outside the Town, along the seashore. This skill gives contacts amid the locals who live along the shore, the teenagers who party on the beach, the homeless beachcombers, and knowledge of the hiding places in the rocks and cliffs. It would also have elements of geography and natural history.

USING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Each Local Knowledge skill covers a different facet of the Town, but they are all used in the same way. A character with Local Knowledge is familiar with the people and places related to that part of the town, and can:

- notice when something is out of the ordinary in that section of town
- notice when someone is behaving oddly
- recite the personal histories and some private details about those people
- ▶ pick up gossip and rumors, obtain favors, and exert influence in that area of town
- perform specialized tasks related to that facet of life

For example, a character with Local Knowledge (Tourist Industry) knows all the Town's hotels and guesthouses. She is on first-name terms with all the staff, as well as regular visitors, government inspectors, salesmen, seasonal workers, and other related individuals. She knows all the Town's tourist attractions and activities and is also plugged into the rumor mill relating to her area of knowledge. If a tourist vanished or if a strange symbol were found scrawled in blood on a hotel-room mirror, the character would know about it before the police. Having Local Knowledge means the character is an expert on that part of life in town.

Some clues are only available with the right Local Knowledge, but other clues might be obtainable with either Local Knowledge or the right investigative ability. For example, a character with Textual Analysis might spot an unusual handwriting style in a hotel's guestbook, but the same clue could be picked up using Local Knowledge (Tourist Industry). Either Forensic Anthropology or Local Knowledge (Logging) could identify the murder weapon as a logging chainsaw by examining a chewed-up corpse.

Local Knowledge Spends: Optionally, Local Knowledge points can be spent to establish historical facts and past experiences. For example, spending a point from Local Knowledge (Tourist Industry) could let a player specify that her character worked in the local hotel every summer when she was a teenager and knows the exact layout of the building — and the code to turn off the burglar alarm. A 2-point spend means the character not only worked in the hotel, she's a close friend of the owner, and he trusts her implicitly and won't even ask questions if she tells him that it's desperately important that she and her strange friends be allowed to search the guests' rooms for vials of blood...

TRACKING THE TOWN

Make sure that someone records all the important details about the Town — things can get forgotten during play. Either stick everything down on the map or write the key elements down and circulate an email to all the Local Resident players. Over time, add to the notes about the Town, or use a campaign wiki to track everything.

TOWN CREATION CHECKLIST

- [] Decide on the type of Town
- [] Draw a sketch map of the Town and mark important places
- [] Have everyone describe a scene from Town to establish atmosphere
- [] Have each Local Resident describe an event or memory, they share with another player character
- [] Populate the Town with public figures and a few personal contacts for each of the Local Residents, using the list of persons of interest (p. 103)
- [] Decide on the types of Local Knowledge available
- [] Finalize details and make sure everyone's familiar with the Town

The Ordo characters receive this briefing at the start of the game or as a flashback early on in the campaign.

For six months, the Ordo Veritatis has tracked a senior Esoterrorist known only as the Sculptor. They tapped her phones, followed her across the world, and fought to keep her under surveillance as she tried to evade her watchers. Six Ordo agents gave their lives to keep the Sculptor from slipping away into the shadows, and the Ordo still does not know her real name or her ultimate goals. They do know that she is a high-level strategist for the Esoterror movement, connecting different cells and shuffling resources across the globe.

Recently the Ordo intercepted a phone call between an unidentified male and the Sculptor.

- **SCULPTOR:** Hello? (Background sounds identified as Schipol airport, the Netherlands. Call traced to prepaid cell phone, which was later found discarded in a waste bin at Schipol.)
- **MALE:** It's me. We've got a... a problem, a big problem. (*Background sounds identified as wind, rain.*)
- **SCULPTOR:** Idiot! This isn't a secure line. You know th-(interrupted by MALE VOICE)
- MALE: There's no time! The haruspex is gone. (A haruspex was a diviner trained in the art of interpreting the future by examining the entrails of animals, especially the livers of sacrifices. Its meaning in this context is unclear.)
- **SCULPTOR:** Who took it? Pluggers? (Plugger is a slang term used by the Esoterrorists to refer to the Ordo.)
- MALE: No, I (unidentified noise and burst of static) loose! We need a – (unidentified noise and burst of static) (Call ends).

The first phone call was traced to a phone booth on the edge of Town. The characters' investigation should commence there. (See "Breach Zero," p. 100).

The Sculptor then made a second, briefer telephone call to an answering service located in Los Angeles.

RECORDED MESSAGE: Leave a message after the tone. BEEP. **SCULPTOR:** There's been a fuckup at Breach Zero. Get on it. (*Terminates call*).

Breach Zero is a codeword that the Esoterrorists have used before. It refers to a theoretical breach in the Membrane that would destabilize the entire barrier between our reality and the Outer Dark. If Breach Zero were fully opened, it would become an infected wound in the Membrane, a weeping sore that would spread out from that initial tear and weaken the whole.

Until now, Breach Zero has been a theory. The existence of such potential weak spots was predicted by Ordo Veritatis mathematicians, but one has never been observed in reality. If the Esoterrorists have found a potential Breach Zero, then it must be investigated and secured.

THE MISSION

RDO VERITATIS BRIEF

The Ordo characters are contacted by Mr.Verity and informed that they are being placed on an extended assignment. They are to immediately travel to The Town and establish a Station there. If they have family members, these dependents will follow at a later date once the Station's cover is in place and the immediate area is deemed secure. The characters are to:

- investigate the events that are potentially related to the Sculptor's phone call and search for signs of Esoterror activity
- recruit one or more trustworthy local agents with expert knowledge of the Town
- establish an observation station in the Town under a suitable cover
- monitor the Town, investigate any further suspicious events, and develop an adversary map by identifying known and potential Esoterror agents
- protect the Membrane and ensure that the enemy is prevented from creating a full breach

THE ESOTERRORISTS

CREATING A STATION

Just as the Town is primarily created by the Local Residents, the Station is created mainly by the Ordo characters, although the Locals can kibitz and suggest ideas. The Station will be the characters' home base for the campaign. It connects the players and gives them a place to make plans and to retreat to when things go bad. If this campaign were a TV series, the Station would be the main standing set. It houses their forensic equipment, their records, and their notes on the Town and their past cases. For the duration of their assignment here, it's home.

The Station can be created in the same preparatory session as the rest of the Town or else established in the course of play after the first actual game session.

THE PLACE

Have the Ordo players pick a place on the map for the Station. Is it a disused building on the edge of Town? A warehouse near the highway off-ramp? A commercial unit in the heart of the Town? Is there plenty of space for both the equipment needed to maintain the cover and for the Ordo Veritatis gear, or do the characters need to get creative (say, by digging an underground bunker or establishing a secret passage between the public and private parts of the Station)? Where do the Ordo characters stay in Town? Initially, they're going to be staying at a motel or other rented accommodation, but they are here for the long haul – do they rent or buy homes in the Town or live above the Station? (Pay especial attention to Ordo characters with families, since you'll be bringing them into the campaign later on.)

THE COVER

The Station needs a cover. In other locales, the Ordo has used a variety of official covers, masquerading as federal agents or state police or an international corporation, but here a lighter touch is required. The Station's cover role must be something innocuous, something that blends in with the small town, something that will not alert the Esoterrorist cell while still giving the characters freedom of action. A small business is ideal. Possible options include the following:

- ➤ Gas station or garage: Lets the characters monitor visitors to the Town and keep track of comings and goings.
- Hotel or tourist attraction: Provides the characters with a large home base and lets them monitor guests (who may be Esoterrorist suspects or targets).
- ▶ **Bar or restaurant:** An excellent venue for information gathering, and the late closing time gives the characters an excuse for wandering around the Town at night.
- Doctor or vet: Ensures that the characters will be contacted to investigate any strange injuries or mutilations and gives a position of authority in Town.
- Plumbing, electrical repair, carpet fitting, construction: Can be exploited to gain access to private residences and gather information on Esoterrorist suspects.

Fast food delivery: Gives an excuse for the characters to be anywhere in the Town at any time. Even reality-destroying madmen order takeout.

The players should decide on the Station's cover role, name, and their own assignments. Local Resident characters can be recruited to the cover as needed.

The Ordo will fund the cover role, so the cover business does not need to make money. The characters are still expected to put in sufficient hours to maintain their cover roles. All this happens offstage, of course, except when a mundane job leads into a supernatural investigation. A small town business inevitably has a coterie of regular customers and familiar faces, so the GM should pick some of the Town's NPCs to be patrons of the new business. These regular customers can pass on rumors, gossip, and plot hooks to the player characters.

THE FACILITIES

Behind the mask of the cover identity, the Station holds key facilities used during investigation. These facilities are set up by the Ordo Veritatis under the cover of conventional deliveries and remodeling, and should be kept out of sight of untrusted civilians.

- forensic and scientific laboratories for analyzing evidence found in the field
- ➤ computer equipment, including the Ordo's CASIE (Case Analysis Schematic Interpretation Engine) software
- a secure panic room
- an armory, equipped with both conventional and esoteric weaponry, as well as useful tools and survival equipment
- medical facilities, to avoid having to use local hospitals or doctors, which would result in troublesome questions about wounds incurred in the line of duty
- holding cells

The Station is also equipped with security measures to prevent unauthorized intruders from gaining access to the private section.

- reinforced doors and windows
- concealed entrances
- ► security cameras
- cutting-edge burglar alarms and sensors
- swipe-key locks

SHARED DESCRIPTION

It's up to the players to design the Station and its cover. Try having each player describe one aspect of the Station — what catches customers' eyes when they first walk in? What does the place smell like? Is it cluttered or clean? Busy or empty? How do the characters enter the secret part of the building? Is there a secret door? A concealed electronic lock? What about the security cameras?

Go around the table once or twice, but no more. The aim is to build up a shared mental picture, not pin down every detail.

BRIEFING: CREATING A STATION | THIS TOWN EATS PEOPLE



STATION ASSETS

Not all Stations are created equal. Ordo characters can invest investigative build points in the Station to upgrade its initial facilities. Later in the game, the GM may allow the characters to expand the Station with further upgrades in the course of play.

Three investigative build points buy one of the following upgrades:

- Improved Laboratory: Allows each character to refresh any one technical pool once per game session.
- Improved Security: Increases the difficulty for any Infiltration attempts to break into the station.
- Improved Armory: Allows each character to refresh either Preparedness or Shooting once per session.
- Improved Archives: Allows each character to refresh any one academic pool once per game session.

The Ordo's CASIE program is a useful tool for any station. CASIE is fundamentally a database for tracking Esoterrorist suspects and identifying links between them. CASIE's semantic processing algorithms can handle a wide variety of input — biographies, medical records, credit reports, biometric data — and searches them for previously unnoticed links. CASIE is capable of speech recognition and can monitor local media for keywords. It can also monitor tapped phone lines or listening devices, though the characters will have to plant the bugs themselves.

CASIE is not infallible — 75% of the program's output turns out to be false positives or useless information. It might flag a local resident as a suspect because she went to the same school as a known Esoterrorist when they were both six years old or draw a connection between a suspect's purchasing history on his watched credit card and a recent shooting just because he regularly shops in that particular mall. Still, CASIE's relentless analysis and recombination of the available data sometimes throws new light on a mystery.

In game terms, CASIE is there to give hints and new leads if the players are stuck or to introduce new plot hooks. If CASIE flags something as unusual, the players should check it out even if there is no obvious connection to their main investigation.

STATION DESIGN CHECKLIST

- [] Decide on where the Station is in Town
- [] Pick a cover for the Station
- [] Pick a role within the cover for each Ordo character
- [] Describe the facilities the Station has
- [] Pick assets



The BEST MODEL FOR A *STATION DUTY* CAMPAIGN IS THAT OF AN ONGOING television series — each game session is an episode. Some episodes are one-shot "monsters of the week" with only limited connection to the ongoing plot. Something ghastly crawls out of the breach in the Membrane and starts eating people, the player characters investigate, track it down, and eliminate the threat, and life returns to normal.

Other episodes deal with the overarching plot of the series — initially, this is the threat of the hidden Esoterrorist cell in the Town. Piece by piece, secret by secret, the characters assemble the truth. They build up a list of suspects, they work out who the enemies are and how they operate, and they uncover what the Esoterrorists are working towards. The whole series builds towards a climactic confrontation. The Membrane is breaking down, the Town is slipping into the abyss, and, if the player characters cannot stop the Esoterrorists... then the end of the world begins right here.

CREATING MYSTERIES

Instead of presenting a few prewritten cases to be investigated, *Station Duty* provides the tools for the GM to create new cases or even improvise mysteries on the fly. It uses the same model as many television shows — a monster of the week shows up, causes trouble, and must be defeated, while continuing plot elements develop a little bit more in each episode. As the characters defeat a series of threats to the Town, they draw ever closer to finding out what is really going on. A rough map of the average game session looks like this:

- 1 Life in the Town is disrupted. Some supernatural threat, like an Outer Dark Entity, attacks someone in Town. While murders or mysterious disappearances work well, explore less obvious hooks, also. The characters might notice a suspicious stranger in Town, observe a suspect, or be passed a tip-off from an informant. The threat might even seem to have no supernatural involvement at first, but it's always suspicious enough to draw the attention of the Ordo. Regardless of how the characters learn of this new threat, it must be dealt with.
- 2 Investigations lead to more questions. The characters investigate the triggering event, interact with NPCs, and learn more about the context of the original event but find no clear clues that reveal the true nature of the threat. Often, the characters have to use their cover identities or specialized skills to get past local law enforcement or other obstacles. Various red herrings are pursued and ruled irrelevant.

3 The threat strikes again. There is a second murder, a second incident. This time, the victim may be a PC or a close ally, or the choice of victim may seem random until the players deduce the unseen connections. This second attack heightens the horror and is usually more bloody and disturbing than the first.

- **4** The path is made clear. Investigating the second attack turns up a clear clue leading to the next part of the investigation. The players may believe they know what is going on. The second incident may explain troubling or confusing aspects of the first incident that earlier stymied the players.
- **5** A twist occurs. Something happens to disrupt the PCs' progress. They may uncover new information that causes them to question their earlier assumptions, their prime suspect may be found dead, or they may discover they are being manipulated.
- **6** A truth is revealed. The characters work out what is really going on and it's worse than they imagined.
- **7** Horror is confronted. The characters confront and defeat the threat by destroying it, banishing it, or otherwise preventing it from happening again.
- **B** Life in Town returns to "normal." The status quo in the Town resumes. Superficially, everything is back the way it was at the start of the investigation, but the characters have learned more about the secret workings of the Town.

Woven into this framework are two other components. **Floating events** can be inserted as needed into the action. Antagonist reactions are always reliable floating events, as are strange encounters with eccentric residents of the Town. There are also **arc plot events**, which are related to the ongoing conspiracy in the Town.

Few adventures will precisely match this outline. Introduce red herrings to slow things down, or quicken the pace through sudden twists.

DISRUPTIONS

- MURDER: There's a brutal murder or suspicious death in Town. If you pick this horror twice, consider making one of the NPCs a serial killer.
- DISAPPEARANCE: Someone in Town goes missing. Are they dead? Kidnapped? On the run?
- ARSON: An important building (possibly the Station) in Town is destroyed or damaged.
- ► ANIMAL MUTILATION: Possible evidence of bizarre experiments or a creature attack is discovered.
- PERSONALITY SHIFTS: Strange behavior is observed, or established NPCs are encountered in very unexpected contexts.
- THE OUTSIDER: Someone important (an FBI agent, a wealthy investor, an Ordo internal affairs investigator, a celebrity) arrives from out of Town.
- MADNESS: Someone in Town goes (or is driven) insane.
 Alternatively, a preexisting condition is revealed.
- STRANGE DREAMS: Either the player characters or an NPC has strange or prophetic dreams.
- THE ROT WITHIN: What appeared to be an ordinary thing (a happy family, a hunting club, a kindergarten school, a farm) is found to be concealing something ghastly, perverted, or monstrous.
- STRANGE ENCOUNTERS IN THE WILDERNESS: Strangers, bizarre animals, or monster sightings.
- DARK SECRETS ARE REVEALED: The truth about someone or something in Town is revealed — affairs, past crimes, hidden histories, old lies.
- RADICAL SHIFT IN CIRCUMSTANCES: The finances or reputation of an important person in Town are ruined by an unexpected event or revelation.
- NATURAL DISASTER: Life in Town is disrupted by a disaster like a storm, fire, or flood.
- BIZARRE DISCOVERY: Something brings the nature of the Town and past events into question, such as finding that every building in Town is wired with bugging devices or that the whole Town was built only a few years ago and made to look older.

Adventures may also have secondary plots that are unrelated to the main investigation. These "B plots" might revolve around the Station's cover or the personal lives of the player characters. Sometimes, the B plot might complicate the main investigation. For example, if the Station's cover identity is a restaurant, then the presence of a government health inspector or a raucous wedding party might distract the characters from their investigation since they have to maintain the cover while chasing bad guys.

As the players become more involved in the affairs of the Town, more scenes will involve the player characters dealing with their own contacts and allies.

NARRATIVE ARCS

The *Station Duty* campaign revolves around the attempt by a mysterious group of Esoterrorists to open the Membrane and how the player characters stop them. How the villains intend to accomplish this, who exactly the Esoterrorists are, and what happens when the Membrane is damaged are all questions to be answered over the course of the campaign, not in a single game session. But each session should move the overall plot on in one way or another. There are three strands to this narrative arc — the Esoterrorists, the player characters, and their eventual showdown.

THE ENEMY

The Ordo Veritatis briefing (p. 85) confirmed that there is an Esoterrorist presence in Town. You don't need to pick who the Esoterrorists are at the start of the game. You can have suspects, but be flexible. Look for characters who have interesting interactions with the player characters. If the players all really hate a particular NPC, then that's a prime candidate for promotion into a villain. Similarly, you can get great mileage out of an unexpected betrayal.

There are sample Esoterrorist cell concepts and schemes on p. 122.

ADVERSARY MAPPING

The identity of those in the Esoterrorist cell is a running mystery for the players to solve. Anyone in the Town could be an Esoterrorist. Encourage the players to build up a profile of their enemies. Early on, for example, you could let the players find out that there are six members of the Esoterrorist cell and that one of them uses the codename "the Mechanic." The players can now draw up a diagram with five blank boxes and one marked "the Mechanic"; they can try to work out what the nickname means — is it a reference to the Esoterrorist's job, role within the group, or attitude to magic, or is it an in-joke or a mistranslation?

Give the players a structure to investigate, even if you don't fill in the details of that structure until needed. Their early investigations must give them a starting point to work from, some thread of clues that they can follow. If they suspect that, say, **Harry Stover** (p. 114) is an Esoterrorist, then where does that lead? Harry's associates include **Lori Wilson** (another local business owner), **Marvin Sellers** (the police officer who calls into Stover's store regularly), and **Malcolm Chambers** (the



TEAM POOL

The whole team gains access to a shared pool of points in a designated ability or abilities. Any player can spend them as though they were the character's own; once expended, they do not refresh. If the scene ends with team points unused, they disappear. This optional rule can be used in any iteration of the GUMSHOE rules.

ADVERSARY MAP AS PHYSICAL PROP

A physical representation of the group's adversary map can serve as a powerful focus for your *Station Duty* series. As the group adds to it each week, they see their progress through the storyline visually represented. The map serves as a recap of past sessions and suggests new directions to move in. You can simply use a large piece of paper or tablet to map out connections, or you can create something more elaborate. For this, you'll need a corkboard, whiteboard, or similar surface you can store intact between sessions and add to over time. You'll need pins or tape to fix them to the board, along with tape or string to mark out the connections between suspects.

Prepare for each session by finding photographs, either from your own collection or grabbed from the Internet, of people who can "play the roles" of the various conspirators.

Using the images of recognizable actors permits an instant visual shorthand. Player knowledge of the actor's defining roles factor intuitively into their understanding of the supporting character he represents. A picture of Christopher Lee will summon a different set of associations than one of Ray Winstone, for example.

Familiar faces may, on the other hand, introduce a feeling of fictionality. They may inspire players to joke or make metareferences that break the fourth wall. Completely unfamiliar faces evoke a sense of documentary realism. Enhance this by subjecting photos to distortion techniques. Use image software effects to remove color, blow out contrast, blur focus, or add filters to create a video effect. Ordinary people in the distant background of photos seem suspicious, as if under surveillance, when singled out into headshots and blown up from a small pixel size. Bad shots you would otherwise discard are perfect for this purpose.

newspaper owner; Stover's the mainstay of the letters page), as well as any family members, regular customers, or friends you create for him. Any of these associates could also be part of the cell. Every one of them must be investigated and either crossed off the list of suspects or added to the adversary map.

Once the players have filled in a given section of the adversary map, they get a team pool (see sidebar) for ops of any kind (surveillance, penetration, flipping, or good old ultra-violence) against a target in that section. As a rule, they receive a team pool of 2 points in any general ability or abilities per mapped connection to the target. Add a pool point if an interpersonal spend has suggested a fruitful approach or attack strategy (e.g., Flirting discovers he likes redheads; Cop Talk indicates he's under pressure from a reformist magistrate). You may adjust this up or down; in general, the higher on the org chart, the bigger the pool bonus per connection.

Most Esoterrorist cells follow a hierarchical structure, with the newer, less reliable or less important agents at the bottom, connected via more experienced and trusted conspirators and handlers to the cell leader or leaders at the top. Some cells have a single inspiring leader; others are run by a cabal of wouldbe sorcerers. Use the adversary map as a way of structuring investigations — the connections between cell members become trails of clues to follow. The first Esoterrorists encountered are the ones at the fringes of the map; save the leaders of the cell for the final adventures of the campaign.

STATION DUTY

Decide on how the Esoterrorists coordinate their efforts. Do they meet regularly, under the guise of a poker game or a church committee, or do they just gather in some secret temple to madness? Do they speak openly on the telephone, do they use a code, or are they careful to speak only in person when they are sure they are not being overheard? Do they use occult means of communication? Intercepting cell communications traffic is a key objective of Ordo Veritatis investigations — once the investigators identify Esoterrorists, encourage them to work out ways to bug and spy on the opposition.

ANTAGONIST REACTIONS

Put yourself in the mindset of your villains. The Esoterrorists are fanatics, but they're not stupid. They know that the pluggers — the Ordo Veritatis — are out there hunting them. They also watch for troublesome civilians — police officers, journalists, ordinary people — who might stumble across Esoterrorist schemes. The Great Work requires steely discipline and sacrifice. The Esoterrorists are making a better world for themselves; they will not be stopped. Make them as resourceful, determined, and unpredictable as any player character. Give them leave to screw up, too — omniscient villains who are always ten steps ahead of the player characters make for frustrating opponents. The Town may look mundane, but it is the battlefield for a covert war between two secret organizations.

The intensity and lethality of the Esoterrorist responses to the investigators' actions ramp up over the course of the game. If the enemy is shooting back or sending killer demons after the player characters, the PCs are doing something right. In the early stages of the game, the antagonist reactions must be comparatively low-key — sabotage, threats, destruction of evidence, counterespionage. Save the real horrors for later on.

At the start of the game, the Esoterrorists do not know who the Ordo agents are. They are operating in the dark, just like the player characters. Keep track of what the enemy knows; when they work out who the player characters are, the stakes get raised as they can now attack directly.

CELL RESPONSES

The Esoterrorists won't sit idly by and wait for the pluggers to come; they'll respond to the player characters' investigations with their own ploys. These responses are divided into the three categories of **Defensive**, **Offensive**, and **Supernatural**, arranged roughly in order of intensity. Whenever the player characters make significant progress, either as part of an investigation or in the campaign as a whole, run through the list of responses and pick the most appealing one. Cross a response off the list after you've used it, to keep the campaign fresh.

DEFENSIVE RESPONSES

- **DESTROY EVIDENCE:** The Esoterrorists take steps to erase the evidence of their activities. They might destroy old newspaper articles and Town records or cover their tracks by removing forensic evidence especially evidence that the player characters are about to find. The investigators arrive at the Town archives just in time to see a fire break out; they find the Esoterrorist ritual site, but, during the night, someone sprays the field with caustic chemicals to destroy any trace of evidence.
- INTIMIDATE WITNESSES: Witnesses clam up after the Esoterrorists scare them into silence. These threats might be overtly hostile, suggesting that the witness or their loved ones will be harmed if they talk to investigators. Alternatively, the Esoterrorists use "soft power" to threaten witnesses — cell members may be influential people in Town and can use their positions to force witnesses to stay silent. "Talk to those investigators, and you'll never work in this Town again..."
- **WATCH AGENTS:** The Esoterrorists spy on the investigators, trying to learn all they can about them. They may use their own agents, pawns (police officers, local informants), or occult means (possessed animals, divination magic). The player characters spot these spies and follow them back to the Esoterrorist cell.
- GO QUIET: The Esoterrorists pull back their horns and temporarily suspend all occult activity, in the hopes that the investigators give up. For several weeks, the cell avoids anything that might attract undue attention or cause supernatural weirdness. Such a tactic can engender stress within the Esoterrorist cell, as the more headstrong members chafe against the forced suspension.
- **MISDIRECTION:** The Esoterrorists attempt to deflect the investigation, by providing either an alternate explanation for the horrific events or a scapegoat. Everything wraps up neatly. It's more than enough to satisfy any mundane investigators, like the police or FBI, so this tactic can remove such assets from the player characters.
- LURE: The enemy spread multiple rumors through different channels about strange events or occult activity. Each rumor mentions a particular location in or near Town. These rumors are designed as bait for the pluggers; the Esoterrorists watch to see who bites and goes to investigate.
- **THE SPECIALIST:** The cell calls in support from the wider Esoterror network, bringing in a specialist like the Troubleshooter (p. 117). This specialist, who might be an assassin, sorcerer, technical expert, government official, or even an ODE, arrives in Town under an assumed name and makes covert contact with the cell. Effectively, you bring in a "special guest villain" for the episode.
- **TRAP:** The Esoterrorists lay a trap for any persistent investigators. Take your pick from "snipers at the ritual site" to "the kidnapped child is actually a kook" to "the characters blunder into a murder scene and are framed for the crime."
- **SACRIFICE:** Better to lose a limb than the whole body the Esoterrorists sacrifice part of their cell to preserve the rest. They engineer a situation where some low-ranking members

THIS TOWN EATS PEOPLE NARRATIVE ARCS

of the cell are allowed to be captured by the investigators. These sacrificial victims may be killed in a shoot-out with the investigators or prepared with a suitable Outer Dark Entity like a nester (p. 60) to eliminate them before they can talk. Alternatively, the victims were deliberately kept in the dark by the cell, and so do not know the real plan.

OFFENSIVE RESPONSES

- **BUY-OFF:** The enemy targets one of the Local Residents, offering something the character wants. Money's too easy; the Esoterrorists are more likely to play on the character's ambitions or personal needs with some Faustian bargain. That girl you've always wanted? Medical treatment for your dying parent? The respect of the whole Town? Anything you want... as long as you promise not to ask any more questions.
- **SABOTAGE:** Cut brakes, gas leaks, electrical fires, falling trees... maybe it's all coincidence, but it could be covert sabotage by the enemy. At this stage, the Esoterrorists don't want to tip their hands or attract further investigators. Identifying that an "accident" was staged is not easy (and requires point spends) but can open up new leads for investigation.
- **INTIMIDATE AGENTS:** The Esoterrorists target the investigators themselves with threatening phone calls, promises of violence, and other terror campaigns. This tactic is only likely to be used on Local Residents; the Esoterrorists know that the Ordo Veritatis is not so easily dissuaded.
- **BUGGING:** The cell tries to intercept the characters' communications. Conventional mail and landline calls are comparatively easy to intercept in a small town; eavesdropping on cell-phone calls or Internet traffic may be harder, but not beyond the resources of the local cell. They may also call in help from the wider network or use occult surveillance methods. They may also plant listening devices and hidden cameras in the characters' homes and in the Station.
- **BREAK-IN:** The cell sends a specialist from out of Town, a disposable asset, or just some hired criminal to break into the Station and steal the characters' records, weapons, or other tools. If the characters have acquired any solid evidence of the Esoterrorists' activities, like ritual items or the remains of alien creatures, then such items are stolen in the break-in, leaving the investigators empty-handed. This response can be combined with **Bugging** or **Arson** to add injury to insult.
- **INTIMIDATE SOURCES OF STABILITY:** Once the Esoterrorists have identified the investigators, they can also easily identify their Sources of Stability and target them with threats or supernatural attacks. The characters can make these attacks stop if they give up their investigation.
- **SMEAR CAMPAIGN:** The Esoterrorists target the characters' reputation in Town, smearing them with rumors and allegations. Throw around accusations that are shocking and revulsive, but also faintly plausible. In a small Town where everyone knows everyone else, allegations of adultery, drug abuse, criminal deeds, or domestic strife can ruin the characters' web of contacts and allies. Poison the Town against them.



- **SUBVERSION:** Like a buy-off, but instead of mundane rewards, the Local Resident is offered a place in the Esoterrorists conspiracy. This may be a genuine offer if the Esoterrorists believe that the player characters can be convinced to switch sides. Alternatively, it could be a trap —the Local Resident will be either killed by the Esoterrorists or used to feed disinformation back to the Ordo.
- **ARSON:** The Esoterrorists burn down the Station and/or the characters' homes. Depending on the tempo of the campaign, this can be a covert action ("It was probably faulty wiring; you know these old buildings") or a direct attack ("You're all sitting around the Station when someone chucks a firebomb through the door").
- **HIT SQUAD:** At this stage in the response ladder, the Esoterrorists have lost all pretence of subtlety and dispatch a few armed goons to eliminate the investigators. They'll cover up the killings later right now, their priority is to kill the Ordo agents and their local allies.

SUPERNATURAL RESPONSES

NIGHTMARE FETISH: The Esoterrorists plant a nightmare fetish — an ugly talisman made from epoxy, ergot-infested grains, feline-spinal fluid, and the bones of a grandmother's hand in or near the Station. This fetish warps the dreams of those nearby, causing them to suffer hideous waking nightmares. As long as the fetish exists, the player characters affected by it are unable to refresh their Stability.

THE ESOTERRORISTS

STATION DUTY

- **SUBTLE ODE:** The Esoterrorists summon an entity from the Outer Dark to spy on or harass the investigators. Such creatures do not present a physical challenge but may still disrupt investigations or cause added problems for the Ordo agents and their allies. Bleeders, death tappers, dream tearers, a Man in the Bar, and scourgers (all from *The Book of Unremitting Horror*) are good candidates. The Esoterrorists might even loose a sleep hag if they want to eliminate the player characters in an untraceable manner.
- MISFORTUNE FETISH: Misfortune fetishes are made from mud and twigs, from bird's bones and tattered lottery tickets and scar tissue. They mangle probability in the area nearby to cause suffering and bad luck. The Esoterrorists make such a fetish and conceal it near the Station or in the belongings of a player character. While the fetish is active, rolling a 1 on a general ability test means a catastrophic failure that puts the character in jeopardy. For example, rolling a 1 on a Shooting test means the character hits an ally instead, while rolling a 1 on a Surveillance test means the character is spotted by the enemy at the worst possible moment.
- **POSSESSOR ODE:** One of the player characters' close contacts (maybe even a Source of Stability) is taken over or replaced by a summoned horror. Dementia larvae, sisterites, soliloquies, the Glistening, nesters or skin crabs (the latter three are on pages 57–65) can all cause behavioral changes or replace human victims. Alternatively, the Esoterrorists can arrange for a creature to possess a human host or call an alternate version of their target out of the shifting planes beyond the Membrane. This possessor does not reveal itself immediately but attempts to subvert the player characters' investigation or insinuate itself into their trusted circle. If possible, it eliminates the player characters one at a time, perhaps even jumping from host to host as it works its way through the group.
- **DEATH FETISH:** Death fetishes are rare and potent; making one involves exotic components like a human embryo preserved in amber and the skull of a Sumatran rat. These fetishes hunger for a death and will never be sated until someone dies in close proximity to the talisman. A death fetish has the same effects as a misfortune fetish but also increases the likelihood of lethal injury. If anyone suffers an injury near a death fetish, and a 4, 5, or 6 is rolled for damage, then roll again and add the total on. Keep rolling until the die comes up with a 1, 2, or 3 or until someone dies near the fetish.
- **OVERT ODE:** Many creatures of Unremitting Horror are savage, destructive monsters. The Esoterrorist cell is unlikely to escalate the conflict to this level until late in the game, when their plans are advanced enough that they can weather the attention that monster attacks will inevitably attract. Potential "hired guns" from *The Book of Unremitting Horror* include packs of blood corpses, a clootie or even a feral drowner in Towns near water, an organ grinder if you want to hurt your players, ovvashi, residue daemons, or torture dogs. Scaulers (p. 63) also make good assassins.



ORDINARY HORRORS

A great advantage of a *Station Duty* campaign is that you can develop your villains over time. In roleplaying games, villains normally don't even get the first five words of their monologue off before some trigger-happy player character takes a shot at them. Here, though, the player characters are living in the same Town as the enemy. At least some of the Esoterrorist cell members should enter the game as ordinary citizens before being revealed as occult conspirators.

While you can play this for shock ("Suddenly, your grandmother pulls a gun on you") or creeping horror ("Oh, honey, I forgot to tell you — that nice little grandmother from next door took the kids to the park"), you can also use it to explore the nature of the Esoterrorist movement. What makes someone turn their back on all rationality and morality to embrace the madness of the Outer Dark? Look at the various Esoterrorist and Influencee write-ups in "Persons of Interest" and think about how such a person acts in public.

CHARACTER ARCS

Over the course of a *Station Duty* campaign, the investigators should be put through the emotional wringer of a personal character arc. Most contemporary procedural shows use personal arcs to fill out their characters over time. You know the formula even if you haven't thought about it as such. While the full ensemble of characters tackles the problem of the week, the issues raised by that problem take on a particular relevance for one or two of the cast members. The personal story adds

92

THIS TOWN EATS PEOPLE: NARRATIVE ARCS

OTHER VILLAINS

Not every villain in the campaign needs to be part of the Esoterrorist cell. A monster of the week that survives can be brought back as a running threat. You can also have mundane villains — the developer who wants to raze half the Town (including the Station) and build a shopping mall is a threat that requires a totally different approach to deal with.

emotional impact to the problem of the week. Over time, as new personal stories build on past ones, the viewer sees a broader narrative linking the episodes.

Some players prefer to play archetypical, iconic characters who do not change over the course of the campaign. The quietly competent Ordo Veritatis SSF sniper who arrives in Town in the first session may remain just as laconic and cold for the whole campaign. The Local Resident who is a heroic, upstanding police officer may prefer to stay exactly that. Such characters are challenged in ways that threaten to change them for the worse. When they overcome these challenges, they prove their heroism by remaining true to their essential selves.

Other players want to put their characters through dramatic arcs. They have goals they want to fulfill, or they have some ongoing conflict that will change the character once it is resolved one way or another. An innocent Local Resident may be drawn into the shadow world of the Ordo Veritatis, be hardened by the loss of family to a monster, and end up joining the Ordo as an assassin. An Ordo Veritatis agent may be faced with the challenge of balancing duties to the Ordo with love for family, eventually being forced to choose between protecting humanity and protecting loved ones.

CREATING CHARACTER ARCS

After play begins and the players are broadly familiar with the Town and its inhabitants, work with individual players to create character arcs. Have each player submit an arc in the following format:

- a brief sentence or phrase expressing the character's most important goal
- a brief sentence or phrase suggesting an introductory subplot featuring the character
- another subplot that builds on the idea introduced in the previous one
- ▶ a third subplot concept, again building on the others

Ensure that the players pick strong, active goals, goals that force them to get out into the Town and kick in doors. For Local Residents, goals often revolve around family or past events; Ordo characters are more likely to have abstract, thematic goals like hating magic or an obsessive devotion to the Ordo.

SAMPLE GOALS

- FIND MY LOST SISTER: My sister vanished from Town; I've got to find her.
- **REVENGE!** An Esoterrorist called the Sculptor killed the other four members of my old team. I know that she's connected to the cell in this Town. I'll go through them to find her, and then I'll make her pay for what she did to my friends.
- **UNCOVER MY OWN PAST:** Ever since I was a kid, I've had blackouts. I'm connected to the mystery of this Town.
- GET OUT OF THE ORDO: If you look past the wounded Membrane, the monsters and the conspiracy of freak occultists, this is a nice place to live. I've been in the Ordo Veritatis for too long. I've done my time. I want to retire here with my family — but first, I've got to make this Town safe.
- **RECONCILE WITH MY FIANCÉE:** I was engaged to be married, but something drove us apart. I want to get the relationship back on track.

Coming up with loose ideas for subplots for strong goals is easy. FIND MY LOST SISTER:

- ► The character finds one of her possessions in an unlikely place.
- She comes home, but it's just a creature pretending to be her.
- Evidence points towards her being an Esoterrorist are the characters going to rescue her or kill her?

REVENGE:

- The survivor has a flashback or dream about the killing; the other players play the dead Ordo agents.
- The Esoterrorists attempt the same ritual summoning that got the character's friends killed.
- ▶ The character runs into the ghost of one of her friends.

UNCOVER MY OWN PAST:

- With the aid of the Ordo Veritatis agents, the character learns that she speaks in tongues during these blackouts.
- The character's eccentric granduncle passes away; she's called to the reading of the will.
- The character learns that she's being prepared as the vessel for a powerful ODE.

GET OUT OF THE ORDO:

- ▶ The character's family arrives in Town.
- An ex-Ordo agent who's on the run takes shelter in Town and confides that there's no way out of the Ordo alive. They won't accept resignation.
- The Esoterrorists offer the character's family protection from the coming storm.

RECONCILE WITH MY FIANCÉE:

- The character's ex-partner is attacked by a creature of Unremitting Horror.
- The character learns that his fiancée's family are involved in the Esoterrorist cell.
- ▶ The fiancée starts dating someone else.

RUNNING CHARACTER ARCS

THE ESOTERRORISTS

When running character arcs, pick one or two to spotlight in a given game session. Use character arcs as an added subplot, not as the focus of the game — unless you tie the character arc directly into the larger plot. Ideally, when you merge the two, arrange circumstances to force the character to weigh personal goals against the overall aim of the team.

For example, in the case of the reconciliation character arc, the "fiancée starts dating someone else" subplot can be brought into the larger plot by having this new lover be the Esoterrorist who's the current focus of the team's investigations. She's in danger — but if the characters warn her too early, they'll tip off the Esoterrorists. The player character must choose between watching his former lover walk blindly into peril or going against the team's decision and warning her, closing off a potentially vital avenue of investigation.

Not every character-centered plot needs to pit the individual against the team, although it is a fruitful source of conflict and drama. Character plots also give players a more personal stake in an investigation. The character who is looking for his missing sister will jump at any hook related to missing persons, and his enthusiasm and personal motivation will drive the investigation.

Use character plots to explore areas of the Town in ways that don't start with mysterious deaths and occult rituals; give the sense of a living community. Take the aging Ordo investigator who just wants to settle down: you can introduce a subplot about his teenage son moving to a new school in Town. This a nice character-building moment, but it also sets up the school and its associated NPCs as a location in Town. When you send the player characters there to hunt an ODE later in the game, the monster's presence now feels like a transgression of a previously established status quo instead of a monster attack in a generic location with generic victims. Use character arcs to bring the Town to life, then make it bleed.

THE SERIES ARC

The clash between the Esoterrorists and the player characters should build over the course of the campaign. You should decide on the "rules" even before you decide who the Esoterrorists are. What do the Esoterrorists need to accomplish to bring down the Membrane? Is there a ritual they must perform — and, if so, what are the components? What do they need? Does their plan hinge on driving a majority of the Townsfolk insane, or using them as sacrifices? Are they harvesting something from the Town? Are they building a mystical geometry across the landscape that will tear open reality?

Over the course of the series, let the players find clues towards the Esoterrorists' ultimate goal. Throw in unexplained elements and listen to the players' speculations about what's really going on — the players will invariably come up with immensely creative ideas about the enemy's plot, and you can harvest and adapt their best ideas. There are suggested Esoterrorist plots on p. 123 if you're stuck.

Wherever possible, let the players drive the investigation. Let them pick which part of the adversary map to investigate next, let them decide on methods and tactics, and have the Esoterrorists respond in kind. Treat the Town as a living chessboard.

CAMPAIGN PHASES

In the early sessions of the campaign, concentrate on setup. Each game session introduces new areas of Town and new NPCs, as well as hints about the Esoterrorist cell and its schemes. Most of the investigations are "monsters of the week"; any ties to the greater scheme are tangential at best. Use these early sessions to lay out the field of play and the stakes.

To kick off the middle section of the campaign, let the players find a solid lead that allows them to investigate the Esoterrorist cell. In this stage, you need to develop the Esoterrorists' grand scheme. Adventures in this part of the campaign are split between focused investigation of the Esoterrorist cell, containment of the increasing flood of evil from the breach in the Membrane, and dealing with the Esoterrorists' counter-measures, as well as the occasional unrelated episode of weirdness.

The middle section ends with the characters finding out what the Esoterrorists are planning, but this knowledge should come with a cost — either the characters need to make personal sacrifices to uncover the truth, or else the Esoterrorists respond violently when the characters penetrate their secrets. The characters should go into the endgame of the campaign feeling like their legs have just been kicked from under them.

In the later sessions of the campaign, abandon the monsterof-the-week format entirely in favor of an ongoing narrative. Chase the players acrossTown, cut them off from their resources, make them use the contacts, allies, and knowledge they've built up over the course of the campaign.

Go all out for the final session. Kill off the players' favorite NPCs, blow up the Station, hit the Town with a disaster — raise the stakes as much as you can. Often, the elements of the final session arise naturally from play, seeming inevitable in retrospect.

AFTER THE CELL

While a suitably climatic final session may be a great ending point for your *Station Duty* campaign, you and your players may wish to continue on into a second series, and, for that, you'll need new villains. The Esoterrorists might double down on the breach by sending in another team. A monster might have come through the Membrane and taken possession of several Townsfolk. The whole Town could be slipping into the Outer Dark. Alternatively, the surviving player characters might be transferred to a new problematic Station to uncover another cell.



EMERGENT COMPLEXITY

The early sessions of a roleplaying game — or the first few episodes of an ongoing storyline in a television series — are problematic. On the one hand, the creators need to grab the attention of the audience with an engaging, dramatic story. They also need to establish the setting and the cast of characters, and that takes time. At this stage in a campaign, the GM is responsible for driving most of the plots; the GM comes up with hooks to bring the players into mysteries, challenges them with NPCs, and has superiors give them assignments.

If the campaign lasts long enough, then the game starts running itself. Connections and relationships develop between previously established NPCs. The repercussions of past events cause new problems for the player characters. Ongoing investigations bear fruit or take unexpected twists. Plots grow organically out of the rich humus of previous adventures. More importantly, the players start launching their own plots and engaging in their own rivalries and projects. Once a campaign reaches a critical mass, it becomes mostly self-sustaining. The GM still needs to introduce new plots and challenges, but the burden is greatly reduced.

Station Duty is designed to get to this stage of emergent complexity as quickly as possible and to support the GM on the way there. Remember to use the map of the Town and to note down as much information as possible on it. Lists or even sticky notes with the names of NPCs can remind the players of their existing contacts. Recap previous sessions at the start of the next one.

Try to introduce NPCs in small, self-contained groups. One adventure deals with the school in Town, the next with the police, the next with vagrants and outsiders. The "Persons of Interests" are divided into three portrayals: Potential Victims, Influencees, and Esoterrorists. Use Potential Victims when you want a neutral or sympathetic NPC, an Influencee when you need someone unsettling or a monster, and save the Esoterrorists for the villainous cell.

THE IMPROVISING GM

There are a few handy tips and tricks to keep in mind when running campaigns like *Station Duty*. Some of these tips are drawn from improv acting techniques; others are born of long experience in roleplaying.

AVOID NEGATION: Try to avoid saying no. Embrace unexpected developments and suggestions from the players. If a player comes up with an idea or a plan, don't shut it down — run with it, even if that means abandoning your prepared ideas. For example, the player characters are heading into a dark and dangerous part of the woods, and you've planned for them to be stalked by monsters and chased into an abandoned farmhouse, when one of the Local Resident players pipes up and declares that his character's uncle lives near the woods, and he played there many times as a child. Instead of negating the player's suggestion, use it. Maybe instead of monsters, the player character finds himself remembering the strange woodland spirits he played with as a child — he thought they were imaginary, but it seems they're all too real when they start hunting the other characters. The character's uncle can be killed off to raise the stakes or used as a continuing NPC.

- **PREPARE A FALLBACK:** Keep a few plot hooks and adventures in reserve, in case your planned adventure for the evening doesn't work or the players don't bite at the plot hook. You should also have some plots that can be brought in to spice up the game when it drags. The classic "a gunman bursts in the door," beloved of so many pulp detective stories, can be adapted here to "something shadowy with claws smashes through the window."
- **PAY ATTENTION:** Keep an eye on the players. If they're swamped with information, confused, or are going around in circles, give them a clear line of investigation to follow. If they're too focused, throw in an extra complication or make them divide their resources. If they're demoralized, give them a win; if they're too cocky, knock them down. If things are dragging, give them a crisis to deal with, and if they're overwhelmed, give them some breathing space. Modulate the tension so it rises and falls over the course of the game but it should rise more than it falls. Ratchet up the stakes when you can.
- KNOW WHEN TO OBFUSCATE AND TO REVEAL: Sometimes, you'll have to avoid giving the players a straight answer. Giving away a clue in the early stages of investigation might lead the player characters right to the end. Letting the players find out too much about the Esoterrorist cell limits your room for maneuver. At times, it's best to weasel out of giving definite answers. You can either give limited information ("A burst of static jams your wiretap for a few seconds; you don't catch the Esoterrorist's name, but you do hear something about a meeting in three days' time") or uncertain, unreliable, and unsettling results ("You analyze the blood, but you can't match the blood type. There's something strange in it, like it's been tainted by some alien chemical"). Early in any mystery, you want to open as many potential avenues of investigation as possible and not shut any off.

At other times, though, you want to give straight answers. Once the players are enmeshed in a mystery, give them solid, reliable information so they can start eliminating possibilities. If the game is coming to a climax, then give the players confirmation that they are on the right track. If they have worked hard to investigate an Esoterrorist suspect, then consider giving them solid evidence that the suspect is (or isn't) a member of the cell.

REINCORPORATE: Look for opportunities to bring back in previously established NPCs or plot elements. Build on what's already happened. Doing so reinforces the sense of narrative and cohesion, even if you're building on what started out as meaningless, throwaway elements.

TACTICS TO PREPARE FOR

- **Surveillance:** The player characters stake out suspected Esoterrorists, watching their every move. What do they see? How can the Esoterrorists avoid surveillance? Make a few notes on the day-to-day lives of any suspects, so you can throw in a few characteristic incidents when the players say, "OK, we watch the suspect for 24 hours — do they do anything suspicious?" Consider ways for key Esoterrorists to evade a tail; maybe there's a network of secret passages under Town or the Esoterrorists have invisibility spells.
- **Electronic Surveillance:** The moment a blank adversary map hits the table, expect any player who's seen a cop show to start tapping phones and installing hidden cameras. In the *Esoterrorists* setting, magic can make bugs and spy cameras unreliable if you need an excuse to have the video feed dissolve into static at a key moment.
- Interrogation: If the player characters get their hands on a member of the cell, they are likely to pile on Interrogation spends or dose their prisoner full of sodium pentothal. This is a definite problem when you've got a small, tightly woven cell of conspirators that is supposed to be the villain for the entirety of a lengthy campaign. Remember, also, that players are much, much more dogged than their narrative-fiction counterparts — if a bad guy escapes in a getaway car in a TV show, the heroic protagonist is likely to take a few half-hearted steps down the road before giving up. Player characters, by contrast, tend to steal cars, shoot out tires, and cause havoc rather than let one minor bad guy escape.

If a minion does fall into the hands of the player characters, ensure that you've got "firewalls" in place to protect the rest of the cell, such as the following:

- The captured Esoterrorist was deliberately kept in the dark; he knows his immediate superior only, and then only by codename. He does not know the identity of any other cell members.
- The characters are unable to hold the victim indefinitely — the local authorities show up to take her into custody, having being tipped off by the cell.
- The minion was supposed to fall into the hands of the player characters and passes on misdirecting information.
- If all else fails, there's the classic "suicide pill" option although the Esoterrorists might use a suicide nester (p. 60) instead.

THIS TOWN EATS PEOPLE: INVESTIGATION OUTLINES

INVESTIGATION OUTLINES

These four worked examples demonstrate how to use the material presented in *Station Duty* to create new adventures. The first two are especially suited for use early in the game; the second two are examples of action during the middle sections of a campaign. All four are based around the standard adventure outline described on p. 88.

BROKEN PEOPLE

When you're running a game ostensibly set in the real world, inspiration is everywhere. This scenario was inspired by passing a real-life car accident, where a van went off the road on a country lane. This investigation takes a fatal road accident on a winding country road as its starting point. One of the victims, Gary Rhodes, is a resident of the Town; the other is a stranger. The deaths appear accidental — but the characters' investigations reveal Esoterrorist activity.

A sudden death strips away layers of deception. Grief pulls away masks, hidden deeds are dragged into the light, and people wonder if they ever actually knew who the deceased really was. By choosing a seemingly ordinary local boy as the victim and exploring the ramifications of that death, the GM can show the strangeness that underlies the Town. In this example, the victim is tied to the knot of NPCs at the local school (**Stuart Mills, Joanne Felton, Sonia Tate**, and the teachers **Alice Henshaw** and **Tom West**). If you want to expose another part of Town, then kill off someone connected to that section of society. Eliminating, say, **Jake Henshaw's** current girlfriend or one of **Carole Crowe's** coffee klatch lets you examine different sections of Town.

Going with the student option, you examine the various options for the high-schooler NPCs. Alice Henshaw's Influencee write-up gives her a coded diary containing Esoterrorist rituals. If she was having an affair with Gary, he could have stolen the diary and experimented with it. It's too early in the campaign for the characters to find a link to the main Esoterrorist cell, so you decide that Rhodes took the diary after a fight with Henshaw and that he accidentally succeeded in calling a scauler.

You need to lay a trail of clues for the characters to find out about this. Stuart Mills in his guise as a PoVic can give the characters a pointer to Gary's movements.

The second victim, the mysterious girl, is left as a plot hook for future investigations. Was she Rhodes's other secret girlfriend or someone who helped him decode the diary? Maybe she's actually something from the far side of the Membrane that he summoned forth along with the scauler.

- LIFE IN THE TOWN IS DISRUPTED: A van crashes on a road outside Town. The characters are among the first on the scene to investigate and find two corpses among the wreckage.
- **INVESTIGATIONS LEAD TO MORE QUESTIONS:** One of the victims is quickly identified as **Gary Rhodes**, a local high school student. Gary had had a few run-ins with the law, but nothing unusual. His father is an alcoholic. The second victim is a Jane

Doe. Examining the van suggests it was attacked by a scauler (p. 63).

At the funeral, the characters observe odd behavior from **Alice Henshaw**. They uncover rumors that she was sleeping with Rhodes, but she seems to be in fear for her life, not her career.

- **THE THREAT STRIKES AGAIN:** The scauler strikes again, savaging a dog belonging to **Tom West**.
- THE PATH IS MADE CLEAR: By questioning **Stuart Mills**, the characters retrace Gary's movements and connections over the last few weeks. This leads the characters to an abandoned shack in the woods, where Gary summoned the scauler.
- A TWIST OCCURS: Someone breaks into the police station and steals evidence, including a coded diary. Following this trail of evidence leads the characters to Alice Henshaw.
- A TRUTH IS REVEALED: The evidence at the shack shows that Rhodes summoned the scauler to attack someone but lost control of it. He fled, and the creature drove his van off the road before flying off.
- **HORROR IS CONFRONTED:** The characters work out that Henshaw is the target of the scauler attack and use her as bait to lure the monster into a place where it can be destroyed.
- LIFE IN TOWN RETURNS TO "NORMAL": With the scauler gone, the Town mourns Gary Rhodes. The characters have the diary that Alice found, which contains clues about the history of the Esoterrorist conspiracy.
- **FLOATING EVENTS:** The scauler can attack the characters or other victims as it searches for Alice.
- **ARC PLOT EVENTS:** Who was the girl? Does the Esoterrorist cell know about Rhodes's activities? Did they send the girl to convince him to steal the diary and suggest that he experiment with the ritual?

THE EYELESS

This adventure uses as its seed one of the articles in the "Local News" chapter — specifically, the article "Vandals Damage Local Park" (p. 131). In the early stages of the campaign, the player characters will eagerly follow up on any leads that might give them an in to the conspiracy.

In keeping with the Esoterrorists' plans to sow chaos and mistrust, you decide that the damage to the park was not the result of any supernatural activity but was deliberately staged as part of a "broken windows campaign" — by degrading the physical environment of the Town, they are subliminally signaling to the Townsfolk that they are surrounded by crime, hatred, and destruction.

The obvious twist is that the police are responsible. The guardians of peace and security are actually the ones undermining it. Simple vandalism isn't much of a master plan, though, so you need to up the stakes. The Esoterrorists are planting magical fetishes that magnify the psychic impact of the despoiled park.

The article mentions **Rick Donner** as the investigating officer. Keeping Donner as a patsy makes sense, so you steer clear of the Esoterrorist form of the character and go with a

STATION DUTY

THE ESOTERRORISTS

PoVic/Influencee portrayal. Both these versions of Donner are sympathetic and deluded; the PoVic one is simply clueless, which works fine for this scenario, and, if the players warm to Donner, then the disturbing Influencee version can be used for added horror later in the campaign. For a villainous police officer, you've a choice of **Douglas Eddington** or **Marvin Sellers**; the Influencee version of Sellers is best at this stage. (Use more Influencees than actual Esoterrorists in the early stages of the campaign). Sellers did the damage and planted the fetish and is relying on Donner's incompetence to ensure his crimes are never discovered.

Turning to the annotated version of the newspaper article, it mentions "the eyeless echo" and a "lodge." The eyeless echo could be a cryptic reference to the fetish... and instead of being addressed to the players, the annotated article could be placed as a public warning by someone who saw Sellers and recognized what he was doing. Sellers's attempt to cover everything up can be the spine of the investigation — he tries to identify and eliminate the witness before the Esoterrorists punish him. As you've already established **"Crazy Mary"** as a character, you use her as the mysterious annotator of the documents.

LIFE IN THE TOWN IS DISRUPTED: The park is despoiled.

- **INVESTIGATIONS LEAD TO MORE QUESTIONS:** To search the park, the characters have to first bluff their way past **Rick Donner**. In the course of their investigations, they find the annotated version of the article and the buried fetish.
- THE THREAT STRIKES AGAIN: Marvin Sellers vandalizes another part of Town and plants another fetish. The psychic degradation of the fetishes starts to affect the characters and the Townsfolk.
- THE PATH IS MADE CLEAR: Questioning witnesses places Sellers in the vicinity of the second incident.
- A TWIST OCCURS: Sellers threatens "Crazy Mary" into silence by killing her cats.
- A TRUTH IS REVEALED: Sellers is murdered by the Esoterrorist cell using horrific occult means. The characters find him dying; his last agonized words warn the characters that there are more fetishes planted around Town.
- **HORROR IS CONFRONTED:** The characters must destroy the remaining fetishes but the cumulative exposure may drive them insane.
- LIFE IN TOWN RETURNS TO "NORMAL": With the fetishes destroyed, the Esoterrorist scheme is foiled.
- **FLOATING EVENTS:** The effects of the fetishes can cause outbreaks of weird behavior, like hallucinations or unreasoning hatred of others.
- **ARC PLOT EVENTS:** Sellers's death can put the characters on the trail of the main Esoterrorist cell.

GNAW YOUR OWN LEG OFF

In the middle stages of a *Station Duty* campaign, you can draw on the established cast of characters and past events to build more complicated mysteries. Previously in this campaign, the following has occured:



- ► The Station has been established with the cover of an electrical repair firm.
- The characters have identified several important people in the town, including Sheriff Eddington and Dr. Wallace, as members of the Esoterrorist cell and are currently working on building up a fuller picture of the cell.
- They have recruited Rosalinda Lopez and Earl Calloway as informants.
- ► The Membrane's strength is failing. Creatures of Unremitting Horror can sometimes force themselves through without aid from the Esoterrorists.

The players are making progress, and the campaign has fallen into a comfortable rhythm — something weird happens in Town, and the characters investigate, thwart the forces of Unremitting Horror, and learn a little more about the Esoterrorist cell. It is time to shake things up with an aggressive response from the Enemy.

The Esoterrorists capture Earl Calloway and use him as bait to lure the player characters into a trap. The characters are led to a breach in the Membrane and transported to a shadowy, nightmare reflection of the Town where they are trapped. To escape, the characters need to invoke supernatural allies and possibly compromise their loyalty to the Ordo Veritatis's goals.

You need somewhere to put Earl and want to give the group's resident gun bunny a juicy tactical challenge. You previously decided that **Malcolm Chambers** was part of the cell, but the players are unaware of this and have treated him as a potential ally. They have even visited his mansion as guests at a party. Putting Earl in Chambers's mansion lets the players use existing knowledge to plan their rescue attempt.

For the sections of the adventure in the shadowy version of Town, you consider various ways to present it. It could be a surreal experience, or you could play it straight — let the players think they're back in Town, then build up the horror until they realize they're not in our reality anymore. You decide to kick the action up — the alternate Town will be a haunted nightmare zone of suffering and death inhabited by creatures from *The Book of Unremitting Horror*.

98

THIS TOWN EATS PEOPLE: INVESTIGATION OUTLINES

- LIFE IN THE TOWN IS DISRUPTED: Earl Calloway goes missing. Most people assume that he's finally drunk himself to death in some ditch; the player characters suspect that he may have fallen prey to some supernatural entity.
- **INVESTIGATIONS LEAD TO MORE QUESTIONS:** The characters trace Earl's movements and find his car abandoned outside Town. There are signs of a struggle. The Enemy has Earl.
- THE THREAT STRIKES AGAIN: The characters receive a call from Earl's cell phone; the caller has a distorted, buzzing voice and informs the characters that if they do not give up their investigation and surrender, Earl will be killed.
- **THE PATH IS MADE CLEAR:** Analyzing clues in the background noise of the call, the characters are able to find where Earl is being held he's at **Malcolm Chambers**'s mansion outside Town. They tool up for a rescue attempt.
- A TWIST OCCURS: In the course of the rescue attempt, the characters are dragged through the Membrane into a shadowy parallel version of the Town. They are cut off from our reality and stalked by monsters.
- A TRUTH IS REVEALED: The characters meet Earl Calloway, who is also trapped in the shadowy realm. He's gone insane, but, in his ramblings, he mentions encountering a woman. The characters search the Town, avoiding or fighting several other horrors, and eventually find the mysterious woman who was found dead in the van with Gary Rhodes during the very first session of the campaign. She is Rona Wallace, the mother of Dr. Anne Wallace; she was killed as part of a ritual by the Esoterrorist cell, and, as a side effect, her consciousness became entangled in the Membrane. She explains a way for the characters to escape the shadowy Town, but there's a cost — their passage will weaken the Membrane still further. They'll carry something terrible back with them when they go. The safest option is for a few of the characters to stay here in the Town, in the hopes that they can survive until the others on the far side can summon them back.

When running the game, one of the players speculates that Rona is lying to them and that she is trying to manipulate them into summoning *her* into our world like Gary Rhodes did. You decide to integrate this idea into the game, discarding your initial conception of Rona as a victim of the Esoterrorists and making her something more sinister instead, another side in the struggle for power in the Town.

- HORROR IS CONFRONTED: The characters must choose to follow Rona's advice or risk causing a bigger breach by returning to Town.
- LIFE IN TOWN RETURNS TO "NORMAL": If all the characters escape, then their next task is to deal with the monster they've let lose. If only some of the player characters escape, then the next session will be split between finding ways to rescue those stranded on the far side and survival horror in the nightmare version of Town.
- FLOATING EVENTS: Various monster attacks and horrific scenes in the nightmare Town. The Outer Dark can be shaped by human perception, so the various parts of the alternate Town might reflect the inner desires and passions of people in Town.

ARC PLOT EVENTS: The characters identify Malcolm Chambers as part of the conspiracy. Rona could be the 'haruspex' referred to in the Ordo Veritatis briefing.

LISTENERS

After a violent session outside Town, where the characters raced to stop the creature that followed them back through the Membrane, you ask the players what their next plans are. They decide that they want to follow up on **Malcolm Chambers** now that they know he is an Esoterrorist. They already know his mansion outside Town is guarded after their ill-fated rescue attempt, so they focus on his business connections and history.

To help them along, a lead walks right in the door of the Station — the characters, in their guise as electricians, get hired by **Harry Stover** to rewire an old building that he just purchased. This office is right next door to the offices of Chambers's newspaper. The characters can use their building work as a cover to plant listening devices. Looking at the various write-ups of Stover, you go for the Influence version — he's superficially sane, but his obsessive note taking may lead the characters to investigate him and find clues in his rat's nest of papers.

The main plot hook for this week's investigation will come through the listening devices. Checking the list of potential newspaper stories, none of them quite fit, so you decide that the investigation will be about a newspaper story that *didn't* happen. The Influencee write-up of **Mayor Crowe** suggests that he is being blackmailed by the Esoterrorists — what if a newspaper reporter found out about the mayor's indiscretions and Chambers had to protect the Mayor without revealing that he himself is behind the blackmail. That's a nicely tangled web of motivations, with several factions involved for the players to investigate.

With that in mind, your plot outline looks like this:

- The characters plant listening devices in the newspaper offices, thanks to Harry Stover.
- They overhear Malcolm Chambers killing a story brought to him by one of his journalists. To embed the journalist in the Town, you decide that he's Dina Chambers's college boyfriend. She pulled strings to get him a job at her father's paper, but he's smarter than Malcolm anticipated. The characters also hear the mayor calling Chambers and asking him to stop his investigation.
- The characters get hold of the journalist's notes and pursue the investigation themselves, learning about the mayor's string of homosexual affairs at Veronica Bayer's hotel.
- From there, the characters learn that the mayor is being blackmailed by the Esoterrorists. The strange buzzing caller who threatens the mayor is the same voice that rang the player characters after Earl Calloway was kidnapped.
- The characters question the mayor and find out that the blackmailers are demanding that he intercede with a civic plan to rebuild parts of Town. They are using the mayor to plant vastly more powerful fetishes under the Town.

BREACH ZERO

STATION DUTY

"BREACH ZERO" IS A SKELETON OF AN ADVENTURE TO KICK OFF YOUR *Station Duty* campaign. It follows on from the Ordo Veritatis briefing on p. 85. The Ordo characters start by investigating the pay phone from which someone called the Sculptor and go from there. To put muscle and skin on the dry bones of this outline, populate it with characters from your conception of the Town.

Character titles in [square brackets] should be replaced with actual characters, either Persons of Interest (p. 103) or original creations, or even player characters.

GETTING THE LOCAL CHARACTERS INVOLVED

The adventure starts with the Ordo characters arriving in Town. Before starting play, discuss how the Locals will get involved. A good initial hook is [the Waitress]; pick someone that the Locals are friendly with. **Dina Chambers** (p. 115) is the obvious choice, but any of the high schoolers like **Joanne Felton** (p. 109) could have part-time jobs in the bar. You could introduce the Local Residents in Scene 2, when they are questioned by the Ordo characters. Alternatively, bring the Local Residents in when their friend [the Waitress] goes missing.

While there may be a short period of mistrust between the Ordo characters and the Local Residents, everyone is ultimately on the same side. Remind the players that defeating the Esoterrorist threat depends on both the Ordo characters and the Locals trusting each other and working together.

SETTING UP THE STATION

At the end of "Breach Zero," the need for a long-term investigation of the area is clear. The Glistening patch is obviously cultivated, and such a large infestation could only exist in a place where the Membrane between our reality and the Outer Dark is extremely weak. The Esoterrorists are well established in Town, and they would not have allocated so many resources here unless they believed that this breach was something special.

The Town is where the end of the world begins.

1. THE PHONE BOOTH

Core Clue: A beer mat from Jake Henshaw's bar

The Ordo characters arrive at the phone booth (see the "Ordo Veritatis Briefing," p. 85. It's at a disused gas station on a road outside Town.

Evidence Collection (Core Clue): Searching around the gas station lets the characters find a crumpled beer mat from Jake Henshaw's bar. Scribbled on the mat is the number of the Sculptor.

Fingerprinting shows that the phone has been hastily wiped clean since it was used, but a spend lets the character

lift a partial fingerprint. This evidence can be used later in the campaign to identify an Esoterrorist.

Textual Analysis: The graffiti around the gas station is suggestive of underlying anxiety caused by an Esoterrorist presence. There are a higher proportion of violent, paranoid, and nihilistic messages than one would expect. There are several troubling repeated phrases, notably *"in the stone"* (variations: *"it is in the stone," the is in the stone"*), and the cryptic acronym *"A.T.C.D."*

2. JAKE'S PLACE Core Clue: Meeting with the waitress

The Ordo characters question the locals at Jake's Place. It is a busy night, so there are lots of people here — use this scene to set up various important local NPCs. In addition to the Local Resident characters, the players might run into Jake Henshaw, Dina Chambers, Tom West, Earl Calloway, June Felton, Lori Wilson, Tony Schilling, or any other characters you wish to establish.

Include at least one Esoterrorist or Influencee in the mix who could have made the call to the Sculptor.

Also present is [the Waitress], a valuable witness. Talking to [the Waitress] about the beer mat makes her nervous. She obviously knows something more, but is unwilling to discuss it in public. She throws nervous glances back into the bar, and is clearly worried about being watched. If the Local Resident characters are friendly with [the Waitress], then they know that she hasn't been herself in the last few days.

Reassurance (Core Clue): Promising to help and protect [the Waitress] convinces her to trust the characters. She agrees to meet the characters somewhere safe and private after her shift ends.

3. THE KIDNAPPING

Core Clue: The red truck; the woods

[The Waitress] never arrives at the meeting place. There is no sign of her at the bar, she does not answer her phone, and she is not at home. She's been kidnapped.

If the characters try contacting the authorities, they find themselves under suspicion. [The Waitress] went missing after talking intently to a group of faintly sinister people from out of Town — as far as the Town's police are concerned, the characters are not to be trusted. Play on this suspicion over the course of the campaign — positioning a police officer like **Eddington** or **Sellers** as a nemesis for the player characters works very well.

BREACH ZERO

Streetwise (Core Clue): Tracing [the Waitress]'s movements by asking around gets the characters a clue - a witness (someone semi-reliable like Lori Wilson or Harry **Stover**) saw her getting into a red pickup truck near the bar.

Forensic Entomology (Core Clue): There are muddy tire tracks near where [the Waitress] was picked up. Trapped in the mud are several insect eggs from species that lay eggs in tree bark. The truck must have driven over a recently felled tree; Local Knowledge suggests that the characters should check woodland areas around Town.

There is also some sort of fungal spore in the mud. Chemistry or Natural History cannot identify it. It is something very unusual.

Cop Talk: There are several red pickup trucks in Town. Without a license plate or a better description, it can't be pinned down.

4 A CRYPTIC WARNING

While the characters are investigating the disappearance of [the Waitress], one of them is contacted by telephone and given a cryptic warning. Good candidates for the mysterious [Informant] are "Crazy Mary" or Ed Bayer. The message is brief yet disjointed:

- "'They' run the Town. They're everywhere, watching everything." 1
- 2 "[The Waitress] will be eaten from the inside. She's gone."
- "The walls are coming down. The walls are coming down, and the 3 darkness is hungry."

The characters do not have time to trace the call, although Electronic Surveillance can be used to follow future calls.

5 ASTRAY

Core Clue: [The Waitress] has been drugged

While searching the back roads for the red pickup truck, the characters spot [the Waitress] stumbling along the side of the road. She is confused and exhausted, and she mumbles that the characters should take her back to Town. She won't say where she's been or what happened to her. She just repeats her demands to be taken back to Town.

A police car rolls up soon after the characters meet [the Waitress]; the cops again assume that any out-of-Town characters are to blame for any trouble.

Forensic Psychology (Core Clue): Her emotions and reactions are noticeably muted; she may have been drugged to wipe her memory. Someone got to the girl before she could talk to the characters.

Forensic Anthropology: There is light bruising on her wrists and something green under her nails. She's sniffing a lot; the mucous Membranes of her eyes and nose are irritated, probably as a reaction to dust or spores.

Chemistry: The green substance is paint, suggesting she scrabbled against something painted green.



Chemistry: A toxicology screen shows that her blood is clean of drugs, but she has traces of a fungal infection.

Research (2 point spend): Checking Ordo records suggests that she may be infected with the Glistening (see p. 57).

6. ALL OVER BAR, THE CRYING Core Clue: The shack

Back in Town, [the Waitress] denies that she was kidnapped. She had a drink after work and blacked out; she suspects her drink was spiked. She asks to be taken to Dr. Wallace (p. 107). Her behavior remains erratic. She refuses to continue her conversation

with the player characters about the incident at the bar. Interrogation (Core Clue): If the characters can interrogate the witness in a controlled environment, they can get a better assessment of her psychological state. She is definitely being compelled not to talk. Her memories of the previous night are being suppressed. The most that the characters can get out of her is a vague recollection of "a shack in the woods" ----presumably, somewhere close to where the characters found her.

Local Knowledge (Core Clue): Asking around, the character discovers that the owner of the red pickup truck - it belongs to Tony Schiller. The truck was seen out in the woods near where the characters found [the Waitress]. (Optionally, Schiller can report the truck as stolen if you want to play him as a potential victim).

7. DEEP UNDERGROUND

Core Clue: The initials

Retracing [the Waitress]'s movements brings the characters to a wooded thicket outside Town. The red pickup is parked at the end of a muddy lane, but there is no sign of anyone nearby. Footprints lead into the woods.

In the middle of the thicket is a crude wooden structure. It is a weathered garden shed, painted a faded green, with a heavy chain and padlock hanging from the door. Inside the shack, the floor and walls are covered in fungal growths. These fungi are not any known species — any Ordo characters recognize them as part of a Glistening patch.

Occult Studies or Natural History: To grow a patch this size would take years or a very large breach in the Membrane.

Forensic Psychology: Exposure to a mind-altering fungus would explain [the Waitress]'s behavior. Someone must have kidnapped her and locked her in the shed until she was thoroughly infected.

Evidence Collection (Core Clue): Scraped on the inside of the door are the initials of [the Esoterrorist] who kidnapped [the Waitress]. She scratched this message even as the Glistening consumed her.

THE MOUNTING HORROR: The characters hear movement from the woods around them. Shapes drag themselves out of the mud and crawl from beneath mounds of fallen leaves. These Glistening slaves are guardians of the shack, here to murder the characters to conceal its existence. Some are animals; some are the remains of long-dead humans: previous victims of the cult or unfortunate vagrants who wandered into the wrong woods. Others are shambling piles of moss and rotten meat that defy definition. The characters are surrounded and heavily outnumbered. They must fight their way out, but any injury from a Glistening-infected victim risks infection.

FOLLOWING ON: With the discovery of the initials in the shack, the characters have a starting point for their investigations in Town. The cultivated Glistening suggests that the Esoterrorist cell here is well established and may have several other mindcontrolled victims in Town. The only way to save [the Waitress] from becoming a mindless slave is to find the Glistening sessile and destroy it, but the cell doubtless keep the sessile somewhere very secure. This will be a long investigation — and if the cell is attempting to create Breach Zero, the characters are racing against a deadline...



This CHAPTER CONTAINS 25 DESCRIPTIONS AND STATISTICS FOR THE Townsfolk and other supporting cast of your campaign. Use these characters to populate the Town, as described in "Groundwork" on p. 80.

Each character has a physical description and a brief personal history that remains true no matter what role the character fills in your game. However, the Townsfolk are then each described in three different ways — as *Potential Victim*, as *Influencee*, and as an *Esoterrorist*.

Potential Victims (or *PoVic*, in Ordo slang) are innocents, unconnected with the Esoterror cell in the Town and largely ignorant of the Outer Dark. They could be recruited as friendlies by the player characters but are more likely to end up, as the name suggests, as victims of the horror. Some PoVics are designated PoVic With Gun, or PWG, indicating that they are possible obstacles or threats to the Ordo investigation. A PWG is not necessarily armed but is invariably troublesome and must be handled with care. Police officers and reporters are classic PWGs. Use a character in PoVic mode if you want them to be a victim that the characters have to save or a potential ally for them to recruit.

Influencees are not Esoterrorists but have been affected by their schemes. They are under the effect of an Esoterrorist mind game, are possessed by an Outer Dark Entity, or have gone insane because of the psychic pressure of the wound in the Membrane. Influencees end up committing acts of independent evil that might fuel a stand-alone episode of your campaign as a monster of the week. Influencees can be used for one-shot villains or just as examples of the mounting strangeness of the Town.

Esoterrorists are full members of the enemy cell. There should only be a handful of full Esoterrorists in the Town (at most, twice as many Esoterrorist as there are player characters). It also lists that Esoterrorist's psychographic profile, as described in *The Esoterrorist Fact Book*.

These descriptions are, of course, merely suggestions. Adapt and alter these characters as required for your campaign.

Next comes a list of that character's associates, the other NPCs most likely to interact with them regularly. Assume that in addition to these associates, each NPC has a half-dozen other contacts (friends, family, coworkers) of lesser importance. Each write-up concludes with a defining quirk or two to aid your portrayal of the character at the gaming table and any relevant game statistics.

| | Jerry Crowe | Mayor |
|-------------------|------------------|---------------------------------|
| Douglas Eddington | | Sheriff |
| | Rick Donner | Bumbling Police Officer |
| | Marvin Sellers | Tough Police Officer |
| | Veronica Bayer | Local Hotelier |
| | Fr. Jones | Local Clergyman |
| | Dr. Anne Wallace | Doctor |
| | Carole Crowe | Postmaster & Mayor's Wife |
| | Stuart Mills | Teenage Rebel |
| | Joanne Felton | Hottest Girl in the High School |
| | Sonia Tate | Weird Girl |
| | Alice Henshaw | Schoolteacher |
| | Tom West | Handyman & Football Coach |
| | "Crazy Mary" | Senile Lunatic |
| | June Felton | Former Beauty Queen |
| | Ed Bayer | Troubled Youth |
| | Lenore Danek | Esoteric Artiste |
| | Lori Wilson | Local Business Owner |
| | Harry Stover | Local Business Owner |
| | Jake Henshaw | Owner of the popular |
| | | bar/restaurant Jake's Place |
| | Dina Chambers | Waitress at Jake's Place |
| | Earl Calloway | Town Drunk |
| | Tony Schilling | Hardscrabble Farmer |
| Malcolm Chambers | | Wealthy Newspaper Owner |
| | Rosalinda Lopez | Hotel Worker |

103

STATION DUTY

MAYOR JERRY CROWE

TOWN MAYOR

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Late 40s, portly, balding

- WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS: Jerry and his buddies have got city hall sewn up tight. His heart's in the right place, and he'll try to sort out your problems if you need help, but he's a political animal first and foremost. He'll take charge of any situation, even if his intervention just makes things worse. He's married to **Carole Crowe**.
 - ► Carole pushes Jerry along. She's the one who got him elected.
 - ► Jerry's had a gambling problem a few years ago. He swears to Carole that he's stopped, but he sneaks out once a month to play poker with **Jake Henshaw** and a few others.
- **POVIC WITH GUN:** Crowe's mainly concerned with keeping the Town's image clean, keeping local businesses happy, and using his current office as a stepping-stone to something bigger. He's got political ambitions, and anyone who might bring the Town into disrepute or cause trouble especially the sort of trouble that attracts the media threatens those ambitions. **Flattery** works best with him. The Esoterrorist cell has blackmail material on him, relating to some questionable financial dealings from ten years ago, but is holding it in reserve until it has to use it.

If the characters convince the mayor of the danger posed by the Esoterrorists, his first instinct is to kick the case up to the state or federal level and let the authorities deal with the matter. The Ordo cannot allow such a breach of security, so their agents within the federal government will quietly quash any reports from Mayor Crowe's office to ensure secrecy. In extremes, the player characters may even be ordered to silence Crowe before he ruins any hope of a successful veil-out.

INFLUENCEE: The Esoterrorists are blackmailing Crowe. Someone shoved an envelope under his door six months ago, containing compromising photos of Crowe having an affair with Lori Wilson or picking up hitchhikers like Stuart Mills for gay sex, or even something weirder (like killing and then raping woodland animals). Now, he gets a phone call every few weeks from a distorted, buzzing voice that tells him what to do. Forensic Psychology picks up that his jolly demeanor is just an act, while Photography lets the characters discover that the photos contain strange spectral messages that only show up under UV light.

The Esoterrorists use Crowe as their agent in city hall, deflecting police attention and arranging events in the Town to their liking. Crowe is desperate to get out from under their thumb and would do anything to find out who sent the pictures. He could be an unreliable ally for the player characters if they can uncover the blackmailer.

ESOTERRORIST: *Dominant.* Crowe treats the Townsfolk as playing pieces. He obsessively watches everyone, noting their fears and desires, and manipulates events to drive them into conflict or madness. There are cameras concealed everywhere, and the whole Town is an experiment in human suffering to him. **Electronic Surveillance** notes that there is a bank of

monitors concealed in a cabinet in the mayor's office; at the center of his web, the spider squats and pulls the strings that unravel lives.

ASSOCIATES: Carole Crowe, Sheriff Douglas Eddington, Veronica Bayer, Lori Wilson, Jake Henshaw

QUIRKS: Sweats profusely from his forehead

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES: Bureaucracy, Law, Intimidation **GENERAL ABILITIES:** Health 6, Preparedness 2, Shooting 4, Shrink 4

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: 0 STEALTH MODIFIER: 0

SHERIFF DOUGLAS EDDINGTON

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Late 50s, gaunt, hard eyed, rake thin, salt-and-pepper beard

SHERIFF

- WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS: Eddington's the head of the local police force (see p. 81). He used to be a cop in the big city but transferred out here about 10 years ago. He keeps troublemakers out of Town and has a zero-tolerance policy towards anyone who isn't local.
 - There are lots of stories about why he moved he had a big blowup with the commissioner; he got shot; it was retire or get fired; he was the one honest cop in a crooked department.
 - Eddington lives outside of Town and keeps four really big, nasty mastiffs as guard dogs. His place is like a fortress.

POVIC WITH GUN: Eddington's not a hick; he may be ten years out of date, but he knows how modern police work is done. He mistrusts outsiders and newcomers until they prove that they're not the sort to disrupt life in Town. If he takes a dislike to a visitor, he follows them and makes their life difficult until they leave. He's got few friends in Town, but he's a stalwart defender of the community. **CopTalk** gets Eddington talking, but he won't trust the PCs until they prove they're on the side of righteousness.

The characters can recruit Eddington as an ally, but that just paints a target on his chest. So far, the Esoterrorists have permitted Eddington to live because he's unaware of their existence. If the local police start looking into the cell's activities, then Eddington will be eliminated using supernatural means like a sleep hag (see *The Book of Unremitting Horror*) or a scauler (p. 63).

INFLUENCEE: Eddington left the big city because he met something one night, something he can't explain — and worse, the thing has followed him to the Town. He sees it, sometimes, when he's out driving. It never attacked him (and he wishes he knew why it spares him), but it chewed up those bodies and... there was so much blood. He drinks to escape, but it stalks him even in his dreams. He's Captain Ahab, but his white whale is a thing of knives and teeth and bile. Asking around the city with **Cop Talk** picks up stories about Eddington's abrupt departure.

Again, this version of Eddington can be recruited as an ally, but he's a loose cannon. Up until now, Eddington was able to deny what he saw in the city and keep going through



POLICE OFFICER



a strict regimen of denial and heavy drinking. Once the characters confirm what he saw was real, he loses his grip on sanity and goes all *Dirty Harry* on the Esoterrorist cell, using brutal tactics and causing more damage to innocents than the occultists. If the characters recruit Eddington, they'll also be the ones who have to put him down.

ESOTERRORIST: *Cipher*. Eddington is the cell's enforcer, protecting them from being discovered and ensuring that no one in Town talks to outsiders. He's very good at making bodies disappear. He was shot and mortally wounded back in the big city; one of the other cell members brought him back using a magical fetish (or by invoking an Outer Dark Entity) — Eddington's a walking corpse, animated by magic. This also means he's unkillable using conventional methods, so use the unsleeping, unstoppable, unrelenting officer to terrify the players. Analyzing Eddington's blood with **Chemistry** shows that it's thick with preservatives like formaldehyde to stop him from rotting from within.

Optionally, the characters might be able to use Eddington as a way into the Esoterrorists' cell, if they can promise to release him from his state of undeath.

ASSOCIATES: Mayor Jerry Crowe, Officer Rick Donner, Officer Marvin Sellers, Ed Bayer

QUIRKS: Takes notes on everything in a police notebook

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES: Bullshit Detector, Cop Talk, Evidence Collection, Law

GENERAL ABILITIES: Health 8, Infiltration 6, Preparedness 6, Scuffling 6, Shooting 8

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +|

stealth modifier: 0

OFFICER RICK DONNER

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Mid-20s, chubby, clumsy, always has a perfect uniform with the shiniest shoes ever

- WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS: "Fat Ricky" deals with the smaller stuff — traffic violations, drunk teenagers, loud music, illegal dumping. He's not that bright, but he's diligent, and he knows everyone in Town.
 - Malcolm Chambers regularly pumps Ricky for information about town-hall politics and the police department. Ricky's too dumb to realize he's being played.
 - Ricky's obsessed with Joanne Felton. He keeps making trouble for Stuart Mills just to impress her.
- POVIC WITH GUN: Donner's just a small town cop, a doughnut
- with a badge. Anything bigger than a fender-bender traffic accident is out of his league, and he panics at the sight of blood. Given a choice, he'd prefer to hang around with his buddies and drink beer, but since **Eddington** took over, he can only do that when he's off duty. In his experience, most trouble in Town is caused by outsiders, so he always takes the local's side in any dispute, which puts him in opposition to the Ordo investigators. **Cop Talk** just confuses Donner; the best way to deal with him is **Flirting**. Use poor Ricky to explain why the Esoterrorists get away their schemes in Town; Ricky's emblematic of the whole police department.
- **INFLUENCEE:** Donner used to be fit as hell; he was a star athlete back in high school, the next **Tom West**. It's only in the last year that he's gotten really overweight. He doesn't understand it, and it's not like his diet or his routine has changed that much. An X-ray using **Forensic Anthropology** shows numerous worm-like parasites nesting in Donner's abdomen. The creatures appear to be attached to his intestines and are feeding off him. There are also several faint scars on his belly that suggest surgery, but Donner has no memory of any recent operations.
- **ESOTERRORIST:** *Sadist.* Donner's dopy demeanor is an act. He uses his position as police officer to cover up his crimes; there's a place out in the Wilderness where he dumps their bodies. He prefers young women, but he takes what he can get. They're always outsiders the Town is a holy place to him, a secret place that must be protected from the corruption of the outside world. He kills them and then draws secret sigils as he walks his beat, marking the intersections with harvested gobbets of flesh that he hides in drains and mailboxes and under cars.

ASSOCIATES: Sheriff Douglas Eddington, Officer Marvin Sellers, Joanne Felton, Stuart Mills, "Crazy Mary," Ed Bayer

QUIRKS: Snorts like a pig to clear his throat before speaking

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES: Cop Talk, Trivia

GENERAL ABILITIES: Driving 4, Health 7, Scuffling 4, Shooting 2 ALERTNESS MODIFIER: - I STEALTH MODIFIER: - I

OFFICER MARVIN SELLERS

POLICE OFFICER

STATION DUTY

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Mid-30s, lean, acne-scarred cheeks

WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS: Marvin's the third police officer, and he gets the harder jobs that **Ricky Donner** can't handle. Normally, he's found on the roads outside of Town, watching for speeding cars.

- ➤ He's one of the best outdoorsmen in the area, and he knows the Wilderness very well.
- He is a dangerous man to cross and holds grudges for a very long time. Don't get on his bad side.
- He wants Eddington's job.
- **POVIC WITH GUN:** Marvin is likely to be the first police officer to arrive at any crime scene. He expects to be obeyed instantly; anyone who tries talking back with **Cop Talk** is liable to be arrested. He's determined to find a big case that will guarantee he gets Eddington's job in the near future. He is not above concealing or falsifying evidence to advance his ambitions. He always carries a handgun or rifle and is an expert shot. The player characters can bribe Marvin to look the other way at a crime scene or open police records to them, but a dirty cop is a hungry cop if they start bribing Marvin, he'll keep demanding more and more cash and favors. Even as an ally, he's lowlife scum.
- INFLUENCEE: While not a member of the Esoterror cell, Marvin takes bribes from them. He reports on the police to the cell and will take steps to protect them if needed. The cell is grooming him to join them once his mind is sufficiently open; if he does not come to embrace the Outer Dark on his own, then hallucinogenic drugs and psychological warfare will push him over the edge into madness and Esoterrorism. Marvin's behavior betrays this ongoing process, for he's becoming more violent and erratic, including occasional periods of insanity. If he has one of these phases when he's in a position of power over a player character (for example, if the player character is in police custody or being held at gunpoint prior to arrest), then he hallucinates that the character is an inhuman monster. Checking his credit history with Forensic Accounting finds evidence of the bribes; checking his blood or urine shows large amounts of hallucinogens.
- **ESOTERRORIST:** *Quisling.* Marvin's a wolf; normal people are just sheep. When the Esoterrorists come to power, Marvin will be able to indulge all his power fantasies and rule like a barbarian king. As a full-fledged member of the cell, Marvin spends even more time out in the Wilderness. He's got a shack out there, hidden from sight, with a cache of illegal weapons he obtained to defend the cell when the pluggers come to Town. A character using **Ballistics** when examining a body killed by the cult identifies the bullet as being Russian made; from this clue, the characters can learn about the weapons dealer and eventually trace the weapons back to Marvin. Of course, taking the fortified shack is likely to turn into a heavily armed standoff.

ASSOCIATES: Sheriff Douglas Eddington, Officer Rick Donner, Tom West, Harry Stover

QUIRKS: Abrasive and crude, Marvin has an insult for every player character who annoys him

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES: Intimidation, Natural History, Streetwise

GENERAL ABILITIES: Driving 8, Health 8, Scuffling 4, Shooting 8, Surveillance 6

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +| STEALTH MODIFIER: +|

VERONICA BAYER

HOTEL OWNER

- PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Mid-40s, willowy, striking, redrimmed glasses
- WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS: Veronica runs the local hotel (see p. 119). Her husband, Mike, died a few years ago, and her son **Ed Bayer** (p. 112) is a troubled young man. She's polite and professional but always seems very fragile, as though she's forever on the verge of a nervous collapse.
 - The hotel's losing money; if the tourist business doesn't pick up soon, it might have to close, and what would Veronica do then? It's the only thing in her life that hasn't turned sour.
 - Mike died suddenly and mysteriously. His sister is suing Veronica for control of the business.
- **POVIC:** Bayer is trying to protect the Town's fragile tourist trade. She works closely with the mayor and other local business owners to try to drum up tourism. Her son, Ed Bayer, is a local troublemaker and the bane of her life. Veronica is a sensitive soul, exhausted from trying to run the hotel — her husband's dream business, not hers — and keep Ed out of jail or the psych ward. **Forensic Psychology** picks up on Bayer's stress, while a sensitive ear and **Reassurance** gets her to trust an investigator. The Esoterrorists prey on visitors to the Town, and Veronica's the best source of information on transients and travelers.
- INFLUENCEE: Bayer's hotel is a locus of psychic turmoil. She is haunted by the ghost — or what she perceives as the ghost, anyway — of her late husband, who instructs her on what to do to save the business. Only ritual murder can bring good fortune, and the hotel gets enough traveling salesmen and government health inspectors to provide a ready supply of sacrifices. She gets her son, Ed, to do the actual killing and gives him extra medication to keep him from remembering what he's done. The bodies are then incinerated in the hotel's old furnace. Analyzing the soot from the hotel chimney with **Chemistry** shows signs of human remains.
- ESOTERRORIST: *Quisling*. Bayer murdered her husband to prove her devotion to the cell. Ed Bayer is not her husband's son; he was fathered by another Esoterrorist, as part of a black magic ritual to create a vessel for an entity from the Outer Black. Using **Trivia** when examining photos in the hotel notes the lack of resemblance between Ed and his supposed father. To maximize the psychic recoil needed to tear the Membrane open, Ed must be kept innocent and unaware of his true purpose. Soon, the time will come for Ed's destiny to be fulfilled.
- ASSOCIATES: Mayor Jerry Crowe, Ed Bayer, Rosalinda Lopez, Dr. Anne Wallace

PERSONS OF INTEREST: SELLERS TO WALLACE

QUIRKS: Always exhausted. Bayer's red-rimmed glasses hide her red-rimmed eyes, and she regularly visits **Dr. Wallace** for more sleeping pills

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES: Anthropology, Flattery, Negotiation **GENERAL ABILITIES:** Filch 3, Health 5, Surveillance 4 **ALERTNESS MODIFIER:** 0 **STEALTH MODIFIER:** 0

FR. JONES

PRIEST

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Early 30s, handsome, light blond hair, bright eyes

- WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS: Fr. Jones (alter his title as needed to reflect the Town's major religion) is the Town's young, charismatic, and enthusiastic priest. He's only been in Town for a few months, but he's impressed everyone with his energy.
 - Rumor has it that Fr. Jones was once in the Army, maybe even in Special Forces. He's certainly got some skeletons in the closet.
- POVIC: Fr. Jones is eager to serve the community. He is a visible inspiration to everyone, a pillar of faith and a genuinely good and kind individual. The Esoterrorists intend to use Jones as part of their scheme to bring down the Membrane. They will make him into a symbol of the Townsfolk's hopes and beliefs - make him symbolize everything positive and worthwhile - and then they will bring him down. Until the time comes to eliminate Jones, the cell members are his greatest supporters and may even use their Outer Dark allies to enhance his reputation. It's easy to do exorcisms when the demon wants to make you look good. Talking about religion with Anthropology excites Fr. Jones and convinces him the PCs are worth paying attention to. When the Esoterrorist scheme goes into full swing, Jones comes to believe in his own spiritual gifts, becoming arrogant and judgmental, and may even turn on the player characters.
- INFLUENCEE: Jones is not an Esoterrorist, but he is aware of some of their beliefs. He is a secret devotee of Catharism and believes that objective reality is a monstrous trap created by a jealous and hateful Demiurge. The Outer Black appears hideous to us, but that is because of our enslavement by the Demiurge — the creatures of the Outer Black are really angels, but we cannot yet perceive them as they truly are. He wants to tear down the veil but believes the Esoterrorists are deluded and monstrous. He's a third side in this war; he'll help the players defeat the cell, but his ultimate goal is to bring down the Membrane.
- **ESOTERRORIST:** *Submissive*. As an Esoterrorist, Jones uses his position to survey the Town's spiritual health. He looks for those who are vulnerable or who might oppose the cell's plans, and then informs his fellow conspirators. He's wormed his way into the confidences of everyone in Town, and knows all their secrets. Everyone trusts him. The priest never takes action himself unless forced to, because he wants to keep the Townsfolk's trust in him intact.

From the pulpit, he whips up the fears and doubts of his congregation with fire-and-brimstone sermons, telling them of the depravity and sinfulness of the modern world and how they themselves are impure and guilty. Behind closed doors, he mocks their faith, holding bizarre rituals in the church to praise the Outer Dark. To him, the creatures of the Outer Dark are the only real gods to be worshipped.

ASSOCIATES: Sonia Tate, June Felton, Lori Wilson, Tony Schilling QUIRKS: Keeps checking his cell phone for messages; claims to be constantly ready to respond to the needs of his flock

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES: Anthropology, Forensic Psychology, Occult Studies, Reassurance

GENERAL ABILITIES: Health 6, Medic 4, Scuffling 4, Shooting 6, Shrink 4 **ALERTNESS MODIFIER:** 0

STEALTH MODIFIER: +|



DR. ANNE WALLACE

DOCTOR

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Late 40s, pale, greying hair

- WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS: Dr. Wallace is the local doctor. Her family has lived in the Town for generations; her father and grandfather were both doctors before her. She knows everyone in Town and is highly thought of.
 - ► Dr. Wallace's father is still alive, but he suffers from Alzheimer's disease and is in a rest home in the city.
 - Before he retired, Dr. Wallace's father kept practicing for several years after he was diagnosed with the disease. He made a lot of mistakes back then, proscribing the wrong drugs and misdiagnosing conditions. Earl Calloway's wife allegedly died because of Wallace's mistakes.
- **POVIC:** Dr. Wallace cares deeply for the Town and everyone in it. Her family is intimately associated with the Town. This place is in her bones. Several years ago, Dr. Wallace found signs of the Esoterror cell and tried to find out what was going on. One night, she awoke to find three shadowy figures holding her down. One of them put her own scalpel to her throat and hissed, "This place is ours. Ask no questions. Tell no one. Close your eyes. Or we will take your face." Since that terrifying ordeal, she has not dared investigate any further. The guilt gnaws at her, and she has taken to self-medicating heavily in secret. If the characters discover her past connection to the cell, she can help them in secret, but doing so will drive her further into paranoia and drug abuse.
- INFLUENCEE: Dr. Wallace has started to worry about her own symptoms — she is convinced that she is suffering from Morgellons syndrome, a bizarre disease (or delusion) where the victim grows strange multicolored fibers from beneath the skin; these fibers resemble wires or electronic components more than anything else. **Pathology** or **Forensic Entomology** can be used to analyze the fibers growing beneath her skin. Wallace's connection to the Town is causing her body to rebel and mutate as the Esoterrorists warp reality. Unless the Esoterrorists' scheme is stopped, Wallace will degenerate into something monstrous.
- **ESOTERRORIST:** *Exofetishist.* The Wallace family has been part of the Esoterrorist conspiracy for generations. Her grandfather discovered the potential weakness in the Membrane; her father spent thirty years mapping it, studying it, and preparing his daughter for the completion of the Great Work. Her body is scarred and tattooed with a map of the Town; her flesh describes the shape of the breach, and her blood will open the way. She is watched by several guardians, human and inhuman, who will protect her until her destiny arrives.

ASSOCIATES: June Felton, "Crazy Mary," Earl Calloway, Veronica Bayer

QUIRKS: Nyctophobia (fear of the dark)

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES: Chemistry, Forensic Anthropology, Pathology

GENERAL ABILITIES: Health 5, Medic 6 ALERTNESS MODIFIER: 0 STEALTH MODIFIER: 0

CAROLE CROWE

POSTMASTER

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Early 40s, well dressed, mousy brown hair WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS: Carole's the mayor's wife and proud of it. She considers herself to be the First Lady of the Town and gets very indignant if not given what she considers to be proper respect. She runs the Town post office; some days, it seems like she's the one really running the Town, not Jerry.

- She's an inveterate gossip and will talk you to death if you give her a chance.
- She has pretensions of being sophisticated and fashionable, which amount to a boxed set of *Sex and the City*.
- **POVIC:** Carole herself is harmless, but her position in Town makes her a target for the enemy. The Esoterrorists may need to gain access to the mail (or cut off communications the Town's main phone exchange is located in the post office) or need to gain leverage over Mayor Crowe. Carole's the obvious target in either case. The cell uses a pickup artist (probably a specialist from out of Town or maybe a summoned creature like a Man in the Bar from *The Book of Unremitting Horror*) to seduce Carole into an affair, and then either kidnap or blackmail her.
- **INFLUENCEE:** The breach in the Membrane pours impossible revelations into Carole's vulnerable mind at night, and she's gone insane from the ceaseless barrage of nightmare visitations. She obsessively reads everyone's mail and sometimes swaps letters between envelopes so that the "right" person gets the message. The player characters may receive letters addressed to them that were intended for other people in the Town. Carole snips out names and other personal details; she collects these snippets and pastes them into scrapbooks. **Document Analysis** confirms that the letter was steamed open, modified, and then resealed expertly. Mayor Crowe tries to conceal his wife's mental illness, but, as Carole becomes more unstable, he knows that he will soon have to choose between his political career and her.
- **ESOTERRORIST:** *Dominant.* Carole is frustrated and power hungry. She tried living through her husband, but Jerry's political career stalled. Esoterrorism offered her a shortcut to power and glory. She dreams of ruling the world — or at least the Town. She's a petty would-be tyrant with an extensive enemies list, and, when the Membrane comes down, everyone on that list will suffer infinite torture at the hands of her extradimensional allies. She'll use summoned monsters for petty acts of revenge, possibly giving the cell away to observant investigators.

ASSOCIATES: Mayor Jerry Crowe, Lori Wilson, Malcolm Chambers QUIRKS: Gossips about everyone

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES: Document Analysis, Streetwise GENERAL ABILITIES: Filch 4, Health 5, Surveillance 3 ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1 STEALTH MODIFIER: 0

PERSONS OF INTEREST: WALLACE TO FELTON

STUART MILLS

TEENAGE REBEL

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Late teens, well built, always scowling

WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS: Stuart's a teenaged troublemaker; he's been caught stealing cars, dealing drugs, listening to that rap

music, and who knows what else. He's a bad seed, that boy. **POVIC:** Stuart's young, arrogant and brave, which can get him into trouble. If he discovers signs of occult activity, he will investigate, which may bring him to the attention of the Esoterrorist cell. He'll never go to the police — they already think he's scum — but he'll turn to the investigators if they've had a positive influence on him.

If the characters don't reach out to Stuart, then he's doomed. Everyone in Town already expects Stuart to end up dead or in jail; he's already on the verge of becoming a statistic, another missing person. When the Esoterrorists need a sacrificial victim or a patsy, they'll use him.

INFLUENCEE: Stuart's increasingly antisocial behavior is the result of an Esoterror fetish he stole several months ago. The fetish is driving him to greater acts of destruction and cruelty; unless the fetish is found and removed, he'll end up dying of suicide by cop or else walk into school one Monday with a handgun and start shooting. He ignores everything except **Intimidation**, but, if the characters force him to talk, he'll show them the fetish and tell them where he got it.

ESOTERRORIST: *ODE*. Stuart Mills died over a year ago. He was one of the first victims of the Esoterror cell. The thing that wears his face and tortures his family is not remotely human. It amuses the horror to act like Stuart as it waits for its Esoterrorist allies to further weaken the Membrane and give it greater freedom. Until then, it acts as the cell's assassin and guardian.

Stuart's body is buried out in the Wilderness, flayed clean of skin. One of his classmates knows that Stuart is dead, but is too scared of the thing that wears his face to speak out. ASSOCIATES: Sonia Tate, Joanne Felton, Tom West, Alice Henshaw,

Officer Rick Donner

QUIRKS: Always has an iPod playing very loud music in his ears

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES: Evidence Collection, Trivia

GENERAL ABILITIES: Driving 4, Filch 3, Health 9, Infiltration 4, Scuffling 4, Shooting 2 ALERTNESS MODIFIER: 0

stealth modifier: 0

JOANNE FELTON

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Late teens, very good-looking, blonde hair **WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS:** Joanne's the prettiest girl in Town, a real

heartbreaker. Every boy in school wants to be with her. Her mother, **June Felton**, was good-looking in her day, but she doesn't hold a candle to her daughter.

- Joanne and her mother fight a lot. They both put on an act in public, but they hate each other.
- ▶ She went out with **Stuart Mills** in the past.

POVIC: Joanne's domineering mother is trying to live through her daughter, and tensions are rising within the Felton household. Joanne is making plans to flee the Town; her plan is to make contact with her estranged father and move in with him. If she can't get in touch with him, then she'll just take her chances in the city. She's not going to get that far — people go missing all the time on the roads outside Town, and the darkness will take her.

Any Esoterrorist with the dominant, hedonist or exofetishist personality type might also take an interest in seducing or possessing Joanne.

- INFLUENCEE: Joanne is an unwilling pawn of the Outer Dark. When she sleeps, she is possessed by an ODE who uses her body to aid the Esoterrorist cell. The thing that haunts her dreams speaks to her in the voice of her mother, muttering the secret desires of other people or screaming insults in Sumerian. Joanne has woken up in unexpected or compromising places a dozen times in the last year but is too scared and embarrassed to tell anyone. At other times, she's awoken to find herself walking empty streets in a shadowy, distorted reflection of the Town. The nocturnal possessions are getting worse, and she's started slipping into the entity's control even when awake. To stave off possession, Joanne tries to fend off sleep for as long as possible and has started handcuffing herself to her bed at night.
- **ESOTERRORIST:** *Exofetishist.* Joanne's jaded. Life in Town bores her. She spent the last summer with her father in the city until he threw her out, and there she learned that all the world has to offer is the same again, only louder and faster. She wants something more, something different. The Esoterrorists are the only ones offering her novelty and joy. She is hungry to be transformed into a thing that is beyond human. She sees her new shape in the dreams, a creature of alien beauty and power. **ASSOCIATES:** Stuart Mills, Sonia Tate, Alice Henshaw, June Felton, Officer Rick Donner

QUIRKS: Toys with her hair when speaking

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES: Flirting, Streetwise GENERAL ABILITIES: Athletics 4, Health 6, Infiltration 4 ALERTNESS MODIFIER: 0 STEALTH MODIFIER: 0

HOT GIRL

WEIRD GIRL

STATION DUTY

- PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Late teens, mismatched clothes, dark hair with multicolored highlights
- WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS: Sonia's a strange girl. She spends all her time on that computer of hers. She's always causing trouble in school and getting into arguments with people. No wonder she's got no friends.
- **POVIC:** Sonia's highly intelligent, and feels constrained by smalltown life. She started investigating the string of strange disappearances and creature sightings last year, and, while she hasn't uncovered the existence of the Esoterror cell yet, she's on their trail — and they know it. The question is whether to recruit her or eliminate her.
- INFLUENCEE: Sonia's an artist of the macabre. Using a combination of digital painting, photo manipulation, and models, she creates nightmarish visions that have a cult following online. One of her fans is an Esoterrorist who is grooming her for recruitment into the movement. Over the course of the campaign, she moves from making models to using animals or her own body as part of the art, eventually starting to use other humans as canvases...
- **ESOTERRORIST:** *Exofetishist*. Sonia grew up in Town. She's played with imaginary friends all her life friends like kooks (see *The Book of Unremitting Horror*), friends with fangs and claws and blood like battery acid. She is extremely unstable and dangerous and is unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality, between this reality and the world beyond the Membrane.
- ASSOCIATES: Stuart Mills, Joanne Felton, Alice Henshaw, Fr. Jones QUIRKS: Unconsciously scratches her nails down her wrists when nervous

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES: Art History, Data Retrieval GENERAL ABILITIES: Filch 4, Health 6, Infiltration 3 ALERTNESS MODIFIER: + 1 STEALTH MODIFIER: 0

ALICE HENSHAW

SCHOOLTEACHER

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Early 30s, dark hair, athletic build WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS: Popular and friendly, Alice teaches

- English and history in the local high school. She's the niece of **Jake Henshaw** and used to work in his restaurant. She slips into "teacher mode" when explaining the history of the Town.
- Alice is an expert on the history of the Town and wants to start a historical society to preserve the Town's unique heritage.
- **POVIC:** Archived documents are stored in the town hall, but no one has bothered to catalogue them in years. She has started a project to assemble a full history of the Town and organizes her students and other locals to help her sort through the piles of documents. Anyone helping her with **Textual Analysis, History**, or **Research** has a chance to talk to her. Her investigations are about to dig up past evidence of Outer Dark activity around Town, which will draw the attention of the Esoterrorist cell and lead to her death.

INFLUENCEE: Alice found a diary written by an Esoterrorist cell member among the archived papers. Her reading of the diary has inspired her to try some of the rituals and thought exercises described in it, and she is on the verge of becoming a servant of the Outer Dark. Alice currently has no connection to the larger cell, but she will be recruited or murdered as a rival when they find her. Parts of the diary are in code; Alice currently lacks the skill in **Cryptography** to crack them. She is desperate enough to kidnap a player character and force him to translate the encrypted sections of the diary for her.

- **ESOTERRORIST:** *Submissive*. Alice is watched over by an entity from the Outer Dark. This creature cannot yet manifest directly in our reality, but it can communicate with Alice through automatic writing on her chalkboard and can even possess her in times of stress. It uses Alice to implant psychic suggestions in her students. **Textual Analysis** of Alice's writing shows the presence of two distinctly different writing styles. This may be the same entity that is preying on her student **Joanne Felton**.
- ASSOCIATES: Jake Henshaw, Tom West, Stuart Mills, Joanne Felton, Sonia Tate

QUIRKS: Explains everything in a didactic manner

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES: Anthropology, Archaeology, History GENERAL ABILITIES: Health 6, Shrink 3 ALERTNESS MODIFIER: 0 STEALTH MODIFIER: 0

TOM WEST HANDYMAN + FOOTBALL COACH

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Early 40s, balding, overweight, wears football shirts

- WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS: Tom was the hero of the Town about twenty years ago. He was a star footballer and led the local team to victory again and again. He got a sports scholarship, and everyone was convinced that he was destined for a glorious national career. A string of injuries, illnesses, and plain bad luck ended Tom's dreams; he never made it as a pro and ended up back in the Town. He works as a handyman around Town, fixing appliances and doing odd jobs. He also coaches the local school's sports team.
 - Tom's always on the lookout for a scheme to get rich quick. He lost a lot of money on gambling and another few thousand on a pyramid scheme.
- **POVIC:** Tom is a loser living on memories of lost glory, but he is still one of the best-connected people in Town. Between his odd jobs, coaching at the school, and his circle of friends, he knows everything that goes on around here and could be an excellent informant. Properly motivated, he could even volunteer to help the player characters; he may have gotten fat, but he's still strong and fast. Shooting the breeze about sports with him by using **Trivia** is the best way to befriend him.

Without some external force to pull him up, though, Tom will spiral down into misery and end up sitting in the back of his truck with a bottle of whiskey and a shotgun.

SONIA TATE



INFLUENCEE: Tom deliberately sabotaged his own career. He took dives, he played badly, he got high before games, and once he even took a knife to his own leg so he missed a big match. He can't explain why he did it all, only that something in him wouldn't let him leave Town. If his career had taken off, it would have taken him away from the Town. There is something here that calls him, and he cannot escape it. He drives around Town at night, looking for a thing he cannot name.

When Tom finally finds the creature, it offers him a bargain. The thing will rewind time and allow Tom to have the stellar sporting career he's always dreamed of — if Tom commits a horrific, blasphemous deed for it. The creature gives Tom a taste of the alternate reality in a dream which is shared by the player characters. It's up to them to work out that Tom's fate is at the center of this reality and to stop him before he's tricked by the Outer Dark Entity.

ESOTERRORIST: *Attention-Seeker*. Tom was an easy mark for the cell. He wants to recapture his glory days, to be carried shoulderhigh through the Town again. He works as a courier and smuggler for the cell, transporting ritual items and weapons in his van. The Esoterrorists consider him to be a disposable asset, so Tom will be sacrificed to protect the rest of the cell. **ASSOCIATES:** Officer Marvin Seller, Earl Calloway, Alice Henshaw,

Stuart Mills, Jake Henshaw

QUIRKS: Talks about sports whenever he can

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES: Flirting, Trivia GENERAL ABILITIES: Athletics 6, Health 7, Mechanics 6 ALERTNESS MODIFIER: 0 STEALTH MODIFIER: 0

"CRAZY MARY"

- **PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:** Uncertain age (anywhere from mid-40s to late 60s), wild hair, filthy cardigan
- WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS: Mary's crazy but harmless. She lives alone in a house full of cats and old newspapers and only comes into Town to pick up her social security checks, to buy groceries, and to rant about whatever paranoid theory is running through her head.
 - Her real name is Mary Wilson; she's Lori Wilson's sister, but they don't talk any more.
 - Mary once attacked Fr. Jones, accusing him of being the devil in disguise.
- **POVIC:** Mary's already been a victim of the Outer Dark; the root cause of her insanity is a past encounter with the Esoterrorist cult or a creature of Unremitting Horror. She is too far gone to help the characters directly, but after some **Reassurance**, she can give the characters cryptic hints about what's going on in Town. Mary's likely responsible for the annotated newspaper articles (see "Local News," p. 127). Once the Esoterrorists realize that Mary's an unwitting leak, they'll silence her. She's physically frail and sick, so they can easily make it look like an accident, and her cats will eat most of the evidence anyway.
- INFLUENCEE: Mary's cats are hosts for lesser entities that squeezed through the breach in the Membrane. These possessed cats whisper secrets to Mary, and in exchange she ensures they are well fed with human flesh. **Natural History** recognizes the odd behavior of the cats. The cats are all carriers for a mutated form of toxoplasmosis, a bacteria carried by felines associated with schizophrenia and alternated behavior in humans. Characters infected by the bacteria become slaves to the cats' whims.
- **ESOTERRORIST:** *Cipher.* Mary formerly led the Esoterrorist cell until a botched ritual drove her insane. She still has valuable insight into the Outer Dark and is a talented magician, but the cell considers her a liability and will eliminate her if the investigators start sniffing around her. The botched ritual left her with the ability to see disguised Outer Dark Entities and to step through the Membrane at will, but it tore her mind asunder. A portion of Mary's consciousness was ripped out of her brain and now exists in the subjective chaos on the far side

of the Membrane, trying to claw its way back to our reality. ASSOCIATES: Dr. Anne Wallace, Officer Rick Donner, Lori Wilson QUIRKS: Mumbles crazy nonsense

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES: Astronomy, Occult Studies GENERAL ABILITIES: Health 5, Surveillance 6 ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1 STEALTH MODIFIER: +1

SENILE LUNATIC

STATION DUTY

JUNE FELTON

FORMER BEAUTY QUEEN

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Mid-40s, heavy makeup, peroxide blonde hair WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS: June's the receptionist in **Dr. Wallace's**

practice. She was the town sweetheart when she was in high school and won the county beauty pageant. Her daughter **Joanne** is even more beautiful that June was at that age.

- ▶ June and her daughter don't get on.
- ► June has a rather one-sided rivalry with Carole Crowe. She badmouths the mayor's wife at every opportunity.

POVIC: June knows that there is something wrong with the Town but refuses to admit it to herself. She is trying to get her daughter to leave Town; while June tells herself that she's just trying to ensure that Joanne lives up to her potential, her subconscious intent is to get Joanne out of danger, one way or another. Getting the truth out of June with Interrogation means putting her in a place where she can't lie to herself anymore. If the characters do so, then she'll agree to help them if they get Joanne to a place of safety.

As a victim, June's best used to illustrate the human cost. When her daughter Joanne falls victim to the evils of the Town, then June loses her mind.

- INFLUENCEE: June is desperate to reclaim her lost youth and beauty. The weakness of the Membrane and the strength of her obsession mean she could succeed here, where reality is fluid. She might suck the youth from her daughter, or bathe in blood by moonlight, or have the skin peeled from her bones and then be renewed by a monster from the Outer Dark. Flirting is the best way to deal with her, although the player character may get more attention than anticipated.
- **ESOTERRORIST:** Attention-Seeker. June wants to be loved and admired and has turned to the Esoterror cell to reclaim her lost glamour. She is a minor member of the cell, serving primarily as an informant and a spy. Any player characters who end up injured and in the care of Dr. Wallace may get special attention from June; she'll swap poison for painkillers or deliberately infect the character's wounds with necrotizing fasciitis.

ASSOCIATES: Dr. Anne Wallace, Joanne Felton, Fr. Jones QUIRKS: Flirts with everyone

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES: Bureaucracy, Flirting, Forensic Psychology

GENERAL ABILITIES: Health 6, Preparedness 2 ALERTNESS MODIFIER: 0 STEALTH MODIFIER: 0

ED BAYER

TROUBLED YOUTH

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Mid-20s, stringy hair, unshaven

WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS: Ed is the no-good son of Veronica and lives with her at the hotel, ever since he got out of jail for assaulting **Rick Donner**. Everyone knows Ed's a bad influence on the Town; he's probably dealing drugs again out of the back of the hotel.

- Sheriff Eddington despises Ed and is looking for an excuse to throw him back in jail.
- Ed's stalking **Dina Chambers**.

POVIC: Ed's troubled and dangerous but has nothing to do with the occult. If the characters treat him honestly with **Negotiation** instead of assuming he's worthless, he can be recruited as an unreliable informant. Ed's a night owl and knows more about what goes on in Town after dark than anyone else. He's seen things when he drives around at night...

If not recruited, then Ed's most likely to get killed by a creature of Unremitting Horror. The characters find the chewed-up, bloody tatters of his remains out in the Wilderness. INFLUENCEE: Ed's past troubles stem from contact with the Outer

Dark. They have pursued him for years, especially in the dark. He remembers cold, pale fingers reaching out of the shadows in his bedroom. He never sleeps at night anymore. The only way to get the creatures off his back for a short time is to kill someone else and use them as a distraction. Ed's learned that if he dresses a fresh corpse in his own clothes and marks it with his blood, the creatures that stalk him are confused and torment the dead man instead of himself. This is only a temporary measure, but it buys him a few months of relief.

ESOTERRORIST: *Hedonist.* Ed's a sociopath, caring for nothing except his own pleasure. The police don't know a tenth of what he's done, and he's forced his mother Veronica to cover up his past crimes. **Archaeology** in the grounds of the hotel will find the mass graves. The animal bones from his childhood are at the bottom of the ossuary; the human ones are stacked so high that only a thin layer of soil hides the most recent murders.

ASSOCIATES: Veronica Bayer, Sheriff Douglas Eddington, Dina Chambers, Officer Rick Donner, Rosalinda Lopez

QUIRKS: Curls his lip and sneers when talking

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES: Chemistry, Explosive Devices, Intimidation

GENERAL ABILITIES: Athletics 5, Driving 2, Health 5, Mechanic 4, Scuffling 6

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +| STEALTH MODIFIER: 0

PERSONS OF INTEREST: FELTON TO WILSON

LENORE DANEK

ESOTERIC ARTISTE

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Early 40s, tanned, wears a lot of jewelry **WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS:** Danek is a newcomer to the town. She's a sculptor and painter; she bought an old farmhouse outside Town and has converted it into a studio and workshop. Her art pieces are bizarre, made from a combination of things she

found around Town like fallen tree branches, discarded toys, and old tires, together with precious metals and gemstones. She talks about "finding the godhead in the mundane" and "revisited perceptions."

- Danek's a devotee of some weird religion, or she's on a lot of LSD, or both.
- ► She's very good friends with Malcolm Chambers.

POVIC: Danek's art is strange and disturbing, but she's not an Esoterrorist. She has an intuitive understand of the Membrane and recognizes the creatures of Unremitting Horror for what they are. She will be an eager (if not alarmingly over-eager) ally of the investigators once she finds out which side they are on and can be a useful guide to shifts and breaches in the local Membrane.

If the Esoterrorists identify Danek as a threat, they can psychically swat her; she's already sensitive to the presence of the Outer Dark, so it is easy to use this as a route of attack and drive her insane.

- INFLUENCEE: Danek's disturbing and provocative art sells to a select clientele. She's not an Esoterrorist, but many of her customers sympathize with the cult's goals. She came to the Town at the behest of one of these customers, who has become her patron. This customer is an Esoterrorist and believes that Danek's art may prefigure a way through the Membrane. The customer encourages Danek to create new pieces, works of art that involve illegal ingredients like human body parts.
- **ESOTERRORIST:** *Dominant.* Danek may be the cryptic Sculptor mentioned in the Ordo Veritatis briefing; if not, she works directly for her. Her role here is to push the Breach Zero project to completion. She'll keep away from the cell's dayto-day activities but will step in to troubleshoot any problems. Danek has no supernatural abilities, but she's a former Mossad agent and assassin, who's more than a match for the player characters in a gunfight.

ASSOCIATES: Malcolm Chambers. She's a devotee of Sonia Tate's work online but is unaware that she lives in Town. QUIRKS: Is highly tactile; touches everything she can

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES: Anthropology, Art History, Photography

GENERAL ABILITIES: Shrink 4 (Health 10, Infiltration 10, Preparedness 10, Scuffling 12, Shooting 16 if an Esoterrorist) ALERTNESS MODIFIER: 0 (+2 if an Esoterrorist) STEALTH MODIFIER: 0 (+2 if an Esoterrorist)

LORI WILSON

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Late 30s, small, full of nervous energy WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS: Lori Wilson runs a local business (tourist

- trap / hardware store / real estate, etc.). She's head of the Town's business committee, a new committee set up to boost the Town's economy. Lori's got a real drive to organize things; she's got a hand in everything, from the Town's annual festival to the school board.
- Lori's sister is "Crazy Mary." They don't talk, but Lori pays her sister's rent.
- **POVIC:** Lori's a lynchpin of the community, who works hard to make the Town better. She's a busybody, but her heart is in the right place. In her way, she's fighting back against the darkness that threatens to engulf the Town. Keeping the community together may be the best way to stop the Esoterrorists from tearing the Town and the Membrane apart so the Esoterrorists must destroy her to succeed. They plan to use a madness fetish to drive her insane.
- **INFLUENCEE:** Lori's obsessed with the Town's image and reputation. Anyone who hints that this is not the most perfect place to live instantly becomes her enemy. As the Town spirals into chaos as a result of the Esoterrorists' schemes, Lori becomes murderous and identifies the player characters as being responsible for ruining her perfect Town. It all started going wrong when they showed up...
- **ESOTERRORIST:** *ODE*. Lori is literally part of the Town. She's the incarnation of the Town's dark side. Physically, she was born out of all the discarded parts of the Town; her body was formed from trash and torn-up photographs, she gestated in an abandoned building, and she feeds on the misery and self-hate of the locals. She knows everyone's dirty little secrets and exists to punish them by bringing down the Membrane and letting her cousins feed.
- ASSOCIATES: Mayor Jerry Crowe, Carole Crowe, Harry Stover, Fr. Jones, Jake Henshaw, "Crazy Mary"

QUIRKS: Tries to recruit the characters to one of her projects

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES: Flattery, Forensic Accounting,

Streetwise **GENERAL ABILITIES:** Health 8, Surveillance 5 **ALERTNESS MODIFIER:** 0 **STEALTH MODIFIER:** 0

LOCAL BUSINESS OWNER

THE ESOTERRORISTS



HARRY STOVER

LOCAL BUSINESS OWNER

STATION DUTY

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Short, owlish glasses, checked shirts

- WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS: Harry runs the local general store / gas station / pharmacy. He's quiet and keeps to himself, expressing himself mostly through long peevish letters to the local newspaper. His current bugbear is the youth of the Town, who Harry feels spend too much time "hanging around making nuisances of themselves."
 - Harry keeps a dachshund called Charlie. He's often seen walking around town with the dog. He lavishes attention on the dog, but Charlie always seems as morose as a dog can be.
- ► Harry may be gay. He's certainly a committed bachelor. **POVIC:** Harry exemplifies the perfectly ordinary Townsfolk who will suffer at the hidden hands of the Esoterrorists over the course of the campaign. The Esoterrorists plan to lock him in his house after injecting Charlie with massive doses of experimental military amphetamines to drive the dog into a killing rage. Harry will be torn apart by his own beloved pet.
- **INFLUENCEE:** Harry's letters to the newspaper are just a tiny fraction of his output. In his house, he's got thousands of pages of handwritten notes and surveillance photos of his neighbors. Harry suffers from paranoid delusions and believes that man-sized spiders are creeping around Town wearing hollow human skin-suits. His notes are an attempt to identify who has been taken by the spiders. His obsessive observations may identify members of the Esoterrorist cell but also give away the identity of the PCs...

- **ESOTERRORIST:** Avenger. Harry's a misanthrope who believes that the world is sick and that humanity deserves everything it gets. Privately, he considers the forces of the Outer Dark to be a form of biblical judgment upon the human race; he intends to help usher in a very local apocalypse. Those who have sinned in his eyes will suffer, but he may let the innocent go free.
- ASSOCIATES: Lori Wilson, Officer Marvin Sellers, Malcolm Chambers
- QUIRKS: Assumes that the player characters read the local paper as closely as he does
- **INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES:** Electronic Surveillance, Research, Textual Analysis

GENERAL ABILITIES: Health 6, Preparedness 6 ALERTNESS MODIFIER: 0 STEALTH MODIFIER: 0

JAKE HENSHAW

BARTENDER

- PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Late 50s, bald, kindly face, smells like a fryer
- WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS: Jake owns the Town's main restaurant and the bar attached to it. Everyone ends up in Jake's. If you need a good meal, a stiff drink, or just someone to bitch to about your life, talk to Jake. The coffee's good, the beer's cheap, and the fried chicken's fantastic.
- Jake's had a string of affairs with his waitresses. That's why none of them stay long — he gets bored and moves onto the next pretty young thing who walks through his door looking for a job. **Dina Chambers** had better be careful.
- Jake owns half the Town. He may come across like your favorite uncle or your drinking buddy, but he's ruthless when it comes to money.
- He collects war memorabilia as a hobby; the basement of his house is crammed with pieces he's picked up over the years.
- **POVIC:** Jake's business is built on stability. He may not believe in the supernatural or the existence of weird cults, but anything that upsets the status quo damages his business and his Town. He hears a lot of rumors and drunken stories about strange things outside the Town; if the characters win his trust, he can be a valuable informant. Otherwise, Jake's too valuable to the Esoterrorists as a source of information, so he'll be replaced by a skin crab (see p. 65).
- **INFLUENCEE:** Jake's not influenced by the Esoterror cell or the Outer Dark; he's just a bastard. He owns a brothel in Town and has a hand in all sorts of other criminal schemes, too, like cigarette smuggling and loan sharking. He bribes **Mayor Crowe** to keep **Sheriff Eddington** off his back.
- **ESOTERRORIST:** *Dominant.* Jake joined the local Esoterror cell for power and connections; to him, they're the Masons with more sex and guns. He isn't a believer in the Great Work, he doesn't worship the Outer Dark, and he's no magician. He just wants money and power. As such, he's more practical than the more unstable members of the cell but also the most likely to switch

PERSONS OF INTEREST: STOVER TO CALLOWAY

sides if it's in his best interests. As the Membrane weakens, Jake's commitment to the cell weakens as he sees the horrors that are about to be unleashed; he'll try to defect to the Ordo for protection if he can make contact with them.

ASSOCIATES: Mayor Crowe, Alice Henshaw, Dina Chambers, Lori Wilson, Tom West, Tony Schilling... everyone in Town comes to Jake's, sooner or later.

QUIRKS: Polishes and cleans the bar as he talks

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES: Bullshit Detector, Law, Reassurance, Streetwise

GENERAL ABILITIES: Health 6, Preparedness 6, Scuffling 4 ALERTNESS MODIFIER: 0 STEALTH MODIFIER: 0

DINA CHAMBERS

WAITRESS

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Early 20s, dark hair, slim, perky WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS: Dina works at Jake's place; she's new in Town and just graduated from university a few months ago.

- ▶ She's the daughter of Malcolm Chambers.
- ► She's writing a book.
- ▶ Ed Bayer keeps following her around.
- **POVIC:** Dina wants to be a novelist. She took a job in the restaurant to earn rent money but also to observe people and gather material for her first book. While working, she tries to get people talking about themselves. She's on the lookout for an interesting story and if she finds evidence of the supernatural, nothing will stop her investigating it. Dina's death makes an excellent adventure hook, because the characters can pick up her investigation where she left off.
- **INFLUENCEE:** Dina's fascinated by death, ever since her mother killed herself. She likes to attend the funerals of strangers and hang around murder scenes and graveyards. She has no wish to die herself not yet but she's experimented with alternate states of consciousness, like auto-asphyxiation, freezing herself in a bathtub of ice, or just driving blindfolded down the highway with her foot down on the accelerator. As soon as the mysterious deaths start piling up, Dina will dog the trail of the investigators, hoping they will lead her to new insights into mortality.
- ESOTERRORIST: Submissive. Dina wants the Outer Dark to come in and lift the burden of responsibility from the human race. She believes that our species has ruined the planet and ourselves and that the Outer Dark Entities cannot be worse than what we do to ourselves. She believes that the breach is a natural reaction by nature to humanity's desecration of the biosphere — the Outer Dark is our sins come home to roost, an extinction event that will wash the world clean of human filth. ASSOCIATES: Jake Henshaw, Malcolm Chambers, Ed Bayer

QUIRKS: Takes every opportunity she can to read a few pages

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES: Flattery, Textual Analysis GENERAL ABILITIES: Health 6, Surveillance 4 ALERTNESS MODIFIER: + 1 STEALTH MODIFIER: + 1

EARL CALLOWAY

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Mid-50s (but might be younger), redfaced, stinks of booze, staggers when he walks

- WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS: Earl started drinking heavily a few years ago, and it's cost him his job, his family, and his health. When he's sober, he works with **Tom West** doing manual labor, but days when he can be trusted with a power tool are few and far between. He's barred from **Jake Henshaw**'s place following a recent brawl.
- **POVIC:** Earl's in danger of becoming another statistic, another missing person report that gets filed away and never investigated. If the Esoterrorists need a sacrificial victim or a host for an Outer Dark Entity, then Earl's a likely target. Few people will notice he's gone; fewer still will care.
- **INFLUENCEE:** Earl's already doomed. He's a psychic chew toy for creatures from the Outer Dark. He can see beyond the Membrane, and, in his insane, drunken ramblings, he desperately tries to hint to the player characters about the dangers in the Town. Once the characters start to trust him and rely on his insights, Earl gets possessed by an ODE and becomes a threat to the group.
- **ESOTERRORIST:** *Submissive.* Earl was recruited as an enforcer for the cell, but he's having second thoughts about his role in the end of life as we know it. He would back out of the conspiracy if he could, but he knows that the cell would kill him if he breathed a word of their secrets to the pluggers. He's trying to drink himself to death because it's the only way out that's left to him. The cell is aware of Earl's suicidal tendencies and is preparing him for use in a one-way mission. If the player characters get too close to the cell, then Earl walks into the Station wearing a vest of explosives and blows the place sky-high.

ASSOCIATES: Tom West, Dr. Anne Wallace

QUIRKS: Slurs his words and sways back and forth, even when mostly sober

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES: Streetwise

GENERAL ABILITIES: Health 6, Mechanics 4, Scuffling 4, Shooting 3 ALERTNESS MODIFIER: - I STEALTH MODIFIER: 0

TOWN DRUNK

STATION DUTY

FARMER

TONY SCHILLING

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Mid-30s, broad-shouldered, tanned

WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS: The old Schilling farm (or fishing boat, or ranch, or lumber mill depending on the Town's surroundings) has been in decline for years. Tony Schilling's trying to turn the family business around.

- Schilling's father, Joseph, vanished in questionable circumstances. Most people assume he just walked out on his family, but there are some rumors that he just... vanished.
- Schilling's got a lot of debts.
- **POVIC:** Tony Schilling's farm is situated right on top of a Low Membrane Strength Location. Things from the far side bleed into our reality here. Unless the characters can save him, he's going to be devoured by creatures of Unremitting Horror before long. Tracking animal deaths using **Natural History** or **Forensic Entomology** lets the characters determine the extent of the LMSL around the Schilling place.
- **INFLUENCEE:** Joseph Schilling was possessed by a creature of Unremitting Horror, and Tony killed his own father with a shotgun blast. Joseph's body is buried somewhere nearby. Since that ghastly night, Tony's dedicated himself to fighting "the monsters." He has no understanding of what he faces or how to distinguish between Esoterrorists, ODEs, and innocents. He is likely to either end up shooting the wrong person or targeting the player characters for their suspicious behavior.
- **ESOTERRORIST:** *Quisling*. The Schillings have lived on the edge of the tattered Membrane for decades. They are worshippers of the Outer Dark and are no longer entirely human. The farm is a stronghold of the Esoterror cell, with numerous hidden tunnels, holding cells, and supply caches.

ASSOCIATES: Jake Henshaw, Fr. Jones

QUIRKS: Looks down at the floor and hangs his head

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES: Natural History

GENERAL ABILITIES: Athletics 5, Driving 4, Health 6, Mechanics 4 **ALERTNESS MODIFIER:** 0 **STEALTH MODIFIER:** 0

MALCOLM CHAMBERS

NEWSPAPER OWNER

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Mid-50s, silver hair, sharp suit WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS: Chambers recently bought the Town's newspaper. He also owns several other businesses nearby — he made millions on the stock market before "retiring" to the Town.

- Chambers is going to run for mayor and keeps publishing articles and editorials that blast Mayor Crowe.
- He's got a big house just outside of Town. Running the newspaper is just a hobby for him — he's still raking in millions from his earlier investments.
- ▶ His daughter **Dina** works in Jake Henshaw's place.
- **POVIC WITH GUN:** Chambers is a potential obstacle on two fronts. As the face of the Town's media, he can expose the characters to unwanted attention if he suspects they are more than they seem. If the characters hope to control the media, they need to get Chambers on their side. Secondly, Chambers is rich and influential; if he decides the player characters are a threat to him, his businesses, or the Town, he can cause a lot of problems for them, such as hiring private detectives to investigate them.
- INFLUENCEE: Chambers moved to the isolated Town for privacy. His country house — protected by high walls, cutting-edge security, and hired guards — is used by him and his rich buddies for their more esoteric hobbies (depraved sexual orgies, blood sacrifices, transplants from unwilling victims, worshipping giant owls). He is not part of the Esoterror cell but is a likely recruit over the course of the game. If the characters stop Chambers from being recruited, they significantly weaken the cell.
- **ESOTERRORIST:** *Hedonist.* Success came too easily to Chambers. He's had everything the world has to offer, and it's not enough for him. He wants to control the will of others. He wants real power and all the unknown pleasures of the Outer Dark. He is a committed member of the Esoterrorist cell and is bankrolling their operations. Many of his friends from out of Town are also Esoterrorists or sympathizers. He's got connections to the higher echelons of the Esoterror movement; this means that the Ordo will want him taken alive at all costs.

ASSOCIATES: Carole Crowe, Dina Chambers, Lenore Danek QUIRKS: Offers the characters luxuries (cigars, expensive whiskeys or wines) to impress them

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES: Architecture, Document Analysis, Flattery, Law, Research GENERAL ABILITIES: Health 6, Preparedness 6 ALERTNESS MODIFIER: 0 STEALTH MODIFIER: 0

PERSONS OF INTEREST: SCHILLING TO LOPEZ



ROSALINDA LOPEZ

HOTEL WORKER

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Mid-20s, dark hair, dark complexion WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS: Rosalinda is a recent immigrant from Mexico (replace her with a more suitable ethnicity if your Town isn't American; in a UK-based game, she might be Polish) who works in the local hotel. She's rapidly become absolutely indispensable to Veronica Bayer.

- **POVIC:** Rosalinda is being blackmailed by the Esoterrorist cell. At the start of the campaign, they just use her as an informant, but, once the Ordo investigation begins, the Esoterrorists begin to use Rosalinda to throw forensic investigations off the trail. They train her to harvest hair samples, fibers, skin cells, and fingerprints from hotel rooms, then plant them at crime scenes to hide the real evidence. These false trails may send the player characters off after innocent hotel guests. Once the characters begin to suspect Rosalinda, she'll be eliminated by the enemy.
- INFLUENCEE: Rosalinda's a serial killer. She injects visitors to the hotel with a slow-acting poison so they die several weeks after leaving. Sometimes, she toys with her victims by sending them anonymous letters, pointing out their symptoms and offering them an antidote if they wire her thousands of dollars, but there is no cure for the poison she uses. She creates her poison from a plant that grows only in the Wilderness outside of Town.

ESOTERRORIST: Attention-Seeker. Esoterrorism promises the power and wealth that Rosalinda could never acquire under normal circumstances. As an Esoterrorist, she still serves as an informant and spy in the hotel but also identifies sacrificial victims for the cell. Her demeanor during cell meetings and rituals is completely different to her everyday appearance; at night, when the Membrane tears open and the Esoterrorists call forth their malformed deities, she is a goddess.

ASSOCIATES: Veronica Bayer, Ed Bayer

QUIRKS: She always appears downcast and submissive, and looks down at the floor when talking.

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES: Evidence Collection, Languages,

Occult Studies GENERAL ABILITIES: Filch 4, Health 5, Surveillance 6 ALERTNESS MODIFIER: 0 STEALTH MODIFIER: 0

EXTERNAL FORCES

The Ordo Veritatis briefing on p. 85 introduces two cryptic NPCs. Bring these in as visitors to the Town — or, optionally, they can be revealed to be residents of the Town. The Troubleshooter can be used as a threat in the early stages of the campaign, giving the characters a threat to focus on instead of the still-nebulous Esoterrorist cell. The Sculptor can be brought in to raise the stakes in the final sessions of the campaign — her arrival heralds the endgame.

THE TROUBLESHOOTER:

- travels widely
- is adept at making problems vanish and sorting out problematic Esoterrorist cells
- may not be an Esoterrorist; he could be a mercenary or criminal contractor
- If he's a local, good candidates are Fr. Jones or Douglas Eddington

THE SCULPTOR:

- ▶ is an accomplished sorcerer
- has an interest in art
- has contacts within the Ordo
- If local, potential candidates are Lenore Danek or Rosalinda Lopez

HIS AWFUL PLACE

STATION DUTY

PERHAPS BECAUSE OF THE MALIGNANT INFLUENCE OF THE OUTER Dark, the Town is subjective. Its geography and history are mutable. It may be a small town in the Midwest, or a rainsoaked logging town in the Pacific Northwest, or a quaint, quiet English town. Instead of describing every location in Town, this chapter presents a few key places that are tied to specific NPCs and rounds off with "stock footage" descriptions of generic yet atmospheric places.

Each place is presented in two modes: neutral and sinister. Use the neutral description for ordinary places or safe havens, or places where the horror is hidden. Use the sinister description to build tension or foreshadow horror.

KEY LOCATIONS

These locations are present in every version of the Town.

POLICE STATION

The Town's police station is a squat red-brick building on the main street. The public entrance is through a set of double doors in a pillared porch; criminals and staff go in an entrance at the back, by the car park. Inside, the ground floor contains the reception desk, an interview room, the equipment locker (tools, all-weather clothing, hazard signs, riot gear, and a locked cabinet of firearms), and the cells. Upstairs, there's the captain's office, meeting rooms, records, and the dispatch office. Typically, there are three police officers plus clerical staff on duty during the day. The station is supposed to be staffed at night, but they rarely bother doing so.

- **NEUTRAL:** You wait on an old wooden bench and look at yellowing posters about public safety. The clatter of a manual typewriter can be heard from behind the desk. One of the police officers offers you a coffee while you wait, and you get the impression that the gears of justice grind pretty slow around here. A phone rings, and you eavesdrop on a one-sided conversation about a tree that's growing over a property line. The officer assures the caller that the tree is their top priority right now, and it looks like he means it.
- SINISTER: You're told to wait, and you sit on an old wooden bench. There's a reddish stain where blood has soaked into the wood. You can hear braying laughter coming from somewhere in the back of the station, but the officers ignore you. The only concession to modern policing is the security camera that stares remorselessly down at you, as if waiting for you to make trouble.

JAKE'S PLACE

Jake's Place (proprietor: Jake Henshaw, p. 114) is the Town's oldest and largest bar/restaurant. It's a rambling, eccentric place — it started out as a small bar, but Jake's bought several adjoining buildings over the years and knocked through the walls to expand the premises, so there are lots of booths, private rooms, and half-hidden alcoves for private conversations. Upstairs, there's a lounge and a half-dozen rooms for rent, although these are normally taken by staff from out of Town.

Jake's place serves food as well as alcohol. The walls are crammed with memorabilia, mostly photos of regulars, sporting heroes, and strange carvings made from driftwood. Ruling over this kingdom of sawdust and neon is Jake himself. These days, it's more likely to be one of his army of nephews behind the bar, while Jake runs the place from his office on the top floor.

There are regular invite-only poker games on the upper floors, and persistent rumors claim that Jake runs or has run a brothel out of the bar.

- NEUTRAL: Jake's Place feels like someone stuck a bar across the living room of a big family home. It's warm and homey. Stairs and archways lead off to other cavernous rooms. The smell of fried chicken wends past moose heads and faded photos of faded baseball stars on the wall. Off in another room, someone just put "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" on the jukebox.
- **SINISTER:** The bar's crowded. It's too hot, too loud in here to think straight. The place is clearly a Frankenstein's monster of cobbled-together rooms linked by stairs and archways, so you're not sure where anything is in here. All the locals seem right at home, though; they watch you suspiciously as you push through the crowd.

TOWN SQUARE

At the very center of Town, there's an open green space. The city hall and other important buildings face onto it. The square's used for meetings, rallies, and fairs from time to time, but normally people just sit there in the shade of the old trees and watch the world go by. Brass plaques in the square commemorate past wars and tragedies, and there's a sundial in the middle of the square. Sometimes, the shadow stays still when the sun moves, and, once, the police had to restrain a vagrant who screamed about the occult geometries of the square and how the paths and plaques form a map of the secret world.

NEUTRAL: At the center of Town, you find a little oasis of calm. There's a grassy square right in the middle, lined with treeshaded benches. Kids play around the edges of the park but never cross into the middle. SINISTER: In the heart of the Town, there's a hole. Intellectually, you know it's just a small square of patchy green grass, surrounded by old white benches, but, emotionally, it feels like you're standing on the edge of a terrifying chasm. Your stomach churns, and you can't shake the overwhelming impression that, if you tried to cross that square, you'd fall into the depths of the earth and be lost forever.

BAYER'S HOTEL

Bayer's Hotel is the Town's largest hotel. It's situated a short distance outside Town, overlooking whatever passes for the local tourist attraction. From outside, it's a blocky whitewashed structure that might have looked modern in the 1970s, but now it's an eyesore. As well as several dozen hotel rooms, there's a small restaurant and a banqueting hall / conference room. The hotel is rarely busy these days. It's run by **Veronica Bayer** (p. 106); the regular staff includes her son **Ed** (p. 112) and **Rosalinda Lopez** (p. 117).

- **NEUTRAL:** The hotel's decor is like a fossil from the seventies. The lobby is mostly empty, except for a pair of retirees browsing through a rack of tourist leaflets and maps. The whole place is comfortably faded, like a pair of well-worn shoes. A perky concierge shows you to your rooms, leading you down a corridor decorated with paintings of scenic vistas in the area. The rooms are fairly clean and spacious, with views out over the countryside.
- SINISTER: The hotel is run down. Paint peels from the walls, and there's a smell of damp in the air. The sullen receptionist takes your details in a way that reminds you of a police interview, then shoves a key attached to a big wooden block across the counter. The rooms are down the corridor and on the left, she tells you. This place is a maze, with corridors leading off in all directions. You don't see any other guests, but you hear them through the thin walls — low murmurs, angry sex, shouted arguments, and someone crying quietly.

DOCTOR'S OFFICE

Near the center of town is a cottage that was converted into the local doctor's office decades ago. **Anne Wallace** (p. 107) is the Town's doctor, like her father and grandfather before her. **June Felton** (p. 112) works as her receptionist.

- **NEUTRAL:** The waiting room is crammed with old magazines and even older patients. The receptionist knows everyone, and they gossip as they wait. Inside, the office smells musky. There's a rolltop desk stuffed with notes, a pair of comfortable chairs, and a bed next to a folded-up floral screen. A battered black bag full of medical instruments and cure-alls sits on the desk, next to a bust of a bearded physician.
- **SINISTER:** For a small-town practice, this place is remarkably well equipped. The waiting room is full of phthisic pensioners waiting for death, but the doctor's surgery is sterile, impersonal, and fitted with modern diagnostic equipment. There is a steel bed with a plastic mattress, a computer desk, and two locked cabinets with smoked glass doors. You can

dimly make out the outline of the contents through the glass; one is full of small pill bottles, but the other contains larger specimen jars.

VALUEMART

The hulking warehouse-like Valuemart department store set up shop in Town about ten years ago, and since then it's driven several local stores out of business. The Valuemart sells everything from food and clothing to farm tools and toys, and provides low-wage employment for a sizeable chunk of the Town. Several local business owners, notably **Lori Wilson** (p. 113), loathe the Valuemart and have lodged several legal appeals against its presence.

- NEUTRAL: It's an anonymous department store; step through the doors, and you could be in any of a thousand similar stores. Still, this is the place to be if the zombie apocalypse happens. Between the grocery section full of food, the sporting goods, and the farm equipment, you're confident of finding whatever you need to survive here.
- **SINISTER:** The Valuemart squats like a concrete toad by the side of the road. Gray-faced shop drones shamble down the aisles, restocking the shelves with cheap plastic crap and processed food. Everything's cheap but valueless and meaningless.

STOCK FOOTAGE

Many groups find large sections of text read verbatim to be distancing and tune out after a few lines. That said, it is not always easy to come up with an evocative description on the spur of the moment. Therefore, this section presents pieces of stock footage that can be dropped into a description on the fly.

Players are also conditioned to attach greater importance to anything written in a game text. If the GM is reading from the book, they assume it must be part of the plot and therefore they are on the right track. Use this assumption to guide or mislead the players, as needed.

The stock footage descriptions assume, where necessary, a North American Town. With a few adjustments, they can be used to describe Towns in other countries.

ARRIVING IN TOWN

- **NEUTRAL:** The late afternoon sunlight flows like warm honey over brightly painted buildings. A man lazily clips the hedges along the square in front of the hall. The streets are lined with small, welcoming stores, and you can hear country music coming from the open door of a bar, mixed with the laughing of children from the nearby playground. It feels like coming home.
- **SINISTER:** Abandoned buildings with boarded-up windows stare at you like hollow-eyed skulls. This town is dying, rotting from within. A man scowls at you as he cuts his hedge, watching your every move suspiciously. A trio of teenagers lounges on a street corner, smoking and laughing. Crushed beer cans and broken glass litter the ground nearby.

DINER

- NEUTRAL: The smell of coffee and frying bacon hits you when you walk in the door. You didn't realize you were ravenous. The diner's got a stainless steel counter along one wall that reflects the electric advertising signs overhead. The rest of this room is taken up with tables and booths. It's big enough for you to talk privately but small enough so you don't feel ignored by the staff. Locals eat and chat and laugh easily; this place is clearly the hub of the small town.
- SINISTER: When you enter the crowded diner, conversation ceases for a moment before picking up again. Hostile eyes watch you. This is clearly a place for locals, and you're not wanted here. The staff members ignore you for as long as they can before finally deigning to take your order. A mangy old dog slinks up to you and insistently paws your leg for scraps. You can see its ribs under its thin, scarred hide; the beast is half-starved.

RUN-DOWN FARM

- **NEUTRAL:** Cattle low as your car bounces down the dirt track towards the farm. There are pastures on either side of the track, and up ahead you see a small knot of farm buildings. There's a somewhat dilapidated wooden farmhouse, several low sheds and outbuildings, and a red-painted barn behind those. Stacked against one wall are crates of produce destined for the local farmer's market. You can hear the noise of a tractor in the distance.
- SINISTER: The dirt track leading to the farm is narrow and overgrown. The only animal you see is a single old bull, who snorts angrily as you pass. The farmhouse itself is a run-down, ramshackle place. Old plastic drums and empty sacks litter the yard. The farmhouse is surrounded by smaller outbuildings, and you notice that every one of the sheds has a heavy door secured with a brand-new padlock.

WOODS

- **NEUTRAL:** Tall trees stretch high above you. Dappled sunlight cascades through the leaves. This is primal woodland, old growth. Birds flit through the foliage overhead. It feels peaceful here, simpler, as though you've taken a step away from the chaos of modern life.
- **SINISTER:** The thick undergrowth makes moving difficult. Creepers and nettles block your path. The trees are tangled together, creating an oppressive, fetid atmosphere. Some of the trees are clearly dead, but they're kept upright by the branches of their neighbors as a ghastly mockery of life. The unrecognizable corpse of an animal swarms with maggots nearby.

LAKE

NEUTRAL: Birds skim the rippled-mirror blue surface of the lake. Across the water, on the far bank, an angler casts his line into the water and is rewarded by the eager splashing of fish. A sudden wild gust blows across the lake, whipping the ripples into spray. SINISTER: The irregularly shaped lake is like a wound in the ground, as if some force tore a chunk out of the landscape that subsequently flooded. Dead fish bob on the surface of the stagnant dark water. A cold wind blows across the lake, as if the place was trying to drive you away. Across the water, on the far bank, a figure dressed in yellow waterproofs watches you.

BACK ROADS

- **NEUTRAL:** The back roads around town are a narrow tree-lined maze, where unexpected discoveries are around every corner. In searching for your destination, you pass several well-maintained and freshly painted houses, an orchard, a small wooded park, a little car-repair place, and a sign pointing you towards the oldest house in the county.
- **SINISTER:** The back roads around town are a maze. Narrow roads hemmed in by thick thorny hedges make it impossible to tell where you're going, and there are no signposts. Your mobile phone signal dies quickly. You could get lost very, very easily out here.

GAS STATION

- **NEUTRAL:** There's a small gas station slash general store at the side of the road. The windows are crammed with posters and advertisements for local businesses. There are stacked cords of firewood by the door. Inside, the shelves are crammed with an astonishing cornucopia. You can pick up anything from paint and cleaning supplies to wine and fresh food. The owner stands proudly behind the counter, ready to help you.
- **SINISTER:** The gas station consists of a pair of rusted pumps outside a small house. There is a tiny wooden office by the pumps, but it is unattended except for thousands of spiders. After a minute, a dim light flickers on inside the house, and a slovenly man wearing oil-spotted overalls emerges. He hawks up a gobbet of thick black phlegm and spits it at your feet. It's his way of saying hello.

SCHOOL

- **NEUTRAL:** The smell of chalk takes you back to your own childhoods. The school is small but lively, cramming dozens of local kids into the few classrooms. The walls are covered with paintings and posters that can best be described as "enthusiastic." Inside, a teacher keeps control of her class with a practiced word of command.
- **SINISTER:** The school is surrounded by a high fence, like a pen for wild animals. The building is larger than it needs to be; unused empty classrooms give the impression of having been abandoned in haste. There are a few pictures on the walls, scrawled images that remind you of Rorschach blots in red poster paint.



CHURCH

- **NEUTRAL:** A white-walled church stands in the center of town. The doors are thrown open in welcome, revealing the brightly lit interior. The straight lines and lack of decoration should make the place seem sterile but are actually somehow calming, reflective, and tranquil.
- **SINISTER:** The church is old and bowed. The spire gives the impression of being on the verge of toppling towards you, no matter where you stand. Inside, there's a sickeningly strong smell of incense that masks everything else. Behind the altar is a single round window that reminds you of a watching eye.

JUNKYARD

- **NEUTRAL:** Piles of scrap metal and the stripped-clean carcasses of old cars surround you. The junkyard owner and a customer are picking through spare parts with the enthusiasm of kids on a scavenger hunt. A junkyard dog, who obviously never got the memo about being savagely territorial, bounds up to play with you.
- **SINISTER:** The yard is pockmarked with pools of rust-colored water. Stacks of old cars loom over you. In the gloom, piles of scrap metal seem to take on unlikely life; a hand made of tangled engine parts tries uselessly to gather wires and tubes like spilled guts. What was once a drift of scrap metal is now a trio of rusted scarecrows. Somewhere off behind a pile of junk, a dog scents your presence and starts barking loud enough to wake the dead.

PLAYGROUND

- **NEUTRAL:** Swings, a roundabout, and a climbing frame compose the attractions of this little playground. Smiling parents attentively watch their rug rats clamber over each other. Nearby, there is a basketball court where a solitary teenager idly shoots hoops.
- SINISTER: There's something unwholesome about a playground at night. The swings creak in the wind, and the climbing frame is like a gallows in the moonlight. Nearby, a pale teenager shoots hoops in the little basketball court, like Sisyphus on sports day.

THE ENEMY

STATION DUTY

THE IDENTITIES OF THE ESOTERRORISTS IN TOWN GET DETERMINED over the course of play. Once the player characters identify the initial Esoterrorist suspects, it is time for the Game Master to start thinking about the rest of the cell. Who are the other Esoterrorists in the cell? What do they want? Do they want power — either to maintain their secret control of the Town or to enslave the rest of the locals? Are they devoted to perverse pleasures, treating the Town as their monstrous playground? Are they religious fanatics, worshipping creature of the Outer Dark? Would-be sorcerers? Do they want revenge on the Town?

ANCIENT CELL: The cell's been here for years, maybe centuries. It has been a part of the Town since the beginning. The Esoterrorists run the Town and come from the old, respected families. They've got their tendrils into every part of life in Town, and there's no escaping them. They're everywhere and they control everyone. This triumph is decades in the planning, and the player characters have no hope of stopping their grand design.

Ancient cells have well-established meeting places and rituals; they have likely adopted ceremonial trappings from other occult groups like the Freemasons. The cell has a clear line of succession, with new members being groomed to replace older ones.

Variants:

- The cell members are immortal.
- The Town was *founded* by the Esoterrorists in the first place.
- The Town is riddled with tunnels and secret passages created by the cell.
- NEW CELL: The cell is young and vigorous. A newcomer to the Town brought the secrets of Esoterrorism and recruited like-minded locals to form the cell, or someone in Town independently discovered Esoterrorist techniques. The cell has only a few months' head start on the Ordo but is less hidebound and more agile than a more established cell. New cells are hard to predict; on the one hand, they're more likely to fall prey to infighting and to make mistakes, but their members are generally quick to react and improvise. New cells also aggressively recruit new members; this can give the PCs a way to infiltrate the cell but also means that the odds against them increase as the enemy grows in number. *Variants:*
 - At the start of the game, there is no Esoterrorist cell in Town — it forms at the same time as the player characters begin their investigation.
 - The previous cell was wiped out by heroic Townsfolk, who left clues about their desperate struggle against the darkness.

EVIL MASTERMIND: A single powerful Esoterrorist sits at the head of the cell; everyone else in the cell is either a new and inexperienced recruit or is being controlled or blackmailed in some fashion. Defeating the mastermind will destroy the cell, but getting to the mastermind is hard. The mastermind works through its agents and never exposes itself directly. The player characters should encounter the mastermind in its "civilian" identity; the revelation that the NPC they've trusted all along is in fact the villain comes at the end of the campaign.

Variants:

- The mastermind is disguised, and the cell members do not know its real identity.
- The mastermind is a puppet of the real villain.
- ► The mastermind does not live in Town.
- The mastermind isn't human.

DELUDED: Some or all of the Esoterrorists have no idea who they are working for or what Esoterror is. They believe the conspiracy has some other goal. This cell structure mimics whatever organization the Esoterrorists' dupes think they're part of. For example, if the cell is hiding within the Town's police force, then the cell is organized along the same lines as the police. The Esoterrorists adopt jargon from their surrogate to describe their own activities, so the police cell might refer to a summoning as a "609." Other possible organizations for the Esoterrorists to "cuckoo" in Town include the following:

- ► the school
- ► the church
- local government
- a hunting lodge
- an art class

Variants:

- The cell is a criminal organization.
- Some of the cell members believe their goals are benevolent.
- No one in the cell knows anything about Esoterrorism, but, by accident, they have recreated Esoterror techniques or are weakening the Membrane.
- **SPLITTERS:** Two rival cells in Town fight over the prize. Pick a different structure for each cell Ancient Cell / New Cell is the obvious choice, with the new cell schisming off from its hidebound parent. The cells both want to bring about the ultimate triumph of the Esoterrorists by bringing down the Membrane but use different methods of doing so. The player characters may be able to play the cells off against each other.

Variants:

- One or both cells come from outside Town.
- ▶ The cells are unaware of each other.

TOWN COUNCIL: The cell runs the Town. All the Town's authorities (official bureaucracy, police) work for or are part of the cell. This gives the Esoterrorists complete influence over official channels. Their meetings take place in city hall, and the destruction of society and sanity is paid for by local taxpayers.

This style of cell is easy to spot — the Town's authority figures are likely to be high on the player characters' suspect list from the start — but hard to eradicate. It casts the player characters as occult insurgents fighting against an entrenched power. Getting aid from outside the Town is especially difficult in this setup, because the characters are effectively fighting against the government.

Variants:

- ► The Town is in danger, and the Esoterrorists have made bargains with dark powers to protect it.
- ▶ The Town was constructed by the Esoterrorists.
- Everyone in Town who isn't a player character is an Esoterrorist.
- **OUTSIDERS:** The cell is on the fringes of society. Most of the members appear powerless or disenfranchised to mundane observers. It's a conspiracy of retired grandmothers and vagrants, of bored teenagers and traveling salesmen. You've walked past every member of the cell a dozen times and ignored them. The cell meets on the streets and communicates through graffiti and sigils scrawled onto walls.

This cell is very hard to find, but the Esoterrorists have no mundane pawns to use and so must fight back directly using costly rituals or by risking themselves. Such cells are run by the most charismatic or powerful Esoterrorist, or else they are anarchistic, with each member pursuing their own crazed dreams.

Variants:

- The cell is literally outside of Town they have a fortified compound.
- The cell is motivated by revenge.
- ► The cell has criminal connections.

INHUMANS: Some or all of the members of the cell are creatures of the Outer Dark. They might be possessed by alien horrors or wear masks of human flesh to disguise their true forms. Such creatures may communicate through supernatural means, and their hierarchy may be incomprehensible to humans. If so, then the main avenue for investigating the cell is "how do the creatures maintain the deception of being human despite their alien needs?" A pack of vampires must feed; a branch of the Practice needs human test subjects. Follow the bodies and you'll find the cell. Variants:

- The cell spreads by replacing humans with duplicates or by possessing new hosts.
- ▶ There are inhumans in Town, but they're not part of the cell.

Variants:

- ▶ Their bloodline gives them supernatural powers.
- They transform into monsters as they mature.
- ▶ Some of the Local Resident PCs are part of the bloodline.

SCHEMES

What does the cell want? What is it working towards? The player characters should gradually uncover the enemy's schemes over the course of the campaign, leading up to a climactic confrontation where they use what they have learned to thwart the Esoterrorists' schemes. Five potential schemes are described below; as always in improvised games, the GM should pick the scheme that builds on established events. Be ready to change schemes if that would make for a better story.

Each of the sample schemes describes the following:

- the ultimate goal of the Esoterrorist cell
- what they need to do
- encounters and clues for the players
- the climactic confrontation where the player characters thwart the scheme (or die trying)

THE RITUAL

THE GOAL: Tear down the Membrane and bring the Outer Dark into our reality.

THE METHODOLOGY: Use a powerful ritual that combines various occult items and human sacrifice.

ENCOUNTERS & CLUES:

- The characters intercept an Esoterrorist courier carrying components for the ritual.
- The Esoterrorists need mass sacrifice to fuel the ritual, so they organize a festival or other gathering in Town as bait.
- The Ordo reports that a senior Esoterrorist suspect has been sighted en route to the Town. The player characters are ordered to capture and interrogate or, if necessary, assassinate the sorcerer before he reaches the local cell.
- Occult Studies: This book of chaos magick is mostly bunk, but there are marginal notes that imply whoever made them was a skilled sorcerer — maybe even skilled enough to work real magic if conditions were right.

BLOODLINE: All of the members of the Esoterrorist cell are related. The cell likely follows the same structure as a family — the cell's disposable agents are the ones connected by marriage, not blood, while the oldest members of the family run the conspiracy. The player characters' investigation comes to center on tracing bloodlines and secret relatives.



- Architecture: The Town's major buildings are aligned with ley lines... and so are these recent murders. With a few more data points of either kind, we might be able to calculate the focal point of whatever they're doing here.
- Forensic Anthropology: The body was killed by a stab wound to the chest that pierced the heart. The incision in the abdomen was made and the intestines and other organs were removed postmortem.
- Interrogation: Under pressure, the suspect cracks and admits feeding human remains to his dogs to dispose of the physical evidence.
- THE CLIMAX: As the Esoterrorist ritual takes hold and reality breaks down, the player characters must sabotage a key element of the incantation and rescue the sacrifices.

THE SUMMONING

- THE GOAL: Summon a vastly powerful creature of Unremitting Horror through the breach in the Membrane, heralding the end of the world.
- THE METHODOLOGY: Each creature brought through from the other side further weakens the Membrane, so all the Esoterrorists need to do is keep enacting the summoning spells... and make sure the summoned creatures are kept fed and contained.

ENCOUNTERS & CLUES:

- ► An unreliable witness rambles about monster sightings outside the Town.
- A creature of Unremitting Horror terrorizes the populace. After defeating it, the characters find clues suggesting that it broke out of a cage.
- A sensitive in Town dreams of impending doom.
- Forensic Accounting: That out-of-the-way farm is spending an awful lot on raw meat.
- Cop Talk: The dog warden admits that there have been a lot of dead dogs around Town. Their bodies look like something big chewed them up.
- ► *Trivia:* Hey, that guy's Lewis Colevan, famed cryptozoologist! I've seen him on the Internet! Maybe he's here to hunt Bigfoot!
- Astronomy: I don't want to alarm anyone, but the stars over Town have been... moving. I don't know what we're looking at overhead, but it's not our sky. Something's pushing through from beyond.
- THE CLIMAX: The characters must stop the final summoning ritual by evading or defeating the Esoterrorists and all the summoned monsters encountered in previous episodes.

TOWN OF WOE

- THE GOAL: Weaken the local Membrane sufficiently to widen the breach.
- THE METHODOLOGY: The Membrane is sustained by the beliefs and convictions of humanity. The Esoterror movement aims to destroy humanity's conception of an ordered, comprehensible reality and replace it with a disturbing, incomprehensible unreality. The local cell intends to do this on a local level, plunging the Town into chaos and undermining the social order to weaken the Membrane.

ENCOUNTERS & CLUES:

- Seemingly trivial disputes and feuds between Townsfolk escalate to an absurd degree.
- The Town is hit by a series of disasters. Local businesses fail; local heroes are discredited or destroyed. Everything that is good and worthwhile about the Town is attacked.
- The characters investigate possible Esoterrorist activity that turns out to be just ordinary crime. The police arrest the criminals but release them soon afterwards on a technicality. Investigating, the characters discover that some element in the police is deliberately fostering crime in Town.
- Textual Analysis: This page of scrawled paranoid rantings was written by an obviously disturbed individual... but this second page was written by someone who was trying to instill paranoia and confusion. It's classic psych-ops propaganda. Translate it into Arabic, and you could drop it on Tripoli.
- Chemistry: The Town's drinking water is dosed with a cocktail of drugs — primarily mescaline, but there are synthetic hormones and other chemicals in there, too. Even shortterm exposure will cause hallucinations and psychosis.
- Research: Look at these figures. Crime in Town is up 800%. Drug cases, up 600%. Suicide rate is ten times higher than it was five years ago. Cancers, up 75% — and that's just diagnosed, there could be more. This place should be a black spot on every government report, but no one's noticed.
- ► *Electronic Surveillance:* This building's bugged. They're watching us. They're watching everyone in Town.
- **THE CLIMAX:** As the Membrane begins to fail, the characters must rally the Townsfolk against the Esoterrorists. The characters must make everyone believe in the Town again.

MAP THE BREACH

- **THE GOAL:** Determine the exact dimensions and nature of the local breach in the Membrane, so that it can be scientifically studied and replicated elsewhere. As this could tip the balance of power towards them, the Esoterrorists respond with lethal force to any interference by the player characters.
- THE METHODOLOGY: Conduct an elaborate survey of the area around Town, using a combination of science and strange rituals. Test the strength of the Membrane in different areas using summoned horrors. Identify the forces that have weakened the Membrane.

ENCOUNTERS & CLUES:

- ► The characters spot a surveyor's van at various places around Town. Over time, they come to realize that the van is visiting the same places they are — after every unusual event or monster attack, the van shows up a few hours later to gather measurements.
- One particular homestead outside Town (like Tony Schilling's place; see p. 116) is the dead center of the breach. The characters deal with an unnatural event there and discover the unusual conditions here. Soon afterwards, Esoterrorist agents show up to survey the place, leading to a firefight and revelation of the Esoterrorists' aims.
- An Esoterrorist experiment attempts to artificially weaken the Membrane, but it goes awry. Reality in part of Town collapses, making dreams into reality and giving birth to nightmares.
- Archaeology: Someone's been digging here and taking samples. They've done a survey, too, by the looks of things. It would all be perfectly innocent, only... who uses solid silver digging tools, sample jars lined with scabs, and crystal pendants in their theodolites?
- Impersonate: The best way to be invisible in the modern age is to wear a bright orange worker's vest and drive a van. People ignore maintenance people and city council workers. I know disguises — and those guys in the van with the orange vests are definitely in disguise.
- ► Data Retrieval: Analyzing the hard drive we captured, I found extremely detailed maps of the area around Town and, overlaid on them, measurements of the Membrane strength over time. And it's dropping like a stone.
- **THE CLIMAX:** The Esoterrorists attempt to widen the breach once more. The characters have to use the information they've acquired to identify the psychic pressure points that the enemy is using to weaken the Membrane, then go there and stop the Esoterrorists before the whole Town falls into the abyss.

AS BELOW, SO ABOVE

- **THE GOAL:** Using symbolic magic, connect the Town to the whole country and bring down the Membrane everywhere.
- THE METHODOLOGY: Through a series of symbolic rituals, people and places in Town are connected to their national counterparts. The mayor is made into a proxy for the president; the Town's farms are tied to the nation's agricultural production; buildings in Town are linked to key locations and landmarks across the country. The Town becomes a microcosm of the country.

ENCOUNTERS & CLUES:

- Several people in Town fall sick. Medical investigations reveal that they are suffering from blood poisoning caused by mixing blood types. The Esoterrorists are injecting blood samples from celebrities and national politicians into local targets to strengthen the link.
- Weather becomes erratic as the Town's environment reflects that of the whole country. It gets noticeably warmer as you walk from north to south in Town (or south to north if the game is set in the southern hemisphere).
- A creature from the Outer Dark attacks the Town and simultaneously, natural disasters hit the whole country.
- Trivia: There's an odd correspondence between national events and stuff going on in Town.
- Photography: All the surveillance photos are bizarrely doubled, as if a second image is overlaid onto the actual subject. Analyzing the photos suggests that the second pictures are shots of well-known tourist attractions across the country.

THE CLIMAX: The characters must turn the Esoterrorists' scheme against them, by symbolically aligning themselves with the civil authorities and claiming the power and authority to defend the nation from its enemies.



This CHAPTER CONTAINS SEVEN SHORT ARTICLES FROM THE TOWN'S local newspaper (published by **Malcolm Chambers**, p. 116). Each article is presented in two forms. First, there's the article as it appears in the newspaper. Second, there is a version covered in crazed scribblings by someone in Town who knows that something strange is going on. The player characters find these annotated clippings at crime scenes, or shoved through a letterbox, or discarded on the street for the player characters to find. **"Crazy Mary"** (p. 111) or the Esoterrorist take on **Earl Calloway** (p. 115) are obvious candidates for the author of these cryptic missives, but they might be the work of anyone in Town who has cracked under the psychic strain — or disinformation spread by the Esoterrorist cell as a "honeypot" for the investigators.

After each document, there are notes on how to use it in the game and possible interpretations of the text.

SECOND MEETING To debate planning application

They crawl out of graves to bury their secrets, build blind towers to the sky to hide them from the sight of god the injustice of it it makes me bleed.

There will be a second public meeting this coming Thursday to debate the controversial plan to build a large commercial/ residential unit close to the heart of town. The plan, which was put forward by a consortium of investors led by Mr. Malcolm Chambers (who, it should be noted, is also the publisher of this newspaper) was passed by the town council last year. Objections were raised by Ms. Lori Wilson, among others, who argued that a new development of this size was not in keeping with the town's general appearance and feared the local businesses might suffer if the new commercial units attracted large chain stores. Ms. Wilson told this reporter, "I'm glad that the mayor has listened to the voters and put this preposterous proposal up for public debate again. The people of this town should have their voices heard, instead of being steamrollered by big business."

I know Chambers I saw what he keeps in his cellars he sends hounds with eyes to stalk me but they will not find me buzzing insects I spit on you

When asked for a comment, Mr. Chambers declined to give one, citing his wish to keep his real estate business separate from the affairs of this publication. Another investor in the consortium did offer their opinion on the proposal, saying, "This town needs men of vision to make something happen. The new building will bring renewal and prosperity."

fear the man of vision

never trust sellers

If the proposal goes ahead, several old houses (most of which have already been purchased by the consortium) will be bulldozed to make way for the new construction, which will have space for six commercial units and twelve luxury apartments on the upper floors.

The first meeting to discuss the same proposal had to be canceled due to disruption by troublemakers. The police have warned that they will not tolerate any further "antics and shouting" at important public meetings.

I watched them they were sent paid agents provocation roaring drunk against the sky how many of them made it home I wonder I followed them until they went into the trees

there are insects under the skin of the world

- If the planning permission goes through, then anyone who owns one of the old houses around the proposed site stands to make a considerable amount of money by selling up to the developers.
- Malcolm Chambers (p. 116) and Lori Wilson (p. 113) are well known citizens of the Town. Chambers's business partners are mostly from out of Town but could also include Jake Henshaw (p. 114) or Veronica Bayer (p. 106).
- Cop Talk or Streetwise lets the characters find out that the last public meeting was disrupted by drunken shouting from either "Crazy Mary" (p. 111) or Earl Calloway (p. 115).
- What's hidden in or under the houses scheduled for demolition? Alternatively, the new development could be part of an Esoterrorist plot to alter the magical geometry of the Town.

ANNOTATIONS:

- If Malcolm Chambers keeps anything in his cellars, his daughter Dina (p. 115) may know about it.
- "Hounds with eyes" might be a reference to torture dogs (see p. 64 or *The Book of Unremitting Horror*, p. 131). It's unclear if the writer is spitting insects or spitting *on* the insects; either way, it might not be a metaphor.
- "Man of vision" could indicate a sensitive.
- "Sellers" may refer to those who sell or to Officer Sellers (p. 106).
- Only one person disrupted the previous public meeting, so the writer's reference to multiple agents is a mystery. He followed them until they vanished into the woods possibly merging with the trees.

SECOND MEETING TO DEBATE PLANNING APPLICATION

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STATION DUTY

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THEY CRAWL OUT OF GRAVES TO BURY THER SECOND MEETING TO DEBAT E PLANNING APPLICATION There will be second public ERS to THE TD argued that a new development TOWF 0 When asked for a comment! have already purchased by the meeting this coming Theday of this size was not in keeping Mag Chambers Joclined to consortium) will be bulldozed to debate the controver list plan with the towns citing his eeneral giv wish to to make way for the new to build a large commercial/ KNOW appearance and feared the local CHANEERS. construction, which will have r@@tial unit@ose(1) the heart businesses might suffer of the new separate North the attains of the Sace for the contract Kard of town. The plan, which we commercial units attracted large publication that investor in and well's usury apartments on chain stores. Ms. (W)l (told this Differward by a comortium of the construin did offer Their MOT NOT investors 1(d) by Mr.-Malcolm Oporter 'I'm (1) hat the Mayor opinion on the proposal, saying N The first meeting to discuss Chamber (who, it should be has listened to the voters and put this town needs men of vision Sthe same proposal had to be noted, is also the pub (sher of this preposterous proposal up for to make something happen. The cancelled due to distuption by this newspaper) was passed public debate again. The people new building will bring renewal troublemakers The police have and prosperity." by the Town Council last year. of this town should have their Objections were raised by Ms. voices heard, instead of being \leq If the proposal goes ahead, \hat{u} any further antics and showing Lori Wilson, among others, who steamrollered by big brances. I styleral old houses (most of which at important public meetings. WATCHED THEM THE 芝南方 RO ARANG M AGENTS PROVOCATTON -M-ST THE SKY (FOMDINE) NONDA

LOCAL BUSINESSMAN'S LIFE WAS AN INSPIRATION TO ALL

<u>Not dead</u>

The recent passing of Herbert _____ makes one want to reflect upon his or her own life. If each of us were as kind and civic-minded as Herbert was, this would be a better world in which to live.

And he will make of them a better world

Herbert was a lifelong resident of this town. Born in 1953, *18*

the eldest of four siblings, he attended our local schools and took over the family business following his own father's untimely death in 1974. Herbert took pride in his work, and under his care, the business grew and prospered until he was forced to close it for personal reasons in 1997.

Fire lies A.T.C.D. In 1976, Herbert met the love of his life, Annabel, and married her after a whirlwind courtship. Soon afterwards, they were blessed with the first of their children. Life was not always perfect, but family remained deeply important to Herb, and he was rewarded in his last days when his supportive family put differences aside and rallied around him.

Closed casket crawling out like fat yellow worms

Herbert loved this town, declaring it the best place in the world to live. He took a keen interest in local history and was an amateur archaeologist and an expert photographer. He would bring his bulky old camera with him on his regular hikes in the countryside. He remained an avid walker up until his final years, and there is an exhibit of his nature photographs on display in the library. Herb will be missed by his family and friends, but also the town itself, which knew so well the tramp of his heavy boots and echoed back the cheery sound of his whistle. Godspeed, Herb.

There will be more deaths many more deaths fuel for the engine they build I hear it clattering and clanking in the red room always more always hungry she knew took me away from it my angel my savior why now?

- Fill in the blank with a suitable last name for Herbert. He could be the father of a player character or a notable NPC. Suggestions include Henshaw (see Jake Henshaw, p. 114, and Alice Henshaw, p. 110) or Stover (see Harry Stover, p. 114).
- Herbert died of stomach cancer after a long illness. His doctor was Anne Wallace (p. 107).
- Photography or Local Knowledge: Herb's photographs are mostly shots of the area around Town, but a few are unfamiliar landscapes. None of the characters have ever seen those particular places before. Did Herb's wanderings lead him through the Membrane into some otherworld and, if so, can the PCs go there by retracing his steps?
- Note that the name of Herb's wife is different in the two documents. For more on this mystery, see "A Great Time to Get Involved," p. 131.

ANNOTATIONS:

- Is Herb not dead? You could have the characters hear whistling and footsteps to set them on edge — is that Herb come back in some undead form or just a passing traveler?
- The "18" could suggest that Herb was actually born in 1918... or 1853.
- "Fire lies" and "A.T.C.D." are both unexplained.
- If the writer is literal about "them" building an "engine," then Tom West (p. 110) and Earl Calloway (p. 115) know the most about mechanical engineering. The mysterious woman rescued the writer from some difficulty. It could be any female NPC in Town; if you're stuck, Sonia Tate (p. 110) and Lenore Danek (p. 113) are good cryptic choices.

STATION DUTY

LOCAL BUSINESSMAN'S LIFE WAS AN INSPIRATION TO ALL

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In 1976, Herbert met the love of his life, Christine, and married her after a whirlwind courtship. Soon afterwards, they were blessed with the first of their children. Life was not always perfect, but family remained deeply important to Herb, and he was rewarded in his last days when his supportive family put differences aside and rallied around him.

Herbert loved this town, declaring it the best place in the world to live. He took a keen interest in local history and was an amateur archaeologist and an expert photographer. He would bring his bulky old camera with him on his regular hikes in the countryside. He remained an avid walker up until his final years, and there is an exhibit of his nature photographs on display in the library. Herb will be missed by his family and friends, but also the town itself, which knew so well the tramp of his heavy boots and echoed back the cheery sound of his whistle. Godspeed, Herb.



LOCAL NEWS

VANDALS DAMAGE LOCAL PARK

Kinson a good man in good standing with the lodge he died screaming

In an act of unparalleled depravity, unidentified vandals inflicted hundreds of dollars' worth of damage on the Kinson Memorial Park. This little oasis of tranquility was horrifically violated by the criminals, who uprooted trees, trampled shrubs, broke a bench and disturbed the ground throughout the park. The attack took place last night, sometime between 10 p.m. and 7 a.m. No witnesses have yet come forward, but the police appeal to anyone who saw anything unusual to make contact. Investigating officer Ricky Donner said that the police were following several definite lines of inquiry and that finding the vandals was his top priority.

The park is home to the eyeless echo speak to it pay its toll it knows who done it wrong

- The Kinson Memorial Park is a small green space in the middle of Town, surrounded by high walls.
- Albert Kinson was a former mayor of the Town and is remembered fondly by the older residents. Jerry Crowe was his protégé and anointed heir.
- If the player characters get into a fight with Esoterrorists or a monster, they could end up being the vandals responsible for trashing the park. This may result in them being investigated by a crusading journalist from the newspaper.
- The disturbed earth could conceal a buried corpse.

ANNOTATIONS:

- ► The lodge might be a secret society in Town or the Esoterrorist cell.
- The "eyeless echo" is a residue daemon (see The Book of Unremitting Horror, page 91).

A GREAT TIME TO GET INVOLVED

The time is at hand when they shall RIP the caul from the eyes of the world and we shall behold

DARKNESS UNENDING

I have made my piece I have said my prayer I am ready I will be CAST UPON THE POTTERSWHEEL

And enter into chambers

Preparations for the upcoming festival are already under way, but there are still plenty of opportunities to get involved, says Lori Wilson, chairwoman of the organizing committee. The festival will celebrate _____ years of our town and is expected to draw hundreds of spectators. There will be bands, openair dancing, food stalls and other street entertainments, all concluding with impressive fireworks. There will also be talks on the history of the area. Everyone will die. The schedule of events has yet to be finalized, and the organizing committee is looking for more volunteers with fresh ideas to add to the melting pot. Those interested in contributing to this historic celebration should contact Ms. Wilson via this newspaper. *Whore 1 20 3 4*

- Fill in the age of the Town in the blank space the festival celebrates some anniversary of the Town's founding.
- ▶ Lori Wilson's on p. 113.

ANNOTATIONS:

- The first note clearly indicates a threat to the Membrane and may be a clue that the festival coincides with an Esoterrorist plot.
- Has the writer misspelled "peace" or made a fetish? Is the reference to "entering into chambers" supposed to imply the writer is going somewhere, or is it a sexual reference to Malcolm Chambers (p. 116) or Dina Chambers (p. 115)? Or perhaps it implies *possession* of one of them.
- ➤ A is the first letter of the alphabet, T is the 20th, C and D are the third and fourth respectively. A.T.C.D. again.
- Note that the sentence "Everyone will die" is present in the second document but not in the first. This may indicate that there were multiple editions of the newspaper and that the line was inserted by mistake or as a joke in one edition and corrected in a second. Alternatively, one version could be affected by the malign influence of the Outer Dark.



STATION DUTY

VANDALS DAMAGE LOCAL PARK

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Wilson via

LOCAL BOY HAS BRIGHT FUTURE

All will be consumed the bright young flesh burning fat bubbling dripping off the bone chewing and crunching spit us out and eat us again and again and again I see it god I see god put out my eyes

it has him already

High school athlete Ian Rhodes (16) is attracting attention from across the country and even beyond. The young sports star has demonstrated his prowess in a series of recent games, and experts say that he's got a chance of going all the way and embarking on a professional career. Ian's trainer, Tom West, knows all about dreams of glory — everyone recalls Tom's brief but glorious career on the professional circuit. Tom believes that Ian Rhodes could match his accomplishments.

He took money the blood is on his hands I watched him take it bury it still there I spit on him

"He's got the talent and the fitness," says Tom, "and as long as he stays disciplined and keeps his mind on the game, he'll go far."Young Rhodes is expected to be named captain of the team in advance of the upcoming game against the school's traditional rival. Victory in that hard-fought contest could see the team on a course to the county finals.

▶ The trainer, **Tom West**, is described on p. 110.

ANNOTATIONS:

- "It has him already" may imply that either Tom West or Ian Rhodes is possessed or inhuman. Of course, taken with the preceding text, it may imply that the writer is insane.
- "'He took money" a spend of Local Knowledge or Streetwise turns up the rumor that Tom was involved in illegal match fixing by throwing games.

POLICE REFUSE TO COMMENT ON RUMORS

No escape no mercy

At the time of going to print, the police continue to make no comment on the allegation that a dead body was found on the outskirts of town two nights ago. According to the rumors circulating throughout the community, the unnamed deceased was killed by gunshot wounds to the head, chest or back. Some accounts even claim that the body was mutilated or partially burned. Sheriff Eddington refused to take questions from this newspaper, saying only that the police were "looking into several matters arising from recent events" and that he would make "a fuller statement when the situation permits."

Samuelson, 4/2/02 Tate, 6/6/05 Daler, 9/1/07 Brown, 12/4/09

While there are several names on the local registry of missing persons, none of them match the alleged description of

the deceased, who was described as a tall male in his mid-30s. The area where the body may or may not have been found has been sealed off by the police.

My name is writ on water we are all writ on water if we are not in the stone

- You can use this handout after a shootout or if a player character is killed and his body is left behind.
- The strange injuries to the body may be (or conceal) the marks of supernatural creatures.

ANNOTATIONS:

The list of names could be a list of previous victims of the Esoterrorists whose deaths were covered up. The "Tate" could be a relative of Sonia Tate (p. 110).





STATION DUTY



scaled off by the police.

STRESS REDUCTION + HEALING WORKSHOP

Tired? Stressed? Confused? There will be a free introductory workshop on stress relief techniques and meditation in the town hall next Monday evening. Meditation is proven to lower blood pressure and relieve stress. It can also help bring mental clarity. The workshop starts at 8 and should finish around 10.30pm.

Don't trust them they suck your soul and drug you into stupid cow people hollow you out skin you wear you

- ► The workshop is organized by Lenore Radek (p. 113).
- ▶ Alternatively, it's a sisterite plot (see *The Book of Unremitting Horror*, p. 105).

LOCAL NEWS 137 Stress Reduction & Healing There will be a free introductory workshop on stress relief techniques and meditation in the town hall next monday evening. Meditation is proven to lower blood pressure and relieve stress. It can also help bring mental clarity. The workshop starts at 8 and should finish around 10.30pm. Tired? Stressed? Confused? Oldnes the Stress Reduction & Healing このようのとろう riked? Stressed? Confused? - to how Dark trust thigh arbund 10 d There with technic Star Fown men

OPERATION: PROPHET BUNCO

PROPHET BUNCO

HEN A CRACKPOT PREACHER'S APOCALYPTIC PREDICTIONS rage through the worldwide media, the Ordo Veritatis dispatches a team to his hometown of Sequoia City, CA. The mission: curb the damage his doomsday perorations will surely do to the Membrane.

BACKSTORY

Octogenarian evangelist **Dallas Bruhn** has long commanded a small but devoted audience for his radio show, *The Divine Calendar*. For the second time in two decades, he's predicted, according to his own mathematical interpretation of Biblical dates, the coming Rapture, in which all true believers will be lofted into heaven, alive. Then will follow months of tribulation, madness, and violence, culminating in the extinction of the mundane universe about half a year from now. That's the claim, anyway. Ordo agents know otherwise: if the Outer Dark bursts through, there may be tribulation, but there sure as hell won't be no Rapture...

INVESTIGATION TRIGGER

Media Threat Analysis shows a spike in Esoterror keywords around this story. The team is to arrive on site, assess the situation, and shut down any Outer Dark or Esoterror activity before it starts.

SINISTER CONSPIRACY

Bruhn's apocalyptic harangues are motivated by sincere (but mistaken and obsessive) belief. He wouldn't know an Esoterrorist if one set up a lemonade stand in his front yard. However, his stirring of the recurring human fear of eschatological doom, amplified by disproportionate media coverage, has thinned the Membrane in and around Sequoia City.

Taking opportunistic advantage of the growing hysteria around Bruhn's studio headquarters, Esoterror cell leader **Walter Clemons** summons a member of the Host. Once one of these creatures makes it across, it can summon others, leaving Astle to counter-intuitively keep Sequoia City's end-times mania at a fever pitch.

As the Host population grows, they start to feed, sweeping away and dining on the faithful. Their unseen disappearances lead other worshipers to believe that they've been taken up, Rapture style, in an anticipatory wave of the main event. As they track the source of the disappearances, the team must also prevent the media carnival from sparking a panic that could rupture the Membrane throughout the country... or the world.

TRAIL OF CLUES

The agents likely want to begin their investigation by talking to **The Good Reverend**. While at his radio HQ, they may meet, and later attempt to contact, **TheVisionary** (Courtney Purcell), a young woman who can see into the Outer Dark but takes these psychic events as premonitions of the end times. In the parking lot outside they may note the presence of **The Skeptic** (Walter Clemons), a prominent atheist. Aided by a van full of supporters, he has come to the atrically mock end-times believers.

Another young woman, **Victim Zero** (Emily Henkel) seems ill-affected by local events. Although she's hard to reach, a **Reinterview** establishes that she was assaulted by Clemons and company, in what may have been a ritualistic crime. **In the Trees** takes them to the crime scene, where they discover physical evidence of supernatural wrongdoing.

At some point (**The First Disappearance**) Courtney disappears, likely the first in a series of vanishings (**Additional Raptures**) the faithful attribute to a pre-Rapture miracle. **Bones of the Raptured** suggests that they met a significantly less heavenly fate. They've been swept up and devoured by the Host, Outer Dark entities summoned by Clemons to amp up the cognitive dissonance caused by Bruhn's well-intended but destructive prediction.

In **Against the Host** and **Cell Busting**, the agents deal with the threats of ODEs and their Esoterror summoners, respectively. As always, the case ends in a **Veil-Out**.

ANTAGONIST REACTIONS

The cable journalist Jessica Komar (**Newshounds of Sequoia City**) may act as an ally, but her need for sensationalist material could make her an obstacle, especially during the Veil-Out.

In **Attacked!**, the PCs face God-fearing folk who believe that angels (really the Host) want them harmed or dead.

Dread and Swooping Shapes shows you how to send the Host themselves after the agents.

SCENES

THE BRIEFING SCENE TYPE: Introductory

LEADS TO: The Good Reverend

Team members arrive separately at the San Francisco International Airport, where they are met by an uncommunicative driver and hustled one by one to a nondescript chain hotel nearby. They cool their heels in the lobby until the entire team has gathered.

If this is your first session of *The Esoterrorists*, take this opportunity to have the players introduce their characters to one another. Ask where the PCs' respective hometowns are. They arrive in order of their distance from the Bay Area, from closest to furthest.

Ask the players to describe their physical appearance and general demeanor. By default an Ordo agent dresses unobtrusively, somewhere on the sartorial spectrum between traveling businessman and FBI agent. However, players remain free to ascribe any kind of outfit to their characters.

Let the players determine the pace here. If they keep their greetings curt, move it along. If they want to gruffly hip each other to their areas of expertise, that's cool too. Some groups like to ease their way into a series, while others prefer to get down to action and let character details come out in play.

When the last agent arrives, the driver nonverbally indicates that it's time to pile into the van. He drives them through the urban outskirts of South San Francisco, onto the 280 thoroughfare, turning off in a snaking suburban neighborhood.

They pass the famed Fenway Park ball grounds. (Ask if any of the characters are baseball fans.)

Eventually the driver reaches the Pacific Coast Highway, affording a green and stunning view. (Ask the players if any of their characters are noticeably pleased or indifferent to the green expanses of the hilly, forested region between the city and the coast.)

The road turns, tracking the coastline south, until it reaches a bucolic town nestled along the coast. A sign marks it as Sequoia City. (Ask the players if they want to pose any questions about the area. This is a prompt for them to apply their investigative abilities to their first impression of the place. Experienced GUMSHOErs will likely prompt you.)

Law: Regulations against further development of the forested coastline have constrained the town's growth.

Architecture: Its buildings hark back to the 1920s. Sequoia City is a living museum piece, quite a contrast with both San Francisco's counterculture heritage and booming tech industries.

Anthropology: Locals probably define themselves in opposition to the legendarily loose San Francisco vibe. To get along, the team should treat them like small-town folk. Bigcity airs and outsider ways will go down poorly here. On the other hand, demonstrating discomfort with those things may ingratiate you to residents. **Trivia:** Sequoia City has been much in the news lately, as headquarters of the apocalyptic radio preacher Dallas Bruhn. (Recount the information given above, under "Backstory.")

[In case you're wondering, Sequoia City is fictional.]

The driver takes the team to a fraying family-style restaurant on the outskirts of town. Mr. Verity waits for them at a back table.

This Mr. Verity is a portly, short-bearded man in his midforties. His anonymous suit tugs at him uncomfortably. He looks more like a genial IT guy than the handler for a team of occultbusting secret agents. In fact, he may look more like one (or more) of the players than any of the characters do. Despite his casual tone, he projects confidence as he lays out their rather sketchy brief.

This case was generated by Media Threat Analysis. (When this gets to the Q&A stage, you may want to flip to p. 38 to supply the players with the information bulleted there. If the concept still seems unclear to the players, explain what their characters already understand: media attention plus apocalyptic panic equals a good probability of Outer Dark trouble.)

Nothing supernatural or even criminal has happened so far. After crunching through the media reports generated by Bruhn's apocalypse story, the computer report basically came up as "I have a bad feeling about this."

The group's starting orders: hang around and see if any shit goes down — and, if it does, put an end to it and veil it out.

Apocalyptic hysteria is nothing new in human history. It almost always thins the Membrane.

Over the century or so of its existence, the Ordo has dispatched teams to hotbeds of end-times mania as a matter of routine.

The Ordo has no proof that Bruhn is Esoterror-backed. But it wouldn't be the first time a charismatic religious figure turned out to be a lackey of the Outer Dark.

Unless there are further questions, it's time for the crew to get going, establish a credible cover, find out what's going on in the community, and ready themselves for trouble.

According to Bruhn, the Rapture begins in four days. (Use the real current date as your starting point.)

Mr. Verity closes by giving the PC with the highest Cop Talk (break ties with die rolls) an FBI badge. Standard protocol applies: the user should exercise discretion in its use. He can deploy it to badge witnesses and otherwise gain necessary access, but can't make arrests or attract guns-blazing attention to the agency.

The character with the highest Forensic Anthropology gets an SMS code. If texted to a dead-drop number, Ordo functionaries will arrange temporary privileges at the county morgue.

Players new to GUMSHOE may ask what other equipment they get. Remind them that the game abstracts this with the Preparedness ability. They've had their usual bags of gear shipped to the site and can determine that they have what they need as they need it. In other words, they skip the inventory prelude other games might have trained them to expect.

Some groups at this stage choose to craft suitable cover identities. Help them to feel smart and cool while doing this, so they can proceed quickly and confidently to the investigation phase.

THE ESOTERRORISTS

OPERATION: PROPHET BUNCO



THE GOOD REVEREND

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-IN: The Briefing

LEAD-OUTS: The Visionary, The Skeptic, Newshounds of Sequoia City

Bruhn's operation is not a church but a quaint small-town radio studio marked by a few faith-based decorative touches. It sits at the end of a dead-end street. An ever-growing crowd tramples its previously well-kept lawn and fills its gravel parking lot with vehicles.

In the crowd appear characters who feature in the scenes "The Skeptic" and "Newshounds of Sequoia City."

Don't describe them unless the PCs decide to do crowd work before visiting the Reverend (in which case one or more other scenes happen first; see below).

Getting past Bruhn's family to talk to the man himself poses a challenge. The reverend is frail and besieged with requests from followers and reporters. A phalanx of burly young relatives has appointed itself his protector. This knot of grandchildren and grandnephews epitomizes beef-fed small-town masculinity.

The eldest grandson, Gary, takes charge as unofficial spokesman and gatekeeper. **Cop Talk** suggests from his stance that he's spent some time in the police academy and might be responsive to an official approach. On a 1-point Cop Talk spend, he decides that the agent and his buddies are trustworthy enough to warrant a quick talk with Granddad.

He might credibly respond to **Flattery**, **Negotiation**, or **Reassurance** (2-point spends) or the less likely **Impersonate** or **Intimidation**, on a 3-point spend.

In failing health, Dallas Bruhn can afford only limited time for meetings with strangers. He husbands most of his strength for his daily one-hour radio broadcasts. Bruhn's softspoken demeanor and kindly manners belie the grim fate he forecasts for the bulk of mankind. He introduces himself, asks after the religious upbringing of each character, and then lets the PCs take the lead. The conversation's direction depends on the cover story they've adopted to gain access to him. He answers questions honestly but in a way calculated to achieve his goal in any interaction — the salvation of his interlocutors' souls, before the cleansing hand of God sweeps down upon the land.

Answers he might be prompted to give are as follows:

- He has been working on his study of Biblical dates for over forty years.
- Yes, he got the dates wrong back in [PresentYear 21], but he's found the errors in his system and fixed them. There's no mistaking it this time.
- The international attention directed at him is understandable. God is using him to ensure that everyone has a chance to learn of the apocalypse, become born again, and escape the coming tribulations.
- He never commanded believers to give away all their possessions, but if they want to do that as a way of spreading the word, that's a prerogative he would never dream of taking from them. (Trivia: He might not have commanded it, but his broadcasts have certainly heavily hinted listeners toward extreme shows of faith.)

Bruhn loves to be drawn into theological argument. No matter how probing or dismissive the questioning, he remains genial, serene, and unshakeable. Give the PCs about twenty minutes of real time to talk to him (at most). Then Gary comes in to break up the meeting.

If the players ask to subsequently interpret their interaction with him using their investigative abilities, they can learn the following:

History: Bruhn's vision of the end-times prophecies straightforwardly follows the Rapture doctrine as developed in the 19th century in America and more recently popularized by such authors as Hal Lindsey and Tim (*Left Behind*) LaHaye. His new wrinkle is the announcement of specific dates.

Forensic Accounting: His math makes sense to him but, like most crackpottery, starts with an assumption and works backward to prove it.

Forensic Psychology: He seems more eccentric than clinically disturbed.

BRUHN CLAN PROTECTORS ABILITIES: Athletics 8, Health 6, Scuffling 8, Shooting 4 HIT THRESHOLD: 4

STEALTH MODIFIER: -|

Proud exponents of the Second Amendment, the young Bruhns stash automatic pistols in the trunks of their cars. Following the rules of responsible gun ownership, they keep these safely lockboxed. They only start packing if matters get weird.

Though all would describe themselves as Bible-believing Christians, not all anticipate the coming Rapture with equal joy. Among outsiders they suppress any doubts they may harbor. They do not want to hurt the old man at this difficult time.

Aside from the lead protector, Gary, their names are Noah, Matt, Mike, Chris, Nick, and Tie (short for Tyler.)

PHEEGOONTERVEREND | THE VISIONARY

Bullshit Detector: The reverend is either completely sincere or a brilliant psychopath and deceiver.

(core) While departing the house, the investigator with the highest **Forensic Psychology** bumps into a pale, redheaded young woman with spooky eyes. This is Courtney Purcell, a hanger-on in the Bruhn household. The investigator who bumps her immediately senses a profound emotional disturbance. (1-point spend) It might be PTSD.

She won't exchange more than a few words with strangers while in the company of the younger Bruhns. Courtney displays a palpable nervousness in their company. To talk to her the team must contrive to meet her alone. (See "The Visionary," below.)

(core) On their way out, a team member with **Astronomy** notices a familiar face in the crowd. It's the famed and controversial space scientist and popular author Walter Clemons. He leads a protest against *The Divine Calendar* and Bruhn; see "The Skeptic."

(alternate) Also outside, a television news crew, led by the indomitably assertive field reporter Jessica Komar, aggressively attempts interviews with mostly inarticulate or unwilling spectators. **Trivia** provides her name, recognizing her as an upand-comer specializing in exploitative material. If the PCs don't seem to have a plan for what to do next or seek out anyone else to talk to, she shoves a mic in their faces and asks why they're here, leading to "Newshounds of Sequoia City."

THE VISIONARY

scene type: Pipe LEAD-IN: The Good Reverend INFORMATION BECOMES RELEVANT IN: The First Disappearance

Courtney Purcell, 28, was born in the nearby suburb of San Ramon, CA. When she entered puberty, she began to have strange visions of a nightmarish world next door to this one. Her struggle to understand these experiences drove her to embrace fundamentalist Christianity, despite her family's secular outlook. Now estranged from them, she's wandered for years, looking for a spiritual father who can put the visions into perspective. After listening to a string of *Divine Calendar* episodes, she quit her job in Big Lake, Alaska, to place herself by Dallas Bruhn's

RESEARCHING BRUHN

Cautious groups may haul out the smartphones and tablet devices for more info on Bruhn and clan before they go in to talk to them.

Research: He's received plenty of press attention over the years, but it's all interviews and profiles. If anyone has investigated him for impropriety, financial or sexual, they've come up short.

Forensic Accounting: Whatever Bruhn's game is, it isn't a straight-up swindle. Some people giving away their possessions do donate to his organization. But plenty more simply give it away in haphazard fashion. Top recipients include the Red Cross or like charities.

side. Since her arrival here about six months ago, she's waged a slow and ultimately successful campaign to install herself in his operation, by acting as an indispensable personal assistant. Having unburdened herself to Bruhn, she now believes she understands the visions: she's seeing into the future. Specifically, the writhing, demonic landscape she glimpses portrays the world after its destruction during the Tribulation, when the spawn of hell roam the Earth.

For his part, Bruhn interprets her arrival in his life like he does any other event or piece of information — as proof that he's right about the coming end times. Not wanting word of her visions to upstage his own message, he has sworn her to secrecy. To reveal any of the above information, the PCs will have to penetrate twin barriers: her terrified reluctance to discuss the visions and her new-found loyalty to the reverend.

Attempts to get her to talk as soon as they meet her fail. The team must meet up with her later, away from the studio. She rents a walk-up apartment above an old-fashioned Chinese restaurant on Sequoia City's main drag. After they first see her, she starts the trek home on foot.

Surveillance (Difficulty 4) allows them to unobtrusively trail her to her apartment or intercept her by apparent accident. Without this subterfuge, the cost of any interpersonal spends listed below increases by 1.

As he approaches her, any male character with **Flattery** realizes that she pines for romantic attachment but is very repressed — and so might respond to an approach so subtle as to be nearly subliminal.

Courtney also responds to **Reassurance** and **Flattery**, provided they somehow reference her obvious faith and attachment to the reverend.

(core) Without spends, she talks to investigators in general, deflecting terms. Play her so that they learn what they need to know about her at this point:

- she's a true believer,
- loyal to Bruhn,
- with a haunted, abstracted demeanor.

With a 1-point spend in any of the above-specified abilities, she'll respond to relevant questions with a version of her life story that leaves out the visions.

If they continue to press her, employing any new verbal tactic to do so, she mentions that she came to her faith after "some really weird stuff most people wouldn't believe."

They must find yet another fresh approach before she describes the visions in greater detail, after eliciting a promise not to tell Bruhn that she's shared her secret with them.

While she thinks of the visions as glimpses of imminent tribulation, **Occult Studies** reveals to the players that she's able to see through the Membrane to the Outer Dark. She's not seeing the future; she's seeing the other side, in real time.

After talking to her (even if she revealed little), the players can cite abilities to gain the following insights:

Forensic Psychology: She shows all the signs of prolonged and ongoing trauma. She's learned to cope with it well, without self-medicating, but has PTSD and probably other mental illnesses as well.

Bullshit Detector: She's entirely sincere.

(If she reveals the visions):

Occult Studies: She's a psychic capable of peering through the Membrane into the Outer Dark. As such, she's a danger to herself and others. The Ordo will want to protect and study her, possibly making her an asset...

Forensic Psychology: ... which will only be possible if they gradually earn her trust.

If they pinned her down to name the places where she's had visions (which you can tell them she's done without spelling out the details), they can do **Research** to correlate them with the sorts of incidents that thin the Membrane.

THE SKEPTIC scene type: Core LEAD-IN: The Good Reverend LEAD-OUT: Victim Zero

On the list of celebrity astrophysicists, Walter Clemons may be no Carl Sagan, but he gives Neil deGrasse Tyson a run for his money. Over the past few years, he's forged a new public persona as an uncompromising crusader for atheism. Adopting the tactics of his foes, he and a small band of fellow skeptics have taken to picketing events staged by or associated with religious extremists. Although Clemons argues that members of mainstream churches are as deluded as any, he mostly targets groups, like Bruhn's, held in low regard by the general public. Always a truculent character in private, the new crusade allows him to be his true curmudgeonly, outspoken self in public.

Clemons and company stay at a local bed and breakfast, driving out each day in a rented van to hold up signs, get into arguments with believers, and make themselves available to the media. Walter's training as a TV presenter aids him in forming pithy, controversial sound bites. His merry band holds up placards with slogans like the following:

SCAM-POCALYPSE

DARWIN [in the shape of a Jesus fish] ATHEISTS DON'T FLY PLANES INTO BUILDINGS WORLD ENDING TOMORROW? THEN GIVE ME YOUR WALLET

Clemons happily talks to anyone who approaches him. Nothing pleases him more than to insult and ridicule believers. He keeps his verbal flamethrower on its highest setting, regardless of whether he thinks he's dealing with a scam artist or a wellmeaning rank-and-filer.

Offer characters with **Astronomy** a 1-point spend to specify that they and Clemons are already professional acquaintances.

In response to questions about himself, Walter provides the above information, reframed in self-admiring terms.

About Bruhn, he offers the following:

CLEMONS'S ALLIES

For self-identified freethinkers, Clemons's fellow infidels spout a lot of predigested slogans. A favorite catchword for believers is "sheeple." The freethinkers seem as dedicated and unswerving in their opposition to belief as Bruhn's people are to his apocalyptic vision. When pressed for information, they deflect, deferring to Clemons. Dress sense ranges from slacker college student to oddball college professor. Several speak in pronounced nerd accents. They are:

- Elena Keaton, fortyish, tongue-tied accountant
- Lee Carmona, thirtyish, mealy-mouthed network security consultant
- Jacinda Reisz, late twenties, grumpy graphic designer
- Marcus Thoman, fiftyish, weedy documentary filmmaker

If braced with interpersonal abilities, they appear to give in but actually deliver information, deceptive or otherwise, in accord with Clemons's agenda. However, after a long private conversation (which they do their best to avoid) **Bullshit Detector** indicates that any given one of them is acting a role.

ABILITIES: Athletics 6, Health 6, Preparedness 4, Scuffling 8, Shooting 8 HIT THRESHOLD: 3 ALERTNESS MODIFIER: - I STEALTH MODIFIER: + I WEAPON: +0 (Pistol; hidden in van when not expecting trouble)

- He plays the doddering old grandpa, but make no mistake
 he's a wily grifter, just like the rest of them.
- It's not clear what his scam is, but it must involve the folks who are giving away their life savings. The Bruhns have to be taking a rake on that somehow.
- One of Walter's team, Elena Keaton, is a forensic accountant. She's been trying to poke into Bruhn's financials, but with no luck yet.
- Spreading fear is contemptible, but that's what religion is all about. This mob is just more brazen about it than most.
- These people who've been streaming here for months, certain God is going to reach down and pluck them up to heaven with their polo shirts and their Dockers and their fully loaded iPods — when they realize they've been snookered, these morons are gonna stage a riot.
- Supernatural activity? You're joking, right? That crap doesn't exist.

Clemons sniffs out any hint that the unit is here in an investigative or official capacity and volunteers any assistance his team might be able to supply.

Bullshit Detector: Even in casual private conversation, Clemons never drops the polished presentation of a seasoned media figure. As a result, everything he says is bullshit on some level, making it hard to pick out individual snippets of truth or falsehood.

PHEESCENTENTSNEWSHOUNDS | VICTIM ZERO

Clemons and his team compose an Esoterror cell. They've already summoned an entity from the Outer Dark. They're sticking around the scene to abet it, if necessary, and to help stoke public anxiety via media appearances. They do this by delivering the atheist message, already unpopular in America, in the most jarring and confrontational way possible.

Clemons initiated into Esoterror after joining a front operation masquerading as a freethinkers' society. Its members brought him in by playing on his intellectual arrogance. Like them, he has always viewed people less brilliant than himself with high-handed contempt. After breaking away from his original group, which has since gone underground, he gathered a new one to orbit around him.

(core) As the agents' first interaction with Clemons winds to a close, a young woman, who looks just old enough to be a high school senior, confronts them:

"You're not listening to this horrible man, are you?"

Clutching a Bible, she proceeds to lambaste them for giving Clemons a hearing. Tears come to her eyes as she inarticulately scorns his mockery of good, honest people.

She then breaks away, resisting any effort to get her to stop and talk. Her arm is in a sling, which should deter PCs from physically intercepting her in front of a crowd. (**Streetwise** warns them against this, on the grounds that the agitated throng might well kick the crap out of them.) She gets in a battered compact car and drives off into the distance. This is Emily Henkel; PCs who track her down learn more in "Victim Zero."

Play Clemons's reaction to this as a satisfied smirk. If asked to explain, he says only that "the mutton hate it when you tell them they're on the menu."

NEWSHOUNDS OF SEQUOIA CITY

scene type: Alternate LEAD-IN: The Good Reverend LEAD-OUT: Live, From the Apocalypse

Jessica Komar exists as a red herring suspect and secondary obstacle. If the PCs manage her adroitly, she might aid in the Veil-Out.

She's an attractive, blunt, type A personality focused entirely on her career. In private moments she reveals herself as a profane smart-ass with a bent for hard living. When asked what she really wants, she says she only cares about informing the people. This statement throws **Bullshit Detector** into overdrive.

Sensing immediately that they're not here to worship, Jessica puts the team on the defensive, peppering them with leading questions. Why *are* they here? Like any seasoned reporter, she turns inquiries directed at her back on the other speaker.

Forensic Psychology: (if they watch her at work for any period of time) Her questions are couched to coax maximum fear from subject and audience alike.

Forensic Accounting: While that's classic Esoterror MO, it's also the money-making stock in trade of any successful news network.

(core) **Flattery** gets Jessica bragging: she has almost secured approval from her network to do a live feed from Bruhn's headquarters when his prophesied deadline comes and goes.

Any agent knows that a live countdown to the end of the world on a major cable network will induce anxiety throughout its viewing range and might spark tears in the Membrane across the continent or even worldwide. The inevitable anticlimax will ameliorate the damage somewhat but won't reverse it entirely.

Taking steps to prevent this may supply an engaging subplot. Create challenges to keep this storyline interesting, in response to player initiative.

VICTIM ZERO

scene type: Core LEAD-IN: The Skeptic LEAD-OUT: Reinterview

Research suggests that a small town library will keep an up-todate collection of high school yearbooks. A quick flip through last year's book identifies her as Emily Henkel. The Sequoia City phone directory includes only one entry for Henkel. Going to the address, they find her at home, with either her mother, Lisa, (during business hours) or father, Brian, (otherwise) answering the door to inquiries.

Alternately, if the team happened to scope her car's plates, **Data Retrieval** allows them to run the number and find the address that way.

Trusting soul Lisa Henkel responds to **Impersonate**, if the PCs cook up a plausible-sounding pretense. Solid citizen Brian gives way to **CopTalk**.

The parents provide the following information, if prompted:

- Emily sprained her arm playing volleyball.
- She's not particularly religious.
- (if asked about the Bible) That's strange. Well, she's impressionable, and everyone's getting caught up in the craziness.
- Even if you don't believe it for a second, it's easy to catch yourself wondering about the end of the world.

Emily resists talking to them. **Reassurance** earns them a hearing but little more. She sticks to the volleyball cover story and counters any other questions with inarticulate mumbles and evasions. When pressed, she seems on the verge of an admission, but then clams up.

Bullshit Detector: She's lying about the volleyball story, but the parents believe it.

(core) **Cop Talk:** Emily gives off a crime-victim vibe. She's almost ready to spill but needs more time.
OPERATION PROPHET BUNCO

THE ESOTERRORISTS

REINTERVIEW

SCENE TYPE: Core LEAD-IN: Victim Zero LEAD-OUT: In the Trees

After "Victim Zero," the group must follow another avenue of investigation for at least one interval before returning to trigger this scene. If they come back to the Henkels before then, Brian or Lisa turns them away.

Should they seem frustrated, **Cop Talk** reminds them that having to wait out a witness's resistance is absolutely standard to police investigative procedure. The character recalls several cases he (or police acquaintances) cracked through simple patience. In the meantime, there's always other legwork to do, and that can crack cases, too. **Forensic Psychology** reminds them that this is especially true with vulnerable victims — by pressing too hard, too fast, they could easily lose her cooperation entirely.

On a second interview, also led by **Reassurance**, Emily tells the following story. She speaks in snippets; the PCs have to keep sympathetically at her to get the whole story. Not until the end does she bite down and name her victimizer. Otherwise, she answers in an order that matches the questions. (Cross out entries if it helps you keep track.)

- She didn't get hurt playing volleyball.
- Somebody attacked her, hypothetically.
- But she's not going to press charges, because it's too humiliating.
- She thought this person was kind of cool.
- Cool and knew interesting stuff.
- But not in a love way. Gross.
- He knew the world and how it works.
- She thought she was gonna meet him for coffee and talk about, like, good colleges and stuff.
- ▶ When? Three days ago.
- But he led her to the woods.
- (core) It was sheltered from the highway, near the Sequoia City sign.
- She was so stupid to get talked into it. She's not even sure how he did it.
- Then she got woozy, like he drugged her or something.
- Then suddenly he was on her, attacking her.
- ▶ No, not sexually. That would be too terrible to think about.
- There were other people there. This part is all blurry.
- Finally she woke up in the grass, alone. They'd roughed her up. Her arm really hurt.
- She was late for school. She went to the nurse, who said it was a sprain and put her arm in a sling.
- Later she went back to find the guy, where she knew he'd be.
- The people in his clique or whatever you call it had weird looks on their faces. Guilty looks.
- He laughed at her and said he was famous and no one would believe her.
- The others told her she was imagining things: nothing could have happened.



- She's not saying who it was. If it gets out, everyone will know how stupid she was.
- But she's been going out to hassle him, anyhow.
- ▶ [very reluctantly] It was that space guy. Walter Clemons.

Cop Talk confirms that this happened too long ago for a rape kit to be of much use.

Chemistry: It sounds like they dosed her with Rohypnol, which only stays in the system for 72 hours or so.

Law: If they do get her tested, the legal system comes into play, rendering a Veil-Out tougher. The Ordo Veritatis is not the Special Victims Unit.

IN THE TREES

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-IN: Reinterview, Cell Busting LEAD-OUT: Bones of the Raptured, Cell Busting

Examining the spot in the woods where Emily Henkel was assaulted, the team finds the following:

Evidence Collection: A gluey, translucent residue drips down the trunk of a sequoia tree.

Chemistry: It's organic, but also not.

Forensic Entomology: A ring of dead insects, including caterpillars, moths, beetles, and ants, surrounds this one tree. The hard-bodied insects have intact exoskeletons but are mush on the inside.

144

KEEP IT CREEPY

Run the initial section of the adventure, before "The First Disappearance," to make players nervous as they wait for the supernatural shoe to drop. In the transition between scenes, or in the backgrounds of scenes, play up ominous details as dread seizes Sequoia City. For a short game, let these events play out quickly in the background. The PCs hear about them second hand. In an extended, sandboxier game, put the agents center stage as they unfold, letting them engage with them to whatever extent they care to.

- A hysterical woman collapses in tears, terrified that she won't be borne into heaven.
 - A man sets up a roadside stand to sell Suicide Kits (only \$99.95!). They're pitched to believers who fear that they haven't repented enough and might be left behind to fight off demons and cannibals during the Tribulation. The vendor, a canny hick named Gerald Blackwell, claims that it delivers a peaceful, painless death. **Chemistry:** A PC testing his homemade toxic brew discovers that it supplies anything but.

- Hacker kids wearing Guy Fawkes masks show up to eerily mock the believers, in declared solidarity with Walter Clemons. They arrived of their own volition and aren't part of his cell.
- A man with a rifle makes a rush for Bruhn's HQ front door, seeking vengeance after his elderly mother gave away her entire retirement fund.
- Weird black clouds swirl over the city, then hang there expectantly.
- A wild, ink-dark horse charges inexplicably from the forest to clop with frothing lips down the main street.
- Lightning sets a fire in the town dump, filling the sky with pillars of smoke.
- A disturbed resident breaks into the hospital's teaching wing to steal a skeleton used for anatomy classes. Later it reappears as part of a disturbing jury-rigged sculpture.

Natural History: The tree is dying, as if blighted. The rot started only a few days ago but has rapidly advanced.

Occult Studies: The circular pattern of dead bugs suggests a die-off when they were struck by energy crossing from the Outer Dark into this world.

(core: "Bones of the Raptured") If more than one disappearance has already taken place, an agent climbing the tree finds bones in a crook between large branches.

(core: "Cell Busting") This proves, to the certitude needed by the OV, that Clemons and company are Esoterror up to their eyeballs.

THE FIRST DISAPPEARANCE

SCENE TYPE: Antagonist Reaction **LEAD-OUT:** Bones of the Raptured

When the time seems right, which may happen:

- about an hour into the investigation
- when the team runs out of people to talk to
- if players seem to be hankering for the overt horror part to start

...the team discovers that Courtney Purcell has vanished. Depending on where they've taken the narrative so far, they may learn this when:

- they seek to reinterview her
- Jessica Komar (tipped by Clemons) reports it as a dramatic twist to the developing story
- believers in the parking lot proclaim it as prelude to the Rapture — she's been taken up in advance!

Bruhn goes on air to warn people against false rumors of a pre-Rapture. He knows that Courtney has gone missing and that the flock has come up with this "taken up" story. The Reverend sets out to quash this line of thinking, which contradicts his prophetic timeline.

By sorting through the crowd outside the radio station, the team can narrow the pre-Rapture rumor to Wilhelmina Heilig, a 58-year-old widow and mother of two who came here all the way from Bardolph, IL, to witness the end times from their epicenter. Play her as loud, fearful, and fervent.

She says she saw Courtney a few hours before she was first reported missing. Wilhelmina describes her as moving, as if impelled, down the road toward the woods. She further claims to have caught a glimpse of an angel hovering overhead, tracking her movements. If pressed for visual details, she can't do much better than "you know. An angel."

(She saw a member of the Host luring Courtney to her death.) Bullshit Detector: Wilhelmina believes what she's saying.

Forensic Psychology: She probably has some minor personality issues but doesn't exhibit other symptoms of disorders that would provoke hallucinations.

Wilhelmina couldn't be more excited to be part of this story and enthusiastically repeats it to Komar and other reporters. This may lead to byplay between NPCs and the agents as they lay groundwork for the Veil-Out:

- Members of the Bruhn clan don't like this development and try to hush her up.
- Clemons encourages her to repeat it. (Putatively to ridicule her beliefs — in reality, to spread cognitive dissonance and further damage the Membrane.)
- Jessica wants to run with it.

WITNESSES AND WALK-ON CHARACTERS

When you need a minor character to serve as a witness, Greek chorus, red herring suspect, or for any other purpose, start with these names, traits, and background details.

PILGRIMS

These loyal listeners to the *Divine Calendar* radio show came here to experience the Rapture. Any of them might perceive the Host as angels, be eaten by them, or perform favors for them.

- Ed Nelson, 57, inarticulate appliance repairman, Newport, KY
- Claud Danna, 64, jolly office administrator, Spokane, WA
- Karen Lewis, 37, flag-waving aerospace engineer, Seattle, WA
- Lucilla Wittmer, 48, gregarious homemaker, Tallahassee, FL
- Grover Fox, 62, prudish DVD-plant worker, Arcadia, LA
- Brent Severson, 29, mumbling baggage handler, Olmstead, KY
- Loretta Powers, 55, entitled wealthy widow, Dallas, TX
- Violet Caines, 72, weather-beaten hotel manager, Stillwater, MN

TOWNIES

Though generally culturally conservative, these locals don't necessarily buy into the end-times business or consider Bruhn their kind of Christian.

- Tim Lee, 30, combative bartender
- Vince Isley, 34, world-weary road worker
- Misty Valentine, 38, folksy police dispatcher
- Dr. Lily Barcia, 41, naïve physician
- ▶ Jeff Koo, 26, reassuring cable installer
- Seth Randall, 20, shifty student
- Andy Green, 59, depressed forestry worker
- Dorothy Flores, 54, woebegone librarian
- Latesha Houde, 62, maternal cleaning lady

Wilhelmina doesn't want to leave her spot in the parking lot, where she's sucking up attention like nobody's business.

(alternate) A 1-point **Impersonate** convinces her that the team shares her faith; this induces her to take them to the spot on the road where she last saw Courtney.

ADDITIONAL RAPTURES

SCENE TYPE: Core **LEAD-OUT:** Bones of the Raptured

At intervals, as needed to stoke menace and suspense, other believers continue to be "pre-Raptured" (that is, taken off to be devoured by the Host), with consequences similar to the above.

- In order, the victims are as follows:Wilhelmina (see above.) Last seen near the forest.
- Megan Ager, 32, a customer service representative for a software company from Leary, GA, who quit her job to be here. Last seen near the water tower.
- ▶ Noah Bruhn. Last seen near his church, downtown.
- Cynthia Martinez, 41, a homemaker who abandoned her family in Fairfax, VA, to come here. Last seen near the forest.

The players must ask about the surroundings of an incident to get the italicized information.

All are described by witnesses as overtly devout.

Ager and Martinez were last seen by other believers, who report either angel sightings or a pervasive holy essence.

Locals without strong religious impulses are the last to report seeing Wilhelmina and Noah. They say that the victims seemed slightly out of it. If prompted for hints of weirdness, they reluctantly admit to "a bad feeling" or seeing "something dark moving in the sky."

(core) Give the team time to piece together for themselves that all of the disappearances took place near something high.

BONES OF THE RAPTURED

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-INS: In the Trees, The First Disappearance, Additional Raptures LEAD-OUT: Attacked!, Dark and Swooping Shapes, Against the Host Various avenues lead a competent team to the remains of Courtney Purcell or one or more other Rapture victims. The bones are left in whatever high place the Host swept a given victim into before devouring them:

- Courtney, Wilhelmina, Cynthia: the forest
- Megan: water tower
- Noah: church steeple

(core) **Forensic Anthropology:** The flesh wasn't gnawed off these bones; it was sucked off, by some sort of unearthly osmotic process. No known animal did this; it has to be an Outer Dark Entity.

Occult Studies: That entity might be the Host, carnivorous creatures enabled by the psychic residue of religious mania. But it's hard to say — reports in the OV database are fragmentary at best. The more the team can learn about these vaguely understood beings — if they are indeed the ODEs at hand — the better!

(2-point **Occult Studies** spend): The character puts together old historical accounts heretofore uncorrelated with the database. Provide the clues given under the creature entry for the Host, on p. 58.

Depending on your pacing needs, the Host might then descend on the team ("Dread and Swooping Shapes") or wait and send a cozened believer to deal with them ("Attacked!").

Or the team might move proactively, seeking the Host's current nest, leading to "Against the Host.")

ATTACKED!

SCENE TYPE: Antagonist Reaction **TRIGGERS:** Bones of the Raptured; The Skeptic

This scene occurs after one of the following developments:

- The team has given Clemons reason to suspect that they might be Ordo Veritatis.
- The team discovers bones of Host victims.

The Host manifests to one or more believers (see sidebar if needed) and instructs them to either overtly attack or covertly sabotage the team. This might take the form of any of the following:

- severed brake lines
- exhaust fumes pumped into a motel room as the PCs sleep
- a physical assault on an agent separated from the group
- ▶ a hit-and-run
- Tailor the circumstances to what the PCs are doing.

Apprehended attackers refuse to explain themselves, in accordance with their "angelic" instructions. A character can use **Impersonate** or spend a point of **Anthropology** to seem to share the attacker's faith. (This fails if it contradicts behavior the suspect has already witnessed.) The suspect then admits to having witnessed an angelic manifestation.

Forensic Psychology: These people show certain symptoms of posthypnotic suggestion, and some of dosing with psychoactive drugs. Yet the full suite of symptoms matches neither possibility. Having discarded ordinary explanations, an extraordinary cause might be the only one left.

History: Religious texts from around the world warn against devils clad in angelic form.

Use as many attacks on the group from suborned angelic servitors as seem exciting or otherwise entertaining.

DREAD AND SWOOPING SHAPES

SCENE TYPE: Antagonist Reaction **TRIGGER:** Bones of the Raptured

When the team is out in the open and away from prying eyes, *x* members of the Host, where *x* equals the number of agents minus 1, descend on them from above and attack.

ABILITIES: Athletics 5, Health 20, Scuffling 16

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +

ALERINESS MODIFIER.

stealth modifier: +2

- **WEAPON:** +0 (Claws); if in an open area, a Scuffling success means that it grabs a hold, flies up into the air, and drops the victim, for +3.
- **ARMOR:** +3 vs. any Scuffling and Shooting (unconventional anatomy); however, a Scuffling success intended to break through the mouth tissue and force feed it a communion wafer gains a further +6 damage bonus.

LIVE, FROM THE APOCALYPSE

When you need an additional complication for the team to overcome, use Jessica Komar. She might figure out that they're the real story and start to follow them. She could seek information they need and then force concessions from them before handing it over. Even if you don't need to actively place her in their way as they move from investigation to mission completion, they'll have to reckon with her during the Veil-Out.

Jessica might be turned to the team's end with spends of the following:

- Negotiation: a promise of a story she can safely pitch to her editors
- Flirting: like so many red-blooded reporters before her, Jess is something of a sexual outlaw. A 2-point spend hooks her up with any PC.

Depending on where you are in the scenario, the Host might fight to the death (ending their threat in the scenario) or fly away after one of them is killed. At this point the team may or may not have determined the Host's special means of dispatch.

If they fly away (or the team flees after suffering casualties), a final confrontation ("Against the Host") is still required to wrap up this mission goal.

Once the agents see the Host in action, **Occult Studies** yields the associated clues for this creature (p. 58) without a spend.

Seeing the Host from a distance entails a Difficulty 4 Stability test. Meeting them for the first time while being attacked by them requires a Difficulty 7 test. Difficulty decreases by 2 if the team knows their special means of dispatch.

AGAINST THE HOST

SCENE TYPE: Conclusion **LEAD-IN:** Bones of the Raptured, Dread and Swooping Shapes

The PCs trigger this scene by deciding to track the ODEs, who they may or may not have identified as the Host, to their lair.

This might involve luring them back to a lair or coming upon them where they happen to be, as pacing commands.

The trick is to confront them in an enclosed roosting spot, where they can't easily fly away. This would be either the church steeple or (in the case of a lure) any other equivalent high, bounded space of the team's choice.

Luring requires finding a believer to use as bait and securing their cooperation, willing or unaware. They might use **Cop Talk**, **Impersonate**, or **Reassurance** spends to get a believer on board. They then leave the believer out in the open.

Let the strength of the team's plan, and whatever general ability tests they are called on to make, determine whether the bait gets snatched in the process. If the believer is grabbed up by ODEs, let gore-flinging horror ensue. This results in a round of Difficulty 8 Stability tests. ►

►

CELL BUSTING

SCENE TYPE: Core / Alternate **LEAD-IN:** The Skeptic, Reinterview **LEAD-OUT:** In the Trees

The team must deal with two threats to consider OPERATION PROPHET BUNCO closed — the Host and the Esoterror cell who summoned it.

They can identify Clemons as hinky either by interviewing Emily Henkel or by sniffing out the freethinkers' true allegiances in improvised scenes of interaction. They could:

- winkle damning truths from one of his henchmen
- subject them to successful surveillance
- notice (with Forensic Psychology) that Clemons's interventions in the media coverage of the event all serve to generate public anxiety

To prove that he's up to no good, the group may break into the freethinkers' van. Or they may already know, from Emily, and want to conduct the search in pursuit of additional intel. Because this leads to a core clue, failure to make the necessary **Infiltration** test (vs. a Difficulty of 4) means not that they fail to get the information but that they alert Clemons's crew while doing so.

Evidence Collection: An area map features a tiny pinpoint hole, as if from a push pin. It corresponds to the site where Emily Henkel was attacked. This provides an alternate route to "In the Trees" if the group hasn't reinterviewed her.

Occult Studies: Highlighting on the map resembles ley lines (in conventional occultism) or fissures in the Membrane (as per Esoterror practice.)

This is all the smoking gun the group requires to apprehend Clemons and gang in accordance with OV protocol. How this goes down depends on how they plan and the outcomes of applicable general abilities. Make the Clemons gang hard to catch if the scenario is coming in short or an easy grab if you need to wrap it up quickly.

Once captured, Clemons reveals himself to be a typical powermad, psychopathic Esoterror cell leader. (**Forensic Psychology:** In PPU category terms (p. 46), he's clearly a dominant.)

Clemons sneeringly answers whatever questions the team puts to him, confident that his transformation to immortal, omnipotent sorcerer has been delayed, not forestalled, by this inconvenient arrest. This is the team's chance to wrap up any nagging loose ends. Depending on what the team asks him, his grandiose replies might go like this:

 Neither Bruhn nor anyone in his camp was in on this in any way. They merely provided the useful baseline of unease on which Clemons's master plan relied.

- Its ultimate aim? To bring a storm of Host down on Bruhn moments after his supposed end times was revealed to be a fizzle. As this unfolded on live TV, maybe — just maybe the fabric between worlds would tear open, and the true end times would begin.
- (If Bruhn's end date has already come and gone) But the actions of the PCs prevented that from happening, slowing the arrival of Host members from the world beyond.
- Yes, he sexually assaulted Emily. He took no great pleasure in it. Her violation was necessary to allow the first Host through.
- Esoterror is his true creed, not free thought. Aggressive atheism is a useful tool to frighten and disturb weak minds.Were he operating in a country dominated by secularism, he might adopt the mantle of faith in his quest for mental havoc.
- Atheists are fools. Of course there are gods. They aren't the benevolent, orderly gods of human belief. They're the writhing, fornicating, entropic gods of the Outer Dark.
- And one day there will be another god, more powerful than even they, a straddler of worlds, a strider across continents. The almighty deity named Walter Clemons.
- ➤ Walter does stand steadfastly by one staple of his pseudoatheistic rhetoric: the world is populated by sheeple.

Having heard as much of his confession as they can stand, the team can then call Mr. Verity to arrange for their captives' transportation to a secure OV facility.

VEIL-OUT

SCENE TYPE: Conclusion

If the team hasn't secured Jessica Komar's cooperation, they'll have to do so now.

(This section assumes Bruhn's survival. If events arising in play have led to his demise, you'll need to alter this denouement, perhaps bringing in Gary as the new upholder of the family ministry.)

The obvious cover story casts the vanished believers as having slipped away after becoming disillusioned with Bruhn's prophecy. Unwilling to believe that they were spirited away by hungry demons, he'll portray them as followers sadly betrayed by a lack of faith.

When his appointed date for the end times comes and goes, apocalyptic mania quickly fades. Disappointed followers angrily confront him. If the players seem to need the emotional release, Bruhn meets some kind of comeuppance.

But in a coda as they leave Sequoia City, a news report announces that Bruhn has found the error in his calculations. Any day now, he will release his revised date for the end of the world. When creating an adventure, use this table to record which abilities are essential to the adventure, which are optional, and which are not used at all. Let your players know which not to take. If you are using preexisting characters, tick them on the left column table, then build your adventure around them.

SUIEHIUNS

THE

ABILITY CHECKLIST

INVESTIGATIVE

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES CORE CLUE TALLY TOTAL IN ADVENTURE ACADEMIC Anthropology Archaeology Architecture Art History Forensic Accounting Forensic Psychology History Languages Law Linguistics Natural History **Occult Studies** Pathology Research **Textual Analysis** Trivia INTERPERSONAL **Bullshit Detector** Bureaucracy Cop Talk Flattery Flirting Impersonate Interrogation Intimidation Negotiation Reassurance Streetwise TECHNICAL Astronomy Ballistics Chemistry Cryptography Data Retrieval **Document Analysis Electronic Surveillance** Evidence Collection **Explosive Devices** Fingerprinting Forensic Anthropology Forensic Entomology Photography Total Investigative Points

INVESTIGATOR THE ESUTERRURIS IS

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| CHARACTER NAME | | | |
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| Player Name | | | |
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| Hit Threshold | | | |
| Health | | | |
| Stability | | | |
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| ACADEMIC | | | |
| Anthropology | | | |
| Archaeology | | | |
| Architecture | | | |
| Art History | | | |
| Forensic Accounting | | | |
| Forensic Psychology | | | |
| History | | | |
| Languages | | | |
| Law | | | |
| Linguistics | | | |
| Natural History | | | |
| Occult Studies | | | |
| Pathology | | | |
| Research | | | |
| Textual Analysis | | | |
| Trivia | | | |
| | | | |
| INTERPERSONAL | | | |
| Bullshit Detector | | | |
| Bureaucracy | | | |
| Cop Talk | | | |
| Flattery | | | |
| Flirting | | | |
| Impersonate | | | |
| Interrogation | | | |
| Intimidation | | | |
| Negotiation | | | |
| Reassurance | | | |
| Streetwise | | | |
| Streetwise | | | |
| TECHNICAL | | | |
| Astronomy | | | |
| Ballistics | | | |
| Chemistry | | | |
| | | | |
| Cryptography | | | |
| Data Retrieval | | | |
| Document Analysis | | | |
| Electronic Surveillance | | | |
| Evidence Collection | | | |
| Explosive Devices | | | |
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| Impersonate | Flattery | | | | | | | | |
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| | Reassurance | | | _ | _ | | | RITI11E2 | RATING POOL |
| Unarmed -2 Filch | Streetwise | | | HIT THRESHOLD | 1 | | Athletics | | |
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| Astronomy | | | | Unarmed | | -2 | Filch | | |
| Ballistics Image: Characterized constraints of the construction of the construct | TECHNICAL | RATING | POOL | | | | Health | | |
| Chemistry | Astronomy | | | | | | Infiltration | | |
| Cryptography 0 -1 -2 -3 -4 -5 -6 -7 -8 -9 -10 -11 -12 Preparedness | Ballistics | | | HEALTH | | | | | |
| Data Retrieval | Chemistry | | | 12 11 10 9 8 | 7 6 5 4 | 32 I | | | |
| Document Analysis | Cryptography | | | 0 -1 -2 -3 -4 -5 | -6 -7 -8 -9 | -10-11-12 | | | I |
| Electronic Surveillance | Data Retrieval | | | | | | | | |
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| Explosive Devices Fingerprinting Forensic Anthropology | | .e | | | | | | | |
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| Forensic Anthropology I | Explosive Devices | | | | | | Surveillance | | |
| Forensic Anthropology I | Fingerprinting | | | | | | | | |
| INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES pull points depend on the number of players: $5 \pm 2014 \pm 2213 \pm 2014$ | Forensic Anthropolog | | | INVESTIGATIVE A | BILITIES build | points depe | nd on the number | of players: 5+ | = 20 4 = 22 3 = |
| Forensic Entomology 24 2 = 32 • Each rating point in Languages grants 1 other language • 1 Occult Studies free. | | | | 24 2 = 32 • Each ra | ting point in La i | nguages gra | ants I other langua | age 🕶 l´Occul | t Studies free. |
| Photography GENERAL ABILITIES 60 build points • plus Health, and Stability • Hit Threshold = 3 (4 if Athletics is 8 or more) • 8 points of Surveillance grants free point of Electronic Surveillance | Photography | | | | | | | | |



OPERATION INVESTIGATION TRIGGER

TRAIL OF CLUES

SINISTER CONSPIRACY

SCENE

SCENE TYPE LEAD-IN LEAD-OUT

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SCENE

SCENE TYPE LEAD-IN LEAD-OUT

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NAME DESCRIPTION

ABILITIES

| Athletics | |
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| Health | |
| Scuffling | |
| Shooting | |
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RECORD SHEET

1

ADVERSARY

HIT THRESHOLD:

WEAPON:

- .

ALERTNESS MODIFIER:

STEALTH MODIFIER:

ARMOR:

SPECIAL ABILITY:

- .

SPECIAL MEANS OF DISPATCH:

NAME

DESCRIPTION

ABILITIES

| Athletics | |
|-----------|----------|
| Health | |
| Scuffling | |
| Shooting | |
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HIT THRESHOLD:

WEAPON:

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ALERTNESS MODIFIER: STEALTH MODIFIER: ARMOR:

SPECIAL ABILITY:

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SPECIAL MEANS OF DISPATCH:

NAME

DESCRIPTION

ABILITIES

| Athletics | | |
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| Health | | |
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HIT THRESHOLD:

WEAPON:

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ALERTNESS MODIFIER:

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SPECIAL ABILITY:

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SPECIAL MEANS OF DISPATCH:

NAME

DESCRIPTION

ABILITIES

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| Scuffling | I |
| Shooting | |
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HIT THRESHOLD:

WEAPON:

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ALERTNESS MODIFIER: STEALTH MODIFIER: ARMOR:

SPECIAL ABILITY:

- .

SPECIAL MEANS OF DISPATCH:





THE ESUTERRURISIS

CELL CORE PHENOMENON

TWISTED GOALS

CELL LEADER

DESCRIPTION

PSYCHOGRAPHIC PROFILE

PERSONAL HISTORY

MEMBERS

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CELL HISTORY

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CELL REACTIONS

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STATION DUTY

TOWN ТҮРЕ

DESCRIPTION

HISTORY

INHABITANTS

- •

STATION

LOCATION

COVER

FACILITIES

ASSETS

LOCAL KNOWLEDGES

- - .

ROLES

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OPERATION LIFE IN TOWN IS DISRUPTED SCENE TYPE: INVESTIGATION TRIGGER

A TRUTH IS REVEALED SCENE TYPE

INVESTIGATION LEADS TO MORE QUESTIONS SCENE TYPE

HORROR IS CONFRONTED SCENE TYPE

THE THREAT STRIKES AGAIN SCENE TYPE LIFE IN TOWN RETURNS TO "NORMAL" SCENE TYPE: CONCLUSION

THE PATH IS MADE CLEAR SCENE TYPE SCENE: SCENE TYPE:

A TWIST OCCURS SCENE TYPE SCENE: SCENE TYPE:

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TOWN REFERENCE SHEET

THE

| INHABITANTS | DESCRIPTION | ТҮРЕ | NOTES |
|---------------------|--|------|-------|
| Jerry Crowe | Mayor | | |
| Douglas Eddington | Sheriff | | |
| Rick Donner | Bumbling Police Officer | | |
| Marvin Sellers | Tough Police Officer | | |
| Veronica Bayer | Owns the local hotel | | |
| Fr. Jones | Local clergyman | | |
| Dr. Anne Wallace | Doctor | | |
| Carole Crowe | Postmistress & mayor's wife | | |
| Stuart Mills | Teenage rebel | | |
| Joanne Felton | Hottest Girl in the high school | | |
| Sonia Tate | Weird Girl | | |
| Alice Henshaw | Schoolteacher | | |
| Tom West | Handyman & Football Coach | | |
| 'Crazy Mary' | Senile Lunatic | | |
| June Felton | Former beauty queen | | |
| Ed Bayer | Troubled youth | | |
| Lenore Danek | Esoteric Artiste | | |
| Lori Wilson | Local Business Owner | | |
| Harry Stover | Local Business Owner | | |
| Jake Henshaw | Bartender; everyone drinks at Jake's Place | | |
| Dina Chambers | Waitress at Jake's Place | | |
| Earl Calloway | Town Drunk | | |
| , Tony Schilling | Hardscrabble Farmer | | |
| Malcolm Chambers | Wealthy Newspaper Owner | | |
| Rosalinda Lopez | Hotel Worker; works in the local hotel | | |
| | | | |

MURDER:

DISAPPEARANCE:

ARSON:

ANIMAL MUTILATION:

PERSONALITY SHIFTS:

THE OUTSIDER:

MADNESS:

STRANGE DREAMS:

THE ROT WITHIN:

STRANGE ENCOUNTERS IN THE WILDERNESS:

ESUITERIRURISTS

DARK SECRETS ARE REVEALED:

RADICAL SHIFT IN CIRCUMSTANCES:

NATURAL DISASTER:

BIZARRE DISCOVERY:



Symbols

101 Board 43

A

Abilities 8. See also General abilities, Investigative abilities General abilities 9-10, 16-17 Having the right ability 74 Investigative abilities 8, 11-15 Listing by family 18 Regaining Pool Points. See Refreshment Using in play 74 Advancement. See Improvement Adventure creation 66-73 Adventure, sample Breach Zero 100-137 Operation Prophet Bunco 138-148 Adversary map 89 Adversary record sheet 153 Alertness modifier 52 Alternate scenes 70 Ammo capacity 30 Amnesia, selective 32 Analysis station 37 Antagonist reaction scenes 20, 70 Anthropology (Academic) 11 Archaeology (Academic) 11 Architecture (Academic) 11 Armor 29, 52 Art History (Academic) 11 Astronomy (Technical) 11 Athletics (General) 16 Attack pattern 52

B

Ballistics (Technical) 11 Bigger Fights 28 Bleeder 53 Blood corpses 54 Briefing 40 Brutalizer 54 Build points 10. *See also* Improvement General build points 9 Investigative build points 9 Regaining 33 Spare build points 10 Bullshit Detector (Interpersonal) 11 BundyClub 48 Bureaucracy (Interpersonal) 12

С

Cell structure 48 Cell types 36, 47 Character 8 Concept 8 Contacts 8 Creation 8–12

Goals 93 Improving 34 Character Arcs 92-94 Character Creation 80 Character Sheet 151 Chemistry (Technical) 12 Close-up fight 28 Clues Core 22, 67 Floating core 68 Gathering 22 Inconspicuous 23 Leveraged 69 Pipe 69 Restricted 69 Rolling for 75 Simple searches 24 Special benefits 22, 23 Timed results 69 Zero-point 23 Combat. See Fighting Communications protocols 41 Concept 8 Conclusion scenes 71 Consciousness 27, 28 Resisting unconciousness 27 Conspiracies 47 BundvClub 47 Dollarmen, The 49 Infernalists, the 50 Rugged 51 Shepherdstown Cuckoos, the 51 Contacts 8 Contagious madness outbreaks 37 Contests 26 Contradiction, the 44 Cooperation 25 Cop Talk (Interpersonal) 12 Core clues 26, 67 Core scenes 70 Corpsejabber 55 Cover 30 Creatures of Unremitting Horror 7, 53-65. See also Outer Dark Entity (ODE) Cryptography (Technical) 12

D

Damage 27. See also Injury Damage modifier 27 Data Retrieval (Technical) 12 Death 28 Deep cover 39 Defensive Responses 90 Delusion 32 Deployment 40 Die rolls 24 Difficulty Numbers 25, 26 For Stability tests 31 In contests 26 Discarnate 56 Document Analysis (Technical) 12 Dollarmen, The 49 Driving (General) 16

E

Electronic Surveillance (Technical) 12 Electronic traffic sifting 38 Esoterror cells Cell structure 48 Cell types 47 Creating a cell 50 Esoterror cell worksheet 154 Esoterror conspiracies Bundyclub 48 Rugged 51 The Dollarmen 49 The Infernalists 50 The Shepherdstown Cuckoos 51 Esoterrorists 7, 36, 44-52 Communications 47 Contradiction, the 44 History 44 Leader types 46 Ethics code, Ordo Veritatis 36, 42 Evidence Collection (Technical) 12, 13-17 Exhaustion 27 Experience. See Improvement Explosive Devices (Technical) 13

F

Fighting 27 Ammo Capacity 30 Armor 29 Bigger Fights 28 Close-up fight 28 Cover 30 Damage 27 Hit threshold 27 Initiative 27 Injury 28 Multiple opponents 29 Non-lethal weapons 31 Range 31 Shoot-out 29 Surprise 29 Without an ability 27 Filch (General) 16 Fingerprinting (Technical) 13 Flattery (Interpersonal) 13 Flirting (Interpersonal) 13 Forensic Accounting (Academic) 13 Forensic Anthropology (Technical) 13 Forensic Entomology (Technical) 13 Forensic Psychology (Academic) 13

G

General abilities 9-10, 16-17. See also individual entries Benchmarks 10 Free general ratings 10 General pool points 77 General spends 26 Ratings 10 Regaining Pool Points 34 Zero general ratings 10 Glistening 57 GM advice 66-78 Goals, character 93 GUMSHOE system 19-34 Clues 22 Contests 26 Cooperation 25 Die rolls 24 Difficulty Numbers 25 General Spends 26 Introduction 19 Piggybacking 25 Refreshment 33 Tests 24

Η

Hazard Scenes 70 Health Health (General) 16 Health pool 27 Ratings for minor foes 52 Regaining pool points 28 History (Academic) 13 Hit threshold 27 Homicidal mania 32 Host, the 58 Hybrid scenes 71

I

Impersonate (Interpersonal) 13 Improvement 34 Inconspicuous clues 23 Infernalists, the 50 Infiltration (General) 16 Initiative 27 Injury 28 Interpersonal abilities 10 Interrogation (Interpersonal) 13 Intimidation (Interpersonal) 13 Introductory scenes 70 Investigation triggers 20 Creating investigation triggers 66 Investigative abilities 8, 11-15. See also individual entries Benchmarks 9 Free investigative rating 9 Investigative ability pool 22, 77

Investigative build points 8 Investigative spends 23 Regaining Pool Points 33 Special benefits 9, 23 Zero investigative ratings 9 Investigative ability checklist 70, 149 Investigator Matrix 70, 77, 150

K

Kook 53, 59

L

Languages (Academic) 14 Law (Academic) 14 Leveraged Clues 69 Linguistics (Academic) 14 Local Knowledge (Academic) 14, 83 Losing It 32

M

Magic 7, 45, 67 Man In Black 60 Mechanics (General) 16 Media 38 Electronic traffic sifting 38, 39 Media monitoring 38 Media threat analysis 38 Media threat analysis 38 Medic (General) 16 Megalomania 32 Membrane, the 42, 44 Mental Illness 32. See also Stability Amnesia, selective 32 Contagious madness outbreaks 37 Delusion 32 Homicidal mania 32 Megalomania 32 Multiple personality disorder 32 Paranoia 32 Post-Paranormal encounter disorder 36 Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) 36 Mr. Verity 40 Multiple opponents 29 Multiple personality disorder 32 Mundane mysteries 21 Mystery. See also Aventure creation Creating Mysteries 87 Mundane mysteries 21 Mystery Structure 20, 76

Ν

Narrative Arcs 89 Natural History (Academic) 14 Negotiation (Interpersonal) 14 Nester 60 Non-Lethal Weapons 31 No Tasers (Optional Rule) 31 NPCs Devising stats 53

0

Occult Studies (Academic) 14, 53 Offensive Responses 91 **Opponent statistics** 52 Ordo Veritatis 7, 8, 11, 35-42, 36, 39 And the law 14 Briefing 40 Cell types 36 Communications protocols 41 Deployment 40 Ethics code 36, 42 Investigative operations 36 Investigative protocols 16, 41 Mr. Verity 40 Organisation 36 Recruitment 43 Sources and methods 38 Special Suppression Forces 16 Statement of Intent 35 Support experience 36 Outer Dark 44 Outer Dark Entity (ODE) 53-65 Bleeder 53 Blood Corpses 54 Brutalizer 54 Corpsejabber 55 Discarnate 56 Glistening 57 Host, the 58 Kook 53, 59 Man in Black 60 Nester 60 Ovvashi 53 Returner 61 Scauler 63 Shamebeast 63 Sisterite 53 Skin Crab 65 Special Means of Dispatch (SMD) 41, 53 Torture Dogs 64 Ovvashi 53

Р

Pacing 25 Paranoia 32 Pathology (Academic) 15 Photography (Technical) 15 Piggybacking 25 Pipe Clues 69 Pools 8 Regaining Points 33 What pool points represent 33 Post-Paranormal Encounter Disorder (PPED) 36 Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) 36

D

Preparedness (General) 17 Psychic abiliities 45–46 Psychological monitoring 43 Psychological triage 32 Psychology 32 Head Games 32 Psychological Triage 32

R

Range 31 Ratings 8 Reassurance (Interpersonal) 15 Refreshment 33, 77 General ability pool 34 Health pool 28 Investigative ability pool 33 **Opponents** 52 Stability pool 33 Regaining Pool Points. See Refreshment Research (Academic) 15 Resisting unconciousness 27 Resource management 77 Restricted clues 69 Returner 61 Roleplaying 7 Rolling for Clues 75 Rugged 51 Running scenarios 78

S

Scauler 63 Scenarios 66-73. See also Adventure creation Activating Players 72 Building on the fly 71 Designing 66 Giving Out Clues 74 Placing Information 71 Preparing a Fallback 73 Running 78-82 Ticking clock 71 Scenario worksheet 152 Scenes Ending scenes 77 Placing information 71 Scene diagrams 71 Scene types 70. See also Clues Alternate 70 Antagonist reaction 70 Conclusion scenes 71 Core scenes 70 Hazard scenes 70 Hybrid scenes 71 Introductory scenes 70 Subplot scenes 70 Scuffling (General) 17, 27 Series Arc 94 Shamebeast 63 Shepherdstown Cuckoos, the 51 Shooting. See Fighting

Shooting (General) 17, 27 Shoot-out 29 Shrink (General) 17 Simple searches 24 Simple tests 24 Sinister conspiracy 20 Sisterite 53 Skin crab 65 Sources of Stability 81 Special Means of Dispatch (SMD) 41, 53-54 Special Suppression Forces 16, 36, 42 Stability Difficulty Numbers 32 General ability 17 Losing It 32 Loss 31 Mental Illness 32 Psychological Triage 32 Regaining Pool Points 33 Sources of Stability 81 Tests 31 Station Duty 79-99 Creating a Station 86 Facilities 86 Scenario Worksheet 156 Station Assets 87 Town reference sheet 157 Town sheet 155 Stealth modifier 52 Streetwise (Interpersonal) 15 Subplot Scenes 70 Supernatural Responses 91 Supporting Characters 68 Surprise 29 Surveillance (General) 17, 39

Т

Team pool 89 Tests 24 And Supporting Characters 53 Simple Tests 24 Stability Tests 31 Textual Analysis (Academic) 15 Timed results 69 Torture dog 64 Trail of clues 20 Trivia (Academic) 15

V

Veil-out 22, 42

W

Weapons 27. See also Fighting Wounds 27

Z

Zero-point clues 23 Zero-sum contests 26