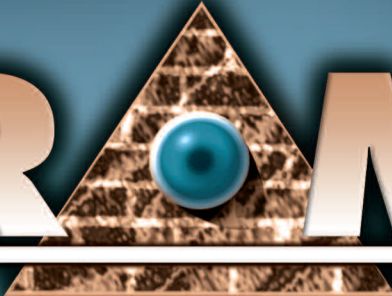


PYRAMID[®]



Issue 3/27 JANUARY '11

MONSTERS IN SPACE



MOONDRAGONS AND STRANGER THINGS

by Ken Spencer

**THE ANGRIST
INVASION OF EARTH**
by J. Edward Tremlett

A WELL-ARMED POPULACE
by Andy Vetromile

**IN SPACE, NO ONE
HEARS THEM CRAWL**
by Christian Nienhaus

CREATURES OF THE VOID
by Rev. Jason "PK" Levine

STEVE JACKSON GAMES

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Article Colors

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

Pale Blue: In This Issue

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

Dark Blue: **GURPS** Features

Purple: Other Features

IN THIS ISSUE

Objectively looking at the laws of physics, space is scary. But once humanity makes it way to the stars, we may be surprised to discover we're not the only alien creatures exploring the void. Who will survive the horrors' attacks, and who will become some cruel creatures' snacks?

Straight from the deserts of Mars, the swamps of Venus, and other extraterrestrial points come *Moondragons and Stranger Things*. With moondragons, Martian throat-stabbers, and more, this bestiary (designed for the Roma Universalis timeline from *Pyramid* #3/20: *Infinite Worlds* but suitable for many settings) offers some of the more feared creatures of that solar system, complete with **GURPS** stats for a dozen different denizens.

The Angriest Invasion of Earth begins in the shadows and ends with explosions – and all the emotions in between pave the way to feed the invaders. This generic campaign gives the groundwork for the GM to destroy the world. Can the heroes uncover the conspiracy and save the world from itself?

As humanity explores the stars, there will be many agendas, some of which conflict. When greed wins out in a first contact, the results can be devastating, even for *A Well-Armed Populace*. This article examines the secrets, lies, and truths (including **GURPS** stats) for a new alien race.

The biggest scares can come in the smallest packages. Learn what's so awful about a snake, a virus, and a bug (each presented with adventure hooks and **GURPS** stats) – because *In Space, No One Hears Them Crawl*.

The night extends to infinity, as shown by *Creatures of the Void*. **GURPS** Assistant Line Editor Jason "PK" Levine revisits the first two **GURPS Fourth Edition** *Creatures of the Night* volumes, which he co-authored. He provides insight into how the Earth-bound entities contained therein might be transformed for extraterrestrial terror.

For the GM who needs to deal with creating a quick monster for a sudden layover on a new planet, or for a hero looking for a deal on a new kind of guard dog, this issue's bonus lets groups *deal* out random creatures with *Aliens on Hand*.

Steven Marsh, *Pyramid* editor, looks at how to decide just what makes monsters in space dangerous in his *Random Thought Table*. When you need a break from the creepy-crawlies in the rest of this issue, head over to *Odds and Ends* for *Murphy's Rules* and other fun stuff.

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FROM THE EDITOR

99 MONSTERS TO KILL IN THE VOID, 99 MONSTERS TO KILL . . .

The cool thing about “monsters in space” is that – like Tabasco sauce – you can decide how much to add. The *Alien* universe only uses one type of monster (at least at first), but it’s a creature with enough variations and interesting bits to hang an entire series on. The *Star Trek* setting has a goodly number of cosmic critters, but those are not the focus of every show. *Doctor Who* has gotten a half-century out of various “monsters of the week,” and *Men In Black* crams its cosmic crannies with every type of life form.

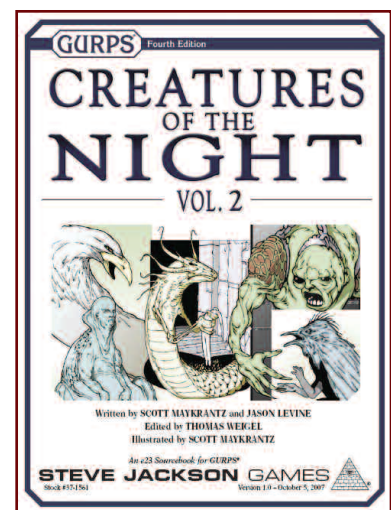
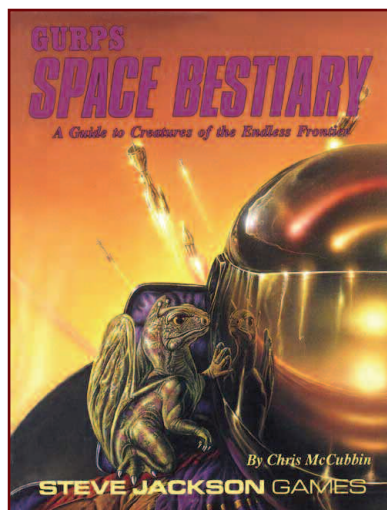
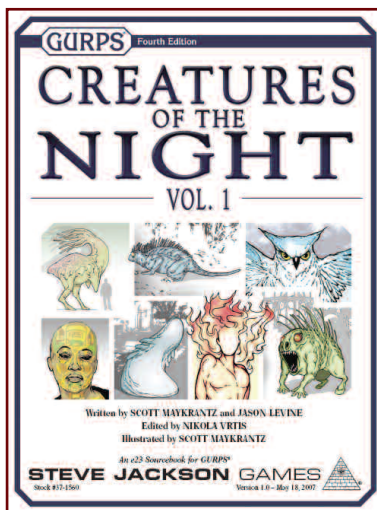
Whatever the default assumption is, mixing it up can heighten the horror or tension causes by the universe’s uglies. If there’s only one alien threat, then maybe having an adventure where something seemingly new – perhaps a mechanical monstrosity or a human-devised decoy – can throw the heroes off their game. A universe with a small number of threats

might find them combining in new or unexpected ways (like the Ussp on pp. 24-30 and the Pyra on pp. 11-17). If creatures are peppered sporadically, perhaps a mass of monsters lumped into a series of adventures can portend something more sinister behind the scenes . . . or a “dry spell” can make the heroes complacent for a future threat. And if the universe is teeming with terror, an adventure where there is *absolutely nothing* in the shadows for a change may well have the spacefarers seeing invisible enemies, cosmic conspiracies, and hyper-hysteria as they await the other shoe that never drops.

May the slathering fangs in this issue inspire you to fill the dark corners of the cosmos with new types of terror!

WRITE HERE, WRITE NOW

Did this issue make you afraid to board your private space station? Or did you have different ideas for how to harness the horrors of the heavens? You can send your private treatises of terror to pyramid@sjgames.com, or accrue your accolades or arguments online at forums.sjgames.com.



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MOONDRAGONS AND STRANGER THINGS

BY KEN SPENCER

Centurion Tullius heard sounds from deeper in the cavern – skittering claws across the stone. He held up one hand to signal a halt to the men following him. The picked men from the third century of IV Flavia Felix stopped, their pila at the ready, torches raised, and ears pricked. Somewhere below them, a moondragon lurked, a creature of great power and ferocity, but one also of great wealth. Within the beast’s gullet would be a lunar star, a diamond worth at least 15,000 sesterces back in Rome. If only they could slay the brute, they could all retire rich men.

Tullius only had time to let out a half uttered word of warning before a swarm of lunar bats swooped down from the cavern’s roof and swarmed the legionnaires. The shrieks of blind bat-things mingled with the curses of Roman soldiers, who were their torches about wildly. Drawn by the commotion, the moon-dragon charged into the fray, its sinuous 16-limbed body whipping around the combatants, slashing at man and lunar bat alike in a frenzy of bloodletting.

Hours later, Tullius was busy amending the daily reports to show his eight companions, an entire contubernium of men, were all absent from the camp with no explanation. He added to the report that he suspected that they had likely abandoned their posts to hunt moondragons for their valuable gullet stones, a loss to the legion. Next time, he told himself, I’ll be better prepared, and bring better men.

There are things out there among the stars, things undreamed by humanity nestled safely in its terrestrial abode. Far beyond the reaches of Earth’s atmosphere, and across the aetherial vastness of the Divium Mare, lay worlds beyond understanding, and monsters well beyond strange. Herein is presented a look at some exotic alien beasts discovered by the Romans in the Roma Universalis setting featured in *Pyramid #3/20: Infinite Worlds*. Although these alien beasts are intended for use with that setting, they are easily transported into any sci-fi campaign. They would work best in a planetary romance campaign, but by making a few changes to their names, these nasties can be dropped onto any planet.

This article describes Venus, Luna, Mars, and the asteroid belt as they appear in Roma Universalis. These sections provide a planetary ecosystem within which the various monsters live, but they are not limited to either the named planets or the Roma Universalis setting. For example, Mars can be taken out as a whole, or part, and dropped into any sci-fi setting with just a quick renaming (Seti-Omega IX is a lot like Mars, or so I’ve heard). Each section also offers a few “stranger things” from that location, complete with its stats for use in *GURPS Fourth Edition*. An alphabetical list of all creatures described in this article appears on p. 10.

VENUS

Three words describe Venus: hot, wet, and buggy. The planet has Earth-like gravity and an atmosphere that is slightly denser – and a lot more humid – than Earth’s. Most of the planet is covered with jungles and low-lying swampland, with only a few truly dry landmasses found at the poles. The native life is well-adapted to a hot and wet environment, and large reptilian lifeforms are the most commonly encountered, though insects of unusual size are not uncommon.

Ferns, cycads, ginkgoes, and other plant life long extinct on Earth dominate Venus’ biosphere, as do lycopods, mosses, and horsetails. Flowering plants have not yet evolved on Venus, though several plant species use brightly colored and perfumed leaves to lure in insects for food. The fact that some of the plants – notably several unusual species of ginkgoes – are carnivorous came as quite a surprise to the first Roman explorers.

As a fun crossworlds mystery, what if some of these creatures were encountered on a different alternate world?

These exotic plants have created a small industry in rare woods and potted Venusian plants, both of which are very popular among the wealthier citizens of the Empire.

Three distinct ecosystems can be found on Venus: the swampy jungles (which make up most of the planetary surface), the shallow seas, and the polar highlands. Of these, the polar highlands are the closest to a temperate environment, and are the habitat of conifers and near-mammals (furred, live-bearing reptiles). The seas are home to a variety of cartilaginous fish and several species of bony fish that sport thick coverings of armor. A few species of marine reptile constitute the apex predators of the seas, and at least one, *the romper*, is capable of crawling onto land in search of prey.

The jungles of Venus are legendary for their lush herbaceous growth and savage animals. Of these, *deathfangs* are the most notorious: 15'-tall bipedal reptilian eating machines whose favorite food seems to be humans. The deathfang's fabled ferocity has earned it a place in the arenas on Earth, most notably in the Roman Coliseum. Other dangerous animals include *Venusian dragonflies* (10'-long, 100-lbs. flying predators) and *flying leeches*.

At his best, Man is the noblest of animals; separated from law and justice, he is the worst.

— Aristotle

DEATHFANGS

The dreaded deathfang is a terror that stalks the Venusian jungles, fearless in its size and ferocity. Standing over 15' tall at the shoulder, this bipedal reptile sports 3"-long razor-sharp fangs, 6" talons on its feet and forelimbs, and a wickedly pointed snout. Its roars have been known to panic even the bravest of centurions, and a rampaging deathfang is a sight no sane man would wish to behold. Yet the Venusian warriors hunt this monster with wild abandon, a sign of either low intellect or courage beyond human understanding.

Besides its impressive array of physical armament, the deathfang is most known for its brightly patterned hide. On the rare occasion that one is slain, the skin of the beast is quickly preserved and shipped to Rome, where the green-and-red jewel-like scales can fetch an imperial price. To date only one deathfang has been successfully captured alive, and that specimen broke loose during the journey to Earth and killed half of the sky galley's crew before being slain.

ST: 18	HP: 18	Speed: 7.50
DX: 12	Will: 10	Move: 7
IQ: 4	Per: 13	Weight: 2 tons
HT: 18	FP: 18	SM: +3
Dodge: 11	Parry: N/A	DR: 10

Bite (15): 1d+2 impaling. Reach C.

Claw (15): 4d+3 cutting or impaling. Reach C-2.

Traits: Acute Smell and Taste 2; Claws (Long Talons); Combat Reflexes; Danger Sense; Discriminatory Smell; Striking ST 15 (Claws only); Teeth (Fangs); Wild Animal.

Skills: Brawling-15; Tracking-12.

FLYING LEECHES

Considering the size of the Venusian dragonfly and the dreaded deathfang, it is surprising that the natives of the Venusian jungles face the flying leech with the most apprehension. This small, worm-like creature only measures an inch long at most, but can be found nearly everywhere outside of the temperate polar regions. The flying leech uses a pair of gossamer wings to rise out of the bogs and attach itself to its prey. After attachment, it secretes a powerful narcotic that induces feelings of lethargy and euphoria in its victims. Once subdued, the leech gorges itself on its prey's blood, and then drops off to digest this liquid meal. The prey, now abandoned, faces further peril in the form of any wandering predator who now can move in and gain an easy meal, provided that another leech doesn't fly up and latch on to it. Flying leech colonies can often be spotted if one pays attention for groups of slumbering animals and piles of rotted carcasses.

ST: 1	HP: 1	Speed: 4.25
DX: 12	Will: 10	Move: 4 (Ground)/8 (Air)
IQ: 1	Per: 12	Weight: 3 ounces
HT: 5	FP: 5	SM: -10

Dodge: 8 **Parry:** N/A **DR:** 0

Blood-Draining Bite (14): Grapple; Reach C. This *must* target bare skin. On subsequent turns, 1d fatigue/turn, with symptoms of ecstasy after losing 2/3 HP.

Traits: Flight (Winged); Horizontal; Fatigue Attack 1d (see above); Invertebrate; Wild Animal.

Skills: Acrobatics-12; Brawling-14.

VENUSIAN DRAGONFLIES

These giant dragonflies are a common sight in the jungles of Venus, and are a danger to explorers. With bodies reaching a length of 10', and wingspans of over 40', the Venusian Dragonfly is the largest insect in the solar system. It is a fierce hunter and preys on all manner of large animal life, including humans and Venusians. These predators are covered in thick chitinous armor, and attack using a formidable set of mandibles, plus their six talon-tipped legs. In coloration, they range from light blue to dark green, and often sport bright gem-like mottling along their thorax.

ST: 15	HP: 15	Speed: 6.00
DX: 14	Will: 5	Move: 6 (Ground)/12 (Air)
IQ: 2	Per: 12	Weight: 130 lbs.
HT: 10	FP: 10	SM: +2*

In a campaign set earlier in Roma Universalis' timeline (or tweaked a bit), the heroes might get the honor of naming one of the beasts from this article. If using this technique, be careful when introducing the critters to use descriptions only!

Dodge: 12 **Parry:** N/A **DR:** 1

Bite (14): 2d-1 crushing. Reach C, 1.

Claws (14): 1d+2 impaling. Reach C, 1.

Traits: Acute Vision 4; Claws (Long Talons); Cold-Blooded (65°F); Crushing Striker (Mandibles; Cannot Parry; Limited Arc, Front); Enhanced Dodge 3; Extra Attack 4; Extra Legs (Eight legs; Long, Can step over SM -2 or smaller creatures without needing to evade); Flight (Winged); Horizontal; Peripheral Vision; Striking ST 2; Temperature Tolerance 1 (65°F to 130°F); Wild Animal.

Skills: Acrobatics-14; Brawling-14; Flight-10; Tracking-12.

* Wings are targeted as SM +5.

Adventure Inspiration

For a change of pace, consider the myths of ancient Greece in the light of the Divium Mare and Elixir of Daedalus. What if the Golden Fleece was on Luna, guarded by a moondragon? Perhaps the Martians traveled to Earth in the distant past, tinkered with terrestrial life, and produced minotaurs, griffins, sphinxes, hydras, and other mythological creatures.

VENUSIAN ROMPERS

The romper is an amphibious marine reptile that received its name from Tribune Lepidus Gracchus Gaius. He apparently commented after an encounter that killed three legionaries

and two Venusian warriors that the beast came out of the sea and romped through his men. Although seemingly bereft of linguistic skills, Gaius had proved to be a formidable warrior and slew the creature by thrusting his gladius through its head (and only losing a leg in the process).

The romper possesses four sets of limbs – two pairs of fins, and two pairs of short, stout legs. When at sea, the beast's legs fold into recesses in its ventral side, while on land the fins fold back to lie along its flanks.

Rompers are large, with most specimens measuring from 15' to 20' in length, and weighing around 1,300 lbs. The creature hunts large prey, both in the ocean and on the shore, and has been found as far as two miles inland. Its skin is thick and provides suitable armor, especially along its head and forequarters. The romper's head is long and filled with wickedly sharp backward-curving teeth, well-suited to grasping and slicing prey. In color, its hide ranges from an olive grey on its back, to a whitish grey on its ventral surfaces.

ST: 18 **HP:** 18 **Speed:** 6.50
DX: 14 **Will:** 10 **Move:** 6 (Ground)/6 (Water)
IQ: 4 **Per:** 14 **Weight:** 1,300 lbs.
HT: 12 **FP:** 12 **SM:** +3

Dodge: 9 **Parry:** N/A **DR:** 5*

Bite (16): 1d+2 cutting. Reach C.

Traits: Acute Sight 2; Acute Taste and Smell 3; Amphibious; Cold-Blooded (65°F); Horizontal; No Fine Manipulators; Teeth (Sharp); Wild Animal.

Skills: Brawling-16; Tracking-14.

* +3 DR on skull, face, and front of torso.

LUNA

The moon is a cold, dry wasteland, nearly devoid of life. There is no water on the surface, and little atmosphere to speak of (atmospheric pressure is low, but the composition is similar to Earth's). Beneath the surface, however, it is a different story. Luna is honeycombed with a vast network of caverns and tunnels that are filled with a rich, vibrant ecosystem. Pools of water, underground streams, and even whole caverns filled with liquid allow life to thrive in the sublunarian world.

Fields of fungus cover the floors and walls of the caverns, and bizarre floating plants fill the empty spaces. Creatures similar to Terrestrial insects abound, though their physiology is decidedly different. All lunar life is blind, and a variety of ingenious ways to compensate for life in perpetual darkness have been developed. Larger creatures, such as *moondragons* and lunar bats use a natural sonar, or echolocation, to navigate the tunnels and find food. Smaller animals rely on enhanced senses of hearing or smell, though some (such as the Antonius crab-mite) exhibit a natural ability to sense the plants they live on and the prey they feed on. Another peculiarity of lunar life

is the seeming excess of limbs. Most of the native creatures of the moon possess upwards of five pairs of limbs, and some have even more.

The most dangerous creature of the sublunarian world is the dreaded moondragon. These creatures roam the caverns, eating any tasty morsel that crosses their path. *Lunar centipedes* are the moondragons' favorite food, but they will not refuse a particularly large lunar bat, or even a human foolish enough to stray into the depths.

Not all of the dangerous sublunarian life are animals, as a mobile and deadly carnivorous fungus has recently been discovered in the lower caverns. The carnivorous mold is a carpet of whitish slime growths that undulates along the cavern floors, or in some reported cases, flies through the air by flapping its entire body. The mold drops from above onto its victims, seeking to suffocate them by enveloping their mouths and nostrils with its pulpy flesh. Rumors abound that the emperor keeps a special chamber in the Empire's lunar base, Urbus Luna, filled with these predatory molds purely for the disposal of his enemies.

You can "deal" up a makeshift lunar base using the cards from Pyramid #3/6: Space Colony Alpha. That issue may provide other inspiration for building a new home among the stars!

CARNIVOROUS MOLD

One of the many dangers of the sublunarian world, the carnivorous mold is a quiet threat to all who delve into the caverns inside Luna. Not really an animal, but a fungal colony that pushes the boundary of animal and plant, the carnivorous mold is a whitefish-grey mass that looks like a fuzzy carpet. It moves by undulating along the floors, walls, and ceilings of caverns, or in some rare specimens, flying.

The carnivorous mold attacks by dropping onto its prey and suffocating it. This process is aided by a potent nerve toxin that paralyzes its prey. The mold then extrudes feeding threads into the prey's body and slowly consumes it.

ST: 2 **HP:** 2 **Speed:** 5.75
DX: 15 **Will:** 10 **Move:** 5 (Ground)/10 (Air)
IQ: 1 **Per:** 14 **Weight:** 5 lbs
HT: 8 **FP:** 8 **SM:** 0
Dodge: 8 **Parry:** N/A **DR:** 0

Toxic Aura (N/A): 2d fatigue (roll HT-5 to resist), with symptoms of paralysis after losing 1/2 HP. Anyone grappled by the mold must roll every second, and only sealed or force-field DR applies.

Traits: Blindness; Constriction Attack; G-Intolerance (0.05 G); Horizontal; Invertebrate; No Manipulators; Scanning Sense (Sonar); Toxic Attack 2d (Aura; Blood Agent; Melee Attack C; Fatigue; Resistible, HT-5); Wild Animal.

Skills: Acrobatics-16; Brawling-16; Wrestling-16.

Notes: Not all specimens can fly. Native gravity is 0.8 G.

LUNAR CENTIPEDES

While not nearly as well-known or as fearsome as the moondragon, the lunar centipede is a monster in its own right. Reaching lengths of upwards of 30', and massing around 400 lbs., this normally docile fungivore only poses a danger to others when startled. If threatened, the lunar centipede releases a cloud of noxious gas and attempts to scuttle away on its many legs. If cornered, the beast will turn to bring its massive mandibles to bear on its attackers. Lunar centipedes are becoming a delicacy, and its flesh has been compared favorably to that of lobster.

ST: 14 **HP:** 14 **Speed:** 5.50
DX: 12 **Will:** 10 **Move:** 5
IQ: 2 **Per:** 12 **Weight:** 1,300 lbs.
HT: 10 **FP:** 10 **SM:** +4
Dodge: 8 **Parry:** N/A **DR:** 10

Bite (14): 1d cutting. Reach C.

Traits: Blindness; Extra Legs (50 legs); G-Intolerance (0.05 G); Horizontal; Scanning Sense (Sonar); Teeth (Sharp); Wild Animal.

Skills: Brawling-14; Tracking-12.

Notes: Native gravity is 0.8 G.

MOONDRAGONS

Moondragons are 16-limbed, serpentine animals that hunt the caverns and tunnels beneath the surface of Luna. Their bodies are long and sinuous, often stretching for 30' or more, but are narrow, and it is a rare specimen that exceeds 3' in diameter.

A moondragon's limbs have five joints each, and are evenly spaced around its body in groups of four, thus allowing it to cling to any surface it encounters. Each limb ends in a three-digit appendage tipped with sharp claws. All of these limbs double as locomotion or manipulative appendages. A moondragon can thus grasp prey at any point along its body. Like most of the native animals of Luna, moondragons are blind, but possess sensitive hearing and natural sonar.

Moondragons are the apex feeders of the sublunarian ecosystem. Like most large predators, they happily taking the kill from smaller creatures. They hunt by ambushing their prey and slashing with their knife-like teeth. Prey that passes too close a moondragon's body may be grabbed by one or more clawed limbs, and held until the teeth-filled mouth can be brought to bear. Due to the hunters' large size, prey that can escape into small tunnels can easily get away from moondragons.

Great deeds are usually wrought at great risk.

– Herodotus

Moondragons do not fare well outside of the thin atmosphere and low gravity of Luna, and none have yet survived the journey to Earth long enough to participate in the Games. Their main value are lunar stars: diamond-like stones formed in the beast's gullet. Moondragons consume fist-sized rocks to act as gullet stones; over the years, the moondragon's digestive juices produce a lustrous and semi-transparent stone that shows several layers of brightly colored strata.

ST: 25 **HP:** 25 **Speed:** 8.00
DX: 19 **Will:** 10 **Move:** 8
IQ: 4 **Per:** 12 **Weight:** 2 tons
HT: 13 **FP:** 12 **SM:** +4

Dodge: 11 **Parry:** N/A **DR:** 14

Bite (19): 2d+1 cutting. Reach C.

Claws (19): 5d-1 cutting or impaling. Reach C-3.

Traits: Acute Hearing 3; Blindness; Claws (Long Talons); Clinging; Extra Attack 8; Extra Arms 14 (Extra-Flexible; Foot Manipulators); Flexibility (Double-Jointed); G-Intolerance (0.05 G); Horizontal; Scanning Sense (Sonar); Striking ST 12 (Claws only); Super Climbing 2; Teeth (Sharp); Vibration Sense (Air); Wild Animal.

Skills: Brawling-19; Climbing-19; Tracking-13.

Notes: Native gravity is 0.8 G.

A sinister contagion can only be cured using an elixir crafted with one key ingredient: blood from a moondragon. This probably inspires the heroes to ask: "How much more dangerous is this plague?"

MARS

Mars is a hot and dry planet, crisscrossed with highlands and cut by a network of canals. Most of the native life can be found in one of three ecosystems, the highlands, the canal zones, and the temperate polar regions. A fourth region – the high desert – bears some mentioning as it covers 40% of the planet's surface. As an ecosystem, the high desert is almost entirely devoid of water, and thus life. A few small oases dot the landscape, and often support micro-ecosystems that contain animals similar to those found in the canal zones. These oases are often either seasonal or short lived, and it is not unusual to find several species making a migration across the wastes in search of a new habitat. One animal – the red-eyed *thalx* – does spend the entirety of its lifecycle in the high desert, preying on migrating wildlife.

Highland animals tend to fall into one of two broad categories: those who make a permanent habitation in one fertile area, and those who wander from area to area in search of food, water, and shelter. Due to the high daytime temperatures (often in excess of 130° F during the summer months), the vast majority of highland life lies dormant during the day, entering a period of activity at night. Nightfall in the highlands is a beautiful sight, with leaves unfolding and insects buzzing in the cooler night air. It is at night that browsers, such as the hill egret, and their hunters, such as the golden-eyed *thalx*, prowl the conifers and succulent trees of the highlands.

Today in the arena – a special attraction! A rare red thalx from Mars is faced against two hungry lions! Following will be the execution of criminals by a pack of Tiberius' wolves, fresh from Mars and ready for blood!

The canal zones support an ecosystem that takes advantage of the abundant water flowing through the canals from the polar regions. Plants abound, as do the animals that feed on or live in them. Canal brush, a tall spreading succulent, is the dominant species of plant, and is the home to canal voles, various insects, and Martian walking fish. As the dominant predator, *Tiberius' wolves* are common sights in the lands around the canals. The canal zones are also home to one of the more dangerous native Martian animals, the *Martian throat-stabber*.

This animal resembles a six-limbed bat, with a long sharp proboscis. The throat-stabber lurks on the walls of the great canals, and hunts by dropping down, beak first, at its prey, impaling it on its proboscis and then draining it of bodily fluids. Many incautious explorers have died thusly, an alien creature imbedded in their neck.

The Martians are masters of biotechnology, and according to their records, they are much older than humanity. These two factors combine to produce a certain amount of confusion with regards to the native life of Mars. Which animals and plants are natural, and which are the result of millennia of Martian genetic manipulation? For example, the Martian glow bat is one of the few animals active during the day, and is often seen flitting about and sucking nutrients from cacti and other succulents. At night, the glow bat roosts inside homes, where its bioluminescent wings provide light. Obviously, the glow bat was bioengineered to be a living light bulb, but it spends half of its life in the wild as part of the natural ecosystem.

MARTIAN THROAT-STABBERS

Of all the weird and wonderful creatures of Mars, the throat-stabber is by far the least appreciated. The dreaded *thalx* is popular in the Games, and is much feared by those who venture into the highlands and desert, but more Martians and humans are slain every year by throat-stabbers than any other native Martian creature (the medal for total annual kills goes to humans). This odd little creature is barely larger than two hands, and weighs from 3-6 lbs. Its red-colored skin and fur help it to blend into the rock that makes up the canal walls. Whole colonies of these creatures can be found clinging to the canal walls, as well as the walls of abandoned structures, the insides of caves, and the undersides of ledges. When it detects prey approaching below them, the throat-stabber releases itself from its roost and glides toward the victim, its bat-like wings outspread and its six legs tucked in tight. Once above its intended prey, the throat-stabber folds its wings and plummets, proboscis first, at the poor victim's weakest exposed point. After the kill, the throat-stabber lets out an ear-splitting shriek, which summons the rest of the colony to the feast.

ST: 8	HP: 8	Speed: 5.75
DX: 15	Will: 6	Move: 5 (Ground)/10 (Air)
IQ: 4	Per: 12	Weight: 5 lbs.
HT: 8	FP: 8	SM: -3
Dodge: 10	Parry: N/A	DR: 0

Stab (16): 3d(2) impaling. Reach C.

Traits: Enhanced Dodge 2; Extra Legs (Six legs; Cannot Kick); Flight 1 (Cannot Hover; Controlled Gliding; Winged); Horizontal; Impaling Attack 3d (see above); Wild Animal.

Skills: Acrobatics-16; Brawling-16.

*For descriptions of some of the many creatures designed by Martians to improve their world, see **Martian Tech** in **Pyramid #3/24: Bio-Tech**.*

Everything has a natural explanation. The moon is not a god, but a great rock, and the sun is a hot rock.

– Anaxagoras

THALX

Of all the native creatures of Mars, the thalx is the one most well-known to the common citizen of the Empire. This six-limbed reptilian hunter is a favorite of the arenas, mostly due to its ferocious appearance and irritable nature. There are several subspecies of thalx, each adapted to a different portion of the Martian ecosystem, but the most commonly encountered is the golden-eyed thalx, notable for its deep-red scales and folding head crest.

Their digestive processes are geared entirely to meat, and handlers at the Coliseum in Rome have noted that thalx fare best on live food. Thalx are chasers who prefer to run down prey, tripping their potential meal before gripping its neck in a suffocating bite.

All thalx possess similar traits, namely a long and high slung six-limbed body covered in tough scales. These legs end in eight toes, each tipped with a sharp talon. Each limb aids in the creature's locomotion, and a thalx can quickly move from a stand to a fast run. The head of the beast is wedge-shaped, and its mouth is filled with scissor-like teeth, the better to tear and rend flesh. A thalx's eyes sit high on its head, and give the creature an excellent field of view.

Although similar in appearance to Terrestrial or Venusian reptiles, the thalx is a different creature entirely. It regulates its body temperature as a mammal would, and births live young.

ST: 19	HP: 19	Speed: 6.25
DX: 13	Will: 12	Move: 6
IQ: 4	Per: 12	Weight: 250 lbs.
HT: 12	FP: 15	SM: 0

Dodge: 10 **Parry:** N/A **DR:** 4

Bite (15): 2d cutting. Reach C.

Traits: Acute Hearing 2; Acute Taste and Smell 4; Combat Reflexes; Extra Legs (Six legs; Cannot Kick); Discriminatory Smell; Horizontal; Night Vision 2; Peripheral Vision; Teeth (Sharp); Temperature Tolerance 1 (74°F to 141°F); Wild Animal.

Skills: Brawling-15; Tracking-15.

Notes: There are various subspecies of thalx, most denoted by their color. The statistics above are for the common golden-eyed thalx; the red-eyed thalx of the high desert is smaller, whereas the green-eyed thalx of the canal zones is larger. Vary ST and HT according to the subspecies.

TIBERIUS' WOLVES

Not a true wolf, the Tiberius' wolf is native to the high deserts and canal lands of Mars. The creature gets its name from its behavior; for only the most imaginative could see a wolf in this slathering ball of fur and fang. Tiberius' wolves live and hunt in packs, similar to Terran wolves, and are known to attack lone travelers, farm animals, and even full-grown Martians.

Like the Martians, Tiberius' wolves are six-limbed and possess a 2'-diameter, round, furry body. Each limb ends in a clawed paw-like hoof capable of slashing open a man's flesh, or caving in his chest. Four prehensile stalks extend from the center of the body, three tipped with the equivalent of eyes and ears, while the fourth contains the sense of smell and the beast's genitalia.

ST: 10	HP: 10	Speed: 6.00
DX: 12	Will: 11	Move: 6
IQ: 4	Per: 14	Weight: 120 lbs.
HT: 12	FP: 12	SM: 0

Dodge: 9 **Parry:** N/A **DR:** 1

Bite (14): 1d-2 cutting. Reach C.

Claws (14): 1d-2 cutting. Reach C.

Traits: 360° Vision; Claws (Sharp); Discriminatory Smell; Extra Legs (Six legs); Horizontal; Night Vision 2; No Fine Manipulators; Teeth (Sharp); Temperature Tolerance (Native comfort zone 110° F); Wild Animal.

Skills: Brawling-14; Tracking-14.

THE ASTEROID BELT

The asteroid belt contains pockets of life in the caverns and craters of the larger bodies. Most of the asteroids are too small to support life of any significant size, however vicious diseases and parasites are not unheard of. The larger asteroids have extensive caves within them, and ecosystems similar to that of the sublunarian caverns. Other bodies have pockets of atmosphere, some dangerously exotic, that contain entire ecosystems in a crater spanning bubble of gas.

Among the strange and terrifying beasts found in and on the asteroids, the most distressing and dangerous is the aptly named *asteroid beast*. This creature is of immense size, and lairs coiled in the deepest caverns. Its serpentine body can reach lengths of over a mile, and its jaws are as large as a small hill. Asteroid beasts prey on *aetherial skimmers*, gargantuan creatures that glide between the asteroids, feeding off of swarms of small animals and ambient energy.

Lots of real-world information on the Red Planet can be found in GURPS Mars. Of course, how closely that information matches up might prove surprising to off-world visitors!

As long as Man continues to be a merciless destroyer of lower living beings, he will never know health or peace. For as long as man massacres animals, they will kill each other.

– Pythagoras

AETHERIAL SKIMMERS

Largest of the animals that frequent the Divium Mare, the aetherial skimmer is approximately the size of a blue whale, though size is where any comparison ends. The beast's body is a round, bulbous mass that contains its nervous and digestive systems. This mass is surrounded by a halo of tentacles, some reaching nearly 90' in length, which it uses to feed. The longest of the tentacles end in a flared membrane, which the aetherial skimmer uses to propel itself across the void, and to gather the small animals that congregate near the smaller orbiting bodies. The shorter tentacles are used for locomotion on asteroid surfaces, as well as grasping larger prey. It is unknown how these bizarre creatures reproduce, though some philosophers have suggested that they are parthenogenic.

ST: 700 **HP:** 700 **Speed:** 6.25
DX: 10 **Will:** 1 **Move:** 24,576 (Space Flight)
IQ: 1 **Per:** 10 **Weight:** 2,000-3,000 tons
HT: 15 **FP:** 15 **SM:** +10
Dodge: 9 **Parry:** N/A **DR:** 150

Tentacle (12): 6d×12 crushing. Reach C-30.

Grapple (10): No damage, but will pull victim *inside* skimmer, where he takes 5d corrosion damage/second. Reach C-30.

Traits: 360° Vision; Absolute Direction (3D Spatial Sense); Constriction Attack; Enhanced Move 10 (Space Speed 24,576);

Extra Arms 15 (Extra-Flexible); Extra Attack 8; Flight (Lighter Than Air; Space Flight Only); Hyperspectral Vision; Injury Tolerance (No Head; No Neck); Internal Corrosion Attack 5d (see above); Invertebrate; Telescopic Vision 3 (No Targeting); Temperature Tolerance 27 (-455°F to 5°F); Vacuum Support; Wild Animal.

Skills: Brawling-12; Flight-15.

ASTEROID BEASTS

Coiled inside some of the larger asteroids lie gargantuan asteroid beasts, creatures whose very dimensions boggle the minds of the Empire's greatest philosophers. Stretching over a mile long, and possessing a mouth that is best measured in acres, no other animal, not even the massive aetherial skimmer, can rival this creature in sheer size and awesome power. The asteroid beast feeds on aetherial skimmers, and one such feast can sate its hunger for weeks. Although humans are beneath the asteroid beast's notice, they have been known to take an unkind interest in passing ships. The creature's senses aren't limited to sight, and they can detect prey from miles away.

Asteroid beasts lair in craters that have a large, natural opening into a cave system. Their massive bodies grow to fill the cave, and their heads rest in the crater's mouth. It is rumored that at least one beast has migrated to Luna, perhaps hoping to prey on translunar shipping.

ST: 30,000 **HP:** 30,000 **Speed:** 6.25
DX: 10 **Will:** 10 **Move:** 6
IQ: 3 **Per:** 12 **Weight:** 100 Mtons
HT: 15 **FP:** 15 **SM:** +18
Dodge: 9 **Parry:** N/A **DR:** 450

Bite (10): 6d×500 crushing. Reach C.

Traits: Horizontal; Reduced Consumption 4; Scanning Sense (Radar; Extended Arc, 360°; Targeting) Temperature Tolerance 27 (-455°F to 5°F); Vacuum Support; Vibration Sense (Air); Wild Animal.

Skills: Brawling-10.

The Strange Creatures of Roma Universalis

This table offers an alphabetical list of the various alien creatures encountered on the extra-solar bodies of Roma Universalis, or another sci-fi campaign.

Name	Location	Page
Aetherial Skimmers	Asteroid Belt	10
Asteroid Beasts	Asteroid Belt	10
Carnivorous Mold	Luna	7
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Venusian Dragonflies	Venus	5-6
Venusian Rompers	Venus	6

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THE ANGRIEST INVASION OF EARTH

BY J. EDWARD TREMLETT

"We have had enough of being lied to!" The Trust Party candidate roared into the microphone, resulting in an even louder roar in return. "We have had enough of high taxes! We have had enough of high spending! We have had enough of enough!"

Yet more roars. More anger. The faces staring at him were red and raging, almost frothing with hate.

"Tell them more, our brother," whispered a voice inside his head. "Make them even more furious. You have truly engineered a great feast tonight . . ."

So the candidate did, and continued to do so for quite some time. Meanwhile, in a secret location far away, his fellow invaders were sated by the white-hot human fury he helped generate. Their bulbous, pulpy bodies writhed and shuddered as waves of blissfully unreasoning anger both fed and intoxicated them.

This emotional banquet would be enough to sustain them for a time, but they would soon need more – much more. Thankfully, these humans were easily manipulated into giving them exactly what they wanted. But how long could they stay angry over nothing at all?

Perhaps another event needed engineering, something really despicable this time. Something that would make them both hate and fear in equal measure, its effects lasting for years to come – well past their upcoming, primitive "election cycle."

Extraterrestrial evil does not always descend from the skies in a mothership and blow up New York City. Indeed, the most dangerous invasions are the silent ones, where conquest-minded aliens sneak in under the radar, assume inconspicuous forms, and destroy our defenses from within. Even more insidious is when they use our own worst qualities against us – getting us so angry with each other that we don't see the real threat, and so terrified of our differences that we fail to unite against it.

There is such a threat on Earth's doorstep, even now. Shape-shifting psychic vampires from beyond the stars have been among us for some time. They can look, talk, and act just like us. Even the loved ones of the infested have been completely fooled.

Yet, while these dangerous creatures infiltrate governments, militaries, and civil services, it is not to ultimately control the world. They merely seek to engineer events that will create intense anger, hate, and fear within us, so they can then feed on those negative emotions.

Love, friendship and respect do not unite people as much as a common hatred for something.

– Anton Chekhov

So far, a mere fraction of their total number has landed, but these few have gained a solid and dangerous foothold. They sent a signal to the main fleet decades ago, telling it to set course for Earth. While they await its arrival, they are laying the groundwork for a massive feast of fear and horror – a banquet that will leave the planet a barren, burning wreck in space . . .

Is Earth doomed? Perhaps not. Herein is presented all the information needed for a GM to run a campaign against this foe, possibly with *GURPS Black Ops, Atomic Horror*, or a sci-fi system. Their physical forms are revealed, and their techniques, technology, and invasion protocols laid bare. Also exposed is what they have done on Earth so far, along with their front organizations, companies, and inhabited forms. Ideas for battling this insidious foe are given at the end, along with story seeds for the past, present, and future.

Enterprising GMs might emulate the Pyra's media-control efforts by modifying the rules for memetics from Pyramid #3/15: Transhuman Space. You'll probably need to add lots of bonuses; those rules are much more subtle than what the Pyra are capable of!

*In hatred as in love, we grow like the thing we brood upon.
What we loathe, we graft into our very soul.*

– Mary Renault

WE'LL WALK ALL OVER YOU

The Pyr'a Dic'tata Ant'ede ("Pyra" for short) is a race of intergalactic, shapechanging, psychic vampires. In their base form, they seem a black and hideous amalgam of terrestrial species: the bloated head of an octopus atop 20 spindly, exoskeletal spiders' legs. They range between 5' and 6' tall, and have two shiny, black eyes above a curious U-shaped sensory organ, giving them what appears to be a smiley face in the middle of their heads. Small, rubbery tentacles extrude out of the head every so often as they communicate, feed, or power their strange, organic devices.

The Pyra are uncertain of their actual origins. They believe they were created millions of their cycles ago by a highly advanced but emotionally crippled race who sought to curb their overwhelming negative emotional responses. They created the Pyra for use as living, unfeeling psychic dampers . . . but obviously something went wrong, and the creatures were jettisoned into space. Now they live as insatiable intergalactic telepathic locusts, ever-searching for sentient beings capable of the intense emotional responses they require as food, but are incapable of generating themselves.

They need a daily intake of at least 10 minutes' exposure to intense hate, anger, sorrow, fear, or pain. Any less, and they eventually weaken. Any more causes a varying degree of intoxication, which is as close as the Pyra can come to actually *feeling* something other than sated/hungry or satisfied/unsatisfied. Excess emotion from a feeding can be stored for later, or used to power their machinery, but each event can only be used once per Pyra, and then it is blocked to that alien.

The Pyra could simply make their prey angry through performing upsetting antics through their host bodies, but such feasts would be short-lived, and possibly endanger or expose the infesting Pyra. It is far better to make their targets deliriously angry *at their fellow lifeforms* – often accomplished by pitting the sides of any social argument against another in a nonlethal manner.

Unfeeling, icily logical beings, the Pyra have neither religion nor philosophy, and no ethics beyond that of pack animals. The strongest and oldest are their leaders, and succession only takes place after death. The only laws are obedience to one's elders, performing duties with competence, and noninterference in the feeding of others. The penalty for breaking any law is to be shot into space in a small capsule with an escape hatch – giving a choice between slow starvation or violent decompression.

Despite their fearsome appearance, they are surprisingly weak. A solid punch to the head puts one in a coma, a single bullet in the right place kills, and extremes in pressure cause them to implode or explode. Conversely, they are fireproof, and immune to extremes in temperature.

If not fed within 17 hours, they begin to starve. They lose a third of their physical and mental strength every 17 hours thereafter, eventually wasting into a dry husk. To prevent this, Pyra spend most of their lives in suspended animation, awakening for the mass feedings following a successful invasion. However, the process only slows down their metabolic rate, and does not entirely stop it. Special biochemical monitors wake up "asleep" Pyra on the verge of starvation, but these are sometimes disabled for complex sociopolitical reasons. Sometimes a tenth of the Pyra nation die while en route to the next conquest.

The Pyra are also highly susceptible to extremes of joy and other pleasant emotions. These give them psychic indigestion – "bloating" their heads to three times their normal size, making it almost impossible to think, plan, attack, defend, or operate devices. The machines that collect, broadcast, and replay stored emotion are set to filter out the crippling cheer, but accidents happen.

SHADOWS OF STOLEN LIFE

The Pyra's most intriguing physical ability is their capacity to partially shapeshift, which aids in the infestation of their intended prey. It can be done to any solid, carbon-based life-form that is at least as large as a mature Pyra.

To begin, the Pyra envelops a victim's cranial unit with its tentacles – both immobilizing the prey and absorbing its memories and DNA. After an hour of physical and mental digestion, the Pyra's head changes to look exactly like the cranial unit of its victim. The Pyra unfurls its legs into long, tiny filaments, and snakes them into the stump, taking over the host's nerves and muscles. Then the alien pulls itself onto the stump, and the disguise is complete.

The resulting duplication is almost perfect. The Pyra is still incapable of feeling anything, but it can expertly fake the mannerisms and emotional responses of the host. Even the host's closest friends cannot tell the difference, though animals and the psychically aware will sense there's something "off" and react accordingly.

However, even while infesting a victim, a Pyra is still a Pyra; they still hunger, and retain their physical weaknesses.

How are the Black Chamber (Pyramid #3/5: Horror and Spies) or the Black Box (Pyramid #3/17: Modern Exploration) dealing with the Pyra? Do these organizations realize the aliens exist – or have the Pyra infiltrated them, too?

They also need to extrude secondary tentacles from the head to feed, send (but not receive) telepathic signals, and power their signature devices. The disguise slips quite a bit during these times, creating a horrifying blend of the host's face and the Pyra's bloated, otherworldly shape.

A Pyra can separate from a host body if necessary, but it must secrete some immobilization agent on its way out. The alien can only be away from the host body for a maximum of 17 hours per immobilization dose, or the body can never be reanimated again. In a pinch, the creatures can also use their legs to burrow into untreated, dead bodies, thus animating them. However, the cadavers' voices sound tinny, and their flat mannerisms will not fool anyone who knows them.

THEY HAVE A PLAN

The Pyra operate with extreme caution, as they know their bodies are relatively weak. They have a time-tested, four-pronged invasion plan that takes advantage of their natural talents while minimizing physical risks. If they are truly desperate, they might skip ahead a step or two, but this is only employed when they see no other way to guarantee racial survival.

Step One: Observation

The first step is performed by scout ships, each containing 20 Pyra apiece. There are numerous scout ships scouring the galaxy at any time, seeking out worlds inhabited by suitable beings. They desire large and illogical creatures, possessed of both extreme emotions and the technological means to broadcast those feelings to one another. Indeed, the scout ships hunt best by listening for broadcast waves, and following them back to a planet. However, ideal targets are those worlds whose occupants are relatively untraveled in space – lacking both any orbital defenses and the ability to voyage beyond their own solar system.

When such a world is found, small capsules are shot down onto the surface, each containing a Pyra scout and some sampling equipment. If all goes according to plan, the scouts observe and then capture a few native beings. They then bring them back to the ship for mental interrogation, emotional harvesting, physical stress-testing, and a resulting autopsy.

The creatures also attempt to infest their captives. After successfully wearing the bodies on the ship for a few days, they return to the planet, reappear to the lifeforms' friends and neighbors, and try to blend into that society. They are ordered to sustain themselves with stored emotion for the most part, in order to avoid suspicion.

Success means further observation and experimentation, with most of the ship's crew operating on the planet while the scout ship hides in space. The scouts remain in frequent

Half Deads

The Pyra have discovered that freshly dead human bodies can be resurrected and put to simple tasks. Such "Half Deads" are useful in carrying out errands that the aliens wouldn't trust a human to perform. They make wonderful laborers, carriers of equipment, and disposers of evidence. They can even be used as bodyguards and assassins as long as they don't have to think.

Creating a Half Dead requires an intact body that has been deceased less than 24 hours. The Pyra inject it with a slightly different version of the immobilization agent, bringing the body back to a semblance of life for 17 hours. Each dose past the first gives another 17 hours of "life," but a missed dose brings death and decay – rendering the body useless. Time-release canisters are often implanted in especially useful or valuable Half Deads to keep this from happening.

Half Deads appear alive to the casual observer: They move, breathe, and speak as they've been instructed to. However, their hearts do not beat, their skin is pale and cold, and their eyes are unblinking and glassy. They remember nothing of their former life, cannot feel any emotions, and are useless at spontaneous conversation.

These sad echoes of humanity obey given instructions, but must be told *exactly* what to do, as they tend to falter and stop when presented with a situation they weren't programmed for. More useful ones are set up with real-time controls: a camera disguised as a lapel pin shows the controlling Pyra what's going on, while an earpiece is used to deliver instructions.

Half Deads are good for driving nosy reporters' cars off cliffs, or piloting political rivals' planes into mountains. They can also be loaded up with Pyra devices: many "bodyguards" and "assistants" of infested humans are actually Half Deads filled with emotional receivers, gathering the deluge of anger that the Pyra generate in their daily business. If all else fails, they make excellent disposable patsies, collateral damage, and human bombs.

communication with the ship and one another, but are forbidden to meet in person, to minimize overall damage if discovered.

Step Two: Evaluation

The scouts perform social experiments to see if they can use their stolen bodies to generate intense anger, fear, and hate. If the majority of the scouts can create enough negative emotion to sustain more than just their own needs, and survive any social reprisals, the world is considered a strong possibility. The scouts return to their capsules, travel back to the scout ship, and deliver a full report. These are compared to other gathered data: political divisions, armed forces, natural defenses, and the like.

If the planet is deemed not worth the risk of invasion, the scouts temporarily return to the planet, and use their host bodies to engineer a massive, brutal event to harvest as much emotional energy as possible. Laden with enough energy to sustain their needs for the journey, they mark the planet down for possible emergency purposes. Then they abandon the world, and continue the search.

The process by which Half Deads are created may be related to the process by which the zombie virus (pp. 32-33) animates its host – or they may conflict! The notion of a Half Dead/zombie hybrid is a truly frightening prospect . . .

Machines of the Kill

The technology of the Pyra is organic in nature, and looks like an extension of the Pyra, themselves. This is because the aliens manufacture their ships, tools, weapons, and other devices with something near and dear to them – bodily waste, created both by their normal metabolic functions and the forced ingestion of biological matter, such as the heads of those they duplicate. The blackish, semi-solid material slops out of their legs at will, and hardens within an hour. In that hour, it can be measured, molded, shaped, sharpened, impregnated with bio-circuitry or other components, and – if needed – treated in such a way as to be nearly transparent. After that, it needs only another 17 hours to fully set – assuming the hardness of tempered steel.

Emotional Gatherers

Small nodules the size of a belt buckle that are worn on a Pyra's person, these are capable of gathering and storing hours' worth of emotional energy for later use. They can also be hooked up to a broadcast device and sent to a relay elsewhere, either after the emotional outburst or in real-time. The energy the devices gather helps power them.

Energy Guns

Small transparent rods, meant to be brandished by the Pyra's head tentacles, they are designed to have one of the emotional gatherers, or a broadcast receiver, attached to

the nonbusiness end. When activated, they create a cone of gathered emotional energy, which the Pyra use to feed. They can also be "sharpened" into an offensive weapon, causing an emotional overlord in the target, or letting unwanted, kind emotions through. Neither application can harm humans, but causes severe mental and/or physical distress to the Pyra.

Personal Shields

These belts are made of small, black, grape-sized spheres. This device is meant to be worn around the Pyra's midsection and is easily hidden underneath human clothing. This device is technologically related to the shields their otherwise-unarmed spaceships use, both to enter subspace and to cause physical rupturing in enemy vessels, which they ram in battle.

In the smaller, personal model, the field surrounding the Pyra deflects all energy attacks and all but the most forceful of kinetic attacks. It also causes extra damage to anything physical that hits them, or that they hit: rock crumbles, metal stress-fractures, skin tears open, and bone cracks. The belts also allow short, subspace "jumps" of up to half a mile.

The belt is always active, in passive mode. Any time it's used to deflect, hurt, or jump, one of the spheres shorts out. When all the spheres are shorted out, the belt ceases working.

If the world proves suitable, the scout ship signals the main fleet with coordinates. The crew returns to the planet, and arranges for the deaths of any "useless" hosts through body-annihilating suicides, massive fires, industrial accidents, and the like. Some of the unencumbered aliens return to the scout ship, while others infest strategically useful hosts within the community, so they can have a measure of protection and power, as well as a safe place to hide the scout ship when it lands.

Step Three: Invasion

The scout ship lands somewhere it can remain undetected, and its crew work to turn its immediate surroundings into the beachhead. The area is impregnated with alien living spaces, defenses, and technology – especially the subspace directional pulse beacon that will guide the fleet to the planet. A few Pyra remain unencumbered, while others infest key positions in preparation for the fleet's arrival. They suborn or replace those who watch the skies, build unremarkable structures to hide their devices, take over key organizations to provide cover, and assemble companies and groups to provide suitable host bodies for the new arrivals.

The Pyra also begin to harness the intense anger they need to feed upon. Special emotion-gathering devices can be worn about the host body, or positioned nearby, in order to send the

harvested waves of negative emotion to receivers anywhere in the world. This allows offsite Pyra to feed, and any excess energy is stored for later or used to power their devices.

This process can go on for quite some time, depending on how long it takes the main fleet to travel to the new planet. When the invasion actually happens, it always comes in cautious, ever-increasing waves. First on the scene are 20 scout ships, with 20 Pyra apiece, who are given sufficient time to travel to the beachhead, infest awaiting host bodies, and dig into the targeted world. They are followed by an attack vessel with 340 scout ships. The main vessel finds someplace to secret itself, preferably off-planet, and its ships land in different areas of the world. Their 20-Pyra crews can either take discreet advantage of the facilities created for them, or else put themselves into suspended animation – sleeping until needed, or when the invasion reaches its climax.

The attack vessel is eventually followed by the 17 capital ships of the fleet, each containing hundreds of thousands of Pyra apiece. These massive spacecraft are guarded by a cloud of 340 attack vessels, each carrying 340 smaller, 20-Pyra spacecraft. It would be a sight that would pulverize the defenses of any planet with a primitive or nonexistent space program, but the last wave will remain hidden in orbit, as the aliens do not want to create suspicion until it's too late.

Some black spray-painted bubble wrap might be useful to emulate a Pyra personal shield. (As a bonus tip: burst fire should make short work of these shields . . .)

Step Four: Annihilation

Once enough Pyra are in place, they begin engineering terrible events: wars, tragedies, terrorist acts, and other disasters. Then they ratchet up the rhetoric and have their infested host bodies blame one or both sides of any social or political division for the body count, either for causing it or not responding to it in time. More events give their angry movement momentum, and more momentum creates more opportunities for angry rallies, violent demonstrations and counter-demonstrations, pogroms, riots – possibly even revolutions.

This cycle continues until either the world's native population is used up and shattered, or until the scout vessels report another suitable world has been found. At this point, the Pyra engineer one last, great, worldwide cataclysm, all but guaranteed to create the greatest surge of negative emotion the world has ever seen. Specially selected Pyra breed in order to replace those lost since the previous invasion, and sleeping Pyra are awoken from suspended animation, so they might feed.

Then, their work done, the Pyra abandon their host bodies, get in their ships, and leave whatever survivors remain to their fate. Perhaps they will return one day, after untold millennia has turned their invasion into a myth.

TARGET EARTH

The Pyra invasion of Earth began in 1955, when the Pyra scout ship *A'has Par'nil* exited subspace just inside the Oort cloud and followed our weak trail of radio waves inward. The planet seemed perfect: Its population was large, illogical, and aggressive, with no real presence in space, and possessing the ability to broadcast information – and emotion – through radio and television.

The scout ship parked behind the moon, and a number of its crew went down to Earth, landing in secluded spots in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The aliens observed the natives for a time, focusing on campers, hunters, and color tourists. After kidnapping a few and taking them to the ship for testing, they determined humanity to be physically compatible for their needs.

The scouts returned, wearing their prey; they spent the next year quietly observing the planet and their fellow citizens. Nothing they discovered disproved their belief that they'd picked an excellent planet. So they moved onto the next phase: destroying their hosts and assuming new, strategically placed ones.

For the next five years, the Pyra scouts continued their observation and infiltrated various social organizations, carefully determining how to use those constructs to generate large amounts of negative emotion. After a few successful experiments in engineering arguments and controversies, they learned that humans were easily angered over almost nothing, and – better still – could be re-angered over the same trivialities time and time again. This quality made them truly excellent candidates for potential invasion.

In 1961, the scouts met back up with one another on the *A'has Par'nil* to present their findings to their commander. They determined that Earth was nearly perfect for their needs,

though there were two chief concerns: the fledgling space programs of the two largest nations (the United States and USSR), and human preoccupation with UFOs. Both of these could prove challenging, should they progress too far before the fleet arrived. However, it was decided that, with the assumption of the right strategic hosts, both concerns could be controlled, if not neutralized altogether.

The die was cast, the subspace beacon was activated, and the scouts returned to Earth. Some of them shucked their host bodies in order to take control of better-placed humans in and around the area of Mackinaw City, Michigan. One of the infested was the owner of Box Industries, an industrial firm that had fallen on hard times, and had to mostly abandon their large plant, a few miles southwest of town. The “owner” completely shut down the plant but retained the company, and, after a few months of refurbishing the structure's insides, the *A'has Par'nil* touched down into what would become its new home.

The Pyra also nabbed the chief of Mackinaw City's police force, the assistant editor of the Daily Cheboygan Journal, the senior partner of the largest law firm, and two of the members of the chamber of commerce. This ensured that they could maintain or disrupt social order as they chose, and could control any official inquiries that might come about due to their activities. The city's near-constant ebb and flow of tourists, seasonal workers, and those simply traveling over the Mackinaw Bridge to or from the U.P. gave them a wide range of possible hosts or Half Deads.

However, the most important reason for infesting the northernmost county of southern Michigan was to have access to Rennie Air Force Base. During their years of quiet infiltration, the Pyra learned that the small installation, just east of Mackinaw City, specialized in developing and testing long-range, early-warning radar. The projects were to warn the Americans about incoming missiles or bombers, but if the humans were going to develop a way to detect fleets in space, it would be there. After assuming the form of the lieutenant colonel who oversaw those projects, the Pyra saw that it never would.

Over the last few decades, the Pyra have kept up appearances, leaving older bodies when the lack of aging could no longer be disguised, and infesting new ones to continue the work. In addition to AFB Rennie, they have taken over an extremely powerful senator, assumed control of a worldwide security company, and have an agent inside America's most popular “confrontainment” program. They have also latched onto a large and influential third political party – one capable of running its own candidates within the two main parties, and able to make or break other candidates with a majority nod.

ONE ARMY TO KILL YOU ALL

The Pyra of the scout ship have successfully infiltrated American society at many levels. Some of their more notable conquests are detailed below, along with how they meet the invaders' needs at the current time, and how they will meet them when the main fleet arrives, however many years from now.

Images of rioting or protesting crowds can easily be found online. Giving them to the players can enhance the verisimilitude of the adventure – especially if a “random” person in the photo is later revealed to be a Pyra agent!

The Trust Party

Arguably the biggest coup the Pyra have scored thus far is the creation of the Trust Party: an independent coalition of extremely vitriolic interest groups that somehow manages to juggle extreme xenophobic, anti-government populism with the need to “retake” that exact same government in order to “save America.”

The movement’s leader, Mark T. Cleobin, is a long-time Pyra host, as are a few of his lieutenants and a couple of reporters who have been assigned to cover it. The “Trustees,” as they are known in the media, have become a major force in American politics in spite of the fractious infighting and vicious rhetoric that plagues the party, and the near-maddened – and occasionally near-homicidal – enthusiasm of their followers.

The party’s internal and external histrionics have provided the Pyra with massive amounts of negative energy, and it seems poised to generate even more friction in the near future. They plan to run several candidates in the next major election, and seek to inspire similar parties in other countries, so as to have more support for their agenda before and after the arrival of the fleet. In the final stages of the plan, these parties will sow fear, breed distrust and xenophobia, and threaten war against other nations until someone takes them up on it.

Politics, as a practice, whatever its professions, has always been the systematic organization of hatreds.

– Henry Brooks Adams

Senator William J. Sykes

William J. Sykes is one of the most outspoken voices in the Senate, and has been a recognizable fixture there since the late 1960s. He alone dared complain that the government was spending untold amounts of money on “that Moon landing fool-dangled thingamabob” while his home state of Michigan was suffering from a lack of funds (according to him, anyway). His highly quotable and plainspoken hatred of the Space Race brought him to the attention of the Pyra, and he was infested shortly after winning re-election.

Senator Sykes has served well ever since, and some credit him with America’s somewhat lethargic exploitation of space since the end of the Apollo Program. Now in his nineties, he has lost none of his sharpness, though it’s becoming harder for the aliens to disguise his true age. His host plans to step down before the invasion fleet arrives, hand the reins over to an up-and-coming Trust Party member, and infest that fresh, new face just after Election Day.

Greenforge Inc.

Formed in the late 1990s by two former Marines from Detroit, the private security company known as Greenforge Inc. has been fortunate enough to elude the same kind of

controversy that other, more visible security companies have courted. That might be because they’ve avoided contracts in areas where the American press is likely to congregate, such as locations where the American military is currently operating, or anywhere in the Middle East.

Greenforge has numerous outposts throughout Africa, South America, Asia, and the former Soviet Union. These outposts oversee hundreds of employees, all engaged in a number of contracts, many of which require an armed presence. When the fleet arrives, many of these employees will be selected to become hosts, and the rest will provide unwitting security for the scout ships – slated to land and hide at appropriately modified Greenforge facilities around the world. If the Pyra need to undertake any hostile actions, and need them done by something more intelligent than a Half Dead, the citizen-soldiers of Greenforge will be the ones doing it.

Rennie Air Force Base

In 1962, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Manning was in charge of the long-range detection projects, and reporting directly to Colonel Mark Stephens, the base commander; with his findings. The Pyra who had infested Manning kept Colonel Stephens from knowing that the radar system they were developing had been modified so as to not report certain things – such as invading scout ships.

Decades later, the deception continues, but now Manning is Colonel Manning, base commander of Rennie AFB, and still making certain all-new detection technologies developed there have a backdoor for his race. The long-range radar “perfected” at Rennie in the 1960s is at use in all American military operations, as well as by anyone else who bought older versions, or copied the plans. This means that the Pyra have the means to blind most long-range radar systems around the world at any time, and also have access to the Air Force’s intelligence on UFOs.

Joey Blammo

Danny Hinge, a former high-powered lawyer from Kalamazoo, may not have been the inventor of the confrontational talk show, but he was regarded one of the best hosts, with some of the most violent and angry episodes ever. When he retired, his amazingly charismatic and scary-looking stage security manager, Joey Blammo (real name: Joseph Beladonna) decided to give it a go. But where Danny was content to be soft-spoken and let his guests provide the drama, Joey decided to crank up the drama by yelling at the parade of miscreants, social misfits, and scum himself.

To ensure he had no surprises, he brought in a fellow security man from Danny’s old show: an even-scarier fellow named Frank Lund. Frank had been called “the Cooler” because he could literally stare people into submission with his cold and emotionless eyes. What no one knew was that Frank was a Pyra, and was using his proximity to the vicious hate and anger generated by Danny’s old show to help feed his shipmates.

In the last five years, Joey Blammo has fed the aliens twice as well as Danny ever did. He has no idea he’s killing his own planet, one episode at a time. If he did, he might get *really* angry.

Any corporation/media personality/etc. that exists within the campaign world can be used instead of the agents here.

FEED ME YOUR ANGER

The most ready-made campaign has the heroes discovering the Pyra's presence on Earth, and uncovering their disconcertingly large support networks while working to confront them. This lends itself to a number of game styles and starting points: FBI agents tracking down alien activity and other weirdness; Air Force intelligence officers going to Michigan to investigate the irregularities in a certain base commander's reports; armed teams of alien-hunters finding out a threat's been under their radar since the 1950s; international reporters discovering unsolved mysteries while looking into the activities of Greenforge; or the coworkers of an infested human realizing something's seriously wrong with him.

Some other options are as follows, including a couple of alternate arrival scenarios for the aliens.

Beachhead, U.P.

It's 1955: Elvis is on television, McDonald's is serving hamburgers, "In God We Trust" goes on American coinage, and the Pyra arrive in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

The heroes are a group of friends who've gone up to hunt in the height of the season, but something is hunting *them*. Three days in, they find a rival party butchered, their heads missing. An NPC friend with the group walks off and never comes back, but his screams keep the adventurers up all night, and the Pyra are drinking down their rage and fear.

It's an experiment in terror management, and to see how dangerous these humans are. Can the heroes win by getting out of the woods alive, armed with only hunting rifles and dwindling ammunition? Or can they save the world by hunting their hunters, thus convincing the aliens that Earth is too much trouble?

Come Back When You're Hungry

In the mid-1950s, the Pyra stopped off on Earth but decided not to stay; the risk was too great, and the fledgling space program had them seriously worried. But they marked the planet down as a "maybe," just in case they needed an emergency stop in the future.

That future is now. A disastrously botched invasion reduced the population by 66%, and – in desperation – they have set course for Earth, in spite of the dangers. But the invasion protocol will be advanced to Step Three: 20 scout ships will land around the world, set up bases, and infiltrate newspapers, social services, militaries, and governments.

The bad news is that there's more of them, and the main fleet's not far behind. The good news is that the world's advanced quite a bit since the 1950s, and the aliens' misunderstandings of the changes make them stick out like Ward Beaver at a rave party. Can the heroes find out what's going on, stop the infiltration, and develop a defense against the Pyra in time?

Our New Friends

Humanity first made contact with the Pyra in 2134, when a small ship of friendly but ailing aliens arrived in need of serious help. According to them, a terrible, nameless enemy had destroyed their home planet aeons ago, and all that remained of them were a few thousand Pyra, inhabiting a couple broken-down ships. Humanitarian repairs went without saying, and,

as their dietary requirements were considered non-threatening, and their case was persuasive, they were invited to stay on Earth until better accommodations could be created.

The Pyra landed in the Arctic Circle and began to build a new home there, and there were hopes that they would teach Earth scientists the secrets of their construction techniques. The education proved slow going, with some scientists swearing that the new friends weren't being totally forthcoming. There was also concern that none of the alien races Earth had diplomatic contact with knew of the Pyra's home planet, or heard of the "enemy" they described.

That was five years ago. The culture has coarsened, with anger available on every channel, every hour. The scientists no longer complain about their alien friends. The Arctic Circle is a massive outpost of spindly, organic cities, and the Pyra have reproduced enough times to number in the hundreds of thousands. A new coalition in Earth's Parliament – the Trust – thinks the visitors shouldn't be asked to leave Earth and colonize an outer moon, but rather stay here as friends. Forever.

Meanwhile, the fleet that defends the solar system from attack is getting confusing redeployment orders. Strange blips appear on their long-distance tracking devices, and there's odd signals coming through subspace. Something seems to be lurking on the edges of the Oort cloud, and the new maneuvers are leaving everything past Neptune rather unguarded of late . . .

The massive Pyra fleet is on its way, due to arrive within the year – and when they do, the feast will be all but prepared. Can the investigators uncover the many conspiracies, driven by many infested humans, and stop it? Or have their new "friends" dug in too deeply to be removed?

When evil men plot, good men must plan. When evil men burn and bomb, good men must build and bind. When evil men shout ugly words of hatred, good men must commit themselves to the glories of love.

– Martin Luther King, Jr.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

By day an unassuming bookstore clerk, J. Edward Tremlett takes his ancient keyboard from its hiding place and unfurls his words upon the world. His bizarre lifestyle has taken him to such exotic locales as South Korea and Dubai, UAE. He is a frequent contributor to *Pyramid*, has been the editor of *The Wraith Project*, and has seen print in *The End Is Nigh* and *Worlds of Cthulhu*. He's also part of the *Echoes of Terror* anthology. Currently, he writes for Op-Ed News, and lives in Lansing, Michigan, with his wife and three cats.

ALIENS ON HAND

"Why did I ever let them have their own ship?" the GM mutters as the heroes land on another unplanned alien vista.

"Do we find anything interesting?" the players ask, as the GM searches among papers, knocking over his drink in panic.

"I'm sure you will," he mutters. "I'm sure you will."

The need for alien beasts can be insatiable. Each ecosystem can demand dozens of interesting animals – or, at least, interesting enough to populate the background and provide a logical response when poked by the PCs.

This deck is designed to make relatively normal creatures; all the characteristics, advantages, and disadvantages can be found in the **GURPS Basic Set**. If you want them to be scarier or more threatening, you'll need to have it attack with others in a pack, pump up an ability, or give the animal a cool power or gimmick.

Critters generated by the deck are also scanty on non-game-related details. An interesting feature or two – an unusual cry, an exotically geometric pattern on its fur, etc. – can go a long way toward making a creature come alive. See p. 39 for some ideas.

USING THE DECK

After printing and cutting out the cards on pp. 19-22, you have a variety of options for using it to create new aliens. At the very least, each creature should have:

- One base animal card.
- One Motivation.
- One Tactic.

Draw (or select) one card of each of the above type. To determine the other aspects of the critter, here are a few possibilities.

The Big Pile

Mix the Attack, Defense, Trait, and Disadvantage cards, and draw however many you like. (Good suggestions are to pick 1d or a flat three cards.) This will result in some creatures with several attacks and no disadvantages, or multiple defenses, or other oddities – just like real life.

The Consistant Creature

Alternatively, draw one each of the Attack, Defense, Trait, and Disadvantage cards. This will result in beasts that are assured of having a good spread of abilities.

Creature Feature!

Of course, you can do whatever you like. For example, you might want to draw at least one Attack card (ensuring the critter can defend itself), and then draw a few of the others.

Variations


All the creatures here are assumed to be of animal intelligence – smart enough to come up with a plan of escape or attack, but dumb enough to be outwitted. The GM is free to tweak that assumption, if he had an idea of a dumber or smarter animal in mind.

Play With a Stacked Deck

Blank cards of all types are provided on p. 23. Feel free to add cards of whatever type you'd like to the deck.

Basic Monster

Motivation
Seeking revenge for some real or perceived wrong against it, its offspring, or its territory.




STRONG ALIEN ANIMAL

ST: 15	HP: 15	Speed: 5.00
DX: 10	Will: 9	Move: 5
IQ: 5	Per: 5	
HT: 18	EP: 15	SM: 0
Dodge: 8	Parry: NA	DR: 0


Default Bite (10): 1d+1 crushing, Reach C.
Default Kick (9): 1d+2 crushing, Reach C.
Default Swipe (10): 1d+1 crushing, Reach C.

Tactic
Ambushes targets.




Optional Characteristics


Defense
Ultra-Tough Skin
DR 6




Attack
Poison Scratch
Damage: Default cutting + follow-up 2d toxic (two 10-second cycles).
Reach C.



Disadvantage
Restricted Vision (No Peripheral Vision)
See p. B151.



Trait
Huge
SM +3
ST +3



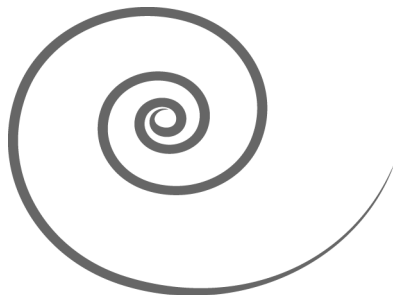
STRONG ALIEN ANIMAL

ST: 16 HP: 18 Speed: 5.00
DX: 10 Will: 9 Move: 5
IQ: 5 Per: 9
HT: 18 FP: 18 SM: 0
Dodge: 8 Parry: N/A DR: 0

Default Bite (10): 1d crushing. Reach C.
Default Kick (8): 1d+1 crushing. Reach C.
Default Swipe (10): 1d crushing. Reach C.

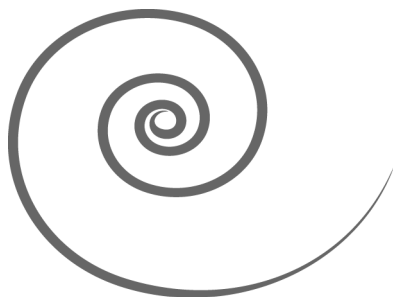
Motivation

Seeking revenge for some real or perceived wrong against it, its offspring, or its territory.



Motivation

Loves the thrill of combat.



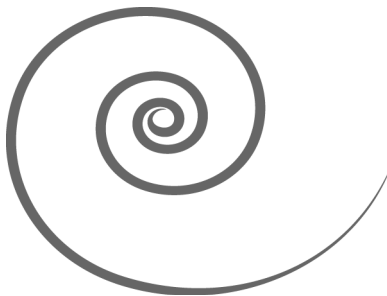
AGILE ALIEN ANIMAL

ST: 10 HP: 10 Speed: 7.00
DX: 14 Will: 5 Move: 6
IQ: 5 Per: 9
HT: 10 FP: 10 SM: 0
Dodge: 10 Parry: N/A DR: 0

Default Bite (14): 1d-3 crushing. Reach C.
Default Kick (12): 1d-2 crushing. Reach C.
Default Swipe (14): 1d-3 crushing. Reach C.

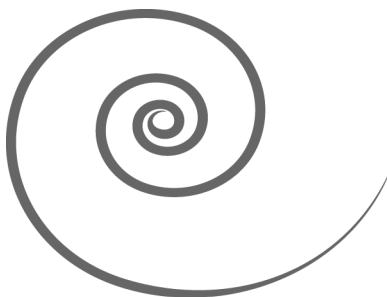
Motivation

Defending its hoard.



Motivation

Forced by training or other coercion to attack anything that comes within sight (or smell, etc.).



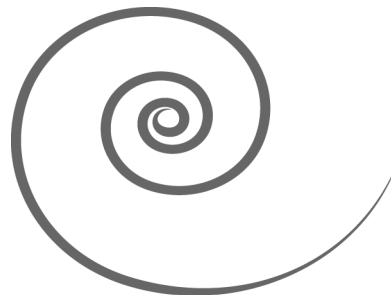
FAST ALIEN ANIMAL

ST: 10 HP: 12 Speed: 11.00
DX: 10 Will: 5 Move: 11
IQ: 5 Per: 11
HT: 10 FP: 10 SM: 0
Dodge: 14 Parry: N/A DR: 0

Default Bite (10): 1d-3 crushing. Reach C.
Default Kick (8): 1d-2 crushing. Reach C.
Default Swipe (10): 1d-3 crushing. Reach C.

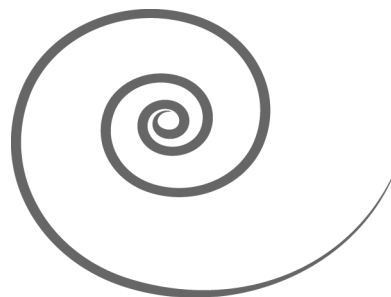
Motivation

Defending its territory or offspring.



Motivation

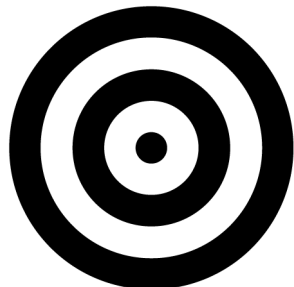
No obvious motivation – seems to attack passers-by at random intervals.



Defense

Ultra-Tough Skin

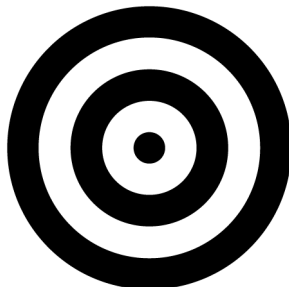
DR 4



Defense

Metal Scales

DR 6

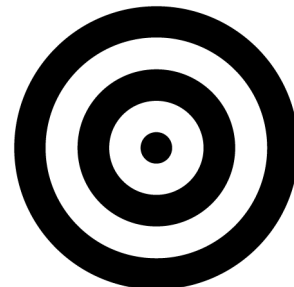


Defense

Tough and Nimble

Dodge +1

DR 1



Attack

Poison Scratch

Damage: Default swipe cutting + follow-up 2d toxic (two 10-second cycles).

Reach C.



Attack

Talons

Damage: +2 cutting or impaling to default kick or swipe.

Reach C.



Attack

Fangs

Damage: +3 impaling to default bite.

Reach C.



Attack

Knobbed Tail

Damage: +3 crushing to default swipe.

Parry: (DX/2) + 3.

Reach C.



Attack

Energy Breath Blast

Damage: 4d burning.

Skill: DX-4.

1/2D 10, Max 100,
Acc 3, RoF 1,
Shots N/A, Recoil 1.



Attack

Extra Attack 1

See p. B53.



Trait

Huge

SM +2

ST +15

Adjust damage and HP (see p. B16)



Trait

Doesn't Breathe

See p. B49.



Trait

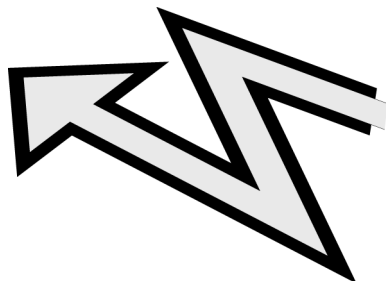
Extra Arms 2

See p. B53.



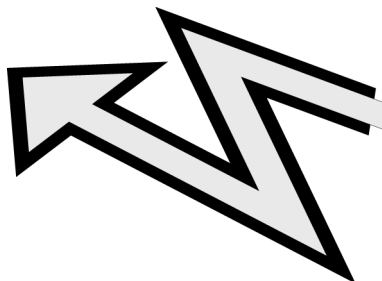
Tactic

Ambushes targets.



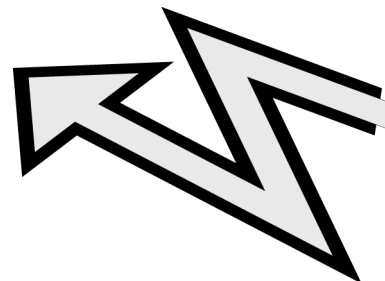
Tactic

Only makes All-Out Attacks.



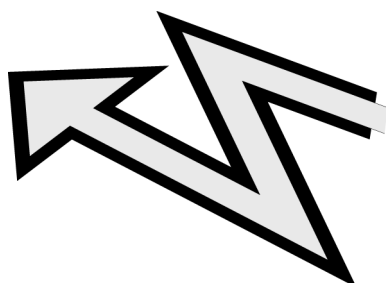
Tactic

Attacks and then immediately retreats (Move and Attack).



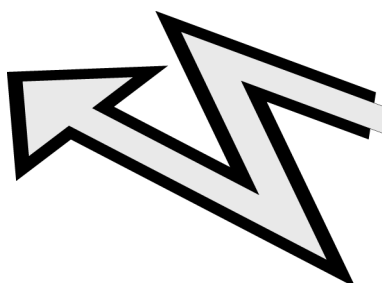
Tactic

Attempts to intimidate targets before attacking.



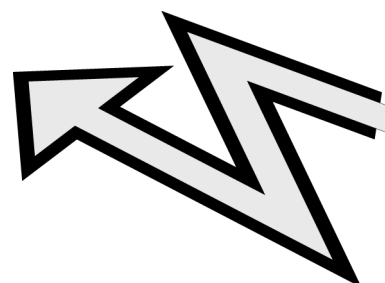
Tactic

Attacks one turn, then actively defends (All-Out Defense) the next.



Tactic

Only attacks targets from behind them.

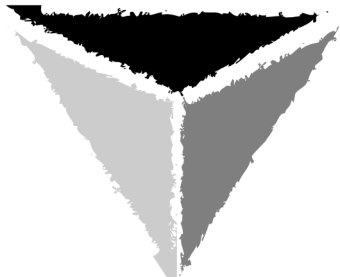


Trait

Experienced Fighter

Brawling (DX+5)

Notes: +1 to melee damage



Trait

Strong-Willed

Fearlessness 5 (p. B55)

High Pain Threshold (p. B59)



Trait

Hyperspectral Vision

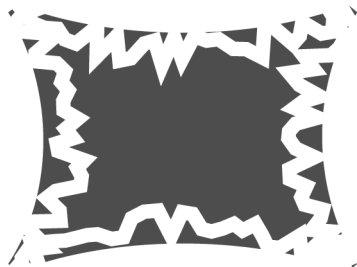
See p. B60.



Disadvantage

Wild Animal

See p. B263.

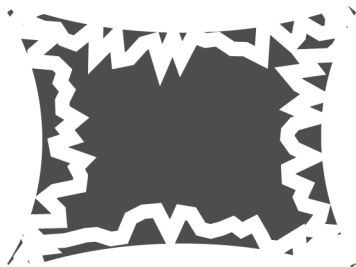


Disadvantage

Restricted Vision

(No Peripheral Vision)

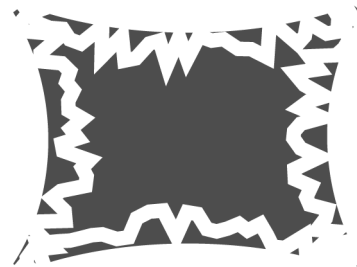
See p. B151.



Disadvantage

Bloodlust (6)

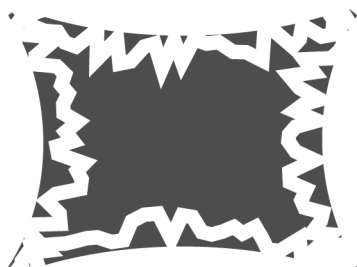
See p. B125.



Disadvantage

Fragile (Brittle)

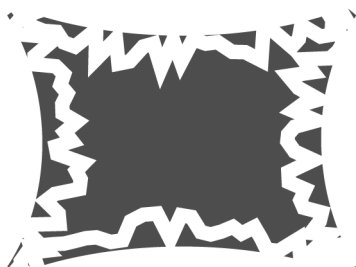
See p. B136.



Disadvantage

Nocturnal

See p. B146.

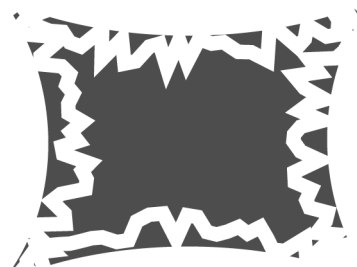


Disadvantage

Horizontal,

Very Fat

See p. B139 and B19.



NAME: _____

ST: _____ Speed: _____
 DX: _____ Will: _____ Move: _____
 IO: _____ Per: _____ SM: _____
 HT: _____ FP: _____ DR: _____
 Dodge: _____ Parry: _____
 Attack (): _____
 Traits: _____
 Skills: _____

Attack

Name: _____

Stats: _____



Attack

Description: _____



Defense

Name: _____

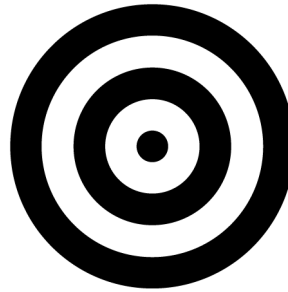
Stats: _____



Defense

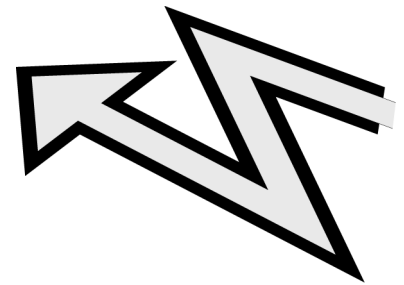
Name: _____

Stats: _____



Tactic

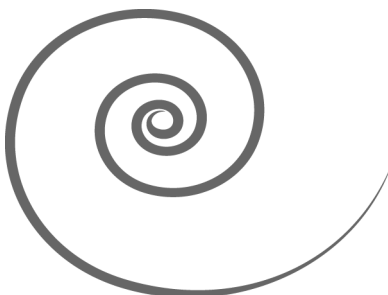
Description: _____



Motivation

Name: _____

Stats: _____



Trait

Name: _____

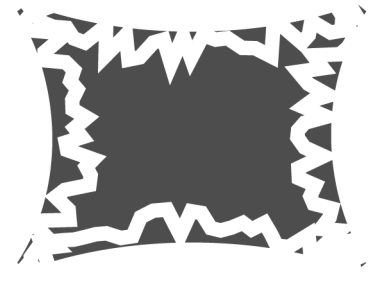
Stats: _____



Disadvantage

Name: _____

Stats: _____



A WELL-ARMED POPULACE

BY ANDY VETROMILE

Private Bellico popped up from behind his boulder and fired a burst across the rocks opposite him. He slipped back down almost immediately, where Sergeant Turco was considering a grenade like he was testing the weight of a gold nugget.

"Get any of them?"

"No, Sarge," he sniffed, peering at an uncomfortable angle back over the boulder. He could see a small line of Ussp crawling about the scree, but none of them were in plain view. "Little suckers are quicker than they look."

"Haw!" Sarge burst out. Bellico stared at him. "Suckers? The Ussp, they're octopuses? They got suckers on their . . . ?" He waved at his soldier like he was wafting flies. "Never mind. This'll dislodge 'em." Causally, without looking, he chucked the grenade over his shoulder just like basic training had taught him not to do. Bellico covered his ears against the "whom" and then his head against the falling chips of stone. "You wanna survive out here, you gotta have a sense of humor and keep up a keen guard, private."

The private started to look for survivors, something they might be able to put in a cage, but as he rose he felt a thick weight between his shoulders. "Ussp!" he cried, standing up and doing a little dance. "An Ussp, Sarge, help!" He could feel the little beak gouging at his protective vest, but his concern was more for the tentacles that had begun wrapping themselves around his neck and face. "Srijj!"

There was a muffled thump, and Bellico felt the constriction relent. He fell forward as the weight unexpectedly fell backward. He looked up to find the sergeant laughing at him, smoking pistol in his fist. "I told you to keep up your guard," he roared.

"And I see you got your sense of humor," Bellico muttered. Turco pulled the junior man up by his arm.

"Hey," he chided, the laughter starting anew, "out here, they just go hand-in-hand."

Once humans stepped off their rock and into the inky black, they knew it would be fraught with perils they couldn't anticipate. Even so, they were surprised by the appearance of the cephalopodan Ussp. As humanity entered their systems, the newcomers found themselves assaulted by thousands of these creatures, both in space and on the ground. Military vessels replaced the exploratory fleet, and these were met with similar resistance, though the soldiers fared better than their nearly

unarmed predecessors. Humans were confounded by the creatures, which were able to navigate in space but showed no signs of actual intelligence. All anyone knew was that they were vicious beasts who were unwilling to ignore intruders of any kind. If it moved, it got swarmed.

So the world government back on Earth has called for additional funding for the military and increased vigilance from citizens, lest outlying nests of Ussp show up somewhere closer to human systems and disrupt society completely. The worlds were at war.

STOP THE PRESS

The story everyone is told about the Ussp is a little more than half-true: They are indeed ferocious fighters, they appear to possess no sapience, and they have a mad-on for human beings. You would too if people had attacked and tried to perform experiments on you. There's an alien menace here, all right, and it's Mankind. They only want to gain power and finances and don't care a tinker's damn about using the Ussp to do it.

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED

Humans found Usspia I and descended to the surface to explore. What they uncovered was miraculous: a race of octopus-like creatures with incredible properties. The "blood" of the Ussp, if it could be called as such, was an elixir of sorts. In its purest form, it healed wounds. One of the original landing party, Dr. Lucinda Smalls, tried to pry a specimen out of its hole and accidentally wounded it with her tool while at the same time cutting a gash on her own hand against the jagged rocks where she worked. The blood washed into her open wound, and within seconds, the opening looked like an old scar. Before the hour was out, there was no trace.

Experiments done since then have uncovered, if not cures, at least promising advances for science and medicine. The party was ecstatic, and prepared to send word of their discovery back to Earth. The team was talked out of it when it was pointed out that the result would probably be dozens of unchecked ships descending on Usspia I like crows.

"Eek! Beware the monsters who lack bug eyes!" It's entirely logical to have aliens find us to be as repulsive as we find them – the revulsion felt toward Others may be universal!

Science vessels, corporations, religious believers, eco-terrorists, and more might cover the planet. Without establishing a proper procedure for such participation, the Ussp could be wiped out overnight as had happened with so many species on Earth before more stringent regulations could be implemented. The delay, everyone assured each other, would preserve the status quo. What it did was present an opportunity.

EARTH NEEDS USSP

A small bloc of aggressive military advisors coordinated their response quickly and quietly. There were but a few such personnel aboard, a common courtesy aboard many exploratory craft, security in exchange for intelligence. Once they were assured there would be no immediate announcement, these men radioed on a secure channel for orders. The value of the Ussp could not be underestimated. This clique of soldiers agreed a declaration of findings would result in humans scouring the planet, and that might result in extinction or, worse, tree-huggers with an agenda. The Ussp would be contained, assessed, and utilized, and then they would tell the world about this fabulous discovery. Maybe.

The Faction

Lest anyone be lead to think the whole galaxy is swamped in a conspiracy, the bloc that maintains the fiction against the Ussp is actually quite small. It's not handled so much on a "need to know" basis as a "who cares to know" basis. While the technical name for the forces holding steady at the edge of Usspian space is the First Usspian Operational Command, most people just call it the Faction – and that's not a compliment. It's a good shorthand, so a lot of the soldiers and civilian advisors in it use it (though not around superior officers), but mostly it's meant as a bit of name-calling against what's increasingly being seen as a rogue element.

The leaders on the front line, those who saw to it they were advanced to that post when the situation was made clear to them, know the truth. Most of those who work for or under them do not, and only a few higher-ranking officials have any knowledge of it. There are medics and other professionals under their command, certainly, but this is a military operation and so the number of people ordered to investigate the Ussp is minimal. Some of them demand, inasmuch as soldiers can based on humanitarian grounds, that they be allowed to examine the "prisoners" (though no one ever calls them that – they're animals, after all). But these inquiries are deflected by the higher-ups who state that there are already people on the situation (which is true).

Troops engaging the Ussp in battle have little time to question orders; they simply attack the positions they're told and take specimens into custody as circumstances permit. During hostilities, there's no denying they're getting their butts handed to them by an implacable foe, so the soldiery seldom has time to muse whether the whole thing is an unfortunate misunderstanding.

The Goals

The Faction has two goals. The first is to secure the Ussp for research and harvesting. They hope to get a majority of them, though it seems less and less likely they can be corralled so easily. They've spread over several systems (that anyone knows about), and so far the only things keeping most people from approaching those stars is the threat of military intervention and the threat of encountering these horrible beasts in an under-armored, under-weaponed science vessel. The conventional wisdom is that the warnings are well-meaning and crossing the boundaries the Earth forces set is both impolite and a good way to get on the service's bad side. It's worth noting the government has no authority to ban people from entering these systems (though they could probably fast-talk a reason to quarantine them from coming back *out* again for some time), and most folks don't try anything simply because they buy into the hype. Everyone wants to be able to count on the guys with guns coming to their rescue.

The other goal is to parlay the threat of the Ussp into greater control in the world government back on Earth. So long as the people fear the mysterious peril, the Faction can demand ever more money and support for their cause. This in turn makes their little fiction that much easier to keep up. These two aims, taken together, stand to make those involved the most powerful people in the galaxy: control freaks with savior complexes who can withhold a panacea from any who would defy them.

First Contact

The GM should decide whether this is the first species humankind has encountered among the stars. While it's assumed this is a nicely cinematic setting where extraterrestrial life is plentiful, the Ussp could form a good starting point for a group that wants to ease into finding out all the galaxy's secrets. Begin with a controversial animal, then move up to entire new races of fellow starfarers.

Opposition

Not everyone toes the party line, and there is a great deal of outrage from people both at home and in space. Even if someone hasn't heard the rumors of what's really happening at Uspia I and environs, the power being amassed by the military in the world government is staggering. Trust in that body is at an all-time low. Politicians have looked into the situation, though most get stonewalled at some point higher up the chain. Decorum suggests they not rock the boat too hard lest they be called on the carpet for being weak or unpatriotic, but a chosen few continue to press the issue quietly. Not everyone at the top is in on it, though (anything but, in fact), so the Faction can't count on a free pass forever. Reporters want the story, but they're usually led on a prepackaged tour of devastated areas left intact for show.

What relationship might the Ussp have to the Earth-bound agents of the Symmetry (as seen in Pyramid #3/26: Underwater Adventures)? It's potentially a "mystery from beyond the stars"!

Ecologists and environmentalists are curious to know more; they're told the situation is under control and experts are already on the ground. Even so, given that this could be the biggest find of humanity's history, they question whether it makes sense not to throw everything available at it. However, too many people are afraid to cause waves but they're not unsympathetic, just watching for more developments.

So Much for Clones

So far, no one has been able to figure out how the Ussp (or their bodies) do the things they do. Likewise, no one has worked out what evolutionary and environmental factors went into this unique species. The substances and specimens produced in laboratory conditions have not had the same effects or abilities as the "real" Ussp, at least not for long. The formulae have resulted in everything from mutated flesh to temporary healing under test conditions, and volunteers are hard to come by (being amoral *and* running a bluff means you can't keep too many casual spectators around on the front, so the pool of victims is small). Creating a new Ussp in a cloning chamber works for a while, but none of the special qualities can be gained by drawing samples of its bodily fluids, and it dies before reaching adulthood.

THE USSP

An Ussp is a small cephalopod, with eight arms, two black eyes, and a small and almost unnoticeable mouth. They hatch from eggs about 12" in diameter. While the young start out 18" tall with a "tentaclespan" of about 2' in all directions, they become adults in one solar Earth year. Then they come in at about 2.5' tall with tentacles of various sizes that range from 3' to 6' long. These arms surround a small beak-like mouth on the underside.

All the colors of the rainbow are represented in one individual or another, most of them being warmer colors like red or orange but a few running to blue or darker. The hide is smooth save for their "faces," where they have small horn-like projections. Some have only two, one on either "cheek," while others have a splendid display of a dozen or more. These have little effect in combat unless the enemy tries to attack in close or grapple the face; in this case, they cause 1 point of damage to the attacker.

They can ooze in and out of small spaces. While they can swim and even live underwater, they prefer only to live near it, unlike their counterparts on Earth.

Special Abilities

The traits listed with the stats represent some of the unusual qualities found in the species. Nonetheless, the GM may adjust them, as new methods of exploiting the species are being found all the time. It's already been established the blood

The Ussp

ST: 12 **HP:** 12 **Speed:** 5.00
DX: 10 **Will:** 9 **Move:** 5 (Groubd/Water)/10 (Space)
IQ: 4 **Per:** 4 **Weight:** 75 lbs.
HT: 10 **FP:** 10 **SM:** -1
Dodge: 8 **Parry:** 9 **DR:** 0

Strangulation (13): 1d-1 crushing. Reach C.

Tentacle Whip (13): 1d-1 crushing. Reach C.

Traits: Ambidexterity; Amphibious; DR 1 (Magnetic aura; Force Field; Space only); Dark Vision; Double-Jointed; Doesn't Breathe (Underwater and space only); Extra Arms 6 (Extra-Flexible; Foot Manipulators; Long, SM 0); Healing (Blood Agent; Cosmic; Xenohealing, Anything Alive); Fearlessness 5; Flight (Space Flight; Space Flight Only; Limited use, Several times per day); Nictitating Membrane 1; Pressure Support 2; Radiation Tolerance (PF 1,000); Reduced Consumption 4 (Cast-Iron Stomach; Space only); Stretching 1; Super Climbing 1; Super Jump 2; Telesend (Racial; Telepathic; Vague); Temperature Tolerance 50; Vacuum Support; Wild Animal.

Skills: Brawling-13; Stealth-14.

Notes: The traits described here are known ones, and they might be inaccurate, because no one has ever made a systematic study of these creatures. See *Special Abilities* and *Tactics* in text for more details.

will heal a wound almost completely, but since that entails harming the poor thing, it's best left to the GM to decide how far he wants to play that sort of thing out.

How the Ussp survive and move in a vacuum is also proving hard to understand. Those in space and those on the surface seem to be physically the same. However, a magnetic field forms around the critters when they move through space, which is only sufficient to move short distances before requiring a rest period. (This magnetic field may somehow affect technology, including space ships; see *Tactics*, below.) Admittedly no one has tried to measure their movement *too* far since that would be like staring at a snail to determine its migratory patterns, but what they can do is enough to make them a hazard to vessels in a system.

Tactics

When confronted with an enemy, an Ussp attacks with little regard to the comparative size of its target. If there are multiple Ussp present, they split their attacks, with one wrapping the enemy's legs and another pinning his arms while a third strangles the prey, suffocates it, or beats it to death with its powerful appendages. A lone Ussp will go right for the face to try to throttle a human or deprive it of air.

In space, Ussp are usually at a disadvantage. They have no energy weapons or ways of disrupting the operation of a starship from a distance, so they have to close with it. There are seldom enough Ussp to attack all the ships brought to bear on them, so they go after whatever presents itself nearest (they always seem to be of one accord about which craft to go after).

Since they can survive in space, in an odd campaign world, the Ussp could be discovered before their homeworld.

No one is entirely sure what the Ussp do to ships once they've gotten to them. They've been seen crawling on the hull, and some state the creatures actually pry open ships' armor at the seams. Nonetheless, enough of these things destroy entire warships. Clearly their bodies are capable of causing disruptions to a vessel once they're in contact with it. Some have slipped into the engines, and instead of being incinerated, they stopped it dead and caused the entire thing to blow (Ussp "passengers" do die in these circumstances if they can't get clear of the wounded ship in time). Others have sealed up weapon batteries with their bodies or penetrated the hull with strange fluids or energies . . . few vessels successfully attacked are intact enough afterward to do a postmortem on the causes.

Orbital Base

Many have sought the source of Ussp in space, but no one so far has found it. The stories continue to circulate that if the Ussp were thrust into space via some collision or eruption, there might be a chunk of rock they rode into orbit, and that might hold secrets all its own. If such exists, it may be just a tomb for those Ussp killed in the blast but left attached to the rock. It could hold a small society of the octopi, or they may remain in a sort of suspended animation. Another possibility is that the ones who were cast into space were dealt with thus deliberately in an effort to get rid of their undue influence, making the rock a prison if anyone's left alive.

Finding this orbital debris would be useful to several people for many reasons. Those aboard could be another strain, maybe a "heritage" species with powers or qualities above their exploited brothers. Their talents have not been diluted by the passage of time and thus represent an even greater discovery. It could be a vehicle that holds clues to their technological past, unlocking the secrets of what became of the race and how they came to hold the systems they do now. Moreover, if the Ussp on this asteroid have no knowledge of the war between them and humans, they may represent another chance for enemies of the Faction to broker a peace with the Ussp. Alas, how do you negotiate with such a species if they aren't sapient? They may understand conflict on an instinctual level, but that doesn't mean they can grasp reconciliation or friendship the same way.

How Did They Get off the Ground?

Many theories have been floated as to how the Ussp achieved orbit and subsequently proliferated among the stars, but none have been proved conclusively. The most hotly debated discussion centers around a long-lost race that seeded the galaxy with them (and, some have heretically suggested, us). That would explain not only the span of their "habitats" but why they could be found in distant star systems with so little genetic drift – the DNA of an Ussp in one system is almost identical to that of specimens in other systems in spite of a physical separation of light years.

A great crater on Usspia I leads some to think the cephalopods were blasted into space – some sort of cataclysmic

explosion has thrust (or pulled) them into orbit (or further), and from there they simply wandered instinctually in every direction under their own power. That then leads critics to ask how they got to so many places on a journey that should take hundreds or thousands of years, especially in light of the fact that the crater reads to geological scans as being only a few hundred years old. The answer varies:

- They hitched a ride on ships of some ancient culture and were ignored as parasites, detaching at the destination.
- They possess navigational talents and the ability to accelerate when in open space or in proximity to certain stellar phenomena.
- They fell through various wormholes.

When this last argument is broached, people pretty much stop listening.

Some think the race was once intelligent and has regressed into animalistic barbarism. This could mean they once had ships as humans do now, but they lost the talent for such technology and are now stuck wherever they "landed." There doesn't appear to be much evidence of ships or any other kind of equipment, and while the Ussp can create intricate homes from sticks, stones, and animal bones, the complete eradication of any tools, relics, or cities seems too unlikely and convenient to allow that possibility.

*Why is propaganda
so much more
successful when it
stirs up hatred than
when it tries to stir up
friendly feeling?*

– Bertrand Russell

PEOPLE IN THE LOOP

Few people back home know even a fraction of what's really going on out here. They see the news and the talking heads and when they hear the jingoistic Faction speak of patriotic duty against the Ussp, they nod and tell the world government to "give 'em hell." Here are some thumbnail personality sketches of the major players in this drama.

In a strange enough universe, everything's interconnected. The war against the Ussp might be fanned by the Pyra (pp. 11-17); unraveling the secrets behind the Pyra might help to resolve the conflict with the Ussp. Of course, cynically, it might not make a difference – there could well be enough natural hate in the universe.

All men kill the thing they hate, too, unless, of course, it kills them first.

– James Thurber

Dr. Lucinda Smalls

The first human to have actual contact with an Ussp, Dr. Smalls' injury and fabled recovery started the whole mess. She and her team wanted to tell the world what they had found but held off until the world government could figure out how to do that without swamping the system with unwanted traffic. Once she saw what was actually happening and the stories they were telling aboard her own vessel, Smalls and her team protested. Officially, Smalls' shuttlecraft went down with all hands during a routine return trip to the mothership, the *UWG Open Hand*. Rumors persist that she was killed any number of ways, from being strangled by an Ussp tentacle to being shot by a human firing squad. In fact, she managed to elude her would-be captors from the Faction, and they've been looking for her ever since. Stories about her flight are as legendary as those of her death. In some, she's thrown her lot in with the aliens and become an Ussp bride who can communicate with her new people because by sharing blood, she unlocked their means of telepathy. In others, she faked her own death and replaced a member of the Faction so she could fight them from within the ranks on their own ships. Whatever the truth turns out to be, anyone who used to know her will tell you she's prepared to fight to undermine this injustice.

General Reynold Perrigault

The highest-ranking man on the front lines, he has lead the Faction against the Ussp almost from the beginning. He was called in because they knew he had been itching for military service for years, so they fed him the same story they fed everyone else. Since he spent so much time early on being the liaison between Earth and the outposts of the First Usspian Operational Command, arguing their case, it was easy to keep up the lie once he was back on the front lines. Everyone knew the part they had to play, and they have kept the general on message.

Perrigault has begun to suspect not all is as he was told, but so much damage has been done he's afraid to say anything for fear of tarnishing his reputation. If he finds someone else who's in a position to blow the cover story, he might be inclined to help them. He's the best ally the truth seekers could have, but it would be almost impossible to gain an audience with him. These days, he's treated by the younger and more virile members of the Faction as a figurehead, leaving him to do what he does best: stew, drink, and plan for retirement.

Roy Applebaum

The motivation behind the throne, Applebaum is obsessed with power and wealth . . . he figures the one will come from the other, so he's not picky about which he achieves first. He believes absolutely in their cause, which is to say he knows it's a lie and he doesn't care who he hurts as long as he and his supporters get whatever they want. He's setting himself up to be valuable to the world government so that he can gain more power when he finally returns to Earth. Others in the Faction think the whole operation is a temporary thing – once the Ussp have been subjugated and controlled, the medicinal uses they provide really will flow, research will flourish, and the troops will return home covered in glory with Earth a better place for it. Applebaum knows these kinds of things don't stop unless someone stops him, and he won't let that happen. He spends about half his time keeping General Perrigault in check and the rest of it tending the various threads of the conspiracy.

Stanley Cupper

A journalist from the old school, Cupper just knows there's a story here, and he's determined to find it. The Faction has agents back on Earth, though, so he's not out of their reach just because he has yet to go off-world for his investigation. Everyone knows he won't let go of a story, so everyone's assumption is they'll soon be reading the old man's obituary.

Gracie Mortimer

An outspoken woman, she's never happier than when she has a cause, and now it looks like she has the mother of all outrages. Not only does it give her something to complain about, she's hit a trifecta: It threatens the orderly government, the environment (destroying and exploiting it simultaneously), and a poor species of octopus-people. Just as some people in the Faction have crises of conscience, so may Mortimer prove more of a hindrance to the very people with whom she should be joining. She's ready to accuse anyone of anything, burn bridges, and whine that so-and-so isn't doing enough. It's already driving both would-be fanatics and well-meaning citizens to other causes. There's more than one group watching her, and the gossip has it that there are contracts out on her life. That could be one of her own stories, told to garner sympathy, but five minutes in an elevator with the woman and anyone could be driven to desperation. All this, yet she has never once set foot in orbit, let alone visited the front lines or the Usspian systems.

All it might take for the Ussp conspiracy to unravel is for a different panacea to be found. (This could be a big problem, if the replacement "panacea" is shown to be problematic after the secret is revealed.)

Intelligent Ussp

This is a whole class of beings who are probably more rumor than reality. Someone always claims they were alone with a captured Ussp specimen when he spoke with them, or they saw the octopi employing this or that form of technology. Soldiers on the battlefield swear that sometimes the creatures respond with human emotions or use tactics that only intelligent beings could develop. So far, this is unconfirmed, and the Faction and everyone else considers it to be a post-modern urban legend. Their physical form doesn't allow for actual speech and their brains don't show the same kind of high-level activity as monkeys, never mind humans, but then neither does it support unsupported travel through space. Notwithstanding, their bizarre and untapped potential means there's no telling what they're capable of, so everyone laughs these tales off in public while privately scratching their chins.

CAMPAIGNS

The setting for the war against the Ussp may differ only in the focus the GM places on the action, or he may fold it into all-new directions by crossing it with other *GURPS* worlds.

Black Ops

Back in the day, members of the Company were sent on missions to kill aliens stranded on Earth. If the group, or some version of it, proliferates into the "present day," they may become the ones trying to save the Ussp once they're convinced of the species' good intentions. Alternatively, maybe the Faction is the cruel offspring of that group and that's why they enjoyed so much success so quickly in the early days of the war. That also makes them more than formidable as opponents, so the heroes need someone (say, a retired agent who's given up on life) to train them in the ways of the ops if they ever hope to present a challenge to their foes. They might choose to bolster their abilities with Ussp formulae to level the playing field a bit and cut a few years off the necessary education. Since no one knows what the Ussp – or more accurately, their bodies – are ultimately capable of doing or providing, this is a good way to bring psionics and all manner of other mutations and technologies into the setting.

Supers

The Ussp may themselves be superbeings, and the heroes are the most capable members of the species, ready to defy humankind for the sake of prolonging their people ("Super-Octopus to the rescue!" has a ring to it). Psionics and super abilities explain so much about the race's success. Alternatively, they could be human guinea pigs, test subjects who are granted strange new powers by scientists eager to inject ichor into the bodies of political prisoners. It's embarrassing enough for the Faction to find – in fact, *create* – still another group opposed to

their schemes. It's something else altogether for their infused DNA to allow them to take refuge among Ussp who now sense them not as invading humans but as fellow victims in the ongoing war. The Faction works hard, then, to field more supers, these under their control, to combat their earlier mistakes – never mind that the process kills half of the subjects at the start and the other half during their new careers.

More to the Truth

There could be even more to the story than the military has let on. It might be that initial relations with the Ussp were something else entirely. An intelligent species, they welcomed humans, but they made them an offer as well: The humans could present the Ussp as a threat to Earth to gain more control, and the Ussp would play along by offering up their undersirables as medicinal resources. In other words, Earth would once again be ferrying slaves, only their value would only be realized in a zoo or on a laboratory slab . . .

The Ussp in charge might be evil leaders with rebel scum to dispose of, or they may be usurpers who see an opportunity to give up their brethren, the rightful rulers, for control of the Ussian throne – "the Octopus in the Iron Mask," if you will.

Time Travel

The conquest of the Ussp is complete, and the madmen in charge of the effort have solidified their hold on the world government – there are no recriminations to be made, save the charges leveled against those rebels who defied the Faction. As society fragments or tries to recuperate from almost tearing itself apart, one small group of scientists finds another as-yet undiscovered use for Ussp: They are the key to time travel. With a few terrified (though willing, should the Ussp have sentience) aliens set to give their lives if need be to achieve this state, this secret cadre gathers a team of qualified adventurers who step through a door into the past. Depending on how much control they have over where they end up, the team may have to help the original exploratory team send its long-stalled message of hope back to Earth. Landing in later periods has them trying to sabotage the burgeoning war machine; reverse the decisions of the politicians back home; or save key Ussp leaders and "talk" them into fighting a more focused campaign against only those who mean them harm (easier to do if the octopi who sent them back can provide critical data that proves to their ancestors the truth of what they say). Another possibility is to travel to an alternate world in which events played out differently and see if there are Ussp or reasonable humans who can lend a hand. Nothing stops them from becoming a new power bloc, though, so care must be taken to either use them only as a referential resource or to bring new players into the ongoing war who can be trusted not to run a game of their own.

In a darkly humorous universe, more and more uses for the Ussp could be discovered as they get hunted closer and closer to extinction. Healing! Time travel! Psionic awakening! Unaging! If the heroes acquire the last cache of Ussp, they might find themselves more and more tempted to use them – but they may need to pick which miraculous use!

ADVENTURE SEEDS

War in itself isn't all that interesting from a roleplaying perspective, but there are many parts for the PCs to play even if they're not members of the rank-and-file.

Angels of Mercy

The team represents a group of concerned citizens from all walks of life. A sort of future version of the Red Cross, they insist on seeing firsthand the effects of the war and the living conditions of the Ussp held in captivity. The argument comes back that these creatures are not intelligent and therefore are in no way subject to conventions of fair treatment, but that doesn't stop a dance of intrigue between the two sides. How far will the heroes go to get the information they want? Can they get it at all. If they do, what are their odds of getting back to civilization alive to make their report? This scenario lends itself well to a broad group of characters, everything from diplomats to former soldiers to whatever demographic serves as "hippies" in space, all anxious to satisfy their curiosity and make things right.

To the Rescue

The heroes suspect, or are made aware, of the real nature of things at Usspia I and are understandably outraged. They want to make a difference and so they join (or create) the resistance against Faction activities, smuggling supplies to other resistance cells.

Newborn Smugglers

Hired to fulfill a government contract, the party is the crew of a cargo ship ferrying crates of unknown provenance from Usspia I to . . . other locations, always with a small military escort (a few armed soldiers on board, if not another craft in their contrail). If they do this often enough, they find themselves parking at space stations, high-orbit transports, and other suspicious or unusual drop-offs. At some point, their shipment starts making noise, or escapes outright, and the military is then torn between getting the PCs' help and keeping the contents of those boxes under wraps. The hunt is on, though the fear is that the Ussp will find a way to show their true colors. The heroes may decide to fight the good fight after this shipboard incident, or they may be a liability in need of detention should their escort think they know too much.

You Never Saw This; You Were Never Here

No matter the forces they deploy, the military cannot possibly watch all of Usspian space. They have left satellites in most systems and a couple of small space stations in the more important but idle regions, so they may at least have information about the ships that come and go when Big Brother isn't physically present. Nevertheless, innocent people fall afoul of the war machine by learning too much, and when that happens, they become targets. The heroes could be these people, or they might be called upon to help hide these victims of circumstance. Some of their charges might even have information that blows the lid off the whole plot, which paints an even bigger bull's-eye on them. Where is safe from the Faction?

Just how deep into Usspian territory must someone go before the military threat is replaced by the octopi?

Soldiers

It doesn't get much more straightforward than soldiers on the front lines fighting the Ussp menace – not at first. As the heroes, though, they soon find themselves doubting the virtue of their service. As the truth begins to reveal itself to them, they understand they cannot simply stand by and do nothing, but confronting their leaders isn't going to help them accomplish much more either. With so few soldiers able to make it out here and manpower stretched to the breaking point, they have more opportunities to go against the Faction. Their every move can't be subjected to scrutiny, but they must still find a plan to help the Ussp. Will they smuggle them out, try to make friends, sabotage the war effort? The only limit to the damage that can be done is the fiendish cleverness of the players and the small window of opportunity that expires when they get their 6:00 a.m. wakeup call for breakfast.

The Fourth Estate Is Far Afield

Reporters want the story once it breaks, and they'll move heaven and Earth to get to it. The Faction has its own reporters, of course, people hired to at least play the part of journalists and feed the folks back home their version of events. Now the real press is here, though, and they have no desire to be lead around by the nose. The Faction wants to do damage control, of course, and they cannot dissuade reporters just by telling them to go home and be good little boys and girls, so they do a delicate dance with them. They want to give the intrepid newshounds their money's worth, seeing the battlefields and scenes of destruction but not letting them get too close to the truth. Can the party break away from their handlers long enough to get something juicy and saleable, and can they then get those data files back to Earth?

*Tell me, O Octopus, I begs,
Is those things arms, or is
they legs?*

*I marvel at thee, Octopus;
If I were thou, I'd call me
Us.*

– Ogden Nash,
"The Octopus"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy Vetromile is a freelance writer, editor, and reviewer with an insatiable taste for games. He has worked with Steve Jackson Games, White Wolf, and Holistic Design, among others. Barbecue is his friend, and he wishes he, too, had eight arms.

IN SPACE, NO ONE HEARS THEM CRAWL

BY CHRISTIAN NIENHAUS

When thinking of “monsters from outer space,” large creatures with fangs, claws, and bulging muscles come to mind. However, just as many people are afraid of creepy-crawlies like spiders or mice too. Here, then, are some small and tiny monstrosities to frighten spacefarers.

BRAIN WORMS

The Brain worm is a nasty creature bent on taking control of your body, destroying your mind, and usurping your place in society.

Appearance

As its name implies, a brain worm has a worm-like body, measuring 8” in length and 2” in diameter. Being limbless, it slithers forward like a chubby snake. Tiny protrusions resembling claws stick out from under the belly, but they are only used to cling to vines or branches.

A brain worm’s head has two black, pin-like eyes with only rudimentary visual function – enough to keep its bearing in the underbrush. Victims are perceived by other sense organs not apparent on first sight: Tiny sensory hairs, able to pick up vibrations of nearby footsteps, cover the belly. Additional hairs on the back sense sound waves, doubling as primitive ears and a detector for airborne predators.

The maw of a brain worm is made up of four sharp-tipped jaws opening up like petals of a flower. Inside its maw, a circular set of sharp teeth point forward, while at the bottom, eight fine tentacles are stored in a closable cavity.

The elongated body is supported by a soft exoskeleton that can change color, camouflaging the brain worm in the undergrowth of jungles or forests, its favored habitat. About 75% of the body is filled with neuronal matter; the rest is muscles and organs. If dissected, a brain worm seems to possess a giant sprawling brain throughout its entire body.

Origin/Habitat

Brain worms originate from Silus IV, a planet on the fringe of known space. Silus IV is a humid planet, covered by extensive jungles and forests teeming with plant and animal life. Here, they feed on little insects and pollen from flowers.

The first brain worms evolved as small parasites, nesting in their hosts and feeding off the nutrients in the colon. Over time, they began influencing the host’s behavior, increasing their chances of survival and procreation. Their physical shape started evolving too, changing from earthworm proportions to an elongated body similar to a pudgy snake.

Worse than spiders or mice . . .

Behavior

When the opportunity arises, a brain worm will try invading a suitable host, as this significantly increases its chance of survival. Being highly adaptive, the parasite can take control of many different species.

Once it has found a host, it attaches itself near the spine with its maw and secretes a mild anesthetic, which numbs the surrounding body area. The tentacles stored in the cavity at the maw’s bottom penetrate the skin and the spine with their subtle tips, until they connect with the spinal cord. By stimulating certain nerves, the host is then put into a coma.

While clinging with the claw-like protrusion to the host, the brain worm uses the sharp tips of the jaws to cut an X-shaped incision into the skin. By pulling back the four skin flaps, the flesh underneath is revealed, into which the circular ring of teeth drills a hole of about 2” down to the spinal cord.

Adventure idea: Aboard a space station, all detection equipment has been sabotaged. Someone accuses the heroes of being infected with brain worms. But they haven’t been infected – have they? (The worms may be behind the sabotage and false accusations!)

All neuronal tissue of the parasite's body, together with some muscles, is disgorged into the host's body and slings itself around the spine. Finally, the four skin flaps are folded back from the inside to close the wound, and the parasite's remaining body lets go and dies within minutes.

A brain worm can also invade a host via the colon, if the route is large enough to accommodate the parasite's body. The brain worm moves up the digestive tract until reaching a location near the spine. After connecting to the spine using its tentacles, the brain worm cuts the intestinal wall and releases the neuronal tissue into the body cavity, from where it moves toward the spine. The now-lifeless husk is later excreted along with the host's regular waste.

The advantage of the latter method is leaving behind no scars on the host's back. Brain worms are thereby able to spread in civilizations familiar with the threat, avoiding the typical X-shaped incisions or scars citizens might be inspected for.

Inside the new body, the neuronal tissue connects to the blood stream or whatever system there is to transport air and nutrients. By secreting neurotransmitters and using the spinal cord, the brain worm takes control of the host's physical functions. The host's psyche cannot be controlled, but the brain's structure is changed within one to two weeks, mimicking the brain worm's neuronal pattern and thus replacing the host's psychic profile with that of the parasite. If the technology for scanning neurological or psychological patterns is available, brain scans will reveal the changes, provided a baseline is available. If the host's former mental pattern has been stored, and advanced science might be able to restore the host's synaptic pattern.

The host's personality vanishes over time, but some very strong traits survive and become a part of the brain worm's own personality. In *GURPS* terms, these include mental advantages and disadvantages and some exotic or supernatural traits such as magic or psionic abilities. Additionally, while the parasite itself has a below average intellect, the host's brain shows an *increase* in intelligence after restructuring.

Most memories are left intact, but some might get damaged during the brain's restructuring process, resulting in blurred or incomplete recall. The brain worm can summon undamaged memories, helping it to learn how to adapt to the new environment.

A brain worm will help others of its kind find suitable hosts. If there are no other brain worms nearby, the parasite attempts to reproduce, provided that the new body is capable of giving birth. It is able to modify the reproductive cells of the host by replacing the original genes with its own, a copy of which is stored inside the neuronal tissue implanted. The host then becomes pregnant by self-fertilization, at the appropriate time during the host's fertility cycle. Pregnancy lasts for only a quarter of the time it would normally take before giving birth. The newborn brain worm will be fully grown, but its blank mind will take 60 and 120 days to develop a personality.

Brain Worm

ST: 2	HP: 3	Speed: 4.00
DX: 5	Will: 14	Move: 4
IQ: 9	Per: 11	Weight: 3 lbs.
HT: 9	FP: 4	SM: -6
Dodge: 7	Parry: 0	DR: 1

Bite (15): 1d cutting. Reach C.

Traits: Affliction (Paralysis); Bad Sight (Nearsighted); Chameleon 4; Eidetic Memory; Night Vision 2; Obsession (Species survival) (6); Possession (Decreased Immunity 4; Extended Duration, Permanent; Parasitic); Sensitive Touch; Slithers; Striking ST 11 (Bite only); Universal Digestion; Vibration Sense (Air).

Skills: Brawling-15; Climbing-13; Stealth-13.

Notes: As the parasite settles in, the host's attributes start changing over time. Each week for five weeks, either the IQ or Will of the host increases by 1 point, starting with Will. With the exception of Obsession (Species survival), the brain worm loses all traits once it has taken invaded the host.

Adventure Hooks

Who's Trapped Here With Who? The heroes land on a backwater planet, bringing equipment to a newly founded colony. The settlement has been infiltrated by brain worms, which have taken control of important positions. They now see an opportunity for getting off the planet by capturing the heroes' spaceship, either by force or by taking control of some of the ship's crewmen (preferably not the PCs). If brain worms have never been encountered before, the heroes will have to find out why some of the crew members are behaving strangely. If it is a known threat, the adventurers will eventually figure it out and start a manhunt in the colony or – if noticed too late – within the cramped confines of their spaceship.

Brain Worm = Danger + Opportunity: If the brain-worm threat reaches the heart of an interstellar empire, war might be declared against regions known to be heavily infected. These will be no-go areas to all except military forces, offering bold traders the opportunity of doing profitable business. It is also a great background for a military or espionage campaign, where the soldiers or agents can never be sure about who is trustworthy and who is not.

ZOMBIE VIRUS

What starts as a seemingly harmless infection ends in good-natured people turning into bloodthirsty maniacs craving human flesh.

Appearance

As the name implies, the zombie virus can only be seen with a powerful microscope. The virus' distinctive features allow all who are familiar with it to immediately identify the threat.

In a campaign with magical or psionic forms of zombies, a "scientific" explanation of the phenomenon can provide an interesting challenge for heroes: "Why aren't they responding to the rituals?!"

Origin/Habitat

The virus stems from the planet Kraxial VI, where it afflicts some types of grazing herbivores. Infected plant eaters experience only mild fever and fatigue, recovering quickly. The virus stays dormant afterwards, lingering in the muscles and digestive system, until finding its way into a new host. Herbivores become infected by coming into contact with the host animal's droppings – usually within the pasture they are grazing on. Predators get infected by hunting and slaying a contagious animal. While devouring the carcass, the hunter ingests the virus contained in the flesh. Once inside the carnivore, the virus starts multiplying, killing the infected cells by causing them to burst, releasing millions of new viruses. This vicious cycle continues until either the predator's immune system is able to fight the infection (thus making it resistant), or the animal succumbs to the virus and dies.

Behavior

In most new host species, the virus either dies or adapts and survives, causing similar symptoms as in its native hosts.

In humanity, the virus has a different and horrible effect. Due to the human body chemistry and metabolism, the virus turns people into zombie-like creatures. It starts with the infected becoming feverish after an incubation time of one to two days. Blisters filled with pus form on the skin, the muscles and joints start aching, and a dry cough develops. The sick person then falls into a coma, while the body starts changing. The muscles become stronger, the nails of both fingers and toes get hard and sharp, and the body becomes insensible to pain and fatigue. During this process, the brain is irreparably damaged, resulting in loss of memory and most skills. An EEG still shows minor brain activity.

Emerging from the coma after one or two days, the infected person is raving mad with hunger and incredibly aggressive. Having developed a strong craving for human flesh and brains, he start hunting for other people, ripping them (and any other living thing in its path) apart with strong claws and feasting on their bodies.

Major injuries that would leave a normal human crippled will not slow down an infected host, making him a deadly adversary. Anyone wounded by an infected person can become infected himself if damage is dealt by biting.

Zombie Virus Host

69 points

The virus itself has no characteristics, but the host gains the zombie virus host template. While an infected loses most skills (especially those based on IQ), physical skills like Brawling, Climbing, or Swimming remain – possibly at a reduced level (GM's choice).

Adventure Hooks

Why Don't We Ever Investigate the Non-Disastrous Labs? The ship's sensors pick up weak energy readings from a nearby asteroid field. They originate from a secret corporate or government laboratory on one of the asteroids. The virus has been brought here for further studies and experiments, and some scientists become contaminated, and turned into murderous beasts. During the subsequent fighting, the sensor shielding protecting the station from detection was damaged. Inside the station, the PCs discover empty corridors and rooms, some of them stained with blood. Barricades erected in doorways and narrow corridor sections have all been torn down and bloody pieces of clothing are stuck in dried pools of blood. Once deep inside the station, the infected will start hunting the heroes, blocking their way back to the ship.

The Station's Not Staying Stationary! While the adventurers visit a space station, a breakout of the zombie virus occurs. The station is put under quarantine until further notice, and the inhabitants trapped inside have to fight for their lives until armed decontamination teams come to the rescue.

Variations on a Scream

The virus can of course also be of artificial origin. In this case, it is a genetically engineered microorganism, created to improve soldiers by making them stronger, tougher, and resistant to pain and fatigue. However, the experiment either went horribly wrong, ending in test subjects going on a rampage, or the virus mutated over time, turning soldiers into zombie-like creatures.

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

Secondary Characteristics Modifiers: HP+4 [8]; Will+2 [10].

Advantages: Claws (Sharp) [5]; DR 5 (Flexible, -20%) [20];

Fearlessness 3 [6]; Hard to Kill 2 [4]; Hard to Subdue 2 [4];

High Pain Threshold [10]; Indomitable [15]; Night Vision 2

[2]; Resistant to Metabolic Hazards (+8) [30]; Striking ST 2

[10]; Teeth (Sharp) [1].

Disadvantages: Bestial [-10]; Hideous [-16]; Infectious Attack (Bite) [-5]; Short Attention Span (9 or less) [-15].

KILLER BUGS

These tiny insects are able to chew up body armor. They will stop at nothing to satisfy their hunger.

Appearance

An adult killer bug resembles an elongated Earth crab, with a length of about 5" and a width of 3" at its massive head, followed by the somewhat slender body. It is completely covered by a bright red exoskeleton whose sturdy, spiked, chitinous structure can withstand considerable damage and mechanical stress. With its eight legs, it can climb almost any obstacle. To overcome narrow crevices, a killer bug uses its last two pairs of legs to jump distances up to two yards high and three yards wide.

For another take on a virus gone wrong aboard a space station (with maps!), see Transhuman Space: Orbital Decay.

Located on each side of the head are small compound eyes, protected by thick, heavy bulges. Below the eyes, mandibles strong enough to cut flesh, bone, and wood are situated left and right of the mouth. To cut stronger materials, the mandibles vibrate at a very high frequency, enabling them to cut through thin sheets of metal – even a car body. When encountering materials the mandibles cannot penetrate, a killer bug spits acid. This fluid consists of two different liquids, secreted by separate glands next to the mandibles. Each liquid is harmless by itself, but mixed together, they form a very potent acid, able to corrode even the toughest material within minutes.

Origin/Habitat

Killer bugs were first encountered on Festus, the second moon of a gas giant called Marginis. Festus has a humid biosphere and is covered by dense jungle and misty forests, interrupted by large rivers and oceans.

Soon after the discovery of the green moon, wood companies started lumbering. While exporting timber, some killer bugs were transported as stowaways to many different destinations.

Behavior

One killer bug is relatively harmless, feeding on plants and small animals. However, when living in large swarms containing thousands or tens of thousands of individuals, they become aggressive, attacking anything in sight. As experience has shown, the bigger the swarm, the more aggressive killer bugs become. The reason for this change in behavior is unknown, but scientists believe that increased social stress experienced when surrounded by its own kind could be responsible.

When in a swarm, killer bugs fall into a kind of eating frenzy, devouring everything organic. In this state, a swarm also attacks

big animals and dangerous predators by crawling all over them, cutting through thick hides or chitin scales with vibrating mandibles, and ripping the flesh off the victim's bones.

A swarm will devour all organic matter in an area within a few days. As a result, killer bugs are nomadic, moving ever onward in search for food. They do not build nests to store food or raise their young, but they rest on the ground, underneath foliage, or in treetops.

Killer bugs are hermaphrodites. To reproduce, two bugs face each other, press their necks together, and start secreting mucus. It envelops the neck region of both bugs, forming a moist pathway between the reproductive organs. Sperm is then excreted by both bugs and travels via the mucus from one to the other. The creature may store that which isn't used to immediately inseminate eggs, in case environmental circumstances might endanger the offspring's survival.

Pregnancy lasts for two to three days, during which up to two dozen baby killer bugs develop within each parent's womb (located at the bottom of the bug's torso). Growing incredibly fast, the offspring need vast amounts of food, which they take from the mother itself. The pregnant bug is thereby eaten up from the inside by its own children, killing it within the first day of pregnancy. The tough exoskeleton protects the still helpless infants, who grow ever stronger until all edible has been consumed after one to two days. They then leave the remains of their "mother" and join the swarm, growing to full size within a few days.

Killer Bug

ST: 4	HP: 2	Speed: 5.00
DX: 6	Will: 13	Move: 4
IQ: 7	Per: 7	Weight: 2 lbs.
HT: 14	FP: 14	SM: -7

Dodge: 8 **Parry:** N/A **DR:** 5

Fangs (14): 1d-3(5) impaling. Reach C.

Spitting Acid (16): 2d(3) corrosion (5 one-second cycles) Reach C. Can only be used 3-4 times per day.

Traits: Fearlessness 3; Hive Mentality (6); Indomitable; Teeth (Fangs; Armor Divisor (5)); Night Vision 2; Resistant to Poison (+8); Striking ST 4; Universal Digestion.

Skills: Brawling-14; Innate Attack (Breath)-16.

Adventure Hooks

Incoming! While traveling on board a passenger space ship or luxury cruiser, the alarm klaxons start wailing. Killer bugs rapidly spread throughout the ship, eating all organic matter and even killing passengers and crew members in order to feed on them.

Bad Seller; Would Not Deal With Again: The killer bugs have been smuggled on board in one or more crates, whose false freight documents and fake bio signs claim to contain harmless pets. The people responsible for this want someone among the passengers dead. The target can be a principal witness, an agent traveling undercover, a powerful merchant or corporate member enjoying the ship's comfort while traveling to a business meeting or a pleasure planet, or even the PCs themselves. By saving the target's life – and that of most people on the ship – the heroes might gain a new ally or at least someone who will be very, very grateful. Finding the ones responsible for the assault will be an adventure in its own.

Don't Let the Bedbugs Bite . . . No, Really: Contact with a colony on the fringe of charted space has been lost. Having a shortage of faster-than-light spaceships, the authorities ask the PCs to re-establish contact. In fact, the colonists have encountered a killer bug swarm and been eaten. The investigators have to find out what happened in the deserted settlement.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After studying biology, Christian Nienhaus now lives in Ulm, Germany, where he works at the University of Ulm in the morning and as a freelance translator and medical writer in the afternoon. He has been roleplaying for more than 16 years. Always fascinated by the fusion of men and machine, his favorite settings are cyberpunk and space; however, he also enjoys horror, supernatural, and post-apocalyptic settings.

His worldly interests include astronomy and dogs. At the moment, he does not have a friend with four paws and a cold, wet nose, but he is planning on having one in the near future.

CREATURES OF THE VOID

BY REV. JASON “PK” LEVINE

The *GURPS Creatures of the Night* series details dozens of interesting monsters. While they were all designed with Earth in mind, there's no reason an enterprising GM can't take them into the depths of space! With a few tweaks, it's easy to make these critters feel at home in a sci-fi setting. The following examples comprise the first two volumes' worth of *Creatures*.

GREIDER

Creatures of the Night, Vol. 1, p. 3

Instead of being a grave worm, the grieder is one of the hazards of space travel. Normally content to float through space, living off the small particles and solar radiation, it will propel itself toward a ship that passes by, clinging to it like a barnacle. If the crew doesn't realize what's happening, they may soon become too stupid to do anything about it!

GUARDIAN OWL

Creatures of the Night, Vol. 1, p. 5

On a particular planet, a rare type of alien symbiote reproduces by incubating its egg in a human (or equivalent sapient species) for several decades. The lucky incubator gains *amazing* resilience during this time, while the symbiote watches from afar. At the end of the incubation, the egg passes harmlessly from the host before hatching . . . unless the GM would prefer a darker ending! Is an eventual, guaranteed, painful death worth years of superhuman durability?

HARRIAD

Creatures of the Night, Vol. 1, p. 7

A harriad is a sapient energy being, which seeks a partnership with anyone sufficiently ambitious and greedy. In return for it sharing its uncanny financial instincts (and, in certain settings, enough psionic Telepathy to accomplish insider trading, hostile takeovers, etc.), it sucks the life energy from its host, gradually leaving him a hideous shell.

LYTHERIONS

Creatures of the Night, Vol. 1, p. 9

These poison-fueled weirdness magnets work as either a new alien race or as a variant human race (for settings which support such a concept, like *GURPS Traveller* or the *Vorkosigan Saga*).

Instead of enhancing mana, their bodies cause rapid fluctuations in local quantum energy, provoking *strange* events (and, if psi exists, making its use unpredictable).

MISER TROLL

Creatures of the Night, Vol. 2, p. 3

This parasite infects its victim with a disease that gradually warps his mind. The victim will become obsessed with securing a local resource – something that the “troll's” species needs for survival. The natural aggression and conflict this can produce is comparable to the threat caused by the Pyra (pp. 11-17); if both exist in the same campaign, they are likely to be mortal enemies.

NAZARAAD

Creatures of the Night, Vol. 2, p. 6

As sci-fi usually precludes demons, the nazaraads are instead an alien species with incredible difficulty gestating. One will quietly implant its tiny, developing egg in an unsuspecting, sleeping host. Since this is not a natural symbiotic relationship, the host must take strange actions to accommodate the egg's growth (e.g., consuming odd chemicals); the parent uses psionic Telepathy to subtly enforce this. When the gestation time is up . . . well, just think of *Alien*.

NERLOCH

Creatures of the Night, Vol. 1, p. 12

Anagon (the nerlochs' dark “god”) is a vastly powerful alien. Whether it is unique or part of a terrifying species is up to the GM. From its home within a massive asteroid, it sends its nerlochs out to raid unsuspecting habitats. Nerlochs' implanted gems allow them limited telekinetic space flight – enough to land silently on a station or asteroid, before creeping inside to abduct new “converts.”

PENDULUM GHOUL

Creatures of the Night, Vol. 2, p. 8

If literal undead exist in the setting, then the ghouls work fine as-is; there's not much scarier than exploring a ruined spaceship or station, only to have the former crew members come swinging at you on shredded, sparking wires!

If not, the ghouls can make a unique encounter as forest-bound aliens, whose natural form of locomotion involves clinging to and climbing the tough local vines.

POOL BEAST

Creatures of the Night, Vol. 1, p. 14

These powerful monsters inhabit the bubbling pools of methane, acid, magma, etc., which pockmark a particular planet. Explorers soon learn to avoid these ponds, but when they eventually discover that these pools are tunnels – dug down into the planet’s crust and interconnected by a vast underground sea – they realize that taming the planet’s surface is only *half* the battle.

PTALLANT LIZARD

Creatures of the Night, Vol. 1, p. 15

This species’ innocent looks belie its powerful and destructive psychokinesis. If disturbed, it sends out *massive* telekinetic shock waves around it in all directions. On a planet, this can devastate a small settlement . . . and on a *spaceship*, this can cause explosive decompression if not stopped quickly enough!

SEA GIANT

Creatures of the Night, Vol. 2, p. 10

In science fiction, ships sail through *space*, not the sea. Thus, this becomes a space giant – a powerful alien who collects electrical systems (from satellites, probes, ships, etc.), to build a pattern that resonates pleasantly with it. Ships who accidentally disturb this pattern will incur its ire! A large specimen will force its way into the ship to attack the crew, while a colossal one may be able to threaten the ship directly.

SHOULDER GIANT

Creatures of the Night, Vol. 1, p. 17

Instead of a literal humanoid giant, this becomes a massive, burrowing, alien species. It slowly makes its way under human settlements, where the soft thrum of the environmental systems and power generators lull it to sleep. The GM will need to decide what in the local environment disturbs it, rousing it from sleep and endangering the settlement. This could be anything from the planet’s equivalent of a storm to a burst of solar radiation.

SLAKE HOUND

Creatures of the Night, Vol. 1, p. 19

The slake hound needs no adjustment to work as an alien species. For added intrigue, consider additional uses for the bile sac – even those that have nothing to do with its acidic properties. For example, a medical corporation may discover

Get it off me! Just get it off me!
– Unknown explorer, deceased

unique enzymes in the sac, leading them to corral and raise slake hounds. This is unlikely to cause a problem . . . until an electrical short opens the gate, releasing the hounds on an unsuspecting colony!

STRIKEWORM

Creatures of the Night, Vol. 2, p. 13

This predator is a natural addition to any planet’s ecosystem, where it uses latent telekinesis to easily climb cliffs and launch itself at anything it sees as a threat. Instead of magical augmentation, any psychokinetic *psi* may form a gestalt with the strikeworm, strengthening its innate levitation so it can act as a mount. Just when the heroes are used to fending off wild strikeworms, they have to deal with angry natives *riding* them!

TELLANODE

Creatures of the Night, Vol. 1, p. 21

With a pedigree straight from the *Twilight Zone*, the tellanodes fit cleanly into any sci-fi game. In fact, once they’re discovered, the *real* question is, “Where did they come from?” Perhaps they’re a probe, sent by another species to gather our secrets. Or they may *be* another species, come to observe (or conquer) us! If psionics exist, the GM should decide if the insiders are using standard Telepathy, or something new, unique, and *unknown*.

URIMANDER

Creatures of the Night, Vol. 2, p. 16

There’s no reasonable technobabble to explain what this creature does, but if one sneaks aboard a ship, the crew will find themselves entering an entirely new world. In addition to the stresses of having to fend off space roaches and similar vermin, the GM can use this as a gateway to another adventure by having them notice something odd that they couldn’t have spotted at full size (e.g., a microdot with encoded information, stuck to a shipping label).

UROTH

Creatures of the Night, Vol. 1, p. 24

There’s no reason to abandon the concept of the uroth as a “walking treasure chest.” But in space, where resources are scarce, the concept of *treasure* can certainly change! What if the uroth has the unusual property of producing pure, fresh water – something not readily available on the planet or easy to synthesize from local chemicals? Survival here may *depend* on the ability to track uroths, slay them, and safely extract their strange bladders.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The unique life form known alternately as Jason Levine, the Assistant *GURPS* Line Editor, or simply “Subject X” was partially responsible for the creation of the *Creatures of the Night* series mentioned in this very article. Because of this, scientists theorize that it possesses a remarkable gift for self-promotion. While its landing site in northern Georgia was positively identified, sensors have since lost track of its movements.

RANDOM THOUGHT TABLE

WHAT'S DANGEROUS ABOUT SPACE? NOTHING!

BY STEVEN MARSH, *PYRAMID* EDITOR

As long as humanity has been looking up at the infinite void, we've been mentally plugging "monsters" into that hole. So what's the appeal? Figuring that out can help us find elements we can ramp up to 11 in our own games. *How* do we decide on that? One possibly fruitful method is by imagining monsters introduced into our own planet-bound world, and seeing what effect is had by introducing space to that equation. (And we say "possibly fruitful," but we know darn well that we were at least able to get two pages' worth of column out of this concept.

BE IT EVER SO HUMBLE . . .

For the most part, Earth is safe – especially the land-based parts. Sure, weather can be pretty annoying, and the need to track down food every so often puts a crimp on lounging-around plans. However, the default assumption is that – in the absence of anything actively dangerous – terra firma is conducive to life.

In comparison, space is anything *but* safe. There is no aspect of the void that is hospitable. You can't breathe. There's nothing to eat. Admittedly, broadcast reception is a lot better, but getting cable up there is comically impossible.

Thus for applicability to our "monsters in space" theme, it's noteworthy to realize that the "in space" portion of the equation is still plenty dangerous all by itself. Monsters merely serve to amplify that danger.

To put it another way, in many sci-fi settings, a bungling boob of a beast can – with the right collateral damage – still ensure the complete annihilation of its victims.

EXIT, STAGE LEFT

On mother Earth, there's usually somewhere else to go. Whether maneuvering on foot, by vehicle, or underwater, there's

usually a left/right/backward/down that can serve as an escape route. Sure, it's possible to get trapped, but such situations are the exception – and keen-eyed (or paranoid!) heroes have an escape plan or two worked out for most situations.

Conversely, in space there's generally nowhere to go but nowhere. Whether small-scale space station, little lunar base, or cramped craft, celestial conditions provide far fewer escape routes (unless, of course, something in the setting mitigates the danger – see the box on p. 38 for ideas).

One fact often overlooked is that a compression of distance usually means a compression in time. If you're able to run from one end of the mall to the other in your effort to escape the zombie apocalypse, you can buy yourself a good five to 10 minutes or more, depending on the size of the mall – and that doesn't even count the ability to run outside! However, if you're running from one end of an orbital satellite to the other, you'll probably run out of room long before you run out of breath . . . and if your back's against the metal wall, your only choice at that point is *how* you want to die.

UNDER CONSTRUCTION (BUT MOSTLY DONE)

We've had thousands of years of culture and society to work out the limitations of this ball of mud upon which we originated. Beyond that, we've had a couple billion years to evolve mechanisms that ensure our survival on *this specific* world. Our ability to deal with excess heat, cellular restoration, temperature ranges – all have been evolved with our world in mind.

Meanwhile, we've only been making space remotely habitable for less than a half-century. Barring exceptional advances in transhumanism, we'll never have the kind of evolutionary advantages in an alien landscape that we have here on Earth.

Keep this article handy in case the players ever get complacent about the dangers of space.

It's Only Space; What Can Go Wrong?!

Many themes draw their power from juxtaposition. *Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies* doesn't get its appeal because the person hearing the title goes, "Ah-HA! Of course; those two ideas are closely related!" Rather, it's the frisson of excitement cause by the collision of two disparate ideas.

"Monsters in space," on the other hand, gets its power from an amplification. Space is dangerous, and monsters are dangerous, so the two together must be *really* dangerous. It's the logic behind "sharks with laser beams," and it's the whole thesis of this column, after all.

However, as an intellectual exercise, try recasting the "monsters in space" divide back within the realm of juxtaposition. The easiest way to do this would be to figure out a way to make space *un-dangerous*. Some possibilities include:

- *Space is naturally safe.* This is the tack taken by RPG settings such as *Spelljammer*. Sure, it may be a pain in the butt to get up to the heavens, but once you're there, it isn't terribly hazardous to your health. This requires a considerable rewriting of our known laws of physics, but even within a (somewhat) hard-science realm it's not out of the question; "we've traveled to an alternate dimension with a breathable æther" can open the possibility for new excitement.

- *Space has been tamed.* While it's unlikely the dangers of an absolute void will be polished away entirely, it's quite possible that we'll reach a point in our space exploits that we'll forget space is dangerous. If Moonville is considered the 24th century's Disneyland, or if interstellar travel is made seemingly foolproof enough that spacecraft are a

luxury, then it's quite likely humanity will forget. (We see this happen in our world. The ocean is incredibly dangerous and inconducive to human life, yet people see it as a perfect place to put a luxury liner . . . and then proceed to panic if something goes awry.)

- *Some people can explore without danger.* It's feasible that we'll figure out a way for some people to mitigate the peril of space, for example via a Lensmen/Green Lantern bit of superscience. Once people take personal technology for granted, it becomes an extension of themselves; global telecommunication may be an impossibility for many remote or impoverished parts of the world, but someone with a satellite phone can travel near-globally and remain in contact.

So, once the foundation for juxtaposition is laid, what can be done with it? There are two obvious possibilities. First, the juxtaposition merely serves to heighten the danger of the situation – gee, everything else is so tamed and controlled on Moonville; why can't we stop one measly star-otter? Second, the seeming juxtaposition is shown to be the charade it is, as the monster (wittingly or not) turns the dangers of space to its advantage. Sure, space is breathable with an emerald amulet, but what if . . .

As a final intellectual exercise: What if juxtaposition is enabled because space is still dangerous, but "monsters" are safe? Devising a mechanism is left to the reader. Perhaps there is some inhuman threat that has been (in normal conditions) rendered harmless, in the way we view beach-washed jellyfish nowadays. Then, of course, it all goes wrong . . .

From a monsters-in-space vantage point, this means that attributes we've cultivated on Earth to deal with its problems here could be deadly to us. Thus, it's a fact that humans sweat; it's necessary for our survival . . . but if some monster is (say) able to read our thoughts via our perspiration, then that "survival trait" could spell our doom.

THE PLANET RECOMMENDED BY FOUR OUT OF FIVE TERRANS

As famed superhero The Tick noted about the Earth, "That's where I keep all my stuff!" We know this world pretty well; there aren't too many things we can learn about this world that have the ability to fundamentally affect us all (which is one of the reasons the possibility of global climate change is frightening). This is partly because of the aforementioned length of time we've been on this planet.

However, what we know about other worlds or regions of space is likely to be infinitesimally smaller. A previously unknown decadal solar-flare cycle can wreak havoc on a system that's been occupied for years. A rare tidal phenomenon might place an entire colony in danger. All manner of comets, meteor clouds, and radiation bands we've tracked meticulously

for thousands of years in our own neck of the interstellar woods can be completely unknown in unfamiliar space.

This lack of environmental knowledge can enhance any monsters-in-space encounter. On Earth, knowing that sunrise will destroy the vampires turns the encounter into a predictable race against the clock (how long until sunrise); however, even if space vampires have the same weakness, who knows if this system's sun will work on them – or when "sunrise" is?

In a lot of ways, an extraterrestrial encounter with monstrous hostile forces is one of the greatest challenges imaginable, and the only upside of "deadly plus deadly" is that you can only be killed once. From the first time humanity began considering the stars – probably beginning with H.G. Wells' *Martians* – we've wondered what else was there, waiting to attack. This becomes doubly interesting when you realize the *Martians* themselves were done in by an "alien" environmental factor they hadn't considered. Let's hope they're not reading this and making adjustments . . .

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Steven Marsh is a freelance writer and editor. He has contributed to roleplaying game releases from Green Ronin, West End Games, White Wolf, Hogshead Publishing, and others. He has been editing *Pyramid* for over nine years; during that time he has won four Origins awards.

ODDS AND ENDS

MORE MONSTROUS!

So you've generated a mundane creature (pp. 18-23) who doesn't feel quite "monstrous" enough. How can you give it that extra pep to make it a threat the heroes will remember? Here are a few ideas.

A Corpse Is a Corpse . . .: True monsters seldom treat human bodies with any respect. Whether stringing them up as food for later (encased in *something* icky), shredding them to precise sinewy strips, or sending tendrils weaving into and out of target flesh, a good creepy creature doesn't just bludgeon something to death.

Go With the Flow: Plenty of good monsters fail to adhere to human expectations of how we expect physical bodies to move. They often travel with slow precision when you'd expect them to move quickly, or with preternatural swiftness and impossible angles when they should be still. (This is part of what makes snakes so creepy; they slither in a way that humans don't, then strike like lightning.)

Orifice Party: Many a terrifying creature fails to respect personal boundaries when it comes to body parts. Slimy ichor that drips into eyes, spinning tendrils that probe the

nose, tongues that seek out the inner ear, and more. Here's where that altered time flow enhances the creepiness: Animals try to gouge out the eyes, while monsters slowly suction them out with a mouth-like tube.

Vive Laaaaaaah Différence!: Good monsters frequently have vastly different life cycles. Your standard animal starts usually out as a smaller or cuter version of their adult form – but not terrifying creatures. No, a good critter might start out as a multicolored flower, then morph into a green humanoid. Or they go from compact basketball-sized insectoids that can expand to a mass of writhing arms, then grow up to house-sized lobsteresque monstrosities dripping with phosphorescent goo. The point is, a good monster doesn't permit complacency; you can't assume that if you've seen one specimen, you've seen 'em all.

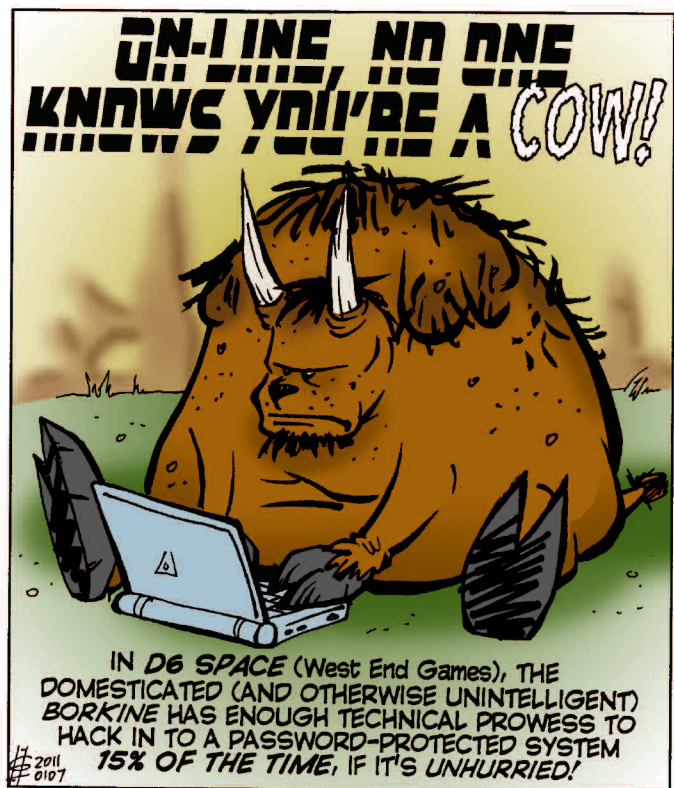
MURPHY'S RULES

BY GREG HYLAND

It's Just a Simple Mission . . .

Nothing good will befall the heroes should they be unfortunate enough to hear:

- "We lost contact with the station a week ago . . ."
- "The Intergalactic Emperor hasn't been acting like himself lately, but it's probably nothing."
- "For some reason, the floorboards of this building smell like iron and copper."
- Their friend stopping midsentence and starting to clutch his head/face/chest/whatever.
- The sound of an explosion from the part of the ship containing the only escape pod.
- "Trust me. There are no other life forms for miles around – except for Mr. Whiskers, the station mascot."
- "There's no possible way that thing could make it out of its cage, so long as the power holds . . . and we've got *two* generators!"
- "Fortunately, we know our monster-hunting gear is in good shape, since we just had it checked by IncompeTech. Can you believe their rates were half the other guys'?"
- "I apologize; I seem to have a cold today."



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

ABOUT *GURPS*

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