

CUSTOMIZING THE REAPING

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Customizing the Reaping is a free publication offered in promotion of *Come for the Reaping*, an adventure for the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game* and the *Urban Arcana* campaign setting from The Game Mechanics, Inc.

Behind high walls and guard posts, a converted sanatorium houses a secret research facility delving into “alternate technologies.” Behind a respectable facade, agents of an ancient secret society work to decipher ancient texts they barely understand, hoping to glean a few arcane secrets from their vast collection of mystic tomes. A few nights ago, researchers with more ambition than skill tried summoning something from another reality. They got more than they bargained for....

Come for the Reaping is a challenging d20 System adventure of modern horror set in the *Urban Arcana* campaign setting, designed for four 1st-level heroes. Heroes must infiltrate the mansion, overcome a small army of undead, rescue any survivors, and defeat a fiend before the facility’s secret masters decide to “sanitize” the mansion. It’s going to take brawn and brains for the heroes to survive in this zombie horror movie come to terrible, shambling life!

Come for the Reaping comes complete with:

- zombie stat blocks
- a brand new fiend for modern d20 System campaigns
- initiative cards
- pre-generated characters
- maps of the converted mansion by Christopher West
- tactical hints for GMs to give players who are new to modern role-playing games
- suggestions for follow-up adventures.



Come for the Reaping is the first modern d20 System adventure from The Game Mechanics.

Requires the use of the *d20 Modern™ Roleplaying Game* and *Urban Arcana* campaign setting, published by Wizards of the Coast, Inc.



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CUSTOMIZING THE REAPING

Writers rarely create adventures in a vacuum—most write with a specific campaign setting in mind. *Come for the Reaping* is no different. If you'd like to play the adventure using the same campaign setting material I used when writing and playtesting it, read on! *Players should read no further.*

Building a Campaign

When I started work on *Come for the Reaping*, my intent was to create an environment in which our designers and our local freelancers could play the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*, become familiar with the rules, and generally experiment. Looking through the campaign models in the core rulebook, I decided that the *Urban Arcana* campaign setting was the best fit. It had monsters, so I could mine the usual fantasy monster books for opponents (opponents that, because of my *Dungeons & Dragons* writing and gaming experience, were already familiar to me). It had lots of opportunities for heroes to learn or acquire magic. That seemed perfect. Plus, it had the yuan-ti and the Infinite Serpents, which really appealed to me as campaign masterminds.

Then I had to write the first adventure. Everyone who has ever written or played a first adventure knows that the first obstacle you have to overcome is how to get the heroes together. We've all played in the "so you're all drinking in the same tavern when..." adventure. I wanted something different. I also wanted something that would allow me to bring in new players, or new heroes, over the course of the campaign. The second adventure-writing obstacle is answering the question, "How do the heroes find out about the adventure?" I realized I could kill two birds with one stone, thanks to an unhealthy childhood obsession with television.

The Setting

This adventure is set in a campaign that would be similar to *Charlie's Angels*, if the Angels fought undead and fiends from other dimensions. Since I already had "angel" on the brain, I decided to draw from the TV show, *Angel*, and set my campaign in southern California. The location is rife with stories, and most people are familiar with the look of L.A. from TV and movies. From Raymond Chandler to *Chinatown*, from Hollywood cemeteries to Hollywood back lots, from the Charles Manson killings to Beverly Hills, the location drips atmosphere, weirdness, and history.

Plus, my gamers and I all live in Seattle and in the middle of a Seattle winter, L.A. weather is irresistible.

This solved the problem of how the heroes met. I told them that they had all had a strange experience, something supernatural, and that it

had cost them friends and jobs because of their insistence that the experience was real. I left the details up to them. I then told them that they had all received a letter, and I emphasized that it was a real letter, on heavy, embossed stationery, and written with a fountain pen. The letter said that the writer knew of their experience, believed them, and wished to discuss it further. He (more on him, below) invited each hero to his office to discuss the matter.

The Boss

The letter was signed "Stennes Drygedenov." I let heroes research Stennes' background before the meeting if they wanted. The information they gathered said that Stennes Drygedenov escaped from Romania with his parents in the 1930s. Stennes was born with xeroderma pigmentosa ("XP") and is acutely vulnerable to cancers of the skin and eyes. He cannot afford exposure to UV radiation, and since all exposures are cumulative, it is remarkable he has lived so long. In fact, he seems to be the oldest survivor of the condition. No one has seen him in person in decades. They learned he was married and that his wife died of lung cancer twenty years ago. They also saw news stories about his son, a medical missionary in central Africa. Stennes is well known in Los Angeles for the Drygedenov Academic Trust that provides scholarships for gifted students and for his charitable contributions to medical research.

The heroes never see Stennes because he "meets" with them in his penthouse office in downtown Los Angeles and communicates with them through an intercom on a desk. The office has all the amenities, including coffee maker and espresso machine, and is very comfortable. It is furnished entirely in white. There are obvious video cameras hanging from the ceiling. His foundation owns the entire building.

Stennes hired the heroes to investigate strange occurrences. He told them straight out that there was more going on in the world than people were ready to understand, and that traditional protective agencies such as the police treated monster reports as coming from crackpots. Someone had to protect people, and he wanted the heroes to join the ranks of those who protected humanity from real monsters.

While Stennes is happy to provide legal and medical assistance to the heroes, he prefers them to rely on their own resources during missions. I use the standard requisition rules in Chapter Four: Equipment of the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game* if heroes ask him for additional equipment, but Stennes will not supply them with military hardware.

This solved both my “how do the heroes meet” issue and my “how do the heroes find out about the adventure” issue. The format allowed Stennes to introduce new heroes if new players joined. I envisioned Stennes as someone who had helped a lot of people, had many contacts throughout Los Angeles who knew of his interest in strange occurrences, was often asked to help, and who would always know of something that heroes could investigate. All I had to do was resolve who, or what, Stennes was. I had time, and I still do have time, since heroes won't find out Stennes' true nature (whatever it is) until late in the campaign.

Who Is This Guy?

Originally, I thought Stennes was a vampire who used the heroes to thwart the plots of other monstrous masterminds while he was advancing his own plots. An evil person advancing evil goals by doing good was certainly intriguing. I saw two flaws in the idea before my first playtest session. The first is that it creates a lot more issues for the GM than it solves, issues like how Stennes finds out about the plots of other monsters and what his master plan actually is. The second is that of trust. The heroes had to trust Stennes enough to work for him. That was a big stretch considering his unusual history, his unconventional ways of meeting with the heroes, and the bizarre nature of his requests. If I could gain that trust, I didn't want to betray it later by revealing him as a villain. If you're willing to deal with those issues, it helps a great deal adapting the adventure, and the campaign, to the Shadow Chasers campaign model. I would advise emphasizing levels of Charismatic, with smatterings of Fast. Depending on what level you need him to be, he might also have levels of Negotiator.

I settled on the idea that Stennes is really a gold dragon who has lived on this world a very, very long time. He can masquerade as a human when he wishes, but he prefers his natural shape. He doesn't think the world is ready to accept dragons, just as he thinks the world is unready for the horrors that lurk in its alleys, abandoned mines, and darkest jungles. He prefers to work through others, and the heroes are his latest set of employees. An ancient gold dragon is tough, smart, and talented enough that it probably doesn't need any class levels.

Alternatives

Despite my warning in the introduction, many players will read this far. A GM, therefore, needs alternate choices to keep his players guessing. Some alternatives are more appropriate for different campaign models (see Chapter Nine: Campaign Models in the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*). Alternate choices for Stennes' background include:

Fiend: Many modern interpretations of Hell portray it as a rule-bound place filled with scheming fiends vying for political power and the favor of the Prince of Darkness. If Stennes is a fiend, perhaps he underwent a miraculous conversion while tormenting mortals on Earth. If his allegiance changed, his underlying nature might not have, giving you someone trying to do good through violence, intimidation, seduction, and betrayal. Then again, perhaps all his good works are simply a masquerade for a plot born in Hell, a plot that must succeed or he will face the torments usually reserved for the damned. Or you could play on a war between those fiends allied with chaos and those allied with law, making Stennes a force working for one side or the other. As a fiend, he should have a high Intelligence and a high Charisma, with levels of Charismatic and Negotiator on top of any supernatural or spell-like abilities. A fiendish Stennes works very well in either *Urban Arcana* or a Shadow Chasers setting. Watch out for betraying your heroes' trust late in the campaign, however. It can be very upsetting to players.

Illithid: Insidious, diabolical, and powerful, illithids possess the mental powers and arcane knowledge to pass themselves off as human. Stennes could easily be an illithid, but you face the same challenges as with a vampiric or fiendish Stennes: What is his plot, how does he know what other monsters are up to, and the ultimate betrayal of the heroes. Generally speaking, illithids consider humans inferior, best suited as cattle they slaughter for brains. If Stennes is working against other illithids for good purposes, emphasize levels of Mage, taking base class levels as necessary to qualify for Mage. This alternative works best in an *Urban Arcana* setting, but can work well in Shadow Chasers as well.

Puppeteer: Invaders seeking to enslave entire worlds, puppeteers provide an interesting alternative in that Stennes could be almost anyone at any time. He could even be one of the heroes! Stennes could be a rogue puppeteer trying to defend the Earth and humanity, or he could be subverting it through clever and subtle deployment of the heroes, preparing the way for an invasion of puppeteers riding alien soldiers. A typical host for Stennes would be a character with levels in either Negotiator or Mage (or Telepath if using Agents of PSI), and whatever base class levels are necessary to qualify for those advanced classes.

Replacement: Imagine if Stennes were once a powerfully psionic human suffering from XP who was approached by the Enlightenment (see the Agents of PSI campaign model in Chapter Nine: Campaign Models of the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*) and offered a replacement body. If they understood how to duplicate a body, but not how to engineer out existing conditions, then every

replacement body would suffer XP and Stennes would constantly require a new one. Heroes could never be entirely sure exactly how old he was. Obviously the Enlightenment and Stennes' psionic power are parts of the Agents of PSI campaign model from the core rule book, but replacements could appear in any campaign model, especially if you give them a supernatural origin rather than a scientific one. As a replacement, Stennes is concerned about laws governing cloning and protecting his sources of replacement bodies. This could put heroes in conflict with rival scientific or supernatural organizations, or even government agencies. Stennes could be using his influence to advance cloning and replacement technology for almost any reason.

Mindwreckers: If using the Agents of PSI campaign setting, Mindwreckers make good villains. They're chaotic, destructive, and have no compassion for non-psionic people. Stennes could be a Mindwrecker using the heroes to eliminate his enemies and thus gain power within the group. Clearly this is best suited for the Agents of PSI campaign model. Stennes could also oppose the Mindwreckers, possibly with ties to the Silent Walkers. In any case, Stennes should be a Telepath with at least enough base class levels to qualify for that advanced class.

Adventure Changes

If you'd like to use Stennes instead of Department-7, you can introduce these simple modifications to *Come for the Reaping*.

Introduction

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Some friends of mine have asked me for help. Their daughter works for a company called Ogdoad Research. O.R. is a think-tank of sorts, investigating alternative technologies. They have a reputation for extracting practical information from folklore. The young lady, Amy Heseltine, usually calls her parents after work on Thursday evening. They called me this afternoon after discovering that the O.R. facility where Amy works, a restored mansion in the Santa Monica Mountains, has been incommunicado since some time Wednesday night.

It is possible that O.R. is using its treasury to keep the LAPD at bay while conducting its own investigations. My concern is Amy Heseltine. Find and protect her if at all possible."

Background

Stennes Drygedenov recently hired the heroes. He meets with them in his penthouse office, communicating through an intercom. The heroes never see him. It is Thursday evening, approximately 6:00 PM, on December 5, 2002, when Stennes gives them the speech in the Introduction.

Stennes is lying about two things. He has never met the Heseltines. He knows who they are because his academic trust gave Amy a scholarship, one of many scholarships for gifted students. He often maintains contact with his scholars, building relationships that can last for years and acting as a mentor. He knows about what happened at the facility because Amy called him.

Campaign Model

Your choice of campaign setting should dictate other changes in the adventure.

Urban Arcana: Any changes you make should be to fit the adventure with how you define Stennes. However, any of the alternatives suggested above could oppose the Infinite Serpents for their own reasons.

Shadow Chasers: *Come for the Reaping* fits easily into the Shadow Chasers campaign model. In fact, *Resident Evil* is cited in the core rulebook as an inspiration for the model! Start by defining Stennes, and then tweak the adventure so the people behind Ogdoad Research are opponents.

Agents of PSI: The easiest way to make *Come for the Reaping* fit this campaign model is to make the reaper a monster of the id. If one of the deceased staff members created it, the reaper will grow weaker and eventually fade away. If Clint Castle or Amy Heseltine created it, the heroes may have some tough decisions to make. Once you define Stennes, you know who his opponents are and can put them behind the O.R. research facility.

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